

The Flamingo Revolution: anti-government protests in Albania

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Albania has witnessed continuous protests over the past three weeks. During this period, the demonstrators have broadened their focus from environmental concerns to wider anti-establishment demands. They first took to the streets on 30 May, calling for a halt to the construction of a luxury hotel complex and attempting to block construction work near the village of Zvërnec and the Vjosa wetlands, an area protected as a national park. They are now also demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Edi Rama, comprehensive investigations into corruption allegations and a change to the economic model created by the country's political elites, both those in power and the main opposition, which they view as rooted in organised crime and oligarchic influence. Within this system, legal regulations are tailored to serve the interests of domestic and foreign actors with ties to the ruling elite. The protesters have also criticised the government's emphasis on developing tourism, arguing that its large scale and increasingly luxury-oriented character have contributed to environmental degradation while providing only limited benefits to ordinary citizens.

The demonstrations, dubbed the 'Flamingo Revolution' and attended primarily by young people, signal a break with the stagnation that has characterised Albania's civil society in recent years. However, at this stage Rama is unlikely to accede to the protesters' demands, including calls for his resignation. Any decision to abandon the controversial hotel project would also jeopardise relations between the Albanian prime minister and the US president, as the venture involves Ivanka Trump and her husband Jared Kushner. Nevertheless, the scale of the protests and the international reaction are likely to weaken both the Socialist Party's government and Rama himself.

From nature conservation to political demands

The immediate trigger for the protests was the controversy surrounding the construction of a luxury hotel complex near the village of Zvërnec and the Vjosa wetlands. Tensions escalated after security personnel brutally assaulted activists demonstrating at the site. The project's principal investors are the Qatari Al-Khayyat brothers, whose business portfolio includes luxury hotels and artificial islands in their home country. Although the investment fund linked to Jared Kushner and his wife has officially withdrawn from the project, the couple remains involved as private investors. Earlier this year, Donald Trump's daughter met the Albanian prime minister to discuss the development, which is estimated to cost at least \$1.4 billion. Rama has claimed that it will create 10,000 jobs, but the protesters contend that

it will do little to stem the emigration of young, educated people at a time when labour shortages are becoming an increasingly serious problem in Albania. The development is currently in the preparatory phase. The country's National Territorial Council (*Këshilli Kombëtar i Territorit*) has granted planning permission for the project but has not disclosed its details. According to activists, the construction work threatens around 200 bird species, including flamingos that feed in the Vjosa wetlands. These concerns inspired the protest movement's name, the 'Flamingo Revolution', which also serves as a metaphor for how the protesters have organised themselves, as flamingos protect one another by forming large flocks.

Within days, the demonstrations spread beyond the Adriatic coastal region, first reaching Tirana and then other cities across the country, including Korçë, Fier, Kukës, Vlorë, Elbasan and Durrës. Albania's large diaspora has also organised parallel protests abroad. Anti-establishment slogans targeting the country's political elites soon emerged alongside environmental demands, reflecting the fact that both the government and the largest opposition party, led by former Prime Minister Sali Berisha, support the development.

Meanwhile, the project has come under scrutiny from the Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK), which temporarily froze the investors' funds for several days. The Qatari investors subsequently demonstrated that the funds originated from legitimate sources. The investigation has since shifted its focus to the land transactions linked to the project, probing allegations that individuals connected to organised crime initially purchased the plots before selling them on to the investors at several times their original value. The properties may therefore be linked to land speculation and money-laundering schemes.

The ongoing protests are also rooted in deeper grievances, including the mass emigration of young and educated people, pervasive corruption, vote-buying in elections (see: '[Albania. Zwycięstwo obozu rządzącego](#)') and persistent rule-of-law concerns (see: '[Rule of law concerns in Albania: an obstacle to EU accession](#)'). The demonstrations have increasingly drawn support from public figures, including actors who previously supported the ruling Socialist Party (PS), which is affiliated with the Party of European Socialists. The protesters are demanding that the government repeal measures introduced in recent years to facilitate foreign investment. They also oppose what they view as the economy's excessive reliance on tourism. Albania, a country of 2.8 million people, now receives more than 12 million tourists each year. The demonstrators are increasingly calling for an end to an economic model that they believe channels the benefits of growth to the wealthiest sections of society.

The 'Flamingo Revolution' represents the latest wave of anti-establishment protests in Albania in recent decades. Earlier demonstrations contributed to the Democratic Party's (PD, affiliated with the European People's Party) defeat in the 2013 election. The United States and the United Kingdom later sanctioned its leader over corruption allegations. Another wave of protests erupted in 2019, when the PD, then in opposition, organised demonstrations that turned violent (see: '[Escalation of the political crisis in Albania](#)'). In 2020, civil society groups mobilised against the demolition of the National Theatre in Tirana, but Rama ultimately ignored those demonstrations. The PD launched a new round of protests against the PS in autumn 2025 following the exposure of corruption within the government. However, because of their partisan character, they did not reach the scale of the protests

that began in Zvërnec.

The government rejects the protesters' demands as the opposition offers passive support

The government initially ignored the demonstrators. Rama only responded after the issue attracted growing attention from foreign politicians and the international media. Even so, he has continued to reject the protesters' demands and to look for those responsible beyond Albania's borders. He first accused Greece of organising the demonstrations, claiming that it sought to prevent Albania from becoming a tourist destination capable of competing with its neighbour. He later alleged that Iran was behind the 'Flamingo Revolution', seeking to destabilise the country in retaliation for Albania's support, expressed unanimously by both the government and the opposition, for the US-Israeli strikes against the Islamic Republic and for Tirana's long-standing hosting of the Iranian opposition group Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) at the request of the United States. Rama has not presented any evidence to support these claims. Meanwhile, the scale of public discontent and the protests, both within Albania and abroad, along with the organisers' links to previously independent environmental movements, suggest that he is confronting a grassroots movement.

The protesters have received support from the European People's Party and the European Democratic Party. The European Commission has stated that the planned development will have a negative impact on Albania's EU accession negotiations and on the closure of Chapter 27, which covers the environment and climate change. Growing allegations that Albania is violating EU environmental standards could become an increasingly significant obstacle to its accession. In recent months, EU institutions have also expressed mounting concerns about the state of the rule of law in the country (see: ['Rule of law concerns in Albania: an obstacle to EU accession'](#)).

As relations with Albania's EU partners become increasingly strained, Rama appears all the more determined to maintain the goodwill of the Trump administration. Albania has joined the Board of Peace, supported the US strikes on Iran and recently signed an agreement to import liquefied natural gas from the United States. Given the involvement of members of the Trump family in the controversial hotel development, Rama will be even more reluctant to abandon the project. In a troubling signal for Albania's ruling camp, Washington has unexpectedly lifted sanctions imposed on opposition leader Sali Berisha a decade ago.

Although the opposition, led by the PD, supports the protests, it is not welcome at the demonstrations, as they are directed against the political establishment as a whole. Having governed the country until 2013, the PD is widely associated with many of the same pathologies now attributed to the ruling Socialists (see: ['The centre-left government in Albania – a new beginning?'](#)). Consequently, Berisha has limited himself to urging people to take part in the protests, while refraining from attending them himself.

Outlook

The demonstrations are currently gaining momentum, aided in part by the support of Albania's sizeable diaspora. Regardless of how they continue to unfold, they have weakened Rama's hold on power. One female member of parliament has already left his party, marking the second internal split within the PS in recent months (see: ['Rule of law concerns in](#)

Albania: an obstacle to EU accession). The investigations conducted by the SPAK will be a key factor, as they could ultimately halt the development. Despite its limited resources, the agency has demonstrated determination in tackling organised crime. It has also continued to pursue investigations into prominent political figures, including Belinda Balluku, Rama's former deputy prime minister and key ally. The protests may strengthen smaller parliamentary parties that are not perceived as part of the political establishment.