



Appendix A – Country of Origin Report: ALBANIA

§A1 Balkans Regional & Albanian Country Context.

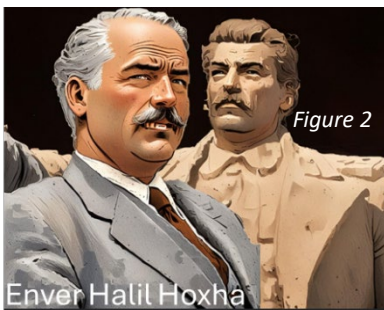
Albania is an ethnicity, a language, and a sovereign republic.¹ The majority of ethnic Albanians live in Albania, and the remainder live in Kosovo where they are a majority population segment. The graphic map in figure 1 illustrates the geographical context, boundaries, and recent regional violence that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



Figure 1 The Balkan Peninsula

§A2. Albanian Governance, Society, and Security.

Where the Soviet Republic of Yugoslavia was a forced merger of six formerly independent states ruled by Josip Tito, the Socialist Republic of Albania was a single ethnic state ruled by an Albanian communist revolutionary and politician named Enver Halil Hoxha. As an indication of his impact on the country, his house and garden in the capital of Tirana are the only



remaining preserved structure in that neighbourhood. For more than 40 years, Hoxha ruled his country with absolute control over all mechanism of government; political, social, security, intelligence, and military, at one point, serving as the head of state, minister of defense and minister of foreign affairs. Hoxha's conversion of Albania into a soviet republic abolished a short-lived exercise in democracy, which in turn, had only recently abolished the monarchy of King Zog I. Hoxha was a fervent follower of Josef Stalin and implemented state atheism. He ordered the anti-religion pogroms, persecuting both Muslims (58%) and Christians (40%) equally. Hoxha implemented a radical program of state control using totalitarian methods of governance. He outlawed travelling abroad and forbid private proprietorship. His security services imprisoned, executed, or exiled thousands of landowners, rural clan leaders, peasants who resisted collectivisation, and any communist party or government officials who came into his disfavour or his distrust. Under Hoxha's 41-year rule, Albanians suffered decades of deprivation and austerity. Their individual and collective socialisation into the Balkan region

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.



and European continent was reversed and Albanians became generationally isolated from the world around them. Interviews with younger Albanians informants who came of age at the end of communist rule, describe that the collective experience of life under Hoxha was and is, deeply imprinted within the psychosocial patterns of life, even today:

“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 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

Albania today operates as a parliamentary republic with a multi-party system, reflecting a commitment to democratic principles. The country's political framework is structured around key institutions, including the President, who serves as the head of state; the Prime Minister, who leads the government; a unicameral Parliament, which holds legislative power; and an independent Judiciary responsible for interpreting and applying the law. Despite the establishment of these formal

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

democratic structures, Albania continues to face challenges in its process of democratic consolidation. Issues related to the rule of law, including weaknesses in the judiciary and persistent problems with corruption, remain

significant concerns. These challenges in the effective functioning and public trust in formal governance mechanisms may, in part, contribute to the continued relevance and reliance on informal structures like the Kanun in certain segments of Albanian society. In its pursuit of European Union membership, Albania has embarked on comprehensive reforms aimed at modernizing its public administration to align with EU standards. These reform efforts encompass various aspects of public service, including policy development, human resource management, organizational efficiency, accountability, and service delivery. Simultaneously, Albania has been engaged in a process of decentralization, aimed at devolving power and responsibilities from the central government to local governance units. The establishment and development of these local self-government structures are intended to improve governance and enhance the delivery of social services at the local level, potentially impacting the traditional roles and influence of customary law in these communities. The capital of Tirana represents all of the wealth of the country, with over one million residents, a third of the entire population of Albania. Between the one-third of Albanians who live in the urban capital and the two-thirds of Albanians who live outside of the capital, there is psychosocial gap that continues to widen as Albania aspires to full membership in the European Union. Tirana has undergone a significant transformation since its emergence from a turbulent post-communist era city. Life in Tirana has been marked by considerable progress in economic and social development, with governance improvements playing a crucial role in the country's performance. However, despite these advancements, Albania continues to grapple with notable governance challenges, necessitating ongoing reforms, particularly in the effectiveness of public administration. Particularly notable is the interplay between the nation's modern structures of governance and security and its deep-rooted indigenous customary law, known as the Kanun.⁴ The Kanun represents an ancient body of Albanian traditional customary laws that has historically formed and guided Albanian tribal society. This ancient indigenous system of law and society continues to exert influence over three-quarters of the Albanian population and limits the reach and effectiveness of modern state authority in all parts of the country. Understanding the dynamics between these two

² Informant interviewee 'Arie'

³ Informant interviewees 'Arie' and 'Iris'.

⁴ transmitted orally for centuries and only later codified, most notably in the form of the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini structured into twelve books.



systems—the formal, state-sanctioned governance and security apparatus and the informal, community-driven customary law—is essential for a comprehensive understanding of contemporary Albania.

§A3 Law and Society.

The principles of the Kanun have exerted a profound influence on the organizational structure of Albanian society at various levels. It has historically reinforced patriarchal family structures and clearly defined gender roles within the household and community. Over the past five centuries, Kanuni underpinned the importance of clan loyalty and the concept of collective responsibility among kin groups to the exclusion of both Ottoman and Soviet Empires. The Kanun's influence has been internalized and perpetuated across generations, forming a fundamental layer of Albanian social and cultural identity. The structures of legal rule during the communist years were not based on formal rules of law, but rather, on authoritarian personalities of Hoxha and his subordinates. Under this decades long regime, Albania continued to remain deeply isolated from the other Balkan States and from all of Europe. Within this closed authoritarian society, much of Albania's society took on a decidedly malformed dimension that persists into the present time. In the absence of social laws normally promulgated by modern representative governance, older codes of conduct and rules of jurisprudence, in the form of an Albanian Kanuni, a literary monument of Jurisprudence that dates from the early 1500s.⁵ This Kanuni became the default for most of Albanian society, especially outside of the capital of Tirana. For at least the last five centuries and until today, Albanian customary laws codified by the Kanuni Jurisprudence, have been the principal source of social-contract

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.

between families and tribes of Albania. The Kanuni laws, and Kanun system of traditional observance, mixes strong pre-Christian motifs with those from the Christian. Although the Kanuni is secular, this judicial code holds longstanding, unwavering and unchallenged authority with a cross-religious effectiveness over the Albanians, both Muslim and Christian. The Albanian Kanun is regarded as a literary monument that is of interest to Indo-European studies, reflecting many legal



Figure 4 Judicial Code Kanuni: a harsh rule with violent consequences...debts of blood.

While not a formal legal code in the modern sense, Kanuni has played a significant role in shaping Albanian culture and identity. It's deeply rooted in the tribal structure of Albanian society, and focuses on Honour (dëshëm, shkë) and "besa" (a sacred promise or vow), which are crucial for social cohesion and maintaining relationships. 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. The Kanun addresses issues of land ownership, water access, and other property-related matters. Core tenets included *nderi* (honor), emphasizing integrity and respect within the community; *mikpritja* (hospitality), highlighting the sacred duty to welcome and protect guests; *sjellja* (right conduct), prescribing ethical behaviour and adherence to social norms; and *fis* (kin loyalty), underscoring the paramount importance of familial and clan bonds.

⁵ The customary rules set out by the Kanin were orally spread, from generation to generation and then later on were collected and compiled into "Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit" by the priest Shtjefën 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.



Figure 5 Albanian school teacher 'Liliana' escorts children under Kanun gjakmarria or blood death sentence to a school event.

practices of great antiquity.⁶ The Albanian Kanun system of traditional, customary law has shaped Albanian society for centuries by fusing social cohesion through powerful controls over individual and collective behaviour. These codes of rules and norms are passed down through oral tradition and cover various aspects of social life, including family, property, and conflict resolution. One of the provisions of the Kanun involves provisions related to blood feuds ("gjakmarria"), which under the authoritarian pressures of Hoxha's communist regime, created monstrous aberrations of how 'giakmarria' was to be maintained for social justice. During his reign, Hoxha attempted to halt the use of

Kanun and eliminate all references to the Kanuni I Leke Dukagjinit, and the use of Kanun by the Albanian population became part of their secret resistance. With the death of Hoxha, Kanun reemerged into the open as a replacement for the totalitarian rule of communism, but its practices had changed in the intervening half century, and not for the better. Most of Kanun's practices and knowledge of conflict resolution during the communist era was lost, especially as Hoxha's regime attacked and oppressed clan and tribal elders as a threat to his power. In the absence of positive conflict resolution, many disputes devolved into physical confrontations resulting in injury and death.⁷ The practice of justice under Kanun became corrupted, with both sides claiming to be the aggrieved party and claiming the right to exact 'giakmarria' or vengeance on the family of the other disputant. Under the traditional Kanuni laws, when a feud ends in murder, the aggrieved party has the right to kill a male member of the offending family in retribution. Rather than a simple eye-for-an-eye, other rules can be applied through the code, which is not officially recognized in Albanian law, but which has been imposed, nonetheless. The traumatic psychosocial deformation of Albanian society during the violent authoritarian reign of Hoxha, drove even minor conflicts into existential disputes of family survival. Hoxha's elimination of elders, clan leaders, and family property rights broke down centuries of Albanian social reality, replacing family and social life with endless conflicts generated by Hoxha's violence, but which were turned inward to the population, unable as they were, to express any resistance to the regime. One of the corruptions of the Kanun was the inclusion of generational transmission of family culpability. Many of the children and adults in Albania who are now under the Kanun sentence of gjakmarria, or blood death sentence, are carrying the burden of verdicts long before their own births. Other corruptions of the gjakmarria involve the rules for selecting which family members can be held accountable for the actions of their family members. Traditionally, only a male member of the offending family may be targeted for death or punishment, but a 16-year-old girl Marija, was executed under Kanun in lieu of her brother, whom the aggrieved family was not able to find. Other rules of gjakmarria under Kanun mandate that one vengeance shall be served on a person who is inside the family home. As a result, many families are stuck in these blood feuds for decades, and their sons or daughters are unable to leave their house.



⁶ While the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini is the most widely recognized, it is important to note that different versions of customary law existed across various regions of Albania. For instance, the Kanun of Skanderbeg was prevalent in central Albania, and the Kanun of Labëria governed the southern regions. However, the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini holds particular significance, especially in the northern Gheg regions of Albania and Kosovo, where its influence on social norms and practices remains strong. This geographical concentration suggests that the Kanun's enduring relevance might be closely linked to specific historical, social, and environmental factors that have shaped the cultural landscape of these regions.

⁷ Did Historically, the Kanun also provided the primary legal framework for tribal governance and regulated the complex interactions between different tribes within a region. At the village level, the Kanun has significantly influenced social norms, the mechanisms employed for dispute resolution, and various community practices that shape daily life.



Figure 7 Family members under threat of vendetta by other families live a solitary existence, with some never leaving their homes for decades.

They do not attend school, and dare not venture beyond their front yard, where the laws of Kanun mandate 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 payments to be extracted on current and future generations. Many children and adults under threat of execution from Kanuni were not even born when the alleged original crime was committed. Many of the actual perpetrators were either in prison, released

from prison, or long since passed away, yet their family members continue to live under the sentence of Kanuni execution. *"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..."*⁸ At the centre of Albanians participation in Kanun as victims, perpetrators, and bystanders, are unresolved trauma issues that drive alienation, shame, and rage. The Albanian government's inability to regulate or halt the practices of Kanun result from long unresolved anger, pride, ignorance and intransigence as Albania struggles to emerge as a modern and prosperous democracy. The country's police services are unable to cope with the population's continued reliance on Kanun, and struggle to intervene against Albania's drug illegal drug production which rivals the country's gross domestic product and contributes to the culture of corruption that the democratic government tries to combat. One example of police powerlessness in intervening to protect its citizens is the work of a schoolteacher named 'Liliana' who travels in a small bus, picking up children under a blood-feud death sentence with a 2-3 car police escort. Parents entrust their children to her to bring the children, ages 6 to 18, to school and other social events, preventing the execution of their extra-judicial death sentence while they are in her care. Each trip that she makes, she and her charges are guarded by a police escort. Liliana ensures that the children's faces are not photographed or filmed and establishes routes and venues that can adequately be protected by her small police security detail. The children's parents hover in their front yards as Liliana takes charge of their children, begging her to keep them safe. Liliana says that "I swear to God they are like my own children."⁹



Figure 6 Albanian police escort a bus full of Kanun sentenced children to prevent them from being killed for the sins of their families' past.

The modern governance structures in Albania and the indigenous customary law, the Kanun, exhibit both potential areas of alignment and significant points of conflict. While both systems, at their core, aim to establish and maintain social order, they often employ differing approaches and are grounded in distinct underlying principles. Fundamental differences arise in areas such as the primacy of individual rights versus community obligations, and the role and authority of the state in

⁸ Interviewee 'Elton'.

⁹ Interviewee Liliana



enforcing laws and protecting citizens. A particularly stark area of conflict lies in the realm of gender equality. The Kanun, rooted in a patriarchal social structure, traditionally assigns subordinate roles to women and often limits their rights, particularly in matters of property ownership and inheritance. This stands in direct opposition to the principles of gender equality enshrined in modern Albanian law and international human rights standards. Furthermore, a critical conflict exists between the Kanun's acceptance and detailed regulation of blood feuds as a means of justice and the modern state's unequivocal criminalization of murder. This fundamental clash presents a significant challenge to the establishment and maintenance of the rule of law throughout Albania. The aspiration to join the European Union serves as a powerful external driver for reforms across various sectors in Albania, with governance and the rule of law being key priorities. The EU accession process necessitates the adoption and implementation of a wide range of legal and institutional reforms, particularly in areas such as the judiciary, anti-corruption efforts, and the protection of human rights. These specific requirements directly address areas where the principles and practices of the Kanun might present challenges or offer alternative, potentially conflicting, approaches to governance and justice. The ongoing alignment with EU standards is therefore a significant external factor shaping the evolution of Albanian governance structures and their relationship with traditional customary law.

§A4 Psychosociological Challenges of Albanian Family Life.

The psychological landscape of Albania has been profoundly shaped by its unique historical trajectory, including a long period of isolation under a communist regime, a tumultuous transition to democracy and a market economy, high rates of migration, and the enduring influence of traditional social structures in certain regions. These factors have created a complex interplay of stressors that impact the mental health and well-being of its population across different demographics. While significant strides have been made in reforming mental health services and raising awareness, challenges related to access, stigma, and socio-economic disparities persist. Various segments of the Albanian population experience considerable psychological distress. Key issues include the impact of poverty and unemployment on family well-being, the psychological consequences of migration, the prevalence of domestic violence, challenges in youth development related to education and societal pressures, and the long shadow of traditional codes like the Kanun in specific contexts. The transition from a rigidly controlled, centralized state to an open market economy has instigated profound social and economic changes, inevitably reshaping the contours of Albanian family life. Family, clan, tribe, and village across various socioeconomic strata collectively represent the hierarchical yet interdependent nature of Albanian social organization, extending from the fundamental family unit to broader kinship networks and communal structures. Traditionally, Albanian social life has been deeply anchored in kinship, with the family unit extending beyond the nuclear core to encompass wider networks of clans and tribes, a characteristic particularly pronounced in the northern regions of the country. This historical emphasis on tribal organization and a strong adherence to patrilineal descent has fostered a social environment where individual identity and social standing are intricately linked to extended family affiliations and established hierarchies.

§A4.2 Young Girls.

Persistent patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles, particularly in rural or more conservative areas, often limit young Albanian girls' autonomy, educational aspirations, and subject them to the risk of early marriage or gender-based violence. For example, it is not uncommon for a young girl from a remote village whose dreams of higher education are curtailed by family expectations to marry young and prioritize domestic duties, leading to feelings of hopelessness and diminished self-worth. Exposure to domestic violence, either as a witness or victim, inflicts severe psychological trauma, including depression, anxiety, and PTSD. The pressure to maintain family honour can be immense, further restricting their freedom



The “sworn virgins” of Albania is a phenomenon predominantly found in the remote, mountainous regions of northern Albania and to a lesser extent in neighbouring Balkan areas like Kosovo and Montenegro, represents a unique social custom where a person assigned female at birth takes a vow of lifelong celibacy and assumes the social role and identity of a man. This transformation grants them the rights, responsibilities, and privileges traditionally reserved for men within their patriarchal society. It was developed as a coping mechanism to the Kanun’s strict patrilineal and patriarchal social structure where men held dominant roles in inheritance, property ownership, family leadership, and public life, leaving women with limited autonomy and rights. It effectively allows for flexibility when demographic or social pressures (like the absence of men) threatened a family’s survival or honour. Other circumstances leading to this phenomenon include lack of male heirs, avoidance of arranged marriages, blood feuds, or attempts at preventing sexual trafficking. The “sworn-virgins” phenomenon consists of taking an irrevocable vow, often before village elders, and typically cut her hair, adopt male clothing, often take a male name, and engage in traditionally male work and social activities such as farming, owning land, carrying a firearm, smoking, drinking, and participating in male social gatherings. They were treated as men by the community and accorded the corresponding respect and authority. The most significant personal consequence was the lifelong commitment to celibacy, meaning they could not marry or have children. While this afforded them freedoms unavailable to other women, it also meant forgoing traditional family life. For the family, a sworn virgin could ensure its continuity and honour. Breaking the vow historically carried severe, even fatal, repercussions, though in more recent times, social rejection is the more likely consequence.

and expression. In families affected by blood feuds, girls live under constant fear and their development is severely hampered by confinement and the pervasive atmosphere of trauma. The modern pressures of social media can also contribute to body image issues and anxiety through social comparison. In recent decades, the mental health of young girls in Albania has become a growing concern. Evidence shows that Albanian girls experience significantly higher rates of anxiety-related disorders than boys. A 2022 study published in *European Psychiatry* by Skendi et al. examined anxiety symptoms in a representative sample of Albanian children aged 8 to 17. The research revealed that over 25% of the children demonstrated high anxiety scores, with girls consistently reporting greater levels of anxiety, particularly separation anxiety in younger age groups and generalized anxiety in older adolescents. Adverse childhood experiences, particularly emotional abuse and neglect, are strongly correlated with poor psychological outcomes for young girls. Emotional abuse significantly reduced overall well-being and increased anxiety among 15-year-old girls in Albania. Girls experiencing multiple forms of abuse showed lower levels of self-worth and social functioning. These vulnerabilities were magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Euronews Albania, over 70% of women and girls reported symptoms of depression, and approximately 37% had experienced some form of domestic violence. The stressors of confinement, unemployment within households, and exposure to violence contributed to elevated anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation among adolescent girls. Healthier psychological lives for young Albanian girls are found almost exclusively in the Capital of Tirana, in families willing and able to resist clan-based pressures for conformity and committed to increased access to education and willingness to challenge traditional gender limitations and encourage girls' aspirations.



§A4.3 Young Boys.

Young boys in Albania face their own set of psychological challenges, often rooted in societal expectations of masculinity. In contrast to the internalized symptoms observed among girls, Albanian boys are more likely to exhibit externalizing disorders, including aggression, defiance, and substance use. Cultural attitudes surrounding masculinity in Albania contribute to psychological distress in boys. Traditional norms discourage emotional expression and promote stoicism, leading many boys to suppress symptoms of anxiety or depression and avoid seeking help. This cultural stigma has been documented in psychosocial counselling literature and continues to limit the effectiveness of mental health outreach. The pressure to be "strong," emotionally stoic, and the future provider can lead to significant stress, an inability to seek help for emotional problems, and an increased risk of engaging in risky behaviours such as substance abuse or aggression. For example, young boys who, feeling immense pressure to live up to a tough masculine ideal prevalent in his peer group, often engage in bullying to assert dominance, while internally struggling with anxiety and insecurity. The absence of positive male role models due to migration or family breakdown can exacerbate these issues. In regions affected by the Kanun and blood feuds, boys may be burdened from a young age with the expectation of vengeance or live in constant fear of being targeted, leading to profound psychological trauma and a distorted worldview. Exposure to 'normalized violence' in the home or community also has a detrimental impact. A 2018 study analysed behaviour among Albanian boys aged 12 to 15 and found higher rates of disruptive behaviour disorders. Boys aged 14 to 15 demonstrated significantly higher levels of aggression and rule-breaking behaviour than girls of the same age. Physical abuse was also more commonly reported among boys. Research published in *Frontiers in Public Health* in 2021 showed that about 30% of 15-year-old boys had experienced physical abuse. This was linked to risky behaviours such as smoking, alcohol use, and sleep disturbances. Notably, these boys also reported increased irritability and academic disengagement, signalling broader psychosocial implications. Conversely, healthy psychological development for young boys is fostered in environments that allow for emotional expression and provide strong, positive, and emotionally available male role models. Families and communities that redefine masculinity to include empathy, respect, and open communication contribute significantly to boys' well-being. For example, a young boy whose father actively participates in his upbringing, encourages him to talk about his feelings, and supports his diverse interests, is more likely to develop good mental health and positive social skills. Engagement in constructive activities like sports (particularly soccer as Albania's national sport), arts, or youth groups that promote teamwork and positive social norms, rather than aggression, is also beneficial. Schools that actively combat bullying and promote an inclusive atmosphere are vital.

§A4.4 The Family.

The fundamental unit of Albanian society, traditionally the family, often exhibits a patrilineal and extended structure, where multiple generations reside together or in close proximity, emphasizing the father's role as the household head. Roles within the family are typically defined by age and gender, with men historically assuming the responsibilities of providers and primary decision-makers, while women are traditionally tasked with domestic duties and the care of children. Intergenerational relationships are characterized by a profound respect





for elders, who frequently hold significant influence in family decisions and play a vital role in the transmission of cultural heritage and traditions. Traditional Albanian values, deeply ingrained in the social fabric, include a strong emphasis on honour (nderi), hospitality (mikpritja), unwavering loyalty (besa, fis), and a deep respect for established customs and traditions. The extended family structure has historically provided a robust system of mutual support and security but has also reinforced traditional patriarchal norms and gender roles, which are now encountering significant challenges in the face of ongoing modernization. The historical reliance on extended families fostered economic and social stability within a society organized around kinship. However, this structure often imposed rigid gender expectations and limited individual autonomy, particularly for women. The contemporary trends of modernization and increasing urbanization are contributing to a noticeable shift towards nuclear family units and an evolution in traditional gender dynamics. Albanian families face numerous stressors that can lead to unhealthy psychological dynamics. Economic hardship, poverty, and unemployment are pervasive issues that create chronic stress, impacting parental mental health and parent-child relationships. Migration, while often an economic necessity, can lead to family fragmentation, loneliness for those left behind, and increased burden on the remaining caregiver. Domestic violence remains a critical problem, creating a toxic and fearful environment that traumatizes all family members, particularly women and children, and perpetuates intergenerational cycles of violence. Families caught in blood feuds experience extreme psychological distress, social isolation, and a complete disruption of normal life, often living in a state of permanent confinement and constant terror. Poor communication patterns, unresolved conflicts, and rigid, authoritarian parenting styles also contribute to unhealthy family environments. In growing urban areas of Tirana, strong family cohesion, mutual support, and open communication are becoming key protective factors. Families that manage to maintain strong emotional bonds despite economic pressures or the migration of a member often navigate these difficulties more successfully. Urban nuclear families where parents, despite financial struggles, prioritize quality time with their children, offer consistent emotional support, and engage in shared problem-solving, builds resilience in its members. The shift towards more egalitarian gender roles within families, where responsibilities are shared and mutual respect is paramount, contributes to greater satisfaction and well-being for all. Access to community support services, though often limited, can also bolster family coping mechanisms and overall psychological health. A study by Dervishi et al. (2013) on Albanian family dynamics revealed that shifts in family composition—such as reduced household size, maternal employment, and changing gender roles—affect child development outcomes. These are examples of Albania's desired future social trajectory, which is mostly possible only in the urban capital. Outside of Tirana, children in fragmented families or those experiencing financial instability reported increased emotional distress and difficulties in academic settings. Domestic violence remains a critical factor undermining family mental health. Children who witness violence between parents or guardians demonstrate higher incidences of behavioural problems and poorer health outcomes. Research indicates that such exposure is associated with habits like breakfast skipping, substance experimentation, and heightened anxiety among adolescents. The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated family mental health conditions. A UNICEF Albania report described the pandemic's impact on children and families as “the tip of the iceberg.” Isolation, loss of income, and school closures led to increased reports of fear, sadness, and hopelessness among children. Mental health support systems were overwhelmed, and access to psychological care was limited, especially in the northern regions.

§A4.5 The Clan (fis).

Beyond the immediate family, the clan (fis) forms a crucial layer of social organization, based on patrilineal descent traced back to a common ancestor, thereby establishing a broad network of interconnected families. This lineage is deeply rooted in the concept of shared blood (gjak), a bond that significantly influences social identity and mutual obligations among clan



members. Historically, the clan served vital social functions, providing mutual aid, protection against external threats, and a structured framework for social control, including the resolution of disputes through the application of customary law. The clan system held considerable historical significance, particularly in maintaining social order and stability, especially during periods when a strong central authority was absent, and in facilitating collective resistance against external powers. Clan identity continues to hold significance, especially in the northern regions of Albania, influencing social interactions, patterns of marriage, and the adherence to traditional norms, although its traditional political and military functions have largely receded with the strengthening of state institutions. While the traditional authority and functions of clans have been diminished by modernization and the consolidation of state power, kinship ties and the enduring sense of belonging to a clan continue to shape social life, particularly in rural areas where traditional values remain influential. The influence of clans (fis) on psychological well-being is complex and often tied to the application or misapplication of traditional codes like the Kanun. In its unhealthy manifestation, often linked to the perpetuation of blood feuds, clan identity can be a source of immense psychological pressure and trauma. The obligation to uphold clan honour through vengeance, even at the cost of individual lives and futures, creates an environment of fear, violence, and inter-generational hatred. Individuals may feel trapped by clan expectations, unable to escape cycles of retribution without risking ostracization or further violence. This leads to chronic stress, anxiety, and a fatalistic outlook, particularly for men and boys who are expected to be enforcers or become targets. The collective trauma experienced by a clan involved in a feud can hinder social and economic development for generations, creating a closed and suspicious society. For example, a community where multiple families belonging to rival clans live in a state of perpetual tension and fear, with young people inheriting animosities and their life choices severely restricted by these ancient conflicts. Conversely, the clan system can also provide a strong sense of belonging, social support, and a framework for social organization as shown historically. In a modern, healthy context, this sense of extended kinship could theoretically translate into strong community networks that promote collective well-being, preserve cultural heritage in positive ways, and provide mutual aid. A healthy clan or extended kinship network today would be one that unequivocally rejects violence and vengeance, champions the rule of law, and focuses on the collective



advancement, education, and psychological health of its members. It would be a source of positive identity and support, encouraging reconciliation and cooperation rather than division and conflict. Instances of community-led reconciliation efforts, often involving elders or respected figures to mediate and end feuds, point towards a healthier adaptation of collective responsibility, shifting from retributive justice to restorative peace. In rural and clan-dominated areas of Northern Albania, individuals facing psychological distress are less likely to seek professional support. Interviews with local NGOs and mental health practitioners reveal that the stigma attached to therapy remains strong. Families often prefer to address issues internally or through religious counsel, delaying access to clinical treatment. Access to mental health care remains limited. Many rural areas lack qualified psychologists or psychiatric services. Mental health problems are increasing among youth in these communities, with service providers calling for more government funding and mobile mental health units to reach isolated populations.

§A4.6 The Tribe (bajrak/farë):

Historically, the tribe (often referred to as bajrak in the north and farë in the south) represented a larger political and territorial entity, comprising several clans united under the leadership of a hereditary figure (bajraktar in the north, kryeplak in the south), often associated with a specific geographical territory. These hereditary leaders wielded considerable authority in political, military, and judicial affairs within their respective tribes. Tribal structures often adhered to specific interpretations or regional variations of the Kanun, the traditional customary law, which regulated inter-tribal relations and the resolution of disputes within the tribal territory. While tribal structures were historically crucial for governance and defence, their roles have largely been superseded by the establishment and strengthening of modern state administration. However, remnants of tribal identity and influence may still persist in certain regions, informing social networks and local power dynamics. The consolidation of the Albanian state and the development of contemporary political and legal systems have significantly diminished the formal roles traditionally held by tribal leaders and assemblies. Nevertheless, historical tribal affiliations can still inform social networks and influence local power dynamics within specific communities. The Albanian tribe, known as the "fis," represents a cornerstone of traditional Albanian social organization, deeply rooted in the country's history and cultural fabric. Often translated into English as either "tribe" or "clan," the term "fis" fundamentally denotes a community whose members are connected through kinship, tracing their lineage back to a shared male ancestor and typically inhabiting a common territory. This concept of "fis" is not uniform across all Albanian-speaking regions, with variations existing between northern and southern Albania, as well as in areas like Kosovo. The bonds among these communities, stemming from the same "fis," are referred to as "farefisni," highlighting the extended nature of kinship ties within this social structure. The origins of the "fis" can be traced back to ancient Illyrian social structures, indicating a long historical continuity that has shaped Albanian society for centuries. This enduring connection to Illyrian ancestry is a significant aspect of Albanian identity and historical narrative, potentially influencing the way tribal structures are perceived and have persisted over time. As noted in previous sections, traditionally, Albanian tribal society in the northern regions was organized with the oldest male, known as the "kryeplak," at the helm of the "fis". Governing functions were carried out by councils of elders, or "pleqt," who were responsible for resolving disputes and making crucial decisions for the community. The "fis" was further segmented into "mehala," representing neighbourhoods of closely related houses, with a central "shpi," or main house. A larger political and military unit, the "bajrak" (banner), often encompassed several "fis" and was led by a hereditary "bajraktar" (standard bearer). These traditional structures, roles, and functions provided a framework for governance, conflict resolution, and social unity, particularly in historical periods where centralized state authority was weak. The "bajrak" system illustrates the intricate connection between tribal organization and the exercise of political and military power within



Albanian society. The significance of kinship ties, "farefisni," cannot be overstated, as they formed the basis for social organization and mutual support among community members. Patriarchy has historically been a deeply embedded characteristic of Albanian society, structuring family life and social interactions with a clear dominance of men and subordination of women. This system has historically manifested in strong hierarchies based on both gender and age, dictating social roles and expectations within families and communities. Traditional gender roles typically assigned men the role of providers and heads of households, while women were primarily responsible for childcare, household chores, and maintaining the home. Within this framework, men traditionally held more power and freedom, while women occupied subordinate positions within both the family and the broader community. This unequal distribution of power and responsibilities often resulted in limited opportunities for women's social and economic participation outside of the domestic sphere. The traditional Albanian legal and moral code, known as the Kanun, has played a significant role in reinforcing these patriarchal norms, particularly in the northern regions of the country. The Kanun, which codifies rules for blood feuds and defines social conduct based on honour, loyalty, and trust, has historically contributed to the violence and mistreatment of women by upholding patriarchal authority within the family structure. Under the Kanun, women were often considered as property with limited rights and agency. Tribal structures in Albania have historically operated within a strongly patriarchal framework. Patrilineal descent, tracing lineage through the male line, has been a fundamental characteristic of tribal organization, inherently reinforcing male dominance and authority within the "fis". Men have traditionally held the leadership roles as heads of both tribes and families, upholding patriarchal authority and making decisions on behalf of the community. Within this traditional tribal context, women have often occupied limited roles and held a lower social status compared to men. Inheritance patterns within these tribal systems have also historically favored male offspring, further solidifying patriarchal control over property and resources. Urbanization and migration have been playing crucial roles in reshaping family structures and social dynamics. In urban areas, the influence of traditional tribal structures has generally weakened as new forms of social organization and governance have emerged. However, patriarchal norms, while undergoing evolution, continue to persist in various forms across both rural and urban settings. Increased female participation in education and the workforce has led to shifting gender roles within Albanian families. Furthermore, exposure to Western ideas emphasizing individualization and love in family formation has also contributed to these changes. Despite the forces of modernization, tribal identity and patriarchal norms continue to hold relevance in modern Albania, particularly in rural communities. Blood feuds ("gjakmarrja"), deeply rooted in the concept of honour and the Kanun, remain a continued practice in some regions, primarily in the north, serving as a stark reminder of the enduring power of tradition. Familial pressure continues to be a primary driver of migration for many Albanians, underscoring the central role of the family in their social and economic lives. Furthermore, a patriarchal mentality still presents a significant obstacle to achieving full gender equality in Albanian society. Thus, these concepts continue to function as a form of social glue in certain contexts, providing identity and social order, while also contributing to social issues and inequalities.

§A4.7 The Village (fshat/katund):

The village in Albanian society fosters a strong sense of social cohesion, often rooted in kinship ties and a shared adherence to local traditions. Historically, village life was characterized by communal practices, including the sharing of resources and collective labour, alongside active participation in local customs and rituals. Each village often possessed its own unique set of traditions, dialects, and social norms, which could vary considerably from neighbouring settlements. Village life, especially in rural regions, continues to be marked by strong social bonds and the enduring importance of local customs, although the dynamics of these communities are being influenced by ongoing migration and increasing urbanization. While



urban centres are gaining prominence, villages, particularly those in more remote areas, still exhibit distinct social characteristics deeply rooted in tradition and close-knit community structures. However, significant socioeconomic disparities between rural and urban areas are also increasingly evident.

In Albania, a notable divergence exists between the social and family life in rural and urban settings. Rural areas often maintain a stronger connection to traditional family structures, the significance of clan affiliations, and the principles of the Kanun. Conversely, urban areas tend to exhibit a shift towards nuclear family units, a greater emphasis on individualism, and more fluid social interactions. Furthermore, access to crucial resources such as education, healthcare, and economic opportunities demonstrates significant variations between rural and urban environments. The rural-urban divide in Albania extends beyond mere geographical separation, encompassing sociological differences that impact family structures, prevailing social norms, and the availability of essential resources, thereby contributing to evident socioeconomic



disparities. The ongoing process of urbanization has introduced substantial changes in lifestyle and social organization, leading to a noticeable departure from established rural patterns. This division is further intensified by the unequal distribution of economic and social capital between these two spheres. The presence of poverty within Albanian society can often reinforce a reliance on extended family networks as a vital mechanism for mutual support and economic survival. Conversely, families with greater financial resources tend to have enhanced access to educational institutions and healthcare services,

factors that can influence family size preferences, prevailing values, and patterns of social interaction. Socioeconomic status also plays a role in shaping marriage patterns, influencing decisions about family size, and defining the roles assumed by individual family members. The disparities in socioeconomic conditions lead to distinct experiences of family life across different strata of Albanian society, affecting various aspects ranging from household size and overall living conditions to levels of educational attainment and opportunities for social mobility. Families facing economic hardship may find themselves more dependent on traditional kinship-based support systems and encounter greater obstacles in accessing modern services. In contrast, wealthier families might adopt more individualistic lifestyles and prioritize different sets of values.

Levels of educational attainment in Albania show significant variations depending on socioeconomic status and geographic location, with these disparities having a direct impact on future opportunities available to individuals. Professional opportunities are often concentrated within urban centres, a factor that contributes to the phenomenon of rural out-migration and subsequent changes in the social fabric of village life. Emigration, frequently driven by a perceived lack of adequate opportunities within Albania, has had substantial and multifaceted impacts on family structures, intergenerational relationships, and the overall socioeconomic well-being of those who choose to remain in the country. The disparities in educational attainment and professional prospects serve to amplify existing socioeconomic inequalities and significantly influence migration patterns, leading to profound sociological shifts within Albanian society. The concentration of educational and professional opportunities in urban areas acts as a catalyst for both internal and international migration, which in turn affects the demographic composition of rural regions and brings about alterations in traditional family structures



and village life. The phenomenon of large-scale migration has become a defining characteristic of contemporary Albanian society, leading to significant alterations in traditional family structures and the formation of transnational social networks. This mass emigration has often resulted in the physical separation of families, the emergence of modified household structures, and the development of intricate transnational connections that link family members across geographical boundaries. Financial remittances sent by family members working abroad play a crucial role in the socioeconomic well-being of those who remain in Albania, often serving as a primary source of income and support for households. Additionally, the phenomenon of return migration, whether temporary or permanent, has its own set of impacts on children who have spent significant periods abroad and on the overall dynamics within returning families. Migration has thus become a defining feature of modern Albanian society, exerting a profound influence on family life, economic stability, and social cohesion, while simultaneously creating both new opportunities and significant challenges for families and communities across the nation. The extensive emigration of Albanians has led to the creation of geographically dispersed families and an increased reliance on transnational networks to maintain familial ties and provide support. While the financial contributions from remittances offer crucial economic relief, the physical absence of family members can place strains on interpersonal relationships and necessitate the re-evaluation of traditional family roles and responsibilities.

Urban centres across the country are witnessing some evolution in traditional gender roles and the dynamics within families. Alongside these shifts, attitudes towards fundamental aspects of family life such as marriage, divorce, and preferred family size are also undergoing transformation. Consequently, traditional patriarchal norms that have long characterized Albanian society are facing increasing challenges, leading to an evolving status for women within both the family unit and the broader societal context. While deeply rooted patriarchal traditions continue to hold sway, particularly in rural regions, the increasing pace of urbanization and greater exposure to Western cultural values are contributing to a gradual but discernible shift. Exposure to Western media, cultural values, and lifestyle norms has become widespread through various channels, including the internet, television, and the experiences of those who have migrated abroad. This exposure is contributing to the adoption of more individualistic values and lifestyles, a trend that is particularly evident in the urban areas of Albania. Consequently, a palpable tension has emerged between deeply held traditional values and the influx of modern influences, leading to observable intergenerational differences in attitudes and behaviours and fostering broader social change within Albanian society. The pervasive reach of global culture is introducing new ideas and value systems that are increasingly shaping traditional Albanian family life, resulting in a complex and dynamic interplay between the forces of continuity and the pressures of change. This is particularly noticeable among younger generations in urban environments, where exposure to global trends is more pronounced, often leading to a divergence in values and practices compared to their more traditional family members.

§A5 Organised Crime.

Albanian organized crime is characterized by a complex structure rooted in traditional kinship ties and clan systems, often referred to as "fis" or "fare". These familial bonds serve as the fundamental basis for trust, loyalty, and the strict internal discipline that governs these criminal networks. This reliance on kinship creates a significant barrier to infiltration by outsiders, contributing to the remarkable resilience and longevity observed in Albanian organized crime groups. The limited number of core members within these kinship structures further enhances their operational secrecy. The strength of blood relations fosters a powerful code of silence, making individuals highly resistant to cooperating with law enforcement agencies. Within these family clans, there often exists an executive committee known as a "Bajrak," which plays a crucial role in selecting high-ranking members to lead various operational units. This suggests a hierarchical element within the



broader clan structure, indicating a level of formal organization that extends beyond mere familial consensus. The presence of an executive committee implies established leadership and decision-making processes that guide the group's criminal activities in a structured manner. Operational units within Albanian organized crime are typically led by a "Krye," or Boss, who then appoints "Kryetar," or Underbosses, to serve beneath them. The "Kryetar" subsequently chooses a "Mik," or Friend, who acts as a liaison to the general members and is responsible for coordinating the activities of the unit. These defined roles within the operational units illustrate a clear chain of command that facilitates the execution of criminal activities with a degree of organization. This division of labour and responsibility within the criminal enterprise enhances both efficiency and control over illicit operations.

Despite these hierarchical elements within family clans and operational units, Albanian organized crime is predominantly characterized by a decentralized structure, featuring multiple families or clans that operate independently while still sharing common overarching goals. This decentralized nature presents a significant challenge for law enforcement efforts aimed at dismantling these networks, as targeting individual groups may not significantly impact the broader criminal landscape. However, the shared goals among these independent clans suggest a level of coordination and cooperation that transcends individual family interests. In the period between 1997 and 2004, large criminal organizations with considerable territorial control were more prevalent. However, law enforcement efforts targeting these large entities led to a transformation towards more horizontally extended criminal networks characterized by intensive collaboration. This shift indicates an adaptation to increased law enforcement pressure, with groups becoming more agile and interconnected rather than relying on centralized power and territorial dominance. Increased collaboration allows for the sharing of resources, diversification of risks, and access to broader networks and markets, ultimately enhancing their resilience to disruption. The operational dynamics of these groups are often influenced by personal characters who dominate individual conduct, rather than a strict adherence to a rigid hierarchy. This suggests that while kinship provides the fundamental framework, individual leadership styles and personal relationships play a significant role in shaping how these groups function on a day-to-day basis. The influence of these personal characters can foster both flexibility in adapting to new situations and potential instability depending on the individuals involved and their interpersonal dynamics. Overall, Albanian organized crime demonstrates a notable ability to evolve and adapt its organizational models in response to changing circumstances. This dynamic nature allows these criminal networks to learn from past experiences and adjust their structures and operations to counter law enforcement strategies and exploit emerging market trends. This continuous adaptation is crucial for their survival and the perpetuation of their illicit activities.

A common operational tactic involves the formation of small, tightly-knit nuclei consisting of four to five individuals. These core groups then hire temporary collaborators as needed to fulfil the specific requirements of their criminal activities. This model enhances secrecy and significantly reduces the risk of large-scale infiltration by law enforcement. By maintaining small core teams, these organizations limit the number of individuals with extensive knowledge of their operations, making it more difficult for authorities to gather intelligence and build successful cases. The use of temporary collaborators provides the necessary flexibility to scale operations up or down without compromising the integrity of the core group, as these individuals can be easily replaced and pose a lower long-term risk of betrayal. Albanian crime clans often operate with a multi-layered structure that includes four to six or even more levels. This sophisticated organizational design ensures that the group retains its operational capabilities even in the event that some of its members or entire subgroups are captured by law enforcement. The redundancy built into this structure allows for continued functioning and adaptation, minimizing the impact of arrests and disruptions on the overall criminal enterprise. This highlights a significant level of planning and foresight aimed at ensuring the long-term viability of their illicit activities.



The Albanian mafia places significant emphasis on a concept known as "besa," which translates to "trust" and serves as their fundamental code of honour. This code of conduct is deeply ingrained in Albanian culture and carries immense weight within these criminal organizations. Oaths taken in the name of besa are considered sacred and unbreakable, reinforcing loyalty and trust among members to a degree that often supersedes the authority of official laws. The cultural significance of besa creates a powerful moral obligation for individuals to strictly adhere to the group's rules and to prioritize the protection of its interests above all else. During the recruitment process, individuals inducted into the Albanian mafia are typically required to take a solemn oath, often referred to as a Besë. This formal initiation emphasizes the gravity of their commitment to the organization and reinforces their adherence to the group's deeply held code of conduct. The act of taking this oath serves as a powerful symbolic and psychological mechanism that binds new recruits to the group and its principles. Albanian organized crime engages in a wide array of criminal activities, with drug trafficking being the most prominent and consistent. These groups are heavily involved in the trafficking of heroin, cocaine, and cannabis, with cocaine becoming an increasingly significant commodity. Albania's strategic location on the Balkan route, a major historical corridor for drug transit, makes it a key area for these operations. Furthermore, there is evidence of a shift towards domestic production of cannabis, indicating an increasing level of control over the supply chain. The dominance in **drug trafficking** underscores the adaptability of these groups to exploit established routes and respond to evolving market demands and international drug flows. **Financial crimes** represent another key aspect of Albanian organized crime, encompassing money laundering, tax evasion, VAT fraud, pyramid schemes, embezzlement, misuse of public funds, and cybercrime. The presence of a large informal economy in Albania provides a conducive environment for these types of illicit financial activities. Engagement in financial crimes demonstrates the increasing sophistication of these groups in concealing and legitimizing their ill-gotten gains, adapting to modern financial systems and technologies, including the rise of cybercrime for illicit financial gain. Albanian organized crime also engages in arms smuggling, trafficking in small arms and light weapons, often remnants from the civil unrest in 1997. These illicit arms are destined for other European markets and are sometimes sold domestically, with criminal networks from northern Albania reportedly controlling this particular market. The involvement in arms smuggling showcases the opportunistic nature of these groups, capitalizing on instability and the availability of weapons.

The geographical reach of Albanian organized crime is extensive, with a primary presence in Europe and South America, but also activities reported in the Middle East and Asia. These groups operate through extensive transnational networks, often collaborating with other international criminal organizations. Their ability to establish affiliations across diverse regions highlights their adaptability and influence in the global criminal landscape. Albanian criminal networks wield considerable influence across various sectors, extending beyond the realm of traditional crime into political and economic spheres. Their impact is felt both within Albania and in the numerous countries where they have established a presence. One of the most significant aspects of their influence is their ability to infiltrate and corrupt political institutions. This is achieved through various means, including bribery and the establishment of connections with individuals holding positions of power. Reports suggest a strong correlation between politicians and Albanian crime groups, indicating a deep level of entanglement. Some sources even note that criminal gang leaders may themselves operate within state institutions. This infiltration allows criminal organizations to protect their operations, evade law enforcement, and influence political developments to their benefit. The influence of Albanian criminal networks extends beyond Albania's borders, with established international affiliations reaching as far as Israel in the east and South America in the west. In Honduras, these groups are reportedly connected with South American politicians, moving hidden assets in banks and investing in construction projects to further their influence. Similarly, in Ecuador, Albanian clans are known to use corruption to safeguard their operations, potentially



brining local law enforcement and government officials. The Israeli government has also expressed concerns about the growing influence of Albanian criminal groups within its banking system, prompting calls for closer cooperation between Israel and Albania to combat money laundering. In Australia, investigations have revealed an "entrenched infiltration" of Albanian crime groups across various levels of society.

§A6 Human Trafficking and Sexual Violence in Albania.

Albania is predominantly recognized as a source country for individuals who become victims of human trafficking and are subsequently exploited across Europe, including the United Kingdom. The most commonly identified forms of exploitation experienced by these victims include sex trafficking, forced labour, forced begging, and forced criminality. For example, a concerted effort by both government agencies and non-governmental organizations in 2023 led to the identification of 165 potential victims of trafficking. Among these individuals, 80 were identified as having been exploited for sexual purposes, while 58 were victims of labour trafficking, which encompasses the specific forms of forced begging and forced involvement in criminal activities. Statistical data indicates that women and girls constitute the majority of those trafficked for sexual exploitation, highlighting their particular vulnerability to this form of abuse. In contrast, men and boys are more frequently trafficked for the purposes of labour exploitation or for their involvement in various criminal activities. Children, especially those belonging to the Roma and Balkan-Egyptian communities, are identified as being particularly vulnerable to trafficking for the purposes of forced begging, engagement in seasonal labour, and, alarmingly, for forced participation in the sale of narcotics within school environments. While Albania's primary role in the context of human trafficking is as a source country, it also serves as a transit point for the movement of trafficked individuals across the region and, to a lesser extent, as a destination country where individuals are trafficked for various forms of exploitation. Several interconnected factors contribute to the problem of human trafficking in Albania. Poverty and pervasive social marginalization are consistently identified as significant underlying issues that increase the vulnerability of individuals to being trafficked. The period following the collapse of the communist regime in the 1990s, which was characterized by significant economic instability and widespread societal upheaval, created conditions that facilitated the rise and expansion of human trafficking within Albania. Existing gender inequalities and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms within Albanian society also contribute to the particular vulnerability of women and girls to sex trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Persistent concerns exist regarding corruption within government agencies and the potential complicity of officials in human trafficking crimes, which can severely undermine efforts to combat the issue effectively and ensure justice for victims. Organized criminal networks play a substantial role in the trafficking of human beings in Albania, often operating within complex transnational structures and frequently involved in other illicit activities such as drug trafficking and arms smuggling. Traffickers commonly employ deceptive tactics to lure potential victims, such as making false promises of lucrative employment opportunities in other countries or offering seemingly genuine offers of marriage. The increasing use of social media platforms as a tool for





recruitment by traffickers is a growing trend, enabling them to reach and manipulate potential victims more easily and efficiently. Finally, familial pressure and the well-established culture of migration within Albania can inadvertently contribute to individuals undertaking perilous journeys that significantly increase their risk of becoming victims of human trafficking. Individuals who become victims of trafficking often originate from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds, marked by factors such as low levels of educational attainment, unemployment, a lack of adequate family support structures, or a history of experiencing domestic abuse. Alarming, a significant majority of individuals identified as traffickers are known to their victims, frequently being relatives or individuals with close social ties. Intimate partners, including boyfriends, fiancés, and husbands, are also frequently identified as perpetrators of trafficking, highlighting the complex dynamics of exploitation within close relationships. The primary and overarching motivation for individuals involved in human trafficking is overwhelmingly financial gain, as they seek to profit from the exploitation of others. Albania faces a significant challenge with violence against women, as evidenced by the 2018 National Violence Against Women and Girls Survey (NVAWGS), which revealed that over half (52.9%) of women aged 18-74 had experienced at least one form of violence in their lifetime. This comprehensive survey, which for the first time collected data beyond domestic violence, encompassing dating violence, non-partner violence, sexual harassment, and stalking, paints a concerning picture of the prevalence of violence in various forms. In the 12 months preceding the survey, over a third (36.6%) of women reported experiencing violence. Earlier data from a 2001 cross-sectional study conducted in Tirana also indicated a high prevalence of intimate partner violence, with more than a third (37%) of women reporting at least one episode of spousal violence in the past year. The forms of sexual violence experienced by women in Albania are diverse. Intimate partner domestic violence includes a spectrum of abusive behaviours, ranging from physical and sexual violence to psychological, economic, and coercive controlling tactics. The study further identified specific demographic and socio-economic factors associated with increased risk, such as younger age (25-34), higher educational attainment of women, employment in white-collar positions, and instances where women were more educated than their husbands. The consistency in the finding of high prevalence rates across these studies, conducted nearly two decades apart and with different scopes, highlights the enduring nature of violence against women in Albania. The 2001 study's observation that more empowered women faced a greater risk of violence during Albania's transitional period suggests that societal shifts and evolving gender roles may contribute to complex dynamics within relationships. The national scope of the 2018 survey provides a broader understanding of the issue, confirming the continued high rates and extending the analysis to various forms of violence beyond intimate partnerships. The 2018 NVAWGS further detailed the prevalence of other forms of sexual violence, revealing lifetime rates of 18.2% for non-partner violence, 18.1% for sexual harassment, and 12.6% for stalking among women aged 18-74. In the 12 months prior to the survey, the reported experiences were 3.4%, 8.5%, and 6.9%, respectively. These figures emphasize that sexual violence in Albania is not limited to intimate relationships but extends into broader societal interactions, with a significant number of women encountering harassment and stalking. The difference between lifetime and recent prevalence suggests that while these issues are widespread, the immediate incidence may vary across different categories of violence.

Child sexual abuse is another critical concern in Albania. The 2018 survey indicated that 3.1% of women aged 18-74 reported experiencing sexual abuse during their childhood. Notably, the analysis revealed a strong correlation between experiencing sexual abuse in childhood and experiencing gender-based violence in adulthood, with 88.8% of women who reported childhood sexual abuse also reporting gender-based violence later in life. This significant connection underscores the long-term detrimental impact of child sexual abuse. This finding aligns with extensive research on the lasting effects of childhood trauma and emphasizes the need to address child sexual abuse not only as a crime against children but also as a factor that can contribute to violence against women in their adult years. Additionally, paedophilia and sexual abuse



offenses against minors is a serious societal problem in Albania, with some studies emphasizing it had reached the level of an "epidemic", highlighted a disturbing trend of increasing instances of sexual violence against minors, often involving victims under the age of 14 and perpetrators including elderly individuals, family members in cases of incest, and instances of forced sexual exploitation. In terms of reporting, there is wide concern about the increasing number of reported cases as well as the potential for a high number of unreported cases due to prevailing social taboos and fear of disclosure. The characterization of child sexual abuse as an "epidemic", coupled with the acknowledgment of underreporting, signals a significant and potentially growing issue.

Underlying these patterns of sexual violence are deeply ingrained societal norms and attitudes. The majority of Albanian women believe that violence within a marriage is a private matter and that a woman should endure some level of violence to preserve her family unit. These beliefs contribute to an environment where violence can be normalized and remain hidden. Specifically concerning sexual violence, women also believe that a woman should feel ashamed or embarrassed to report a rape, and that if a woman is raped, she likely acted in a way that put herself at risk. These deeply rooted patriarchal traditions, and harmful social norms are significant factors in perpetuating sexual violence by fostering a culture of silence, victim-blaming, and impunity for those who commit these acts. The belief that domestic violence is a private matter can isolate victims and prevent them from seeking necessary support, while the prevalence of shame and victim-blaming can act as strong deterrents to reporting sexual assault. Addressing these fundamental societal norms requires sustained and comprehensive strategies involving education, widespread public awareness campaigns, and efforts to challenge and transform traditional gender roles within Albanian society. Interestingly, in some instances women also believe that men in the community sometimes hit or beat their wives for refusing sexual intercourse. Contrasting this to the broader acceptance of violence as a private matter might suggest a more nuanced perspective within the community, where certain specific justifications for violence are less readily condoned than others.

Albanian criminal provisions related to sexual crimes still exhibit limitations and inconsistencies with prevailing international standards. A key area of concern is the definition of rape within Albanian law, which has historically tended to focus on the presence of force or violence and the victim's resistance, rather than on the fundamental principle of the absence of freely given consent, as emphasized by the Istanbul Convention. This discrepancy has been specifically highlighted by rulings of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which have underscored the importance of consent-based definitions in ensuring comprehensive legal protection against sexual assault. Another area of concern involves the practice of mandatory conciliation in cases of rape and forced marriage. Critics argue that this requirement can potentially undermine the rights and safety of victims by pressuring them to reconcile with their abusers rather than pursuing justice. The implementation and effective enforcement of emergency barring and protection orders, which are crucial for providing immediate safety and security to victims of violence, still fall short of the authorities' stated commitments and intentions. This gap between legal provisions and their practical application can leave victims vulnerable and erode their trust in the protection offered by the state. A persistent challenge also remains the high number of reported cases of violence against women that are dismissed at various stages within the judicial system without ever reaching a conviction. This high attrition rate suggests potential systemic issues within the investigation, evidence collection, or judicial processes that need to be addressed to ensure accountability for perpetrators and justice for survivors. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has also raised concerns regarding inadequacies in Albania's healthcare infrastructure, including shortages of personnel and a lack of access to specialized services for sexual and reproductive health, particularly in rural areas. These deficiencies can disproportionately affect survivors of sexual violence who often require specialized medical and psychological care as part of their recovery process. One of the most significant challenges in effectively addressing sexual violence in Albania is



the persistent underreporting of incidents. This is often due to deeply ingrained social stigma surrounding sexual violence, feelings of shame experienced by survivors, and a pervasive fear of retaliation or further harm from perpetrators. Law enforcement personnel and prosecutors in Albania frequently lack the specialized training and extensive experience necessary to effectively investigate and prosecute the often-complex cases of human trafficking. This can sometimes result in the application of lesser charges, such as "exploitation of prostitution," which carry less severe penalties than those associated with human trafficking itself. Conviction rates for human trafficking offenses in Albania remain concerningly low, indicating potential systemic deficiencies within the justice system. There have also been reports of lenient sentences being handed down to individuals convicted of trafficking, which can undermine the deterrent effect of the law and create significant safety concerns for the victims involved. There is a recognized lack of adequate resources dedicated to providing comprehensive and long-term reintegration support for trafficking victims. This deficiency can significantly hinder their recovery process and increase their vulnerability to being re-trafficked as they may face limited options for safe and sustainable livelihoods. Prosecutors have been reported to be inconsistent in their responsiveness to requests for assistance related to victim witnesses in trafficking cases. This lack of consistent support can impede the progress of investigations and prosecutions, potentially discouraging victims from fully cooperating with the legal process.

Persistent concerns exist regarding the issue of corruption within government agencies and the potential for complicity of officials in human trafficking crimes. Such corruption can severely undermine the effectiveness of anti-trafficking efforts and erode public trust in the institutions responsible for combating this crime. Organized criminal groups are heavily involved in the trafficking of human beings in Albania, often operating within complex transnational networks. Their involvement in this illicit activity, frequently alongside other serious crimes such as drug trafficking and arms smuggling, makes it particularly challenging to effectively investigate, prosecute, and ultimately dismantle these criminal enterprises. Trafficking survivors, particularly those who have been victims of sex trafficking, often encounter significant stigma and social exclusion upon their return to Albania. This can severely impede their reintegration into their communities and make it difficult for them to rebuild their lives. Economic hardship and the lack of sustainable employment opportunities represent major barriers to the successful reintegration of trafficking victims. Without viable economic alternatives, survivors remain vulnerable to re-trafficking as they may be compelled to seek exploitative situations out of desperation to meet their basic needs. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that provide crucial reintegration services to trafficking survivors in Albania often face the challenge of limited and inconsistent funding. This financial instability can significantly impact their ability to offer long-term and reliable support to victims, hindering their recovery and increasing the risk of re-victimization. Bureaucratic inefficiencies within state agencies and a lack of seamless coordination and effective collaboration between these agencies and anti-trafficking organizations can create significant obstacles for victims attempting to access the necessary services and support they require for their recovery and reintegration. Many trafficking victims, especially those who have been subjected to sex trafficking, face the painful reality of rejection from their families. This rejection is often rooted in traditional Albanian patriarchal values and deep-seated concerns about family honour and shame, further complicating the already challenging process of reintegration for these survivors.