

Nations in Transit 2024 - Albania

Author

- Anonymous

Score changes in 2024

- No score changes in 2024.

Executive Summary

Albania's democracy experienced numerous challenges in 2023, especially during the local elections in May, which further consolidated the ruling party's dominant position in the country. Several journalists were subjected to verbal and physical attacks throughout the year, and the working environment and conditions for journalists have deteriorated in 2023 compared to previous years. The main opposition party in parliament, the Democratic Party, continued to experience internal conflict and was split into factions led by dueling party leaders Lulzim Basha and Sali Berisha. This weak position ultimately resulted in little oversight of the government, led by the Socialists and Prime Minister Edi Rama, and, later, outright violence in the parliament.

The Democratic Party's fragmentation had a spillover effect on the part the opposition plays both in holding the government to account and in contributing to the parliament's basic functionality, resulting in violent clashes in parliament in the last two months of 2023 that undermined the legislature's important role in a parliamentary democracy. The government exploited news of the violent clashes to further obstruct the parliament's authority to scrutinize the government, adopting a number of new laws in December 2023 that impose severe penalties on members of parliament who act in a disorderly fashion and make it more difficult for the opposition to conduct parliamentary inquiries into the government's decision-making.

The year 2023 witnessed the deterioration of Albania's civil society space and the erosion of its media environment, both of which seriously undermined the country's commitment to democracy. Several journalists were physically and verbally attacked for their reporting in 2023. Most notably, Elvis Hila and his wife were physically assaulted after his reporting on a case with links to an organized crime group. Another journalist, Afrovieta Hysaj, received threats and was eventually sacked from a media outlet after reporting on a rape case that implicated family members of the outlet's head. Similarly, a number of journalists from Balkan Insight, Top Channel, Syri TV, and other organizations received physical and verbal threats from senior politicians and members of both governing and opposition parties for questioning and reporting on political activities. Journalists' safety is increasingly threatened in an environment that remains heavily politicized and influenced by prominent businesspeople. Furthermore, there is a growing trend among businesspeople with close political ties to buy increasingly large stakes in various outlets, pay pundits and journalists, and sponsor major political TV shows that shape public debate and opinions, all in order to promote the agendas of the political parties they support in exchange for public procurement contracts or in-kind benefits. The media landscape appears diverse, with a wide range of outlets. However, ownership is concentrated among a few main owners and parent companies. These companies work closely with political parties to advance their agendas, neglecting important issues that Albania faces.

Civil society organizations, which are legally required to be consulted by the government when new or amended legislation is adopted, saw little willingness by the parliament to engage with them

or accept their suggestions. Several civil society organizations, for instance, objected to changes to the Academy of Sciences of Albania's legal framework in 2023, on the grounds that the changes would further politicize the institution and undermine academic freedom. It later came to light that the current head of the Academy had written the changes himself for his own personal gain. Still, parliament passed the changes and the president signed them into law. This case demonstrated the government's continued lack of commitment to engaging with civil society to safeguard democratic values like academic freedom.

Prime Minister Rama and the Socialist Party leveraged the increasingly violent rifts in the opposition to further consolidate their grip on power and dominate local elections held on May 23, with Socialist candidates winning in 53 of 61 municipalities. Election observers documented the Socialist Party misusing state resources to gain political advantage in a number of municipalities in the lead-up to the elections, a particularly effective strategy at the municipal level where many local governments are struggling financially and are dependent on the central government.

Albanian political parties remained unable to address corruption within their own ranks in 2023, and still appear unwilling to disassociate themselves from problematic party leaders that have been either sanctioned abroad or face serious charges by Albania's Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure (SPAK). This trend is due, in part, to a lack of internal democracy within political parties and their inability to self-regulate and address internal division and bad practices in their ranks. Internal party failings have carried over into government structures—generating increased hostility towards critics in the civil and media sectors—and continue to have an adverse impact on Albania's overall state of democracy.

Nevertheless, at the end of the year, the European Union (EU) published an encouraging screening report on Albania. The November progress report proposed that the 27 EU member states authorize the EU Commission to begin negotiating the first chapters of accession with Albania in 2024, praising rule-of-law reforms and SPAK's track record of holding high-ranking public officials accountable for corruption and abuses of power. However, Greece opposed the EU Commission's decision to start the negotiations for political reasons, after Albanian authorities arrested Fredi Beleri, the ethnic Greek mayor-elect of the Albanian city of Himara, for alleged voter fraud in the May local elections. Greece has been heavily criticized by Albania, several EU member states, civil society organizations, and academics for undermining SPAK's work, in which the EU has invested significant political and financial resources in an attempt to address corruption and abuse of power in Albania.

SPAK steadily improved its track record of investigating high-level corruption and pressing charges against a number of key politicians in Albania in 2023, making it one of the few functioning judicial and prosecutorial institutions in the country as the judicial vetting process continued in Albania in 2023. Notably, in October, SPAK charged Berisha, a former president and prime minister and the leader of one of the Democratic Party factions, and put him in house arrest on December 30, on corruption allegations that had also led to him being sanctioned by the United States and the United Kingdom in 2021. Since October, Berisha's Democratic Party faction has transformed into a violent group that appears to want to destabilize the country, making the news of his arrest welcome to many. SPAK also charged a Socialist former deputy prime minister, Arben Ahmetaj, with corruption and put out an international warrant for his arrest after he fled across the Greek bordercountry, among other investigations into former high-ranking officials from various political parties in 2023.

Since SPAK charged Berisha and Ahmetaj, as well as exposing disrupting ties between a number of organized crime groups and businesses, politicians, and law enforcement agencies, there has been a growing campaign of disinformation by media establishment outlets and senior political figures in both the government and the opposition to discredit SPAK's work. Furthermore, there have been physical and verbal threats directed at SPAK judges and prosecutors and their family members. This negative response has underscored the reality that SPAK cannot combat corruption at the highest levels on its own, and that it is critical for Albanian democracy that political parties cast out those who engage in corruption and have a track record of undermining the rule of law and

democracy. Until then, Albania will continue to be classified as a hybrid regime with elements of both democracy and authoritarianism.

At-A-Glance

National governance in Albania is democratic, although it is dominated by clientelist party politics and individual personalities from the main parties. Elections are typically competitive, as demonstrated by the May 2023 municipal elections, although they are frequently marred by vote-buying, manipulation, fraud, and gerrymandering. The civic sector contributes to public discourse, although it is underfunded, illegally excluded from policy consultations, and, in some cases, serves as a front for larger political interests. Albanian media is largely independent and scrutinizes public officeholders, but media owners use their platforms to influence the government and political parties while allowing media literacy to deteriorate and disinformation to flourish. Local government is democratic, yet it is severely underfunded and incapable of providing necessary services to citizens. The judiciary is only partially operational due to ongoing vetting procedures, but the Albania's Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure (SPAK) SPAK is considered by the international community as Albania's most trusted public institution, raising hopes that the judicial system is becoming more independent. Corruption persists and produces dysfunction in the various branches of government, even though SPAK has achieved encouraging results in battling corruption and organized crime at the highest levels.

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**

- Prime Minister Rama reshuffled about half of his Council of Ministers in 2023. In July, Rama dismissed the minister of the interior, Bledi Çuçi, and appointed Taulant Balla to replace him.¹ Rama announced the appointment of several new ministers in September, including Igli Hasani as minister of foreign affairs, Ervin Mete as minister of finance, Ogerta Manastirliu as minister of education, Albana Koçiu as minister of health, Anila Denaj as minister of agriculture, Delina Ibrahimaj as minister for entrepreneurship, and Arbjan Mazniku as minister for local governance.² Numerous former ministers are reportedly being investigated for corruption and abuse of power, and local analysts say those allegations prompted the changes to the government.³
- The long-standing division in the opposition camp, and especially within the Democratic Party, has continued. The Democratic Party is split into two factions: former prime minister Berisha has most of the party's MPs behind him,⁴ but a smaller bloc backs Basha, who nonetheless returned to the chair in the summer of 2023 after the Democratic Party lost local elections.⁵ The validity of the Democratic Party's 2023 internal election for chair was also questionable because the party did not know how many members it had, and the process was marred with allegation of voters fraud.⁶ The fragmentation of the Democratic Party has left it unclear who runs the main opposition party, allowing the Socialist Party to govern without any credible alternatives.
- The functioning of parliament and its subcommittees deteriorated in 2023, with most preliminary sessions and subcommittees devolving into violent fights between Berisha's Democratic Party faction and the Socialist Party. This culminated in November with opposition deputies setting off smoke bombs to set fires in the middle of parliament in order to disrupt the session.⁷ Berisha's faction has indicated that there will be no normal proceedings in parliament sessions and subcommittees unless the government meets the group's conditions, including that Rama resign as prime minister.⁸ However, the Socialist Party and local observers said Berisha was trying to destabilize the country, after SPAK had suspended Berisha's passport in October and had ordered him not to leave the country as he is being investigated for abuse of power and corruption (see

Corruption).⁹ Berisha refused to comply and answer SPAK's questions, and consequently he was placed under house arrest on December 30.¹⁰ Since October, Berisha's Democratic Party faction has stated that it will not respect any public institutions in Albania; it has become increasingly violent and confrontational with the Socialist Party, Basha's opposing Democratic Party faction, the media, civil society, and others who do not agree with its position. Following the violent clashes in parliament, the subcommittees met online in November.¹¹ The Socialist Party has also kept most parliamentary sessions extremely short to avoid disruption; in the most notable instance, the 2024 budget¹² was passed in less than five minutes without any debate in late November.¹³ In December, the Socialist Party passed new rules imposing severe penalties on MPs who act in a disorderly fashion in parliament, and also suspended numerous MPs from Berisha's Democratic Party faction for their role in instigating some of the violent clashes.¹⁴ Both the changes to parliamentary rules and the clashes that occurred in late 2023 have seriously undermined the parliament's ability to legislate and provide government oversight, weakening a key component of Albanian democratic life.

- The EU Commission presented its screening assessment of Albania's readiness for EU membership in July 2023¹⁵ and a progress report in November 2023, concluding in both cases that the country is reasonably prepared to join and praising rule of law reform, especially given SPAK's efforts to launch investigations into high-level corruption cases.¹⁶ Given the geopolitical implications of Russia's war in Ukraine, the EU Commission asked the EU's 27 member states in November 2023 to begin negotiating the chapters for accession with Albania by January 2024. However, Greece blocked the process and has said it will not remove its veto until Beleri, the ethnic Greek mayor-elect of Himara, ¹⁷ is released from prison on voter fraud charges (see Local Democratic Government).¹⁸ Italy, Germany, and a number of other EU member states have heavily criticized Greece for undermining Albania's rule of law and judicial process with the veto.¹⁹

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**

- Local elections are mostly regulated by the constitution and the Electoral Code, both of which were last amended in 2020 – but the legal framework has another of additional by laws for the political parties, such as ensuring gender equality and quota, as well as on the integrity of public officials, which is regulated by Central Election Commission (CEC) regulations under the so-called law on decriminalization that bars people with serious criminal records from holding office.²⁰ This electoral structure for local elections, according to international and local expert observers, is not in accordance with international standards because it is primarily tailored to parliamentary elections and lacks clarity on a number of issues, including election administration, candidate registration, campaign finance, and election dispute resolution by the CEC.
- Albania held local elections on May 14, 2023, to elect 1,613 city councilors and 61 mayors to four-year terms. The local elections featured 144 mayoral candidates, 852 candidate lists for municipal councils, 40 parties and coalitions, and 12 independent candidates.²¹ Women were well-represented on municipal council candidate lists due to a mandatory 50-percent quota, with 11,828 women (49.8 percent) running, but there were only 15 women (10.4 percent) out of the 144 mayoral candidates.²²
- According to international and local observers, the May 2023 elections were competitive and generally managed well by the CEC.²³ However, election administration was problematic in smaller and rural municipalities, because political parties did not nominate their representatives—both observers and commissioners—on time or, in some cases, at all.²⁴ In a number of occasion, political parties replaced their commissioners and observers and even though this is legal, the Office for Democratic

Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)²⁵ raised concerns that such the practice is not in line with international good practice, as it did not allow enough time for training replacement commissioners and negatively impacted consistent adherence to election-day procedures, and indeed the May 2023 local elections saw a number of related issues.

- Campaigning on all sides was driven by personalities, chiefly incumbent prime minister Rama, who led the Socialist-majority governing coalition, and former prime minister Berisha, who led an opposition coalition called “Together We Win.”²⁶ The campaigns barely mentioned concerns below the national level and mayoral candidates, and mainstream media only covered only a handful of local issues. The Socialist Party won the elections in a landslide (see Local Democratic Governance). However, international and local observers reported that the government used state resources at the central and local levels to its advantage. ODIHR observers also reported allegations of voter intimidation, pressure on public-sector workers, and vote-buying.²⁷ The CEC confirmed that the government had used state resources to its advantage for the purpose of winning the local elections, but the commission did not take adequate action to penalize the government.²⁸

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**

- The ODIHR made an effort to engage more Albanian civil society organizations during the local elections in May, and the Albanian Central Election Commission allowed a number of NGOs to monitor the election process—particularly regarding compliance with campaign regulations and the misuse of administrative resources—in order to provide more security and legitimacy to the election process. NGOs were very successful in carrying out their mission, reporting 438 cases of electoral rules violations, campaign-related offenses, and misuse of administrative resources to the CEC prior to the elections.²⁹ However, the number of observers from such NGOs was smaller than that of observers affiliated with political organizations.
- In 2023, the government proposed more policies and parliament adopted more laws without adequate involvement with NGOs and interest groups. As a precondition for accession to the EU, Albania had in place legal requirements that NGOs be consulted on policy changes, and that their views and concerns be considered. However, the government and the parliament have failed to engage in a constructive dialogue with the civil society sector, demonstrating that the requirements for NGOs’ involvement and empowerment in policy consultation remain an empty promise. For example, in June 2023, the Academy of Sciences of Albania lobbied two Socialist members of parliament to amend the law concerning the Academy to remove a measure barring the Academy’s head from serving consecutive terms, in order to allow current Academy president Skënder Gjinushi to be reappointed when his term expired.³⁰ It later emerged that Gjinushi had written the amendments himself. Several NGOs and local experts encouraged parliament not to change the law because it would further politicize the Academy and erode academic freedom, integrity, and independence, but the changes were passed anyway.³¹ Gjinushi had largely spent his career in politics, including a stint as the communist regime’s last education minister before the fall of communism in 1991, and his selection as the Academy’s president in 2019 was widely seen as a political appointment by Rama; since then, several retired politicians with scant scientific achievements have joined the Academy.³²
- Despite the government and parliament’s indifference to involving NGOs in policy consultations, several civil society organizations staged protests in 2023 to raise awareness about environmental issues, government corruption, gender-based violence, LGBTQ+ rights, and the Italy-Albania migration protocol, which was signed in

November 2023 and will allow Italy to build two camps in Albania to hold detained refugees and migrants.³³ Opposition MPs filed a case in Albania's Constitutional Court alleging that the Italy-Albania protocol breached both the constitution and international law and that the government had failed to consult parliament, the president, and civil society.³⁴ However, the court ruled in January 2024 that the deal could go forward.³⁵ According to civil society and studies, Albania had the highest femicide rate in the Western Balkans in 2023, followed by North Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro.³⁶ Albania has pledged to invest in the prevention of gender-based violence in line with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, but it does not have a clear legal framework on gender-based violence, and political parties have made no clear commitments to 'eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres,' as the UN's gender-equality goal requires.³⁷ In one highly public instance that displayed politicians' lack of commitment to stopping such violence, some male MPs physically and verbally abused their female MP colleagues during the clash staged by Berisha's faction of the Democratic Party in the fall of 2023.

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 Albanian media landscape is highly diverse, with a large variety of outlets, but ownership is concentrated among a few major owners and parent companies: the Top Media Group, owned by the Hoxha family; the Klan Group, owned by the Frangaj family; Media Vizion, owned by the Dulaku family; G2 Media, owned by the Ulaj brothers; the Hysenbelliu family; and Italian journalist Carlo Bollino. Free-to-air television channels owned by the Hoxha, Frangaj, and Hysenbelliu and by Bollino reached a combined 86.94 percent of the free-to-air television audience in the first five months of 2023, according to Media Ownership Monitor Albania (MOM Albania), an initiative of the local organization of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) and the Germany-based Global Media Registry.³⁸ Furthermore, according to MOM Albania, some media companies receive central and local government subsidies in exchange for favorable coverage.³⁹ Outlets that become critical of the government, like the Hysenbelliu family's News 24, face punitive measures and harassment, and in some cases large fines.⁴⁰ The EU and local observers have raised concerns about the growing trend over the last several years of business groups purchasing media to promote owners' economic interests and political agendas.⁴¹ In March, after main PD lost six mayoral by-elections and US intelligence revealed that the party had received \$500,000 from Russia⁴² in the run-up to the 2017 general elections, journalists asked former PD leader Lulzim Basha if he would resign and take responsibility for the Russian money allegations. Basha, however, responded with disparaging comments, and some reporters were subsequently barred from future press conferences.⁴³ Additionally, several journalists were verbally abused in the course of covering protests and violent clashes outside PD headquarters and the rifts between Basha and Berisha over the party leadership.⁴⁴ Senior government members, also banned some journalists from their press conferences⁴⁵ when their questions were deemed too probing, as happened in one case with questions about Foreign Affairs Minister Olta Xhacka.⁴⁶ In response to this suppression of press freedom, journalists protested outside the PM's office in July demanding better treatment of journalists by politicians across the political spectrum.⁴⁷
- Albania's concentration of media ownership is made possible by a lack of transparency in media ownership laws and policies, particularly on how the media is funded.⁴⁸ Political and business interference pushes journalists to engage in self-censorship, and during the local election, there were several cases of editorial autonomy being eroded, leaving journalists vulnerable to pressure from media owners and politicians to inform the public. ⁴⁹ For example, it was common practice for major

political parties and public institutions to give the media prerecorded footage of political and campaign events during the local elections. This footage was widely used by broadcasters in their programming, including in news reports, and often without proper fact-checking, a practice that local observers and the ODIHR have noted limits editorial independence.⁵⁰

- Several cases of attacks and threats against journalists in 2023, including against Elvis Hila,⁵¹ Afrovieta Hysaj,⁵² and Elton Qyno,⁵³ highlighted a deteriorating environment for the safety of journalists.⁵⁴ In another notable case, Balkan Insight reporter Ola Xama was verbally attacked by Tirana's mayor, Erion Veliaj, and referred to as "a contract killer" after publishing an article about corruption investigations into a Tirana waste incinerator procurement contract.⁵⁵ Albanian journalists also face legal threats over their reporting. Veliaj filed a defamation lawsuit against Syri TV and a journalist and producer of the news program *Piranjat* after the show questioned his role in the corruption prob regarding the incinerator's procurement.⁵⁶ Monika Kryemadhi, a Freedom Party MP, filed a defamation lawsuit against Top Channel⁵⁷ after it aired a program alleging that Kryemadhi⁵⁸ has close ties to and received funds from a Russian oligarch under US sanctions.⁵⁹ Similarly, Berisha verbally abused Balkan Insight when the news outlet reported that the former prime minister was misinforming the public about the reasons why he was sanctioned by the United States and the United Kingdom.⁶⁰

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 organization and operation of local government is regulated by the Law on Local Self-Government, as well as by the Law on Local Finances. Local government is organized into 61 municipalities.⁶¹ In February, the Central Election Commission allocated around €3 million in party funding, most of it going to the two major parties, PS (€1.2 million) and PD (€860,000),⁶² and the rest distributed to the other nine parties based on the results of the most recent parliamentary elections (April 25, 2021). Experts heavily criticized this fund-allocation formula due to the massive advantage it afforded the Socialists and Democrats.
- In the 2023 local elections, municipalities elected mayors to four-year terms. The Socialist Party won 53 municipalities, and the "Together We Win" coalition led by Berisha of the Democratic Party's main faction and Ilir Meta of the Freedom Party won seven municipalities. The Ethnic Greek Minority for the Future (MEGA) won one municipality.⁶³ Nationally, the Socialist Party received 43 percent of the vote, "Together We Win" received 20 percent, and the Democratic Party received seven percent. However, turnout was low in comparison to last election, with approximately 35 percent of eligible voters casting their votes.⁶⁴
- Debates during the local election campaigns largely focused on national political leaders and grew highly partisan, with little discussion of local issues. Except for the contenders for Tirana's mayoral office, candidates for mayor received little television coverage.⁶⁵ However, the municipality of Himara in southern Albania garnered national and international attention as Fredi Beleri, the opposition camp's candidate from "Together We Win," was arrested by police for allegedly buying votes just a few days before the election.⁶⁶ Beleri was imprisoned pending a hearing, but nonetheless won the election, and the matter has since become a major point of dispute between Greece and Albania, as Beleri is ethnically Greek. Beleri has been the subject of multiple investigations for inciting ethnic hatred, and after he made Greek nationalist remarks during the campaign, Prime Minister Rama accused him of attempting to "Hellenize Himara."⁶⁷ Greece has put significant pressure on Albania to release Beleri and allow him to be sworn in as mayor.⁶⁸ However, many politicians across the political spectrum,

as well as international and local observers, see Greece's actions as interfering in the judicial process of Albania and undermining SPAK's role in addressing corruption.⁶⁹

- Many international and local observers suggest that Albania's local governments are not equipped to govern because they are massively underfunded, receiving less than one percent of the country's GDP in funding from the central government. Even those financial resources made available to local governments are subject to conditional subsidies or schemes from ministries and government agencies, which makes local governments extremely dependent on the central government.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Albania's local governance model has significant design flaws, as local governments have limited capacity to develop their own policies—for example, only 12 of the 61 municipalities have designated environmental directorates, despite the grave challenges posed by global climate change. The Institute for Albanian Municipalities NGO published an important report in 2023 calling for a new set of reforms to make local governments more democratic and transparent, as only 29 out of 61 municipalities have an adequate transparency program in place regarding their decision-making processes.⁷¹

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**

- Since the judicial system reform was adopted and the vetting process began in 2016, SPAK has shown an impressive track record of launching successful investigations against leading public officials and organized crime networks (see Corruption).⁷² However, law enforcement agencies are still unable to function independently, and are under the influence of politicians and organized crime networks, as observed in multiple cases during 2023. For example, in July, family members of Rrahman Rraja, a powerful former Socialist MP, brutally attacked a group of citizens in the northern town of Krujë who had complained to the local police about the Rraja family's business activities, going so far as to break some of their victims' limbs. The local police at first failed to act, and only made some arrests after news of the attack went viral online. In the end, the prosecutor's office only brought the lowest possible charges against the attackers, evidently due to Rraja's strong local political influence.⁷³ Civic sector and political pressure on the judicial vetting process has increased as delays in the justice system have caused legal, social, economic, and political challenges in Albania.⁷⁴ Access to justice has worsened, with experts claiming it now takes over three and a half years to commence or complete proceedings due to a lack of magistrates.⁷⁵ Since the 2017 reform, the judicial system has failed to attract new recruits and is on the verge of collapse.⁷⁶ While 26 new magistrates will graduate in 2023, the prospective number is insufficient to run the system at full capacity for another five years, further eroding public trust in Albania's justice system.⁷⁷
- In 2023, several cases demonstrated how organized crime networks infiltrated law enforcement, the judiciary, and groups of politicians in Albania, and how those criminal outfits operated freely outside the law. In January, local news outlets reported that organized crime networks had installed illegal surveillance cameras in several cities to avoid the authorities and to facilitate loansharking operations.⁷⁸ Law enforcement agencies only intervened to remove the cameras after the story made international news.⁷⁹ SPAK, in collaboration with other law enforcement agencies, was able to bring down a powerful organized crime network operating in the cities of Tirana, Shkodra, and Kukës in July 2023, arresting police officers, prosecutors, and businesspeople for involvement with the criminal group.⁸⁰ A similar powerful organized crime network operating in the cities of Elbasan and Lushnjë, which allegedly had free reign due to its close ties with law enforcement and the judiciary, was brought down by SPAK in September 2023.⁸¹ SPAK prosecutors have been threatened with their lives since the crackdown on these organized crime networks, and local observers have called for increased security for the SPAK's magistrates.⁸² The Kuvendi voted in July to adopt the

new judicial map, which will be implemented by July 2023. While international actors who championed judicial reform in Albania praised the new map, it has been heavily criticized by numerous lawyers' associations⁸³ and CSOs, such as the Albanian Helsinki Committee, for failing to include local actors in the consultation process.⁸⁴ These groups also claim that reducing the number of courts will damage citizens' access to justice and increase the cost of the judicial process since some citizens will have to travel over 200 kilometers to reach a court under the new plans.⁸⁵

- Since 2017, a new vetting process put into place under US and EU pressure has resulted in the dismissal of about half of Albania's judges and prosecutors, primarily because they could not justify their wealth.⁸⁶ However, local observers have criticized the process in recent years for failing to follow due process, saying that authorities are cutting corners by dismissing judges and prosecutors without sufficient reasons in order to meet the December 2024 deadline set by the government for completion of the vetting process. Critics also say the process does not take into account the fact that half of the Albanian economy is informal, making it impossible to show every financial record and transaction.⁸⁷ In one notable case, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in April 2023 that the Albanian government had acted unlawfully in dismissing a prosecutor, Dritan Gina, for failing to fully disclose assets. (Gina's wife Rovenka Gashi had also been dismissed as a prosecutor under the vetting process and had appealed her firing, but the human rights court ruled against her.)⁸⁸ However, Albania has a poor history of enforcing European Court of Human Rights rulings, and both domestic and foreign observers have serious concerns about the country's commitment to respecting human rights, and particularly the right to a fair trial.⁸⁹ Additionally, the International Monitoring Operation, a body appointed by the European Commission to oversee the vetting process as part of EU membership proceedings, had warned earlier in April that any attempt by Albania's High Council of Prosecutors to reinstate another dismissed former prosecutor, Besnik Cani, could jeopardize the application of the vetting process over isolated errors; Cani had previously won a partial victory after challenging his dismissal in the European Court of Human Rights.⁹⁰

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.

**3.00 /
7.00**

- Public procurement contracts for the construction and operation of waste incinerators for the cities of Tirana, Fieri, and Elbasan have become a contentious political issue in Albania in 2023, as SPAK investigations revealed that the contracts were awarded to companies with no prior experience in waste management but close ties to senior government officials.⁹¹ In August, SPAK ordered the seizure of the company that was building Tirana's incinerator for allegedly bribing several public officials in order to win the contract, and allegations have since been brought against a number of senior officials linked to the contract.⁹² SPAK sentenced former environment minister Lefter Koka to six years and eight months in prison for corruption in September, for the role he played in awarding a public procurement contract worth about \$30.5 million (to build a waste incinerator in Fieri during his time in office)⁹³ Koka faces similar charges over a \$23.5-million incinerator contract in Elbasan.⁹⁴
- SPAK built on its impressive track record of fighting corruption by charging several powerful political figures in 2023,⁹⁵ such as Vangjush Dako, the Socialist former mayor of Durrës, for abuse of power and corruption.⁹⁶ The US State Department had sanctioned Dako on similar grounds in 2019.⁹⁷
- In July, SPAK asked parliament to lift the legal immunity that former minister of finance and deputy prime minister Arben Ahmetaj enjoyed as a current MP,⁹⁸ in order to arrest him on corruption charges for his role as a minister in awarding public contracts for waste incinerators in exchange for a bribe.⁹⁹ However, before parliament could act, Ahmetaj fled the country.¹⁰⁰

- In August, SPAK charged former deputy minister of health Klodjan Rrjepaj¹⁰¹ and three other officials with corruption for fixing the bidding process for a \$110-million public procurement contract for the purchase and sterilization of medical equipment awarded in 2015.¹⁰² SPAK also charged the former minister of health, Ilir Beqaj, in November for the role he played as minister in allegedly rigging the contract.¹⁰³ The Hashtag Initiative (Nisma Thurje), an youth movement that has since become a political party, begun a campaign in 2019 to raise awareness against Beqaj alleged corrupt conducts;¹⁰⁴ since then, the movement's leader, Endri Shabani, has received threats and verbal attacks, and has been targeted with a negative media campaign by media outlets close to government.
- In October, SPAK charged Berisha with abuse of power and corruption for illegally helping his son-in-law privatize public property as part of a real estate deal. Berisha refused to engage with courts, and on December 30 was put under house arrest.¹⁰⁵ Since Berisha was charged, his supporters and the Democratic Party faction he leads have begun an all-out intimidation and disinformation campaign against SPAK's judges and prosecutors. ¹⁰⁶

Footnotes

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