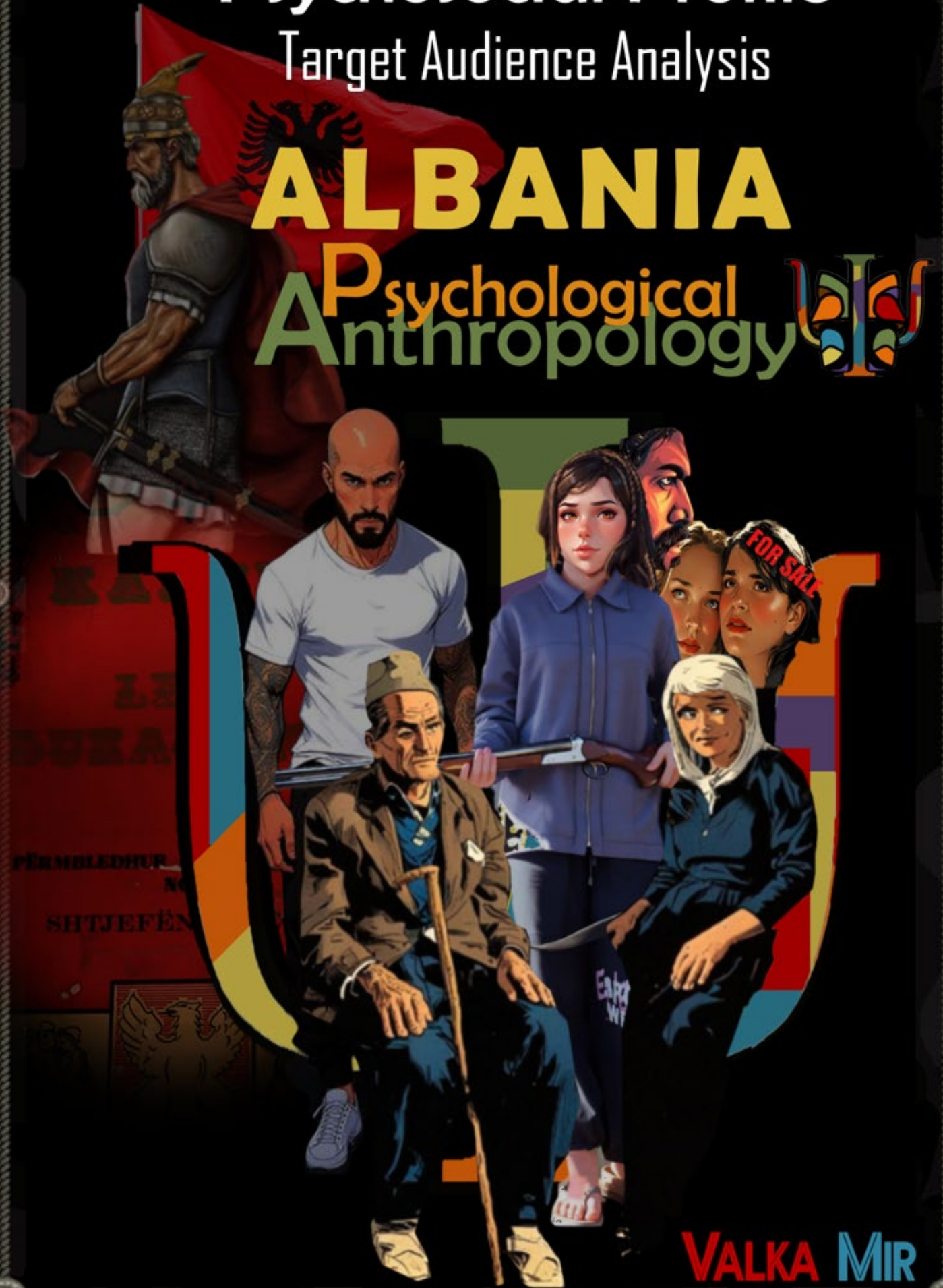


Psychosocial Profile

Target Audience Analysis

ALBANIA

Psychological Anthropology





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This Research Report was developed by member scientists of Valka-Mir Foundation to support European and American understanding of the psychological and sociological conditions in Albania that drive violence and exile, while inhibiting resolution and normalisation. Volodymyrska Street, 49A, #5, Kyiv City, Kyiv, Ukraine 01001

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- Country-of-Origin Psychosocial Profiler (Asylum Refugees): UK, Canada, Netherlands, & USA Immigration Courts
- Psychological Warfare Research & Training: UK 77th; CANSOF/CJOC JT&E; NATO



APPENDIX A: Regional and Country Context of Psychosocial Conditions of Albania.

Albania is an ethnicity, a language, and a sovereign republic.¹ The majority of ethnic Albanians live in Albania, and the remainder live in Kosovo where they are a majority population segment. The graphic map in **Figure 1** illustrates the geographical context, boundaries, and recent regional violence that affects Albania.

“For some, Albania is a paradise. For others, a frightening country”.

§A1 Balkan Soviet Socialist Republics.

From this graphic, the republics of the former Soviet State of Yugoslavia are depicted, with a timeline of the violent conflicts between Albania’s neighbouring states. While the Republic of Albania was not involved in this multi-nation civil war, the Albanian population of southern Serbia suffered tremendously. This region is now Kosovo, which is a partially recognized state, albeit not by the United Nations, nor Serbia. The dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics hit Yugoslavia hard. In the aftermath, the six formerly independent republics turned on each other with a murderous rage between 1990 through 1995 as illustrated in **Figure 10**. While ethnic Albanians in the southern Serbian region of Kosovo or Kosovar, were traumatically affected, the Republic of Albania was not a direct combatant in these conflicts.

§§A1.1 Enver Halil Hoxha’s malformation of Albania.

Unlike the Soviet Republic of Yugoslavia, which was a forced union of six formerly independent states under Josip Tito, the Socialist Republic of was a single-ethnic state ruled by the Albanian communist revolutionary and Enver Halil Hoxha. His impact on the country is reflected in Tirana, where his house and garden remain the only preserved structure in that neighbourhood. For more than 40 years, Hoxha exercised absolute control over every arm of government—political, social, security, intelligence, and military—and at various times served as head of state, minister of defence, and minister of foreign affairs. His transformation of Albania into a Soviet-style republic ended a brief experiment with democracy, which had itself only recently replaced the monarchy of King Zog I. A committed follower of Josef Stalin, Hoxha imposed state atheism and ordered anti-religious campaigns that targeted both Muslims (58%) and Christians (40%) in an effort to create an atheist state. He enforced a radical system of totalitarian control, banning travel abroad and private ownership. His security services imprisoned, executed, or exiled thousands of landowners, rural clan leaders, peasants who resisted collectivisation, and communist party or government officials who fell from favour. During Hoxha’s 41-year rule, Albanians endured decades of deprivation and austerity. Their social integration with the Balkans and wider Europe was reversed, leaving generations isolated from the outside world. Interviews with younger Albanian informants who came of age at the end of communist rule indicate that life under Hoxha remains deeply imprinted in Albania’s psychosocial patterns even today:

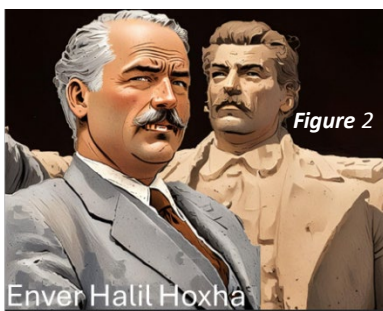


Figure 2

Enver Halil Hoxha

Albania politician



Figure 1 The Balkan Peninsula

“Everybody had to spy on everybody else”.² “One in every three persons in Albania was a spy [and] everybody was afraid to say anything, anything...a lot of people were killed just because they said something or because

¹ Albanian people have maintained a distinct cultural identity, primarily anchored in their unique language, rich traditions, folklore, and the influences of the diverse civilizations that have touched their lands. Albania is home to approximately 2.8 million people, characterized by a dominant ethnic Albanian population, alongside minorities such as Greeks, Roma, Vlachs, and Slavs. Despite considerable religious diversity—Islam, Catholicism, and Orthodoxy—Albanian identity has historically been constructed around language and shared historical narratives rather than religion.

² Informant interviewee 'Aire'



they listened to foreigner music ... or because they had long hair.... Hoxha isolated Albania from the rest of the world...we are still dealing with the consequences right now".³



Figure 3 Research informants

§A2 Albania's Political and Social Conditions in 2026.

U.S. Embassy reporting on conditions in Albania presents a mixed picture.⁴ The United States regards Albania as a key strategic ally in the Western Balkans, while also expressing serious concern about organized crime and corruption. U.S. policy therefore emphasizes strengthening Albania's judiciary, addressing what it describes as pervasive corruption across government, and reinforcing the rule of law to support EU integration.⁵ Albania's most vulnerable groups remain women and children, particularly in the context of domestic violence shaped by traditional honour and revenge codes, as discussed in Appendix A. Albania is also a source country for the



Figure 4 26 May 2018 Mass protest in Tirana Albania demanding resignation of PM for corruption

trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation and forced labour, primarily to Greece and Italy, with many victims later moved to the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands. Many Albanian asylum claims in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada involve women and girls fleeing sexual trafficking, as well as family members threatened with death for alleged honour-code violations. Our research found that Albanian authorities, including the police, have been unable to adequately protect vulnerable women and girls or to eliminate Kanun-based honour violence. Since 2023, media figures and political dissidents have increasingly also gone into exile to avoid physical harm linked to the expanding power of the ruling Socialist Party, which controls the central government and most local institutions.

On the positive side, although Albania does not yet meet the minimum standards for eliminating human trafficking, the U.S. Embassy in Tirana has reported notable efforts, particularly through the independent Special Prosecution Office within the Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure (SPAK), which has taken part in anti-corruption conferences organized by the U.S. Department of Justice.⁶ SPAK continues to monitor major ports and disrupt trafficking, leading to several successful interdictions. At the same time, concerns remain about weak implementation of anti-trafficking measures. Stronger efforts are still needed to protect and reintegrate victims, improve prevention for vulnerable groups, and address trafficking-related corruption through fuller use of existing laws and programs. Albania's National CVE Center also plays an active role in coordinating countering violent extremism initiatives among international donors and promoting cooperation across ministries, while an Albanian representative serves on the board of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF). GCERF grants have supported the reintegration and rehabilitation of Syrian women and children repatriated by Albania. In addition, the U.S. Country Team reports that Albania criminalizes terrorist acts, including terrorism financing and transactions involving persons on UN sanctions lists. The Albanian State Police Counterterrorism Directorate (CTD) has worked closely with U.S. agencies to align Albanian requirements with U.S. expertise and resources, helping to strengthen Albania's focused counterterrorism capabilities.

On the negative side, the U.S. Department of State reports that Albanian political and business interests continue to exert pressure over the media and other oversight bodies. Several journalists reported receiving threats or being subjected to public smear campaigns after covering alleged government corruption or misconduct. In March 2024, for example, the Albanian Journalists Union publicly denounced the prime minister for using intimidating language toward a journalist investigating tourism investment in the country. We found that journalists often self-censor to avoid violence, harassment, or loss of employment. We also reviewed credible reports that the Albanian government, the Socialist Party, and criminal groups use ties to media owners and senior editors to shape coverage. As the U.S. Department of State noted, "Media reported access to public information continued to decrease, and journalists found it increasingly difficult to obtain public documents and receive timely responses from public institutions to media inquiries." Other NGOs have also raised concerns about academic freedom, reporting that several public academic institutions selected or appointed leaders on

³ Informant interviewees 'Arie' and 'Iris'.

⁴ (Office of the Spokesperson USDoS, 2024)

⁵ (Nahzi, 2021)

⁶ (U.S. Embassy in Albania, 2023)



Figure 5 Mass Protests against the Ruling Socialist Party

the basis of political ties. Media organisations likewise reported significant obstacles to monitoring and covering election processes within academic institutions. Albanian public officials also remain implicated in trafficking-related corruption that has yet to be addressed. Serious resource constraints and official corruption continue to hamper anti-trafficking efforts. Although the government states that it has investigated police involvement in trafficking—including four officers investigated for trafficking-related offences in 2004—it has not prosecuted or convicted any officials for trafficking complicity before or since.⁷ A 2020 U.S. Department of State report described Albania as a European narco-state marked by “rampant corruption, weak legal and government institutions and weak border controls,” with drug trafficking, tax evasion, smuggling, and human trafficking among the country’s most profitable crimes.^{8 9}

We found that many Albanians go into exile to escape political violence, sexual exploitation and trafficking, unchecked domestic abuse, and execution arising from inter-family conflicts under the informal and illegal codes of Kanuni Skanderbeg that persist in Albania’s rural and mountainous regions. Albania’s psychological and social problems extend beyond the Socialist Party alone, although the party and government have contributed to the entrenchment of domestic violence.¹⁰ The ruling Socialist Party’s consolidation of power, and its historical link to the former Communist Party, have prolonged the damaging legacy of Enver Hoxha’s 47-year rule and the resulting deformation of Albanian society. The historical record shows that Albania emerged in 1990 from communism while presenting itself as a new democracy aligned with wider Europe. It also shows, however, that Hoxha’s authoritarian ruling party rebranded

itself as the Albanian Socialist Party, adopting a democratic public image while preserving many of the same structures of surveillance and oppression. The social deformation of the past eight decades continues to affect nearly every sector of Albanian life. One key finding is that Albanian society has been conditioned to avoid openly challenging the government, even as individuals, families, and related groups continue to resist or undermine it in different ways. The “Patronazhist,” or informant network, remains one of the problematic holdovers from Enver Hoxha’s authoritarian rule that Ramiz Alia continued under the ruling Socialist Party.

“...the discovery, structure, and systematic operation of the ‘Patronazhist’ network in Tirana and across the country, including its role in tracking and influencing voters’ political views. Do international reports or reputable NGOs confirm that individuals identified as Patronazhist have documented ties to organised crime or drug trafficking, as stated in the affidavit?”

As practiced in Albania, the Patronazhist system assigns Socialist Party members at all levels responsibility for monitoring and guiding a small number of non-party citizens—typically three to five—to ensure they do not speak or act against the government. For example, Mr. Kuka’s supervisor, Ms. Eglantina Lamaj, might be overseen by a Patronazhist from the Interior Ministry department responsible for broadcast licences and censorship.¹¹ That Patronazhist could direct her on how KhanTV should help the government manage an unruly production assistant. In return, she might receive advantages unavailable to competitors and be expected to monitor or

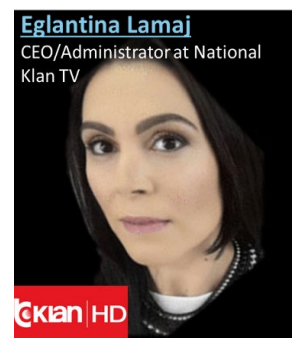


Figure 6 Pro-government media platform. Main beneficiary of government sponsored advertisements.

⁷ (Reed, 2019)

⁸ According to the International Monetary Fund’s definition of a narco-state, as a state ‘where all legitimate institutions become penetrated by the power and wealth of the illegal drug trade’.

⁹ (Newton-Cheh, 2020)

¹⁰ (Godole, 2023)

¹¹ The Patronage system is one whereby every person in the country has a “patronazhist”. This is a low-ranking party official or even just a party member who is assigned several members of the public to “watch over”. This means they are tasked with getting close to those they are watching over to get information from them which is then reported back to the party. The information includes their political affiliation and opinions and who they are likely to vote for in the election. Prime Minister Edi Rama has admitted to using this system since 2009.



control non-Socialist Party staff. In that context, Mr. Khan's extra workload, reduced pay, and eventual non-payment could be understood as warnings to moderate his conduct toward the Socialist Party and the government.

The Albanian patronage system is a well-documented form of political clientelism in which the Socialist Party uses public-sector jobs and benefits to secure votes and maintain party loyalty. *"At the local level, municipalities often become the scene where electoral patronage takes concrete form. Instruments such as building permits, infrastructure projects and employment in municipal services are used to consolidate political support."*¹² Former Ambassador Kim had a close relationship with Prime Minister Edi Rama, and the record indicates that she favoured him and the Albanian Socialist Party over the more conservative Democratic Party and President Ilir Meta. Albanians are generally pro-American and often place significant weight on guidance from the U.S. ambassador. Given her relationship with the prime minister and her dismissal by the current U.S. administration, however, her comments provide limited clarity and may instead create confusion.¹³

§A3 Albania's Stealth Authoritarian State.

The Socialist Party of Albania maintains detailed voter databases that track individual behaviour and influence access to public jobs, services, and, at times, intimidation for perceived disloyalty or improper voting.¹⁴ This system is widely viewed as a driver of corruption, state capture, and a barrier to EU integration, often bypassing merit-based hiring.¹⁵ Our research indicates that support for the ruling party significantly increases an individual's chances of public-sector employment, particularly in lower-tier positions.¹⁶ In 2021, a database containing detailed information—including political preferences and phone numbers—for roughly 910,000 voters, mostly in Tirana, was exposed ahead of the election, highlighting systematic localised monitoring by the "patronazhist" network. Under Prime Minister Edi Rama, this patronage system has expanded beyond job-for-vote exchanges to include public contracts, licences, and social assistance for loyalists. Our research found that since 2013 Albania has also seen a surge in illegal activity and organised crime, including electricity theft, occupation of public spaces, illegal construction, widespread corruption, abuse of the tax system, and a "solve-it-yourself" culture tolerated by state institutions when it serves the interests of the Albanian Socialist Party. During the 2025 elections, reports suggest this patronage system was extended to the diaspora through intimidating calls urging support for the ruling party.¹⁷ Reliance on party loyalty rather than merit in appointments continues to undermine the development of a professional and transparent public administration.¹⁸

§§A3.1 State Capture by Crime & Corruption.

Even more concerning are the growing alliances among key political structures, illicit businesses, and organised crime in Albania. In December 2025, the U.S. Congress reportedly warned that a "second wave" of sanctions could bridge the gap between political non grata status for Socialist Party leaders and criminal prosecution of those leaders and their organised-crime partners.¹⁹ The U.S. Congress and the EU have expressed increasing concern that Albania is undergoing "state capture" by a deeply rooted political party that treats the state as property to be distributed among relatives and political

Patronazhist in Action

Mrs. Reshat Elezi, Reç School

principal: Hello, good morning, director.

Mr. Drini Gjeci, Education

Director: Okay, where are you?

Reshat Elezi: I'm here, in line at the voting center.

Drini Gjeci: Did you take the whole family with you?

Reshat Elezi: The ones at home? No, they're not coming to vote now, later. I'll go get them later.

Drini Gjeci: Which center are you voting at?

Reshat Elezi: Here in Zallrec.

Drini Gjeci: Zallreç? Listen, I have bad information from there. Today your vote and your family's vote will be declared openly. You didn't declare your vote openly today with your family, go and find another job.

Reshat Elezi: Director, don't worry about that job at all. Listen to me. People are just talking, don't worry about that job at all.

Drini Gjeci: Okay, it will be declared openly, openly! When I say openly, openly.

Reshat Elezi: Don't worry about it at all. No worries, no worries.

Drini Gjeci: Do it openly with the whole family.

Reshat Elezi : No worries, no worries, no worries. Okay.

Figure 7 "wiretap #12" published by Bild journalist Peter Tiede. Socialist Party Education Director Drini Gjeci threatens School Principal Reshat Elezi during the 2017 elections in Dibër

¹² (Lela, 2026)

¹³ Ambassador Kim's 3-year tenure in Tirana ended in June 2023. She served as a deputy assistant secretary until March 2025 and then retired as the new US Administration reorganized the Department of State.

¹⁴ (Uberti et al., 2026)

¹⁵ (Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation et al., 2026)

¹⁶ (Hajdari, 2025)

¹⁷ (Progni, 2025; Semini, 2021)

¹⁸ (Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation et al., 2026; Vukaj, 2026)

¹⁹ (News Staff, 2025)



The **Socialist Party** of Albania emerged in the aftermath of the fall of communism in Albania that had dominated Albanian politics since the end of World War II. The dissolution of the People's Socialist Republic prompted a re-evaluation of political ideologies and a quest for democratic governance, paving the way for the rise of multiple political entities.

The roots of the **Socialist Party** can be traced back to the Party of Labour of Albania under its founder Enver Hoxha, which had been the ruling party for over four decades. Hoxha's successor Ramiz Alia was forced to introduce limited reforms in the late 1980s and agreed to accept a multiparty electoral system in place of its historical monopoly of power. Thereafter, Hoxha's Party of Labour won the 1991 Albanian Constitutional Assembly election, the first free elections held in the country in almost 80 years. By this time, the party had shed its Marxist-Leninist ideology and transformed itself into part of Europe's Socialist International movement. In the 2005 elections,



Albania's **Democratic Party** led by Sali Berisha, secured a majority in parliament and took control of the government for the next 8 years. In 2013, the **Socialist Party** now led by Edi Rama, won a parliamentary majority, took control of the government, and has held power for the past 13 years.

Throughout most of this time, the **Socialist Party** and the opposition **Democratic Party** held most of the seats in parliament. In 2021, the split was 74 seats for the Socialist Party and 59 seats for the Democratic Party. In 2023 however, the **Democratic Party** of Albania (PD) were not allowed to register their candidates, a court upheld that decision accordingly the **Socialist Party** of Albania (PS) won most of the seats in Parliament, securing their control over the government.

Figure 8 Context of Political Parties in Albania

crories through patronage networks embedded in public institutions. In June 2019, Bild published a series of wiretapped conversations involving senior Socialist Party **figures**, including Prime Minister Edi Rama, former Interior Minister Fatmir Xhafaj, and former Infrastructure and Energy Minister Damian Gjinkuri.²⁰ These 'Bild wiretaps' reportedly showed officials pressuring teachers, school administrators, and public employees to vote for the ruling party, with threats of job loss if they refused. Those targeted were believed to be affiliated with the opposition Democratic Party. One tape allegedly captured the Director of Education in Dibër saying, "Vote openly or quit your job," and instructing others to "take all the teachers" to vote for the ruling party.²¹ The recordings formed part of a broader scandal over vote-buying and intimidation in the 2017 parliamentary elections, which contributed to serious political instability in Albania in 2019.

The publication of the Bild wiretaps triggered significant backlash over the Albanian government's handling of the election, with the opposition calling for its resignation. No meaningful action followed, however, and the practice appears to have continued. Our research indicates that in the months—and now the year—before each election, protests against the Socialist Party and Prime Minister Edi Rama intensify, as does coercion by the party and state institutions. We found, for example, that public-sector employees were bussed to pro-government rallies, patronage networks were activated nationwide, and pressure on voters was palpable and at times violent. Journalists also routinely observed party loyalists lingering near polling stations to pressure citizens how to vote, making a level electoral playing field all but impossible.²² The Socialist Party operates a sophisticated system of surveillance and coercion to preserve its vote base and retain control of government. It has co-opted much of Albanian society, providing institutions and key individuals with ongoing incentives to support the party and undermine the opposition Democratic Party. The 2018 elections are one example, as are those of 2021 and now 2026.²³ The Socialist Party has continued, in updated form, the coercive methods used under Enver Hoxha. Rather than relying on large numbers of state personnel to surveil and control the population, the party now broadens the system by exchanging surveillance and coercion for financial and judicial patronage.



Figure 9 Centre: Albanian Communist Dictator Enver Hoxha. Right: a young Fatimir Xhafaj, now Albanian Minister of Interior

Albanian Interior Minister Fatmir Xhafaj is more than a cabinet official in Prime Minister Edi Rama's government. In the final years of Enver Hoxha's communist regime, he served as a close confidant of the dictator and as the regime's Youth Secretary. Hoxha tasked him with monitoring and reporting on growing demands for democratic change.

²⁰ (News Staff, 2019a)

²¹ (News Staff, 2019b)

²² (News Staff, 2021c, 2021e)

²³ (Bos, 2018; Dervishi, 2018; Semini, 2018)



Rather than denouncing these young reformers, however, Xhafaj used his position to protect **figures** he believed would become important leaders in post-communist Albania.²⁴ (See **Figure 9**). One of those young democrats was university student Edvin Kristaq Rama. Several years later, Edvin (now Edi) Rama was attacked by remnants of Albania's State Secret Service, the SHIK, because of his outspoken criticism of the former regime. Those attacks ceased, and in 1998 he was offered a junior ministerial post for culture and youth in the new Albanian Socialist Party.²⁵ Behind these and other developments, our research indicates, stood Enver Hoxha's former Youth Secretary, Fatmir Xhafaj. His own transition from communist functionary to Socialist Party leader after 1990, and his later proximity to Rama, helped sustain Rama's continuity of power after he became prime minister in 2013.²⁶

Today, Fatmir Xhafaj occupies several influential roles in Albania's interior ministry, including work connected to judicial reform, counterterrorism, and organised crime. Our research indicates that he works with Albanian business interests in the import and export sectors to shape law and enforcement, turning contracts, permits, grants, police acquiescence, judicial pliability, intelligence access, and increasingly direct cash payments into tools of patronage. These benefits are used to induce one part of the population to monitor and coerce another, allowing the state apparatus to retain managerial control while directing action through a co-opted civilian network.²⁷

§§A3.2 Organised Crime as Government Partner.

Where direct coercion is required, organised crime acts as a government partner. Albania is unusual in Europe because its crime bosses are not renegade outlaws; they are closely linked to those in power and often cooperate, to varying degrees, with party officials and senior government figures, including Fatmir Xhafa, Albania's Minister of Justice. Illicit proceeds from drug trafficking and human trafficking are integral to Albania's political system because cash is one of the most effective ways to buy votes, and those trades are among the country's largest cash generators. One of Albania's most notorious crime figures is Agron Xhafaj, Fatmir's brother, who was convicted in Italy of running an international drug cartel between Venezuela and Europe. Albania's Minister of Justice and Prime Minister Rama successfully lobbied to have Agron released into their custody, after which he was freed.^{28 29} An EU-funded study conducted from 2016 to 2019 found that 20.7 percent of Albanians were offered money or favours in exchange for their vote.³⁰ In January, investigative reporters found that cocaine gangs had successfully rigged elections by buying votes.³¹ Afrim Krasniqi, head of Albania's Institute for Political Studies, said the role of criminal gangs in the 2017 election campaign exceeded that of the political parties: *"Today, there's a general impression that nobody is able to win elections without support from such groups."*³²

An increasingly serious aspect of the relationship between the Socialist Party, parts of the state, and organised crime is the population's vulnerability now that extensive personal data is available to criminal actors. We have learned that the Socialist Party datasets known as "Patronazhist data" include Albanians' national ID number, name, father's name, surname, date of birth, voting centre, place of birth, residence code, list number, phone number, emigrant status and country, likely voting preference, employer, and assigned Socialist Party patron. This information allows criminal groups with access to party and state officials to generate coercion target lists and recruit for EU-wide criminal operations linked to human trafficking. Human trafficking in Albania is a well-established market involving both domestic and foreign actors, with the country serving as a source, transit, and, to a lesser extent, destination country. Albanian women and children are trafficked for sexual exploitation, forced labour, and coerced criminal activity across Europe, including Italy, the UK, Germany, Greece, and Switzerland. Access to Socialist Party Patronazhist datasets gives recruiters highly organised access to Albania's most vulnerable populations.

§§A3.3 Failing Systems of Justice and Accountability.

Corruption in Albania is documented at every level of government, including among members of parliament, ministers, the prime minister, and police officials at all ranks. Yet this extensive record has done little to weaken Prime Minister Edi

²⁴ (Exist Staff, 2018)

²⁵ "Fatos Klosi: E vërteta e rrahjes së Ramës nga shikaset me xhupa të zinj të Gazidedes, pse nuk e ndëshkuam Berishën dhe kush i urdhëronte rrahjet"

²⁶ (Gazeta Shqip Staff, 2018)

²⁷ (Editorial Board, 2018)

²⁸ (Hoxha, 2018)

²⁹ Agron Xhafaj's was convicted for trafficking drugs as part of a criminal organization and was sentenced in 2002 to 7 years and 2 months in jail, a sentence upheld by both the Lecce Appeals Court, and Italy's Supreme Court. The rest of Agraon's criminal organization was successfully extradited from Albania and served similar prison sentences but not Fatmir's brother.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ (Sinoruka, 2026b)

³² (Sinoruka, 2026b)



Rama's and the Socialist Party's control over parliament, state institutions, society, and commerce. The institutions most able to resist the current regime's pressure and impunity appear to be SPAK and the High Court in Tirana, both supported and trained by the United States and the EU. Many U.S. and European diplomats are increasingly concerned by Albania's drift toward domination by organised criminal groups enriched by drug, petroleum, and human trafficking across Europe and North America. European authorities, strongly supported by Europol and Eurojust, have intensified action against Albanian organised crime groups, which dominate segments of Europe's cocaine trade and high-value burglaries.

These efforts include transnational investigations using encrypted-communications data such as Sky ECC, leading to hundreds of arrests and the dismantling of logistics bases in Belgium, Italy, and Germany.³³ Despite this progress, investigations into Albanian crime and corruption continue to face concerns about judicial independence, selective prosecution, and the need for stronger cross-border coordination, particularly as sanctioned Russian and Iranian petroleum products begin appearing in Albanian ports.³⁴ The U.S.-trained and Europol-advised SPAK has improved its investigations into corruption and organised crime, as well as prosecution efficiency and asset confiscation. This progress has been made possible by coordinated action from Washington and Brussels.³⁵ Even so, judicial independence remains a serious concern, with persistent reports of selective prosecutions and undue political influence. Although high-profile convictions have been secured, systemic corruption within the judiciary continues to erode public confidence. Harsh sentences for minor offences, combined with lenient treatment of organised crime figures and officials, further undermine trust in a justice system widely seen as corrupt.

Public confidence has not improved significantly, despite clear political will for reform. Albania's prison system also faces major challenges, including overcrowding and reports that some organised crime leaders continue directing operations from prison, weakening the system's deterrent effect. SPAK operations have dismantled several criminal networks, but entrenched corruption in police ranks continues to limit overall effectiveness. Reports suggest that some senior officers are directly involved in organised crime, further complicating enforcement efforts. In October 2025, Prime Minister Edi Rama's close ally, Deputy Prime Minister Belinda Balluku, was indicted by SPAK in Tirana's national court.³⁶ Her corruption case and court-ordered removal as deputy prime minister were followed by her quiet reinstatement by Rama, triggering months of protests, legal disputes, and political unrest, while observers questioned whether Albania's courts would uphold the rule of law.³⁷ SPAK charged Balluku with allegedly manipulating public tenders, focusing on contracts related to the Llogara Tunnel (€190 million) and sections of the Tirana Outer Ring Road.

Albanian courts required Rama to dismiss Balluku, imposed a travel ban, and confiscated her passport; those measures remained in place as of April 2026. SPAK sought her arrest, but the prime minister and Socialist Party members of parliament blocked it by granting her parliamentary immunity. Balluku remains a member of Albania's parliament for the Tirana district, and her indictment reportedly enraged Rama, who threatened retaliation against SPAK. Balluku's predecessor as deputy prime minister, Arben Ahmetaj, is believed to be in hiding after also coming under SPAK investigation. Ahmetaj told investigators that Prime Minister Rama *"directed all key decisions on tenders, finances and public assets"* and allowed his deputy prime ministers to bear the legal blame.³⁸

§§A3.4 State Protection.

Although international cooperation has strengthened Albania's capacity to combat organised crime, local law enforcement still struggles with limited resources and internal corruption. During the reporting period, however, its ability to investigate complex organised-crime cases improved, supported by stronger institutional integrity. SPAK has pursued high-level corruption cases, including investigations involving the deputy prime minister and other current and former officials. With support from U.S. and EU partners, SPAK and other Albanian bodies have also moved to sever links between law enforcement and organised crime, contributing to the arrest of several police officers, the chief prosecutor of Vlora, and the dismissal of Albanian State Police Director Ardi Veliu in October 2021.³⁹

Investigators alleged that Ardi Veliu had acted in the *"service of criminal groups and drug trafficking networks"*⁴⁰; however,

³³ (Vija, 2025)

³⁴ (Organisational Staff, 2024; Press Release, 2025)

³⁵ (Media Staff, 2025; Staff, 2025)

³⁶ During her tenure from July 2022 to early 2026, she served concurrently as the Minister of Infrastructure and Energy, a role she held since 2019.

³⁷ (Sinoruka, 2026a)

³⁸ (Sinoruka, 2026a)

³⁹ (News Staff, 2021a)

⁴⁰ (Hoxhaj, 2024)



after his dismissal as national police director, the Socialist Party appointed him deputy minister of infrastructure and energy, effectively shielding him from further prosecution.

His successor, Gledis Nano, was removed in August 2022, a year after his appointment, for failing to halt assassinations and the growth of drug and human trafficking.⁴¹

Nano was replaced by Muhamet Rrumbullaku, who targeted internal corruption and organised crime, leading by late 2024 to prosecutions of several senior officers before Interior Minister Fatmir Xhafa removed him. His successor, Ilir Proda, was already under investigation when he took office: SPAK seized his mobile phone and those of his subordinates over allegations that they had leaked information to violent criminal gangs, allowing them to evade justice.

Proda remained in post for 17 months, until corruption investigations forced his removal in March 2026, when he was replaced by Skënder Hita.⁴² Albania's national police have long been troubled by organised-crime involvement, with several senior officers reportedly *"arrested, charged or sentenced for serious crimes, including helping organised crime networks to execute competitors, allow drug cultivation and launder money. Some officers themselves have been directly involved in drug production and trafficking."*⁴³ The repeated appointment by the Ministry of Interior of police directors who later became subjects of criminal investigations—or, in Rrumbullaku's case, were removed after aggressive anti-corruption action—suggests that Albanian police protection cannot be relied upon to uphold the rule of law.

§A4 Albania's psychosocial structures of family and community.

Albanian society remains shaped by deeply rooted patriarchal norms that emphasise male authority within the family and obedience by women and girls, especially daughters. Although Albania has undergone rapid urbanisation and legal reform since the 1990s, international observers consistently note that family attitudes often lag behind formal legal standards. The United Kingdom Home Office reports that domestic and family life in Albania is still frequently governed by traditional expectations that assign men a dominant role and women a subordinate one, with daughters expected to obey fathers and other senior male relatives. These norms are not confined to rural or remote areas. Although Tirana is Albania's most

Despite the establishment of a formal legal system in Albania, the Kanun continues to exert a strong influence on social behaviour and cultural norms, particularly in rural areas.

urbanised and socially diverse city, research indicates that conservative family structures persist in private life, particularly in households marked by alcohol abuse, intergenerational living, or strong religious or cultural conservatism.

Albania's Institute of Statistics has found that violence against women occurs across all regions and socio-economic groups, and that urban residence does not necessarily protect women from family control or abuse. Concepts of family honour continue to regulate women's behaviour. Actions perceived as undermining family authority or reputation—such as refusing parental control over marriage, choosing one's own partner, engaging in premarital relationships, eloping, or entering an inter-religious relationship—may be treated as serious dishonour.⁴⁴ We have documented that women who challenge these norms often face punishment ranging from social exclusion to physical violence, frequently justified as necessary to "restore" family honour.⁴⁵ Responsibility for enforcing honour is often shared among male relatives, so control and punishment may extend beyond the father to uncles, cousins, or brothers. The Office of the People's Advocate also provides detailed accounts of femicide and gender-based violence in Albania.⁴⁶

We find each of the segments in this profile to be important parts of understanding the whole of related socio-cultural and psychosocial malformation of Albanian society. This especially includes Kanun laws, blood revenge, sacred promises, respect, shame, guilt, and honour. For many Albanian families, especially in traditional and rural areas,



Figure 10 Family members under threat of vendetta by other families live a solitary existence, with some never leaving their homes for decades.

⁴¹ (Xinhua Huaxia, 2026)

⁴² (Staff, 2026)

⁴³ Interviewee 'Elton'.

⁴⁴ OSCE (2019)

⁴⁵ UN Women and UN Albania (2025)

⁴⁶ The Office of the People's Advocate (2021-2023)



family honour is paramount. It is a collective good, and any perceived transgression by an individual—especially a woman—may be seen as bringing shame on the entire family. That shame is treated not as private but as public. If a woman is seen to challenge the male head of household, or if her reputation is tarnished, it is often viewed as an assault on the family’s honour.⁴⁷

§§A4.1 Kanun i Skanderbeg.



Figure 11 Cover of a reprinted Text on Albanian Kanun

During the communist years, legal rule in Albania rested less on formal law than on the authority of Hoxha and his subordinates. In the absence of the kinds of social laws typical of representative government, older codes of conduct and jurisprudence continued through the Albanian Kanuni, a literary monument of jurisprudence dating to the early 1500s. The Kanuni formalised Albanian social life and is associated with Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg, the fifteenth-century warrior and leader who resisted the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁸

With the dismantling of religiously based systems of social morality, Skanderbeg’s ancient Kanuni became the default framework for much of Albanian society, especially outside Tirana. Modern Albanian governance has been unable to break the Kanun’s hold over the population for many of the same reasons that Enver Hoxha could not. Skanderbeg remains one of the strongest symbols of Albanian identity, and his life and rule still occupy a central place in Albanian

and Kosovar culture. For at least five centuries, Albanian customary laws codified by the Kanuni have served as a principal social contract among families and tribes. The Kanun combines strong pre-Christian elements with later Christian influences. Although secular, it has long exercised cross-religious authority among both Muslim and Christian Albanians. It is also regarded as a literary monument of interest to Indo-European studies because it preserves legal practices of great antiquity.

The Kanun has shaped Albanian society for centuries through orally transmitted rules governing family life, property, conflict resolution, hospitality, and social conduct. Though not a formal legal code in the modern sense, it has profoundly shaped Albanian culture and identity. Deeply rooted in Albania’s tribal structure, it centres on honour and “besa” (a sacred promise or vow), both regarded as essential to social cohesion and stable relationships. It also provides frameworks for dispute resolution, often through elders or appointed mediators, and regulates land, water, and other property matters. One part of the Kanun concerns blood feuds (“giakmarria”), which were severely distorted under the authoritarian pressures of Hoxha’s communist regime. During his rule, Hoxha tried to suppress the Kanun and eliminate references to the Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit, and popular adherence to it became part



Figure 12 King Skanderbeg, Albania’s Cultural Icon and founder of Kanun

The Kanun emphasizes the importance of family and kinship ties, with powerful rules governing family relations, property inheritance, marriage, hospitality, proper conduct, and other aspects of social interaction.

of hidden resistance. After Hoxha’s death, the Kanun re-emerged openly as a replacement for totalitarian rule, but its practices had changed during the intervening half century, and not for the better.

of hidden resistance. After Hoxha’s death, the Kanun re-emerged openly as a replacement for totalitarian rule, but its practices had changed during the intervening half century, and not for the better.

§§A4.2 Malformation of Kanuni into a terrifying nightmare.

Much of the Kanun’s tradition of conflict resolution was lost during the communist era, especially as Hoxha’s regime targeted clan and tribal elders as threats to his power. Without effective mechanisms for resolving disputes, many conflicts deteriorated into violence causing injury and death. Justice under the Kanun became corrupted, with both sides claiming victimhood and asserting a right to exact “giakmarria,” or vengeance, on the other family. Under traditional Kanuni rules, when a feud ends in murder, the aggrieved party may kill a male member of the offending family in retribution. But the code came to be applied in far more distorted ways, despite having no formal recognition in Albanian law. The traumatic psychosocial deformation of Albanian society under Hoxha’s violent authoritarian rule turned even minor disputes into

⁴⁷ (Arsovska, 2006; Sadiku, 2014; Avdiaj and Avdiaj, 2015; Xhaxho, 2018)

⁴⁸ The customary rules set out by the Kanun were orally spread, from generation to generation and then later on were collected and compiled into “Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit” by the priest Shjefen Gjeqovi. The formation of the Kanun likely occurred during the reign of Skanderbeg in the 15th century, whose valiant struggle against the Ottomans has cemented his status as Albania’s national hero. Ottoman rule also led to the conversion of a large segment of the Albanian population to Islam, creating religious diversity that continues to be a factor in Albanian society.



existential struggles for family survival.

By eliminating elders, clan leaders, and family` property rights, Hoxha broke down centuries of Albanian social order, replacing ordinary family and social life with conflicts generated by his violence but redirected inward against the population, which could not openly resist the regime. One major corruption of the Kanun was the transmission of family culpability across generations. Many children and adults now living under a Kanun sentence of *giakmarria*, or blood death sentence, bear the burden of verdicts imposed before they were born. Other distortions concern who may be held responsible for a family member's acts.

Traditionally, only a male member of the offending family could be targeted, yet a 16-year-old girl, Marija, was reportedly executed under the Kanun in place of her brother when the aggrieved family could not find him. Other rules require that vengeance not be carried out against someone inside the family home. As a result, many families remain trapped in blood feuds for decades, unable to let their sons or daughters leave the house. Children do not attend school and dare not go beyond the front yard, where the Kanun holds they cannot be harmed. *"The Kanun still exists in Albania. It is somewhere in people's minds."* The current judicial code of Kanuni allows blood penalties to fall on present and future generations.

Many children and adults under threat of execution were not even born when the alleged original crime was committed. Many of the actual perpetrators are in prison, have been released, or have long since died, yet their relatives continue to live under Kanuni sentence. *"We grew up with the reality of Kanuni, so how to not"* *"We have had these problems of blood debts for years now... it's getting more and more complicated because they are angry, very angry in the other families..."* At the centre of Albanian participation in the Kanun—as victims, perpetrators, and bystanders—are unresolved trauma, alienation, shame, and rage. The Albanian government's inability to regulate or halt Kanun practices reflects long-standing anger, pride, ignorance, and intransigence as the country struggles to emerge as a modern and prosperous democracy. The police are likewise unable to cope with the population's continued reliance on the Kanun, and they also struggle to combat illegal drug production, which rivals a significant share of the country's economy and contributes to the corruption that democratic institutions attempt to address.



Figure 14 Albanian school teacher 'Liliana' escorts children under Kanun *giakmarria* or blood death sentence to a school event.

One example of police powerlessness is the work of a schoolteacher named Liliana, who travels by small bus with a two- to three-car police escort to collect children living under blood-feud death sentences. Parents entrust their children, aged 6 to 18, to her so they can attend school and social events without being killed. On each trip, Liliana and the children are guarded by police. She ensures that their faces are not photographed or filmed and carefully selects routes and venues that her small security detail can protect. Parents wait anxiously in their front yards as she takes charge of their children, pleading with her to keep them safe. Liliana says, "I swear to God they are like my own children."

§§A4.3 Religious Tolerance.

Albania is often described as religiously tolerant, and inter-religious coexistence is frequently cited as a positive feature of Albanian society. That broader tolerance, however, does not necessarily extend into family life. Research indicates that inter-religious relationships may be socially visible yet still provoke strong resistance within conservative households, especially when daughters are involved. Family expectations around religion and marriage remain influential, even in otherwise pluralistic settings. Many people still identify with the religion of their childhood—Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, or Catholic—suggesting a cultural rather than strictly doctrinal attachment. Family remains the main driver of religious practice, and attitudes toward intermarriage continue to be shaped by family and community expectations. Support for inter-religious marriage also varies by region, age group, and denomination.⁴⁹

Relationships between a Christian woman and a Muslim man may be seen by some families as a dual affront to religious identity and patriarchal authority. Although women are legally free to choose their partners, that autonomy is often



Figure 13 Albanian police escort a bus full of Kanun sentenced children to prevent them from being killed for the sins of their families' past.

⁴⁹ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2024)
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constrained in practice by fear of family retaliation. Parental consent is not legally required, but it still carries considerable social weight, and refusal to comply may lead to punishment or expulsion from the family. Where a woman marries without permission and leaves the family home, documented reactions in Albania include threats, attempts at forced separation, long-term rejection, and sometimes violence. These reactions tend to be more severe where the father exercises strong control over the family and regards the relationship as dishonourable.⁵⁰

§§A4.4 Risk of Domestic Violence and Honour-Based Violence.

Domestic violence in Albania is widespread and remains significantly underreported. National surveys and international monitoring bodies consistently report high prevalence rates. The Albanian Demographic and Health Survey found that about half of Albanian women have experienced some form of domestic or family violence in their lifetime. The U.S. Department of State likewise reports that domestic violence against women and children is common, and that enforcement of protective measures remains inconsistent, especially when abuse occurs within the family.⁵¹ Violence by fathers, uncles, and other male relatives is well documented, particularly in families marked by alcohol dependency and entrenched patriarchal attitudes.⁵²

International observers note that such abuse often begins in childhood and can continue for years without intervention, as family members discourage reporting and authorities hesitate to interfere in what are treated as private family matters. Domestic violence is often tolerated and concealed in Albanian society because deep-rooted patriarchal norms frame it as a private issue.⁵³ Many cases go unreported, especially in rural areas, where violence continues to be excused and women often blame themselves. There is also widespread lack of awareness among women and girls about domestic violence laws, protection measures, and legal remedies, or even that such violence is a violation of human rights and a punishable crime.⁵⁴ Although Albanian law does not recognise “honour-based violence” as a separate legal category, NGOs, international organisations, and the UK Home Office recognise honour-motivated harm as a real phenomenon. The 2024 UK Home Office CPIN states that perceived dishonour can trigger serious violence, including death threats, particularly where a woman has married or eloped without family consent.

While not all cases become lethal, documented threats by family members—especially when coupled with a history of severe violence—are treated in country guidance as credible indicators of risk. For a woman with a documented history of extreme intrafamilial abuse, sexual violence tolerated by relatives, defiance of paternal authority through marriage without consent, and explicit death threats, the risk of renewed violence on return would be real and foreseeable in the Albanian context. The involvement of extended family members further heightens that risk, because responsibility for enforcing honour is often collective rather than individual. Domestic violence in Albania is not merely common; it is embedded in social structures shaped by patriarchal traditions. It reflects not only individual abuse but also systems of control, respect, and social order. At its centre are concepts such as honour (nderi), shame (turp), and guilt (fajësia).

Although blood feuding is a distinct phenomenon, its underlying logic—intense concern with honour, collective family responsibility for perceived slights, and the potential for extreme retaliation—contributes to a broader climate in which violence, especially against women, can escalate when honour is perceived to be breached.⁵⁵ Domestic violence is not a feud in the classic sense, but the deep cultural importance of family honour means that if a woman’s actions are seen to bring public shame, family members may respond severely in an effort to “restore” that honour through control or violence. In this logic, personal acts become public affronts that bring collective shame. In some distorted interpretations, extreme violence is then justified as necessary to reclaim control and reputation. This is a perversion of traditional honour codes, but it draws on the same deep cultural emphasis on public perception and male dominance.

§§A4.5 Sexual Abuse.

Sexual abuse of children and adolescents in Albania, particularly by family members, is widely recognised by international monitoring bodies as a serious but largely hidden



Figure 15

⁵⁰ (Tokrri, 2019)

⁵¹ (US Department of State, 2023)

⁵² (UN Women and UN Albania, 2025)

⁵³ (Haar, 2013)

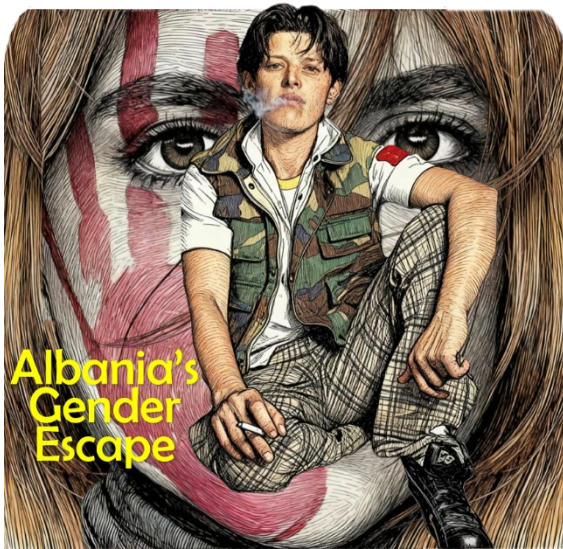
⁵⁴ (UK Home Office CPIN, 2022)

⁵⁵ (Xhaxho, 2018)



problem. 85 percent of victims of sexual crimes in Albania are girls under 18. It is significantly underreported not because it is rare, but because of intense social stigma, fear of retaliation, and strong cultural pressure to protect family reputation over victim safety. This is especially true in cases of incest or abuse by extended family members such as cousins, uncles, or other male relatives living within or closely connected to the household. The United States Department of State (2023) has repeatedly noted that sexual abuse, including of minors, occurs in Albania and that cases involving family members are among the least likely to be reported to authorities. Victims often face disbelief or minimisation, particularly when the alleged perpetrator is a relative, and families frequently discourage reporting to avoid shame or legal consequences for male relatives. The Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) has highlighted that victims of sexual violence in Albania, especially children, are commonly pressured into silence by family members.⁵⁶

Patriarchal attitudes often lead to victims being blamed, accused of provoking the abuse, or told that disclosure would destroy the family. In cases of incest, the stigma is especially acute, and families may prioritise preserving family unity over protecting the child. As a result, perpetrators are often shielded rather than confronted, and abuse may continue for long periods. Abuse by a cousin or uncle is not necessarily treated as less serious; instead,



it can make disclosure even harder. Extended family members often play a major role in household life and decision-making, and reporting one relative can implicate others who knew of the abuse or failed to intervene. International and Albanian NGOs report that fathers or senior male relatives are not infrequently aware of sexual abuse but take no action, whether because they disbelieve the victim, fear social consequences, or view the matter as private. Such inaction is consistent with documented patterns of complicity and silence in cases of intrafamilial abuse. Children and adolescents who resist or disclose abuse within the family may face further violence, confinement, withdrawal from education, or expulsion from the family home.⁵⁷

Albanian girls perceived as having brought shame on the family—even when they are victims of sexual violence—may be punished rather than protected, particularly in families with strong honour-based values (see previous sections and background information).⁵⁸ Although Albanian law criminalises sexual abuse, including rape and sexual violence against minors, major practical barriers to justice remain.

Figure 16 Albanian girls at risk of sexual assault or sexual slavery transition their outward appearance and personality to that of a male to avoid rape and sexual enslavement.

Reporting often requires victims to deal with police and prosecutors who may lack specialist training in trauma, especially in cases involving children or incest. Victims may also be required to give repeated statements, sometimes in the presence of family members, which can be retraumatising. Conviction rates for sexual offences remain low, and cases are often delayed or discontinued because of insufficient evidence, withdrawal of complaints under family pressure, or intimidation of the victim. Support services for survivors of childhood sexual abuse exist mainly through NGOs, but access is uneven and capacity is limited.⁵⁹

Long-term psychological support, trauma-informed therapy, and safe accommodation are not consistently available, especially for women without family support or financial independence. Survivors may also struggle to access sustained help once they reach adulthood, and services are often concentrated in major cities, leaving many women without realistic options for recovery or protection. Importantly, survivors of childhood sexual abuse in Albania often remain at risk well into adulthood, particularly if they stay in or return to the same family or community.⁶⁰ Disclosure does not necessarily bring safety; it may instead increase the risk of retaliation, social exclusion, or further violence. Where a survivor later challenges family authority in other ways, such as by choosing her own partner or leaving the family home, past abuse may be reinterpreted by the family as evidence of dishonour rather than victimisation, further weakening her position within the

⁵⁶ (GREVIO) (2024)

⁵⁷ GREVIO (2024)

⁵⁸ The UK Home Office CPIN (2024)

⁵⁹ (Arsovska, 2006; Tahsini et al., 2024)

⁶⁰ (The Advocates for Human Rights, 2019)



family. Thus, a woman who experienced prolonged sexual abuse by a family member, with her father's knowledge and inaction, would fit known patterns of intrafamilial sexual violence in Albania. She would also face significant barriers to reporting, limited access to protection or justice, and an ongoing risk of blame, rejection, or further abuse if she returned to her family environment.⁶¹

§§A4.6 Treatment of Single Mothers.

Single mothers in Albania are among the most socially and economically vulnerable groups, especially when they lack support from their family of origin. Albanian society still places strong emphasis on the traditional family unit, with marriage, paternal authority, and extended-family support seen as central to social stability. Women raising children outside that framework, particularly without family involvement or approval, are often viewed as having departed from accepted social norms. Even in urban centres such as Tirana, this can lead to stigma, social exclusion, and discrimination.

The UK Home Office CPIN (2022) recognises that women without family protection face heightened vulnerability and notes that single mothers are at increased risk of poverty, marginalisation, and exploitation. This is especially acute where their circumstances involve perceived moral transgression, such as having a child outside a family-sanctioned marriage or returning from abroad after fleeing familial control. Social attitudes toward single mothers are shaped by honour, shame, and expectations of female respectability. Women who give birth outside traditional family arrangements may be blamed for their situation and seen as morally suspect. UN Women has documented that this stigma can lead to community isolation, weaker informal support networks, and greater exposure to harassment. It is often intensified when a woman's family has rejected her, because family backing remains a key source of social legitimacy and protection in Albania.⁶²

Economic marginalisation is a defining feature of many single mothers' lives. Employment opportunities for women are limited, especially for those with young children and no childcare. Work available in these circumstances is often informal, insecure, and poorly paid, such as domestic labour, cleaning, or service jobs without contracts or legal protections. The absence of formal employment increases exposure to exploitation, including unpaid labour, sexual harassment, and coercive relationships entered for survival rather than choice. Housing presents a further barrier. Albania's rental market is largely informal and often depends on personal recommendations, family guarantees, or advance payments that unsupported single mothers may be unable to provide.

Landlords may also be reluctant to rent to single women with children, particularly where there is no male co-signer or family intermediary. As a result, many single mothers end up in unstable or overcrowded housing or dependent on acquaintances or partners, which increases vulnerability to abuse. State assistance exists in principle but remains limited in scope and adequacy. Social payments are low and often insufficient to cover basic living costs, especially in urban areas. Accessing benefits typically requires documentation, stable residence, and contact with local authorities, which can be difficult for women who are relocating, hiding from family members, or coping with psychological distress. International observers have noted that Albania's social protection mechanisms do not adequately meet the needs of women raising children alone, especially those without family networks (see Kaser, 2012). Single mothers returning from abroad face additional scrutiny and stigma. Return from Western Europe after an asylum claim may arouse suspicion and resentment, particularly where the woman's departure is linked to family conflict or perceived dishonour. Families may see return as a renewed opportunity to reassert control, while communities may treat the woman as someone who failed abroad or shamed her family by seeking protection elsewhere.

The UK Home Office acknowledges that returnees may face reintegration difficulties and social hostility, especially women whose circumstances depart from traditional norms. The absence of family support also has serious implications for personal safety. In Albania, family networks often provide informal protection against harassment, exploitation, and violence. Single mothers without such protection are more exposed to predatory behaviour and have fewer routes to assistance. Where a woman is already at risk from her own family, the lack of alternative protective networks compounds that vulnerability. See the background information and previous sections for further context. Taken together, the treatment of single mothers in Albania must be understood not only as a matter of social attitude but as a structural condition affecting access to safety, dignity, and survival. For a young woman returning with an infant, without family support, and already stigmatised by her relationship choices and flight abroad, the country evidence indicates a high likelihood of discrimination,

⁶¹ UN Women and GREVIO both report similar issues.

⁶² Kaser, 2012



economic hardship, social isolation, and exposure to harm. These conditions are particularly severe for women with histories of trauma and mental health difficulties, for whom the absence of stability and support may have serious consequences for both mother and child.

§§A4.7 Child-Specific Risks.

When assessing risk on return to Albania, it is necessary to consider not only the danger to the mother but also the risks faced by her child in the context of family-based and honour-related conflict. International and UK guidance recognise that in situations involving domestic or honour-based violence, children may become direct or indirect targets of harm. This risk is heightened where the child is closely associated with the perceived source of dishonour, such as being born outside family control or into a relationship the family opposed (see background information and previous sections). In Albanian family structures, children are often seen as belonging not only to the mother but to the wider family unit, especially the paternal line.

Where a woman has defied family authority, her child may be treated as a symbol of that defiance. International observers and NGOs working in Albania report that children in such circumstances may face threats, neglect, or coercive control as a way to punish the mother or compel compliance. Although extreme acts such as killing children are rare, threats to harm them or forcibly remove them from the mother have been documented in family conflict and honour-based disputes. Child abuse and neglect remain serious problems in Albania and state responses are often inadequate, particularly where abuse occurs within the family.⁶³ Child protection mechanisms exist but remain limited in capacity and effectiveness, especially when the alleged perpetrators are parents or close relatives. Authorities may hesitate to intervene decisively in family disputes, and social services often lack the resources to provide sustained protection. In honour-based cases, the presence of a child can increase rather than reduce risk.

Families may see the child as evidence of moral transgression and may seek to “correct” the situation by separating the child from the mother or reasserting control over the child’s upbringing.⁶⁴ This can include attempts to take custody, pressure the mother to return to the family home, or threats designed to force compliance. In families with strong patriarchal views, the wishes and safety of the mother may be subordinated to perceived family interests. Protection for infants and young children in Albania depends heavily on family cooperation and the willingness of local authorities to intervene. International reporting indicates that child protection units often operate with limited staff and resources and that intervention thresholds may be high. In practice, authorities may act only after harm has occurred rather than preventing foreseeable risk. Where threats come from extended family members rather than the immediate household, responses may be even weaker. The effectiveness of restraining orders and similar measures in protecting children is also limited.

As noted in assessments of domestic-violence enforcement, breaches are common and not always addressed promptly by police. For an infant wholly dependent on the mother, any failure to enforce protective measures exposes the child to the same risks faced by the mother, without any independent means of seeking help. The mother’s social position also directly affects the child’s safety. A single mother without family support is less able to access informal protection, stable housing, or reliable childcare. Economic hardship and social isolation can increase exposure to unsafe environments and unsafe people, heightening the child’s vulnerability to neglect or harm. International organisations working in Albania have repeatedly identified children of marginalised women as among the most at-risk groups.⁶⁵

Where a woman has been threatened with violence by her father and extended family and honour-based motives are present, it would be unrealistic to assume that the child would be insulated from harm. UK Home Office country-of-origin evidence (from 2019 onward) supports the conclusion that children may be used as instruments of control or punishment in family conflicts and that state protection mechanisms are often insufficient to prevent such harm. For an infant dependent on a mother who lacks effective protection, the risk to the child must therefore be regarded as serious and ongoing upon return to Albania.

§§A4.8 Mental Health and Vulnerability.

Albania’s mental health system remains underdeveloped and under-resourced despite formal commitments to reform.

⁶³ The U.S. Department of State (2022 and 2023)

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ (US Department of Labor, 2020; Child Protection Hub for South East Europe, 2022; The Children’s Legal Centre and UNICEF Albania, 2007)



International organisations consistently report that access to appropriate services is limited, unevenly distributed, and insufficient for people with complex trauma-related conditions. The World Health Organization notes that Albania's mental health services are marked by a shortage of trained professionals, limited community-based care, and significant disparities between urban and rural areas.⁶⁶ Although some outpatient services exist in major cities such as Tirana, they are overstretched and often focused on acute psychiatric conditions rather than long-term psychological support or trauma-informed therapy. Specialist services for survivors of domestic or sexual violence are particularly limited, and long waiting times are common.

Access to care is also closely tied to social stability, including secure housing, documentation, and family support. Women without family backing often face practical barriers such as lack of information, financial constraints, and difficulty navigating administrative systems. For single mothers with infants, regular appointments may be unrealistic because of childcare duties and the lack of affordable childcare. Mental health services are rarely integrated with social support, forcing women to manage housing, income, and safety concerns alongside treatment—an overwhelming burden for those with trauma-related symptoms. Social stigma further restricts access. Mental health difficulties are often poorly understood and may be treated as a source of shame, especially for women. Disclosure of psychological distress can lead to judgement or exclusion, discouraging people from seeking help. This stigma is compounded for women already marginalised by family rejection, single motherhood, or perceived dishonour. International observers note that women with mental health difficulties in Albania may be blamed for their condition or encouraged to endure symptoms privately rather than seek professional support. The effects of untreated or inadequately treated trauma are substantial.

Survivors of childhood physical and sexual abuse commonly experience long-term consequences, including post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance, and impaired functioning. These effects can be intensified by displacement, fear of return, and responsibility for a young child. Victims of domestic and sexual violence in Albania often lack access to appropriate psychosocial support, increasing the risk of chronic mental health problems.⁶⁷ Mental health vulnerability also heightens practical risk. Women experiencing trauma-related symptoms may be less able to seek help, advocate for themselves, or respond effectively to threats. Fear, hypervigilance, and emotional exhaustion can impair decision-making and increase dependence on others, including people who may pose a danger. In the Albanian context, where informal networks often substitute for state support, that dependence can increase exposure to exploitation or further abuse.

For single mothers, these vulnerabilities directly affect both mother and child. Postnatal mental health difficulties, sleep deprivation, and trauma-related symptoms can undermine a woman's ability to secure employment, maintain housing, or deal with authorities. Without family support, the combined burden of childcare, economic insecurity, and psychological distress can quickly become unmanageable. International research shows that women in such circumstances face heightened risks of social isolation, poverty, and unsafe living conditions. Most importantly, vulnerability is not static. Return to an environment associated with past abuse can trigger re-traumatisation and worsen existing symptoms. Anticipated contact with abusive family members, combined with the absence of protective support, may significantly increase anxiety, depression, and the risk of psychological deterioration. International protection standards recognise that this kind of vulnerability must be considered when assessing both risk of harm and the feasibility of return.

Albanian woman who present with a history of severe childhood abuse, ongoing mental health difficulties, recent childbirth, and no family support would face major barriers to accessing adequate mental health care in Albania. Those barriers, combined with social stigma and structural weakness, would significantly increase her vulnerability to harm, exploitation, and further psychological deterioration upon return.

§§A4.9 State Protection of Vulnerable Population Segments.

Albania has in recent years adopted a legislative framework intended to address domestic violence, sexual abuse, and violence against women. Domestic violence is criminalised under the Albanian Criminal Code, and the law provides for emergency and longer-term protection orders, police intervention, and prosecution. Albania is also a party to the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention). Yet international monitoring bodies consistently emphasise that formal legal provisions do not translate into

⁶⁶ (WHO, 2020)

⁶⁷ U.S. Department of State (2022)



effective protection in practice, especially where family members are the perpetrators.

Although police are formally required to respond to domestic-violence reports, their willingness and capacity to intervene effectively vary considerably.⁶⁸ Cases involving fathers, uncles, or other close relatives are often treated as private family matters rather than criminal acts, especially where the victim is young or financially dependent on the family. Police may encourage reconciliation or return to the family home rather than pursuing protection or prosecution, even where there is a history of serious violence. Corruption and informal influence further weaken state protection.

Corruption remains a significant problem within the Albanian police, and judiciary and that personal connections or family influence can affect whether cases are investigated or pursued.⁶⁹ This is especially relevant in family-based violence cases, where perpetrators may rely on social standing, local ties, or pressure on the victim to avoid legal consequences. Protection orders are central to Albania's domestic-violence framework, but enforcement is inconsistent. We find that these orders are frequently breached and that police responses to breaches are often delayed or ineffective. Victims may have to report violations repeatedly, placing the burden of enforcement on them rather than on the authorities. In both rural and urban areas, women report that protection orders do not prevent ongoing harassment, threats, or violence, particularly where the perpetrator is a family member with continued access to the victim.

Prosecutions for domestic violence and sexual abuse do occur, but conviction rates remain low relative to prevalence. International observers note that cases are often discontinued because of insufficient evidence, withdrawal of complaints under family pressure, or intimidation of victims. In intrafamilial sexual-abuse cases, prosecution is especially unlikely, because victims may be unwilling or unable to testify against relatives and authorities may lack the specialist training needed to investigate such cases sensitively and effectively. Social services and child-protection mechanisms are also limited in capacity and reach. Although child protection units exist, their effectiveness depends heavily on cooperation from families and local authorities. Where the alleged abusers are the child's own parents or extended relatives, intervention may be delayed or minimal.

Child abuse and neglect remain serious concerns and that institutional responses are often inadequate, particularly in cases involving family violence.⁷⁰ For women facing honour-based or family-motivated violence, state protection is further undermined by social attitudes that normalise male authority and family control. Patriarchal norms among law-enforcement and judicial actors can lead to victim-blaming, minimisation of harm, or failure to recognise the seriousness of threats.⁷¹ Death threats by family members are not always treated as indicators of imminent danger, despite evidence that such threats are commonly used as tools of control and intimidation in Albania. In assessing whether the Albanian state could realistically protect a woman facing domestic and honour-related violence, it is necessary to consider not only the existence of legal remedies but also their accessibility and effectiveness.

A woman subjected to long-term abuse beginning in childhood, involving multiple family members and explicit death threats, would face major obstacles to obtaining meaningful protection. Reporting abuse by a father or extended relative would likely expose her to retaliation, family pressure to withdraw complaints, and social isolation.⁷² Even if she obtained a protection order, enforcement would depend on the willingness and capacity of local police, which international evidence suggests cannot be relied upon in such cases. Effective protection must also be durable and capable of preventing future harm. International guidance recognises that protection existing only on paper, or maintained only through repeated action by the victim, does not meet the threshold of sufficiency.⁷³

In Albania, where domestic and honour-based violence remain widespread and systemic weaknesses persist, it would be unrealistic to conclude that the authorities could provide consistent and effective protection to a woman and her child facing threats from their own family. The country evidence therefore indicates that while Albania has formal mechanisms to address domestic and sexual violence, those mechanisms often fail in practice, especially in cases involving intrafamilial abuse, honour-based harm, and vulnerable women without family support. For a woman subjected to violent domestic abuse and sexual assault, reliance on state protection alone would not be a realistic or effective safeguard against serious

⁶⁸ UK Home Office CPIN (2025)

⁶⁹ U.S. Department of State (2025)

⁷⁰ U.S. Department of State (2024)

⁷¹ GREVIO

⁷² (also see UN CEDAW, 2016; US Department of State, 2019)

⁷³ (see also Albanian Helsinki Committee, 2021)



harm.

SA5 Internal Relocation for Vulnerable Persons in Albania.

Although Albania is geographically small, dense family and community networks, strong informal ties, and frequent movement within extended families significantly limit internal relocation as a protective option for women fleeing family-based violence. International and UK guidance recognise that extended families in Albania often remain closely connected even when members live in different cities, and that information about a woman's whereabouts may be shared through relatives, acquaintances, religious communities, or informal employment networks.⁷⁴ The Women who relocate internally to escape family violence may still be traced by relatives, particularly where the family is motivated by honour or perceived shame.⁷⁵ This risk is greater where a woman has left without consent, because relatives may actively seek to reassert control or punish perceived disobedience. In honour-based cases, relocation may not reduce risk at all. On the contrary, international observers report that disappearance or relocation may be treated as an escalation of dishonour, prompting greater efforts to find the woman.

Where responsibility for restoring honour is shared among multiple relatives, the family's capacity to pursue her across regions increases. Albania's small size, frequent internal travel, and strong kinship networks make long-term anonymity difficult. Economic feasibility is also central to the relocation assessment. A young single mother in Albania with no family support is likely to struggle severely to secure independent housing. The rental market often depends on informal guarantees, advance payments, or personal connections, which women fleeing family violence usually lack. Employment opportunities for women, especially those with childcare responsibilities, are limited and poorly paid. Women without family backing face disproportionately high levels of unemployment and poverty. Childcare is an additional and often insurmountable barrier.⁷⁶ Public childcare for infants is limited, and private childcare is unaffordable for most single mothers. Without reliable childcare, sustained employment is difficult, which in turn undermines the ability to maintain housing and basic subsistence. These pressures increase vulnerability to exploitation, including unsafe informal work and dependence on individuals who may pose further risks.⁷⁷

Shelters and NGO-run safe houses are often cited as sources of support for women fleeing violence in Albania. Although they do exist, they are primarily emergency measures. International reports emphasise that shelters generally offer only short-term accommodation, often for a few weeks or months, and are not designed to provide long-term resettlement or anonymity. Capacity is limited, and admission criteria may exclude women who do not meet specific thresholds of immediate danger. After leaving shelters, women are often expected to return to family environments or find their own accommodation, which may be neither feasible nor safe. In practice, shelter locations are not always confidential, and women have reported being found by family members even while in protected accommodation.⁷⁸ This is particularly concerning where extended kin networks are involved. Longer-term support with housing, employment, and childcare remains limited and fragmented. Social isolation is another major factor. Internal relocation often requires a woman to sever ties with her family and community, leaving her without support in a society where family networks are central to daily life. That isolation can worsen mental health difficulties and reduce her ability to seek help or assert her rights. For women with trauma-related conditions, the absence of a support network further undermines the sustainability of relocation. In assessing reasonableness, international protection standards require consideration not only of physical safety but also of whether relocation would impose undue hardship.

In Albania, a young single mother with an infant, no financial resources, no family support, and a history of severe trauma would face substantial and continuing obstacles to survival. The combined effect of economic insecurity, childcare responsibilities, social isolation, and the ongoing risk of being traced suggests that internal relocation would not provide a durable or reasonable alternative to protection. In such circumstances, relocation within Albania is unlikely to offer meaningful safety or sustainability. Rather than reducing risk, it may expose the woman and her child to further harm, exploitation, and instability. Return to Albania after seeking asylum abroad can also carry serious social and familial consequences, especially for women whose departure was linked to family conflict, perceived dishonour, or rejection of

⁷⁴ (de Rapper, 2002; Neale, 2018 and 2021; and INSTAT, 2019)

⁷⁵ UK Home Office CPIN (2024)

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ UN Women

⁷⁸ As UN Women and UN Albania (2025)



patriarchal authority. Although there is no formal state punishment for claiming asylum, international and UK guidance recognise that returnees may face stigma, suspicion, and heightened scrutiny from their families and communities. These consequences are especially pronounced for women who left without family consent and whose absence is associated with conduct considered morally or socially unacceptable.

Returnees may encounter reintegration difficulties, including social hostility and family rejection, particularly where their actions are seen as bringing shame on the family.⁷⁹ For women, leaving the country to escape family control or pursue an unsanctioned relationship may itself be viewed as a serious challenge to family authority. In families governed by honour-based norms, flight abroad is not treated as a neutral or protective act but as a public declaration of disobedience. International research indicates that this can intensify family anger because it moves the conflict from the private sphere into external scrutiny. Families may feel that their authority has been challenged not only domestically but internationally, especially where the woman has sought protection from foreign authorities. This can strengthen the perceived need to reassert control or punish the source of dishonour. Seeking asylum may also deepen negative perceptions within the family. Relatives may interpret the claim as an accusation against them or as evidence of betrayal. In cases involving domestic or sexual abuse, disclosure—or even suspected disclosure—may be treated as bringing shame on the family rather than as a legitimate attempt to seek safety. As discussed elsewhere in this appendix, that reaction is consistent with documented patterns in Albania, where family reputation is often prioritised over individual wellbeing, particularly for women.

Return after a prolonged absence may also trigger renewed efforts by family members to find and confront the woman. Extended relatives may become involved, especially where responsibility for restoring honour is collective. Information about a returnee's presence in Albania may spread quickly through community networks, religious institutions, or informal employment contacts. The risk of being traced is therefore not confined to the immediate family but may involve a broader circle of relatives. For women who have married without consent or had children abroad, return may be seen as compounding the original dishonour. Rather than creating an opportunity for reconciliation, it may be viewed as further proof of defiance. The presence of a child born outside family control may symbolise the permanence of the perceived transgression, reinforcing hostility rather than reducing it. The UK Home Office notes that in such circumstances family attitudes are unlikely to soften over time, particularly where there is a history of violence or coercion. Community attitudes can further compound the risk.

Returnees who sought asylum may be viewed with suspicion, seen as having failed abroad, or accused of damaging Albania's reputation. Women may face gossip, moral judgement, and social exclusion, especially in conservative environments. This can further isolate them and reduce access to informal support. The psychological impact of return after asylum is also relevant. Women with trauma histories may experience heightened fear and anxiety on return, especially where they anticipate confrontation with relatives who previously abused or threatened them. International guidance recognises that this psychological vulnerability can impair a person's ability to seek protection or navigate state systems effectively, further undermining safety. Accordingly, for a woman whose departure, marriage, and motherhood are all associated with perceived dishonour, return may act as a catalyst for renewed or escalated family violence. Country evidence supports the conclusion that, in such circumstances, having sought asylum abroad may increase rather than reduce the danger posed by family members, particularly where threats have already been made.

⁷⁹ The UK Home Office CPIN (2022 and 2024)



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