

Rule of law concerns in Albania: an obstacle to EU accession

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Since the beginning of this year, Albania has faced mounting concerns from the EU over the state of the rule of law. Last February, a report by the European Parliament and a statement by the European People's Party highlighted the government's persistent pressure on the judiciary and ongoing problems with corruption. The rule of law is one of the key issues in the accession process for the Western Balkans. Chronic difficulties in this area could prevent Albania from securing EU membership before 2030, a goal that was one of the main promises made by Prime Minister Edi Rama during the last election campaign. His relations with Brussels have deteriorated, and his party has lost some public support. Meanwhile, government officials continue to criticise the special prosecutor's office, a key institution in the fight against corruption.

The prosecutor's office is also investigating cases of suspected corruption related to construction failures on railway lines and roads completed in recent years. These incidents were directly caused by weather events, with landslides occurring after heavy rainfall in February and March. However, the prosecutor's office has pointed to the likely use of substandard construction materials. Meanwhile, the governing majority has rejected the opposition's motion to establish a parliamentary commission of inquiry into the matter. The damaged infrastructure has cost the state treasury around €250 million. The south of the country was cut off from the capital, paralysing trade with Greece, a key partner, for several days. The situation has exacerbated public protests that began last January, sparked by corruption allegations against the then infrastructure minister, Belinda Balluku. The demonstrations have been organised by the Democratic Party of Albania (PD), the country's largest opposition grouping and a member of the European People's Party (EPP).

Corruption allegations within the government

During Balluku's tenure, her ministry invested nearly €3.8 billion in infrastructure between 2024 and 2026, a figure that Prime Minister Edi Rama highlighted during the spring 2025 campaign as one of the government's crowning achievements. However, last autumn the Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK) accused Balluku of causing losses to the state budget totalling approximately €251 million in several key tenders for road infrastructure projects. Some of the funding for these investments came from EU funds. SPAK was established under pressure from the European Commission in response to corruption concerns highlighted in its reports. The prosecution has requested the arrest of Balluku, now a former minister. However, she is protected by parliamentary immunity and Rama's Socialist Party has refused to lift it, instead severely criticising SPAK. In addition to

protesters, both the Constitutional Court of Albania and the European Parliament have expressed support for the anti-corruption body. The former ruled that the prosecution had the right to request Balluku's removal from government due to the risk of witness tampering. Ultimately, after weeks of controversy, Rama dismissed her. Despite this, she remains a close associate of his. The scandal forms part of Albania's broader struggles with corruption. In Transparency International's 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index, the country fell by 11 places over the year, ranking 91st out of 182 countries surveyed.

Government attacks on the rule of law

In connection with the Balluku case, Prime Minister Rama began to question the competence of prosecutors and judges, accusing them of links to the opposition. Referring to the SPAK investigation, he stated that his associate "has our unwavering support", that "the judiciary will always remain independent", but that "the minister is innocent and is the target of a witch hunt". Consequently, he argued that lifting her parliamentary immunity was out of the question. These developments have been reflected in the positions taken by the EPP and the European Parliament. Both concluded that violations of the independence of the judiciary and the prosecution had been taking place in Albania. The EPP, which includes Albania's main opposition party and is the largest faction in the European Parliament, emphasised that it supports Albania's bid for EU membership while highlighting the need to strengthen judicial independence and media freedom.

While praising Albania's progress, including the opening of all negotiating clusters, the European Commission also expressed reservations. Marta Kos, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, stressed that although EU membership by 2030 remains a realistic prospect, it is essential to strengthen the rule of law and maintain the key role of SPAK. At the same time, the EU Delegation in Tirana and diplomats from the EU's member states, including Germany, sought to persuade the Albanian prime minister to support a parliamentary vote to lift Balluku's immunity. Meanwhile, members of the European Parliament tabled more than 60 amendments on the rule of law to the Commission's report on progress in the negotiations. Furthermore, nine EU member states, citing concerns over the independence of the judiciary, blocked the delivery of the Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) to Albania – a document confirming progress and enabling the closure of negotiating chapters.

Prime Minister Rama's challenges

In this situation, Rama has little chance of fulfilling his campaign promise of securing EU membership by 2029. Albania has opened all six negotiating clusters and all 33 negotiating chapters, but it has not been able to close any of them. Moreover, the IBAR currently does not foresee the possibility of concluding work on two of them: those concerning the judiciary and fundamental rights, and justice, freedom and security. This appears to stem mainly from the previously mentioned delays in reforms in these two areas, corruption scandals and efforts by the ruling party to undermine the rulings of the Constitutional Court in the Balluku case.

Likely motivated by an awareness that failure to meet these requirements constitutes an insurmountable obstacle, Rama proposed a special path to membership in a joint appeal with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. The two leaders called for their countries to be admitted to the EU without veto rights but with access to the single market. However, both the EU's member states and the European Commission rejected the initiative.

The situation is further complicated by the emergence of new corruption scandals, including those concerning the port of Durrës, which forms part of the Pan-European Transport Corridor VIII. SPAK prosecutor Vladimir Mara has acknowledged that investigations indicate strong links between organised crime structures and certain segments of state institutions, including public officials and law enforcement agencies. In Durrës, criminal groups reportedly control the port area and the flow of goods, operating under a cocaine trafficking kingpin based in Brescia, who is also wanted by the Italian prosecutor's office.

Rama's long-time associate Elisa Spiropali has also spoken out against him, marking the strongest criticism to emerge from within his party in years. She previously served as Speaker of Parliament, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, and Minister of State for Relations with Parliament. In her view, the current Albanian government is characterised by abuses that are no longer mere aberrations – they have become an accepted way of conducting politics. Referring to Albania's European integration, she stressed that the EU should not remain merely a 'political narrative', but must set standards of values that are observed in practice.

Despite all this, Rama's position at home is not seriously threatened. Public protests have so far failed to destabilise the government, despite instances of aggressive behaviour by some demonstrators and a firm response from the police. Large-scale demonstrations, involving thousands of participants, have taken place only in the capital and appear unlikely to bring down the government. At the same time, an erosion of support for Rama is visible in opinion polls: since the 2025 elections, his Socialist Party of Albania has lost 6 percentage points. However, this has not benefited the country's main opposition force, the Democratic Party of Albania led by Sali Berisha. The most recent poll indicates that 26% of Albanians would prefer to vote for an entirely new political movement, unconnected to the existing elites. The local elections in June will serve as a key test of support for both the prime minister and the opposition.

The EU needs a success, but not at any cost

Maintaining SPAK's independence will be of key importance in the context of the accession negotiations. Unblocking the European Commission's assessment of progress in this process depends on the stance of the Albanian prime minister, who recognises the problem of delays in the negotiations but blames the opposition, accusing it of allegedly 'reporting to Brussels'. Meanwhile, he has proposed to his party a draft law that would strengthen the immunities of certain public officials, including members of the government and the head of state, preventing their removal from office until a court of first instance issues a judgment.

As relations with the EU become more complicated, Rama has turned more clearly towards Israel and the United States in recent months. At his initiative, Albania joined the Peace Council launched by President Donald Trump and designated Iran as a terrorist state. Rama addressed Israel's Knesset, where he received a standing ovation from Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu. The Albanian leader's frustration with the EU's firm stance on the rule of law may therefore lead to closer foreign policy alignment with other partners. In recent years, the EU has stepped up efforts to finalise the accession of at least some candidate countries and to overcome the impasse in its enlargement policy (Croatia was the last country to join the EU in 2013). At the same time, however, the EU's institutions and member states have sought to ensure consistent compliance with the accession requirements, particularly in the area of the rule of law. Rama is unlikely to retain full power domestically while simultaneously bringing the accession negotiations to a successful conclusion.