

## **Albania's Challenges**

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Albania suffers from at least six related disorders that obstruct its political, economic, and international development and can precipitate a spiral of destabilizing national conflict:

1. ***Political bi-polarism***: Albania has developed a bifurcated two-party system despite numerous attempts by individuals within both the Socialist and Democratic Parties over the past two decades to break the deadlock and form electorally viable and durable new third parties. Political life is personalized and has been directed by strong leaders where top-down management places limits on intra-party political competition and the input of citizens in decision-making. The latest round of conflict is symptomatic of this fundamental reality.
2. ***Limited political competition***: Attempts to form durable and electable third parties have proven difficult, especially when they are splinters from the two major formations whose leaders seek to discourage fractionalization. Although several exist and some have persisted through several election cycles, the DP and SP together always control over three quarters of parliamentary seats. It suits the two mega parties to have a larger number of smaller formations in parliament rather than a single third-force, which could become the kingmaker and draw them into electoral coalitions. After each round of parliamentary elections some smaller parties have been brought into governing coalitions but this does not threaten the major two-party monopoly and does not contribute greatly to developing novel political programs and fostering political competition.
3. ***Non-ideological conflicts***: Albania's underlying political disputes are not based on party ideologies or programs as the two major formations largely share the same goals. Left, center, and right are programmatically almost meaningless in Albania. Instead, party divisions have become grounded in group loyalties and leadership support concretized into two mutually exclusive political camps.
4. ***Political clientelism***: This has developed over the past twenty years, similarly to other Balkan countries, and involves an extensive patronage network, a spoils system of official appointments, favoritism shown to supporters of the governing party, and various levels of state-party corruption. Clientelism is deeply ingrained in the political system, of course not only in Albania, and it undermines political competition based on program and merit. It also means that political office is lucrative and losing office is financially painful and is therefore resisted.

5. ***Zero-sum political culture:*** Each election is supposed to create clear winners and losers and when the result is extremely close as we see in the recent mayoral elections in Tirana, even where the election process has improved. There is little tradition or willingness to engage in dialogue and compromise. Instead, there is always a danger that disputes will escalate into open conflict. This is not just a question of hanging chads but of differing interpretations and uses of the electoral law.
6. ***Political revenge factor:*** Politics in Albania also contains the principle that you contested my election victory so I will contest yours even more vigorously. And such contests are not simply conducted through legal means. As a result we have witnessed regular parliamentary boycotts, constant complaints to international institutions, persistent public protests against election results, and even instances of vandalism and violence often intended to provoke a government overreaction.

The disputed Tirana mayoral election and the ongoing battle of the ballots has compounded the existing grievances from the 2009 parliamentary elections and threatens to transform political polarization and legislative gridlock into outright civil conflict. The only solution, however difficult in an overheated political environment, is a legal ruling that the final election result (whether for the Democrat or Socialist candidate) meets constitutional and international standards. This may require high-level international involvement of EU and U.S. representatives to defuse the crisis before rather than after the conflict escalates.

As a result of the factors outlined, the ongoing political standoff over the 2009 general elections as well as the recent local elections have become dangerous opportunities for confrontation and violent escalation. Meanwhile, necessary reforms to meet EU accession criteria have stalled and the passage of legislation is often blocked. Long-term paralysis will simply increase social frustration, raise the risk of economic decline, and further erode Albania's qualifications for the EU.

It is often said that once a country accedes to NATO, the Allies have very few policy instruments available to positively influence its behavior. This is not fully accurate in the case of Albanian-U.S. relations because of the high esteem in which the U.S. is held in Albania. Washington possesses both direct and indirect instruments to help Tirana make the right decisions in its own national interests. It needs to assist Albania in constructing a more open and competitive political system, in developing a politically more active younger generation, in continuing to improve the conduct of elections, in reforming key institutions such as the judiciary, in encouraging greater media non-partisanship, and in various other ways qualifying politically for inclusion in the EU, and thereby becoming a more effective partner for the U.S.

Washington can also promote Albania's strategic interests by helping resolve the pan-national question so that Tirana is not drawn into damaging disputes with its neighbors and remains a constructive political player in the Balkans, which it has been for twenty years. A potentially negative scenario may unfold in the region if a confluence of factors coalesce in the coming years and is more likely to embroil an unstable Albania with limited European prospects than a politically stable Albania on route to the EU.

Such factors could include growing social unrest in Kosova as a consequences of international isolation and economic distress that encourage populist and even nationalist elements to mushroom; the division of Kosova through unilateral partition supported by Belgrade; a de facto fracturing of the Bosnia-Herzegovina confederation and its drift toward conflict that encourages other regional secessions; and political conflicts in the Republic of Macedonia that begin to assume ethnic dimensions with Albanian parties calling for federalization or even separation as Skopje's progress toward the EU is stalled.

This is the complex puzzle that cannot be resolved by the U.S. or the EU acting alone. It will require a much more determined drive by the EU with U.S. political assistance to incorporate the West Balkan states beginning as soon as possible with Croatia (which is expected to join by 2012) and accompanied by clear membership tracks for all states. It also necessitates more significant involvement in institutional stabilization. Unfortunately, this is clearly not popular in the EU itself where leaders and tax payers are weary of bringing in new problems into the Union.

Short of such commitments, political and economic prospects in the West Balkan region are likely to diminish and spur out-migration. Disillusionment with the EU will increase and the Union's effectiveness and viability will come under increasing question. Such scenarios could undermine reformist leaders and bring populist and nationalist elements to the forefront who will benefit from economic stagnation and brewing public anger and may trumpet ethnicity and xenophobia as solutions to mounting domestic challenges. In this context, if Albania were to descend from prolonged political conflict toward social unrest and state instability this will only have negative consequences for the wider region.