

"Breaking the myth of the untouchables"

Background paper on Albania's rule of law development and the fight against organized crime, corruption and human trafficking

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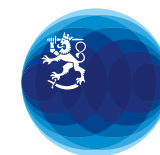
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1. Introduction

The aim of this background paper is to address the linkages between organized crime, corruption, and the effects on the rule of law in the Western Balkans, with a specific focus on Albania. The paper addresses crime threats posed by Albanian-led criminal organizations both within Albania and in Europe at large and its implications nationally and internationally, including on governance and the rule of law. The paper also specifically raises the questions of corruption as well as human trafficking and human smuggling through and from the Western Balkans. The paper considers criminality within Albania as well as Albanian-speaking traffickers and crime groups operating in the European Union and provides an analysis of how such criminality affects Europe at large, in particular in view of Albania's accession to the European Union.

Albania is a country in the Western Balkans with a population of 2.78 million inhabitants (2022). The country's GDP has increased from 3.48 billion USD in 2000 to 18.92 billion USD in 2022.¹ According to the Human Development Index (HDI)² from 2021, Albania is categorized as a high human development country ranking at 67 of 191 countries and territories.³ The country has implemented various reforms over the past decade to enhance its rule of law development as a part of the on-going EU accession negotiations.

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¹ [Albania: Data | The World Bank](#)

² The HDI is based on population life expectancy at birth, expected/mean years of schooling, and GNI per capita (PPP \$).

³ [Human Development Report 2021–22 | UNDP](#)

for Crime Prevention and Control, affiliated with the United Nations (HEUNI). The paper provides background information for the Centre's activities in Albania, which aim to support democratic development and the rule of law.

The paper is based on a desk review consisting of research reports, academic articles and to an extent, media articles. Furthermore, five European experts working in research, law enforcement and civil society were interviewed in order to get a sense of the current situation related to Albanian-led organized crime and human trafficking. The interviews were organized on Teams and followed a semi-structured interview framework, which was applied based on the particular expertise of each interviewee. The interview data was analyzed thematically and will be referred to throughout the paper, as it deepens the information gathered through the desk review. Although the information provided in this overview is public and unclassified, the names and background organizations of the interviewees will not be disclosed. The authors of this paper would like to thank the interviewees for taking the time to share their valuable expertise.

Organized crime group (OCG) – a structured group of three or more persons that exists for a period of time and acts together with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.⁴

Corruption – the abuse of power and influence for personal gain. Corruption can involve the abuse of public office, of the power a person has due to holding a political office or an influential role in a corporation, of having personal wealth or access to significant resources, or of having high social standing. Corruption can involve gains for a person, a political party, a corporation, or a group of people, and the gain can be financial or non-financial, e.g., the preservation or increase of a person or an entity's position of power and influence. Corruption can be manifested through a wide range of behaviors, such as bribery, conflict of interest, patronage, nepotism, embezzlement, influence peddling, or the manipulation of legislative processes with a hidden corrupt motive.⁵

Trafficking in human beings / human trafficking – the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means, for example, of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, or of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, for the purpose of exploitation.⁶ The forms of exploitation include but are not limited to: sexual exploitation, forced labor, forced criminal activity or begging, child trafficking, and the removal of organs. In this paper we discuss trafficking and exploitation in a broad sense, potentially also covering actions that would not fill the criminal justice criteria for trafficking in human beings.

⁴ [United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime \(2004\)](#)

⁵ [What is corruption? | Basel Institute on Governance](#)

⁶ Summarized from the [Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime \(2000\)](#)

Rule of law – a durable system of laws, institutions, norms, and community commitment, that delivers the four following principles: the government and private actors are accountable under the law; the law is clear, publicized, stable, applied evenly, and ensures human rights as well as property, contract and procedural rights; the processes by which the law is adopted, administered, adjudicated, and enforced are accessible, fair, and efficient; and justice is delivered timely by competent, ethical and representatives and neutrals who are accessible, have adequate resources, and reflect the makeup of the communities they serve.⁷

Albanians – an ethnic group in the Balkans who share a common Albanian ancestry, culture, history and language. They mainly live in Albania and Kosovo, with populations residing also in other Western Balkan countries such as North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Croatia. Moreover, there are significant Albanian diasporas in, e.g., Greece, Italy, United Kingdom, USA, Germany, Turkey and beyond.⁸ Historically, Albanians lived in the Ottoman Empire. As Albania became independent in 1913, the state was partitioned so that areas with large Albanian majorities, such as present-day Kosovo, became parts of Montenegro, Serbia and Greece.⁹ For the purposes of this paper, when referring to Albanians, we mainly refer to the ethnic group and European diaspora of Albanians, but acknowledge that Albanian-led organized crime, to a large extent, has its roots in the history of the Albanian nation state.

⁷ [What is the Rule of Law? | World Justice Project](#) – the organization prepares the annual [Rule of Law Index](#).

⁸ [Labour Migration in the Western Balkans | OECD](#); [Mapping and profiling of Albanian Diaspora | IOM](#); [Albania: The Migration-Development Nexus in Albania | MPI](#)

⁹ [Albania – Nationalism, Ethnicity, Culture | Britannica](#)



2. Albania under development

A brief overview of the history of Albanian organized crime and the country's EU accession process

After the Second World War Albania was an isolated Stalinist state until its transition to democracy in 1990, which set into motion social and economic reforms (Campbell 2013). In the newly established market economy, two-thirds of Albanians invested money in funds and companies offering lucrative returns (Jarvis 2000). In many cases these turned out to be fraudulent pyramid schemes. In 1996 many of the schemes collapsed resulting in the collapse of the government and mass unrest, as 300,000 people lost their savings. Some 2,000 people were killed in the turmoil, and armed gangs took control of parts of the country. (Campbell 2013, 86–87; Jarvis 2000.) Large numbers of Albanians emigrated in the 1990s to Greece and Italy, in particular. The Albanian coast also became a site for the smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons into Italy from Albania, other Eastern European countries and beyond via speedboats.

During the turbulent years of the 1990s several organized crime groups (OCGs) were formed in Albania. Many of the members were former officers of the Albanian secret service, the republican guard or the police and therefore knowledgeable and trained in the use of violence (Intelligence Fusion 2023, 7). Simultaneously, the disintegration of the socialist regime and the lack of a replacing functioning state governance led to the revival of customary laws known as Kanun especially in the north of the country (Voell 2003). According to the Kanun, a murder results in a blood feud, in which the family members of the victim can restore their honor by killing a male mem-

ber of the family of the original offender (Cara and Margjeka 2015). This can lead to a cycle of revenge killings. The historical concept of blood feuds is not related to organized crime, but it has also been misused to justify violence (ibid.), e.g., by criminal organizations (Plaku, Bosna, and Grattagliano 2019).¹⁰

A multinational peacekeeping mission led by Italy entitled Operation Alba entered the country in 1997.¹¹ The OSCE also established a presence in Albania in 1997 to support the stabilization of the country and coordinate international assistance. The OSCE is still present in Albania and continues to offer expertise and assistance in the fight against crime and corruption; in enhancing the rule of law, justice reform and human rights; and in advancing democracy and good governance, including electoral reform (OSCE Factsheet 2023).

In April 2009 the Stabilization and Association Agreement of Albania with the European Union entered into force and Albania applied for membership. The Commission identified a set of priorities that Albania had to address before the start of the accession talks, including public administration and judiciary reform, strengthening the fight against organized crime and corruption, and reinforcing the protection of human rights (European Commission 2010a). Short-term visa-free travel between Albania and EU and Schengen countries was made possible in 2010 (European Commission 2010b). Albania was granted the EU candidate status in 2014.

Reforms followed, including the on-going judicial reform, which includes a vetting process of all judges and prosecutors and aims to ensure the functioning of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, as well as to improve public confidence in the judicial system (European Commission 2022). The vetting process consists of three pillars: firstly, an asset assessment in which all judges and prosecutors under assessment must be able to justify their assets based on legitimate sources; secondly, a background assessment in which the judges' and prosecutors' potential links with individuals in organized crime are examined; and thirdly, a proficiency assessment in which each judges' and prosecutors' professional ability is evaluated (Maxhuni and Cucchi 2017, 3). By 6 October 2023, 57 % of the vetting dossiers processed had resulted in dismissals, resignations or termination of mandate. Judicial vacancies were addressed through the swearing-in of 40 new magistrates in October 2023 (European Commission 2023a, 18).

The EU accession process of Albania initially faced setbacks. The Netherlands vetoed the opening of accession negotiations in 2018 reportedly due to serious concerns about tackling corruption, while France, the Netherlands and Denmark blocked the talks in 2019 (Euractiv 2018; BBC News 2019). Dutch MPs also called for the suspen-

sion of visa-free travel for Albanians in 2019.¹² Eventually, in March 2020, the EU decided to open the accession negotiations with Albania and its neighbor North Macedonia. The first intergovernmental conference on the negotiations with Albania was held in 2022 and the Commission launched a screening process in which Albania's level of alignment with EU rules and policies was examined. The screening process was completed in December 2023. (Council of the European Union 2024.) The Council of the European Union (2024) will soon open the first negotiation cluster, which covers chapters on the judiciary, fundamental rights and justice.

In terms of human trafficking, the Albanian government first addressed the issue in 1998 when the Ministry of the Interior established an Anti-Trafficking Task Force, which led to the deployment of specialized police units at airports and border crossings (Campbell 2013, 87). In 2001, trafficking in persons (Art. 110/a) and child trafficking (Art. 128/b) were added to the Criminal Code. In 2002, the country ratified the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Trafficking Protocol, and in 2006, the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (Boksi and Mandro-Balili 2021, 18–19).

¹² Commission: Suspending visa-free travel for Albanians should not be decided lightly | Euractiv

¹⁰ see also e.g. [Blood feuds in Albania exploited by criminal groups | GI-TOC](#)

¹¹ see [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1101 \(1997\) | UN](#)



3. Present-day Albania

3.1 Organized crime

Albanian criminal networks operate widely outside the Balkans, in regions such as Western Europe and Latin America (Intelligence Fusion 2023). Their activities in Europe include for example drug trafficking, human trafficking, prostitution, money laundering, corruption, and assassinations, while in Latin America the activities are mostly related to drug trafficking (ibid.). Some sources suggest that Albanian kingpins hide in the United Arab Emirates (Mejdini and Zhilla 2022; SOT 2023). The experts interviewed for this paper echoed this. An interviewee working in law enforcement described Dubai as a place where leaders of criminal organizations feel more secure and can also negotiate with each other. The criminal activities are then put into practice by lower-level members present in e.g., Europe.

The existence of an organized, homogenous "Albanian mafia" has been contested, rather, there seem to be several Albanian-speaking criminal groups operating in Europe and beyond that occasionally co-operate with one another as well as with criminal groups originating from other countries (see e.g., Arsovska 2015; Sergi 2019; The Economist 2019; Rama 2021; Intelligence Fusion 2023; GI-TOC 2023). One of the experts interviewed for this paper explained that by co-operating with one another in, e.g., drug trafficking, the groups are able to scale the operation and share the financial risk. They also described the groups as being "clan-like" and said that in comparison to other

Western Balkan OCGs, Albanian groups are more family-oriented and tend to direct the proceeds of crime to the regions they originate from. Albanian groups have also, for a long time, had close connections with Italian organized crime, including 'Ndrangheta¹³ and Sacra Corona Unita as well as with Turkish organized crime groups and Kosovar and Montenegrin criminal networks (GI-TOC 2023, 5).

A report based on open-source reporting and analyzing the state of Albanian organized crime groups and their impact on global security by Intelligence Fusion (2023, 10–11) summarizes the defining characteristics of Albanian organized crime, some of which include:

- A pragmatic approach, avoidance of attracting unnecessary attention;
- Reputation for being professional and for being dependable partners;
- Willingness to work for and with other organizations, establishing business relationships and “working their way up”;
- Demonstrated ability to sow corruption and work with corrupt law enforcement officials in Albania and abroad;
- Albania seen as a “safe haven” for e.g., money laundering and retaliations;
- Conflicts mainly take place within the Albanian criminal community;
- Fear factor: willingness to use extreme violence when deemed necessary. (Ibid.)

The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) has published the Global Organized Crime Index¹⁴ in 2021 and 2023, which assesses the level of criminality and resilience to organized crime in 193 countries along three key pillars: criminal markets, criminal actors, and resilience. The objective of the Index is to provoke a dialogue on organized crime as well as to help different stakeholders prioritize their interventions and to measure their effectiveness.¹⁵

The following graphs 1 and 2 have been created using the GI-TOC Global Organized Crime Index data on Albania to demonstrate the changes in the Criminality score (consisting of the sub-components for criminal markets and criminal actors) and Resilience score between the two evaluation periods, 2021 and 2023.¹⁶

¹³ see also The Guardian 2019

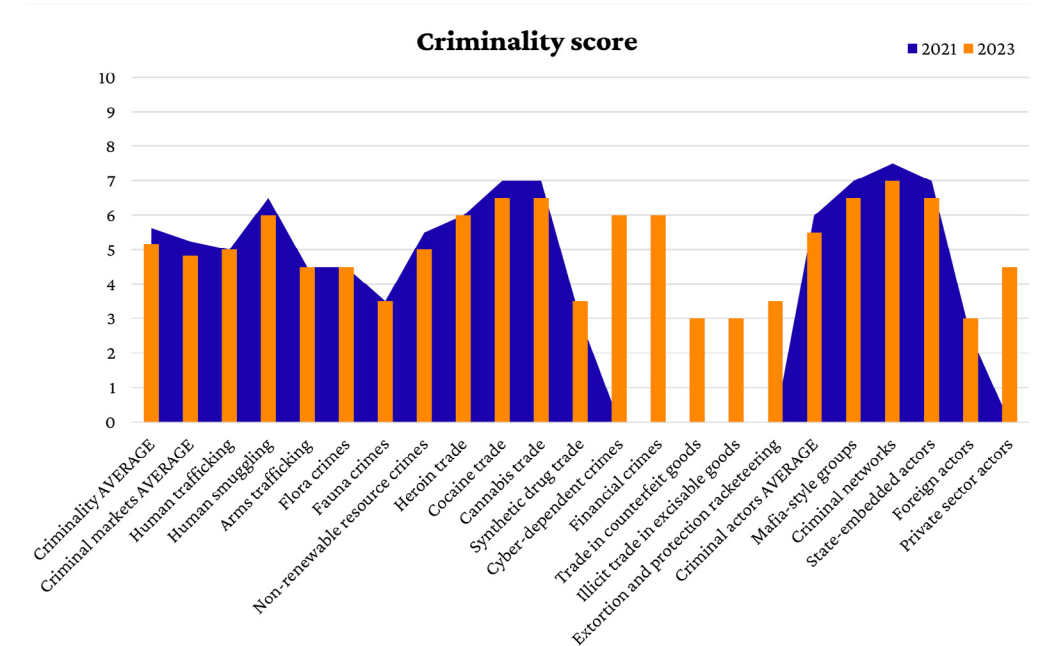
¹⁴ [Global Organized Crime Index | GI-TOC](#)

¹⁵ [About the index – Global Organized Crime Index 2023 | GI-TOC](#)

¹⁶ The scale is from 0 to 10: in the Criminality score a lower score is desirable as it indicates a less organized crime, while in the Resilience score, a higher score indicates more resilience.

Graph 1. The Global Organized Crime Index criminality scores of Albania from 2021 and 2023. Please note that five criminal markets were added to the Index in 2023 on which there is no corresponding data from 2021 (missing part of the chart in blue).

Data source: [Criminality in Albania – The Organized Crime Index \(ocindex.net\)](#)

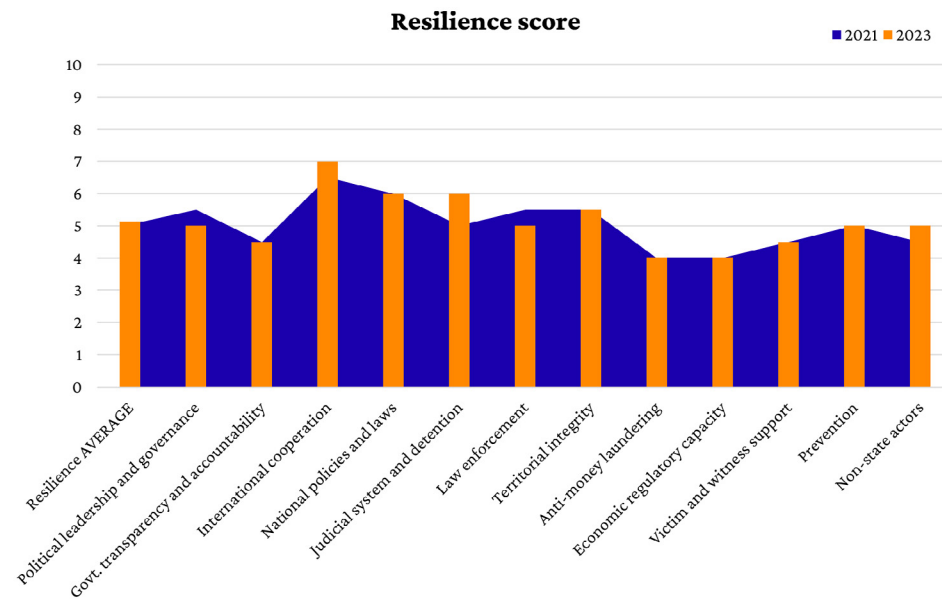


¹⁷ i.e., “the illegal extraction, smuggling, mingling, bunkering or mining of natural resources and the illicit trade of such commodities” (GI-TOC 2023)

¹⁸ IFFs in the Western Balkans: Albania | GI-TOC

The 2023 OC Index criminality score average (see Graph 1.) for Albania is 5.17, down 0.46 points from 2021 (5.63) and Albania now ranks 87th of 193 countries (GI-TOC 2023). When comparing the criminal markets in 2021 and 2023, there has been a decline in human smuggling, non-renewable resource crimes¹⁷, cocaine trade and cannabis trade, and an increase in synthetic drug trade. In terms of criminal actors, there has been a decline in mafia-style groups, criminal networks and state-embedded actors, and an increase in foreign actors, which include foreign nationals and diaspora groups. The changes have amounted to 0.50 points each, except for the criminal markets average which has declined by 0.42 points. To compare, the average criminality score for all of Europe is lower at 4.74. In the region, Albania has a higher criminality score than North Macedonia (5.03) and Croatia (5.15), but performs better than Bosnia and Herzegovina (5.85), Montenegro (5.90) and Serbia (6.22). (Ibid.) Moreover, Albania had the most significant reduction in its criminality score between 2021 and 2023 out of the six Western Balkan countries.¹⁸

Graph 2. The Global Organized Crime Index resilience scores of Albania from 2021 and 2023. Data source: [Criminality in Albania – The Organized Crime Index \(ocindex.net\)](#)



The 2023 OC Index resilience¹⁹ score average (see Graph 2.) is 5.13, up 0.08 points from 2021 (5.04), and Albania now ranks 84th of 193 countries (GI-TOC 2023). When comparing 2021 and 2023, there has been an increase in the scores for international cooperation, judicial system and detention, and non-state actors, and a decline in political leadership and governance, and law enforcement. The changes have amounted to 0.50 points except for judicial system and detention, which has increased by one point. The average resilience score for Europe is 6.27. Albania’s resilience score is a bit behind North Macedonia (5.29) and Croatia (5.92), but higher than in Bosnia and Herzegovina (3.88), Montenegro (4.75) and Serbia (4.96). (Ibid.)

¹⁹ “The Index defines ‘resilience’ as the ability to withstand and disrupt organized criminal activities as a whole, rather than individual markets, through political, economic, legal and social measures. Resilience refers to countries’ measures taken by both the state and non-state actors.” ([About the index | GI-TOC](#))

3.1.1 The Balkan route: drug and firearms trafficking

The Balkan route is an important transit route into the EU for drugs and firearms (De Schutter and Duquet 2023, 8). Firearms trafficked into the EU include weapons used in the conflicts in former Yugoslavia as well as state arms looted during the mass unrest in Albania in 1997 (ibid.). For instance, in Sweden, a large number of weapons used in shootings have originated from the Western Balkans, entering the country by “ant trafficking” (i.e., a small number of weapons transported at a time mainly in cars and buses) through existing ties between the Balkan suppliers and the Balkan buyers living in Sweden (Hillier and Lewis 2022, 390).

The Yugoslavian wars which took place between 1991 and 2001 also affected drug smuggling routes. The heroin route – originating from Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan – that had previously run through Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, began in the early 1990s instead to flow through Albania into Northern Europe and Italy. Simultaneously, the Albanian production of cannabis began to grow.²⁰ (Intelligence Fusion 2023, 6.)

Eventually, Albanian OCGs also became major players in cocaine trade from South America to Europe, mainly via Dutch and Belgian ports (Qyno 2021). An expert interviewed for this paper explained that drug traffickers try to corrupt employees and officials in big European ports or infiltrate their members into the staff. Additionally, while Albanian groups tend not to use violence against civilians, they may target dockworkers if the criminals encounter difficulties in seizing drug containers.

As an example of an intercontinental cocaine business, Kompania Bello, a network/cartel of 14 Albanian OCGs, jointly ran a drug supply chain from South America to Europe (Qyno 2021). Lower-level Albanian crime gangs took part in the distribution of drugs in Europe and foot soldiers were recruited from the large Albanian diaspora in the Netherlands and Italy. A strict pact of silence in case any collaborators were arrested was enforced through intimidation which included threats of revenge towards the collaborators’ families in the Netherlands, Italy, or Albania. (Ibid.)

Nearly 4,000 kilos of cocaine and more than 5.5 million EUR in cash were seized during the investigation into Kompania Bello which took place in 2015–2020 (Europol 2020). The business model was described by Europol (2020) as “sophisticated”, with the network controlling the entire supply chain. Traditionally, international importers of cocaine have worked separately from the wholesalers and distributors (ibid.). By procuring cocaine directly from the South American cartels instead of relying on European wholesalers as middlemen, Albanian gangs have been able to pay a significantly lower price per ki-

²⁰ Due to state and police efforts, including the destruction of plantations, cannabis cultivation in Albania has declined significantly since 2016, and production has shifted from outdoor cultivation to indoor methods (GI-TOC 2023, 4).

lo, and as a result, have ousted a lot of the competition by also having lower retail prices and a higher quality product (The Guardian 2019).

The multi-million proceeds of Kompania Bello were laundered using an underground system resembling the Hawala system, in which money was deposited to an informal agency in one country and withdrawn through another operator in another country, making it difficult for investigators to trace the money (Europol 2020). According to an expert interviewed for this study, more minor players and criminals operating in the street distribution of drugs may use legitimate business structures for their money laundering activities. However, professional money laundering services are a necessity for groups operating a large business in such a cash-intensive criminal market as drug trafficking.

3.1.2 Facilitation of irregular migration

In 2022, around 330,000 irregular border crossings were detected at the external border of the European Union (Frontex 2023). The Western Balkan route was used in 145,600 entries into the EU (45% of the total number of entries), a record high on this route since 2015. The persons detected were most often of Syrian, Afghan or Turkish nationality. (Ibid.) Albanian OCGs reportedly participate in facilitating irregular migration together with Turkish, Greek, Kurdish, North African and other Balkan gangs (Intelligence Fusion 2023, 17–19; Taylor 2021).²¹

In 2023, Italy and Albania agreed on a deal, in which Italy would set up detention camps in Albania for irregular migrants who are intercepted at sea on their way to the Italian island of Lampedusa. The deal raised objections among Italian and Albanian opposition politicians, international human rights’ groups and Albanian nationals and drew comparisons to the UK’s much-criticized “Rwanda model”²². (See e.g., Balkan Insight 2023; TRT World 2023; Human Rights Watch 2024.) The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (2023) also raised several concerns regarding potential legal and procedural ambiguities that could result in differential treatment between asylum applicants in Albania and in Italy. Despite the critique, the agreement was ratified in the Italian senate and the Albanian parliament in February 2024 (CNN 2024; Reuters 2024). One of the interviewees for this paper speculated whether the establishment of these camps might increase the human trafficking risks or criminal activities, as crime groups could potentially try to recruit the migrants.²³

The number of Albanian nationals found to be irregularly staying in the EU Member States in 2022 was 38,865, an increase of 11.5% from 2021 (34,840) (European Commission 2023c). The number of applications for international protection by Albanians also increased by

²¹ As a case example, see [Eurojust-supported action leads to arrest of 29 people smugglers in Italy and Albania | Eurojust](#)

²² Cf. UK’s Sunak suffers major blow as Rwanda migrant scheme declared unlawful | Reuters (15 Nov 2023)

²³ Similarly, Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group’s expert has previously argued about the planned UK-Rwanda deal, that asylum camps in Rwanda would put vulnerable people at a greater risk of human trafficking (UK’s asylum outsourcing deal with Rwanda could fuel people smuggling | TRT World)

14% between 2021 and 2022, with 12,955 applications lodged in 2022. Some 9% of applicants were granted international protection. (Ibid.)

Albanian citizens were among those most often detected exiting the EU towards the United Kingdom (Frontex 2023). Organized crime groups are heavily involved in this activity. People are smuggled from e.g., France, Netherlands, Belgium and Spain in lorries and ferries. The use of small boats in crossing the English Channel also increased sharply, with more than 12,000 Albanians arriving in the UK in small boats in 2022²⁴. (Intelligence Fusion 2023, 21–22.) The Guardian (2023) reported that 85% of the Albanian arrivals applied for asylum and 12% said they were victims of modern slavery. Albanian OCGs have reportedly recruited persons from migrant camps in northern France to work in the UK drugs industry in exchange for paying for the passage across the Channel (while the actual crossing is operated by Iraqi-Kurdish networks).²⁵

As a countermeasure for the increase in small boat crossings, the UK and France signed a 72 million EUR agreement in late 2022 to increase funding for border patrols and policing on French beaches (UK Home Office 2022b). The UK and Albania also agreed on the expedited removal of Albanians entering the UK illegally, many of whom were, according to the UK Home Office, making false asylum claims on arrival (UK Home Office 2022a). These actions have been met with some criticism from civil society with the arguments that instead of trying to curb human movement, efforts should be made to set up avenues for government-controlled, legal migration that could not be exploited by criminal actors (Evans 2022), and that attention should be paid, instead, on asylum and employment policies and the tightening conditions of the labor market, which may potentially lead to an increase in the exploitation of migrant workers (Perrott 2022).

In 2022, the Albanian Special Structure against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK) and the Italian Anti-Mafia Milan District Directorate, with the support of Eurojust, dismantled a criminal network suspected of committing fraud against the Italian national health system, and of corruption and drug trafficking (Eurojust 2022). The organized crime group allegedly operated between Milan and Italy, and with the complicity of doctors and nurses working in Italian hospitals, offered Albanian citizens expensive and unnecessary medical services that allowed them to enter Italy. By issuing fake medical certificates stating the need for urgent, life-saving medical treatment in Italy, the Albanians were able to enter the country and receive medical and pharmaceutical services under an exemption regime. Corrupt medical practitioners were allegedly bribed with money and sexual services. Furthermore, the OCG members are believed to have trafficked drugs (including high-demand drugs for treating

²⁴ [Albanian migrants: Why are they coming to the UK and how many have arrived? | BBC News](#)

²⁵ [Channel crossings: Albanian migrants recruited to the UK by gangs | BBC News](#)

COVID-19) from the Italian health system to Albania. At least 82 Albanian citizens were registered in the Italian national health system and received (specialist) medical services under this scheme between January 2020 and June 2021. Once caught, six suspects were arrested in Italy and three were placed under house arrest. The authorities also seized over 500 000 EUR from the suspects' bank accounts as well as drugs worth 20 000 EUR. (Ibid.)

3.2 Corruption

Corruption in the Western Balkans is widespread. The forms of corruption have transformed from the political protection of crime facilitators in the 1990s to organized corruption manifested in the abuse of power in decision-making processes. This includes, for example, public procurement misuse, particularly in the health, infrastructure, environmental and climate sectors. (Dordevic 2023, 23.) Members of criminal groups reportedly hold political positions at local, regional and state levels, operate with the police, and receive political protection (GI-TOC 2023, 5). Some of the efforts to curb this include the provisions in the Law on Decriminalization that prevent potential candidates with criminal records from running for public office²⁶, and the Electoral Code's thresholds for monetary and in-kind contributions and the prohibition of donations from non-Albanian public and private entities in political campaigns (IDM 2023). Drug trafficking in particular seems to be facilitated through bribery and corruption, specifically in the border police (GI-TOC 2023, 5). Criminal groups may extort businesspeople and high-level officials with compromising materials, and in some cases, media companies have allegedly used similar tactics to extort businesses and high-level state officials (ibid., 3).

According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF) (2024), editorial independence in Albania is threatened by partisan regulation. Journalists face threats and attacks from organized crime groups in particular, and at times from the police, "spurred on by the government's failure to protect them" (Reporters Without Borders 2024). Journalists investigating crime and corruption are especially threatened, and although self-censorship is common, media outlets have created a platform for ethical self-regulation. The ownership of the most influential private-sector media is concentrated in the hands of few and has ties to the political world. Furthermore, according to RSF, politicians appoint the directors of public media outlets. Journalistic criticism towards the government is often met with political attacks and discredit.²⁷ Albania's constitution and international legal commitments guarantee press freedom, but the protections for the confidentiality of sources are described as insufficient. Moreover, while the police have

²⁶ The implementation of the Law On Decriminalization prompted special mayoral elections in 2022: vacancies were created in the municipalities of Shkodër, Vorë, and Lushnjë after incumbent mayors were dismissed for violating the law on the integrity of elected officials (Freedom House 2023).

²⁷ see also Freedom House 2023

recently taken steps to investigate attacks against journalists, the impunity for these crimes as well as the attempts of political discredit towards journalists arguably undermine the efforts. (Ibid.) RSF has also criticized Albanian prosecutors for banning the media from covering certain topics, such as the threats to state officials leaked following cyberattacks²⁸ that took place in 2022 (Szalai 2022).

Albania ranked at 98 out of 180 countries in the 2023 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index with a score of 37 out of 100²⁹ (Transparency International 2024). Citizens are often asked to pay a bribe for basic public services (Hoxhaj 2023). At least a third of Albania's GDP is thought to come from the informal economy, which causes the loss of tax revenue and makes the introduction of labor protection and competition rules difficult (GI-TOC 2023). Illicit financial flows originate from drug trafficking, corruption, white-collar crime, and tax evasion. Considerable amounts of cash generated by OCGs operating abroad are also believed to enter the country. (GI-TOC 2024.) The proceeds of crime are invested in properties, commercial activities, and luxury goods (Rama 2021, 113). The construction industry and the real estate sector, in particular, are central arenas for money laundering activities (GI-TOC 2024).

The Basel AML Index, an independent ranking tool for money laundering and terrorist financing risks around the world, ranked Albania at 93rd out of 152 jurisdictions in 2023 and classified it as a medium-risk country.³⁰ The Council of Europe's (2022) anti-money laundering body MONEYVAL, however, reported in 2022 that Albania has improved its measures to combat money laundering and terrorist financing, and has demonstrated positive progress in complying with FATF (Financial Action Task Force) standards, particularly in areas related to transparency and beneficial ownership of legal persons, regulation and supervision of financial institutions, and mutual legal assistance regarding freezing of assets and confiscation.

The Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) (2023) published a report entitled "Civil society report on the Implementation of Chapter II (Prevention) & Chapter V (Asset Recovery) of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption in Albania", in which they state that although Albania has recently put in place provisions to prevent corruption and enhance asset recovery, there is still a lack of implementation in practice, as well as an inadequate financial and technical capacity within institutions to tackle corruption effectively. IDM finds that institutions' lack of internal audits and a general lack of proactive engagement to investigate and sanction corruption offences are barriers in implementing activities to prevent corruption, and that there are loopholes within public employment and public procurement that must be addressed (ibid.).

²⁸ Hackers publish sensitive data on political assassination plots in Albania, Kosovo | Euractiv

²⁹ A country's score is the perceived level of public sector corruption on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean) (The ABCs of the CPI | Transparency International)

³⁰ Basel AML Index – Assessing money laundering risks around the world | Basel Institute on Governance. In the Index, ranking first would mean being at the highest risk for money laundering, so the lower the ranking, the better.

The linkages between corruption and organized crime are evident. One of the experts interviewed for this paper illustrated that money stemming from illicit sources is used to gain power and protection: having power means having access to the judiciary, the prosecutor, and central institutions such as the police. The interviewee stated that OCGs nominate or sponsor individuals seeking political office or another influential role, who would facilitate their criminal operations once selected for the post.

The investigative journalism organization Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) reported in 2023, that a prominent Albanian businessman and politician Tom Doshi, who has ties to the Albanian Prime Minister, was suspected of leading a criminal group in Australia (OCCRP 2023). According to the article, the group operates in immigration fraud, drug trafficking and money laundering, and consists mostly of members of Doshi's family, many originating from the Albanian county of Shkodër. Doshi had run business ventures in Albania in the pharmaceutical and construction industries, which had largely benefitted from state contracts. The United States sanctioned Doshi for "involvement in significant corruption" in 2018 and he lost his seat in the Albanian parliament in 2021. Doshi was also linked to an investigation into election corruption, including buying votes with cash or other favors. The prosecutors, however, decided not to investigate Doshi, focusing instead on the general phenomenon of vote-buying in Albania. Doshi has denied all accusations towards him. (Ibid.)

The Australian intelligence documents referred to in the OCCRP (2023) article describe Albanian organized crime groups' five-stage "life cycle" in Australia. First, people are recruited in their home regions in Albania, sometimes with false promises of work abroad. Second, they enter the country using fraudulent visa claims and documents as well as registered migration agents (who in the Doshi case were reported to be members of their extended family). Third, they are able to remain in the country due to the lengthy visa review process, and some also claim that their lives would be in danger in Albania, e.g., because of blood feuds. Fourth, they carry out criminal activities. Fifth, they are arrested, convicted and their visas are cancelled. (Ibid.)

3.2.1 Special Structure against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK)

The Special Structure against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK) was established as a part of Albania's judicial reform in 2016 and consists of a special prosecution office (SPO), the national bureau of investigation (NBI), and special courts that deal with corruption and

organized crime (Hoxhaj 2023). SPAK takes on cases of corruption involving public officials where the money involved exceeds 50,000 Albanian lek (~480 EUR) and cases involving public procurement contracts where the money exceeds 800,000 Albanian lek (~7700 EUR) (ibid.). The structure currently employs 18 prosecutors (European Commission 2023a, 42).

In 2022, SPAK participated in 142 criminal cases involving 626 accused persons, and 3,816 new cases were referred to both SPAK and the general prosecutors (European Commission 2023a, 44). 186 people were convicted of public sector corruption, seven of high-level corruption, and 18 of corruption in the judicial system in 2022. 298 new cases were also sent to court for public sector corruption. Seizure of assets from corruption-related crimes came to a total value of 38 million EUR. There were several high-profile cases, such as the convictions of a former Minister of Environment and of a Member of Parliament in a case related to concession contracts on urban waste treatment. A former deputy prime minister was indicted for criminal offences and a former deputy minister of health was arrested in connection to a procurement case. (Ibid., 25.)

SPAK also takes part in capacity-building activities. In October 2023, SPAK, the OSCE presence in Albania and the Albanian School of Magistrates organized a two-day training on “Investigation and adjudication of criminal offences related to public procurement” to enhance the overall capacities of SPAK prosecutors and Special Courts to conduct criminal investigations of high-level corruption and transnational organized crime groups (OSCE Presence in Albania 2023b).

Many of the experts interviewed for this paper highlighted the work of SPAK as a promising practice that has so far hailed positive results. SPAK’s actions have led to indictments and convictions of high-level politicians, such as former government ministers and sitting MPs, and powerful members of organized crime groups. An interviewee described this as “breaking the myth of the untouchables”. At the same time, the interviewee pointed out that criminal groups’ countermeasures have become more sophisticated. As an example, some investigative journalists have reportedly been paid by criminals to expose sensitive information gathered as a part of their journalistic work. One of the interviewed experts reported that SPAK is currently one of the most trusted public institutions in Albania, where such trust has traditionally been difficult to establish, and may bring hope for ending a culture of impunity to the public.

3.2.2 Indicators of democratic development

The V-Dem Institute’s Democracy Report 2024 (Nord et al. 2024, 10) indicates that based on population-weighted averages, democracy is declining the most in Eastern Europe. The report distinguishes between four types of regimes: liberal and electoral democracies, and closed and electoral autocracies (ibid., 12). In Eastern Europe, 66% of the population live in electoral autocracies such as Hungary, Russia, and Serbia. Electoral democracies are home to 29% of the population in, e.g., Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Romania. Of these, 2% reside in what are described as ambiguous “lower bound” electoral democracies – Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Only 5% live in liberal democracies, in Czechia, Estonia, and Latvia. (Ibid., 14.) Electoral democracies are characterized by free and fair multiparty elections, satisfactory levels of suffrage, freedom of expression, and freedom of association. However, countries like Albania which are placed in the lower bound of the regime are described as being in a “grey zone” where classification between electoral democracy and electoral autocracy is more uncertain.

Freedom House (2023) categorizes countries as democracies, hybrid regimes, or authoritarian regimes. In an index describing democracy, Freedom House assigns Albania with a status of transitional or hybrid regime, with a democracy score³¹ of 3.79 out of 7. The overall democracy score improved slightly from 2022 due to the improved corruption rating (from 2.75 to 3.00), which resulted from SPAK’s high-profile indictments and convictions of former officials, and SPAK’s proactivity in promoting the fight against corruption and organized crime (ibid.).

According to International IDEA (2022), Albania performs in the mid-range level across all categories of democracy in the Global State of Democracy Indices³², scoring in the top 25% globally for Freedom of Religion. Albania performs well regarding Elected Government and Freedom of Movement but poorly regarding Absence of Corruption. Over the past five years, Albania’s performance is described as stable with no notable changes. Some of the underlying issues in the country’s democratic development are identified as the transition into a market economy through corrupt privatization efforts and state-led pyramid schemes, and the democratization efforts mostly managed by elites that resulted in a “culture of corruption”, which hampered the formation of strong institutions. (International IDEA 2022.)

³¹ In the democracy score scale of 1 to 7, 1 represents the lowest level of democratic progress and 7 the highest (Freedom House 2023).

³² [Global State of Democracy Indices | Global State of Democracy Initiative, International IDEA](#)

3.3 Trafficking in human beings

In the past three decades, Albanian nationals, women and children in particular, have been trafficked to other European countries (Ramaj 2021). Albania can be described as a country of origin, transit, and destination for human trafficking. Factors contributing to trafficking from and within Albania include poverty and lack of income earning opportunities and livelihoods; low educational attainment and a lack of access to education; gender inequality and violence against women; and the presence of organized crime groups (Haarr 2022, 11–12).

According to the third evaluation round report of the Council of Europe’s Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA 2020, 8), the majority of victims of trafficking in Albania are women and girls trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation, but there are also victims of forced labor, forced begging, forced criminality and forced marriage. Albanian victims are exploited in Albania as well as abroad in, e.g., Western Europe – Belgium, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Norway, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom – and in the neighboring countries – Kosovo, Greece and North Macedonia. Migrant victims of trafficking are rarely identified in Albania, typically there are fewer than 10 cases annually.³³ (Ibid.) Furthermore, Albanian nationals placed in the top-10 non-EU perpetrators of human trafficking in the EU Member States in 2021: among suspects (4th), prosecuted (9th) and convicted (7th) persons (European Commission 2023a, 45).

Albania has over the years introduced legislation and policies to tackle human trafficking. In the most recent Trafficking in Persons Report by the U.S. Department of State (2023), Albania was designated a Tier 2 status as “the Government of Albania does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so”. According to the TIP report, these efforts have included an increased number of trafficking investigations, new screening procedures to identify victims among irregular migrants, and establishing four support centers that provide psychosocial, legal and family support (ibid.). However, during the reporting period, no traffickers were convicted, and the number of identified victims decreased. The screening efforts among potentially vulnerable populations such as migrants, asylum-seekers, Roma- and Balkan-Egyptian communities and children were inconsistent, and mobile victim identification units remained under-resourced. Moreover, reintegration measures for victims were limited and key anti-trafficking coordination bodies did not convene. (Ibid.)

The Ministry of Interior Affairs of Albania is responsible for the work regarding the prevention of trafficking, and the protection of victims’ rights and their reintegration. The strategic coordination

³³ In 2015–2019 these foreign victims originated from Afghanistan, Philippines, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Belarus, Republic of Moldova, Italy, Nigeria, and Romania (GRETA 2020, 8) and in 2020–2022 from, e.g., Philippines, the Gambia, Serbia, Romania, Syria, and Kosovo (U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons Reports 2020–2023).

of the state and non-state actors’ responsibilities has been guided by the National Action Plan (NAP) for the Fight Against Human Beings Trafficking 2021–2023.³⁴ A focal point for the Albanian anti-trafficking efforts is the Office for the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator (ONAC) (U.S. Department of State 2023). The State Committee against Trafficking in Persons, consisting of ministry representatives, monitors and implements certain anti-trafficking activities but did not convene in 2021 or 2022. The National Anti-Trafficking Task Force, in which representatives of ministries and civil society and other relevant organizations participate, monitors the NRM. This group met once in both 2021 and 2022. Moreover, there are twelve regional anti-trafficking committees comprised of local officials and NGOs, that work on victim assistance and referral mechanisms. (Ibid.)

According to the experts interviewed for this paper, trafficking in human beings is no longer a major line of business for Albanian organized crime groups, mainly because drug trafficking is much more financially lucrative than human trafficking. However, particularly domestic (i.e., in-country) trafficking and trafficking in children remain concerns, and the fact that only a low number of convictions have been secured showcases that efforts to strengthen national actions against trafficking are still needed.

3.3.1 Human trafficking statistics

Number of	2020	2021	2022
<i>cases investigated by the Albanian State Police</i>	31 (32 suspects)	31 (32 suspects)	85 (112 suspects)
<i>cases prosecuted by the General Prosecution Office</i>	2 (12 defendants)	2 (12 defendants)	54 (8 defendants)
<i>persons convicted for trafficking in court</i>	0	11	0
<i>(potential) victims of trafficking identified by the Albanian government and NGOs</i>	86	159	112

Table 1. Albanian trafficking statistics from the U.S. Department of State’s Trafficking in Persons Reports 2022; 2023.³⁵

³⁴ National Action Plan (eng) | tdh-albania.org

³⁵ According to one of the sources interviewed for this paper, the no. of (potential) victims identified in 2023 was 166, and 90% of them were exploited in Albania.

According to the latest Trafficking in Persons Report, the Albanian State Police (ASP) investigated 85 new cases of trafficking with 112 suspects in 2022 (U.S. Department of State 2023). 71 of the suspects were potentially involved in trafficking for sexual exploitation and 41 in unspecified forms of trafficking. This was a significant increase from 2021, when a total of 61 cases with 27 suspects were investigated. The General Prosecution Office (GPO) prosecuted 54 cases with eight defendants in 2022. Additionally, the Special Structure against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK) initiated two new investigations and continued with two investigations from 2021. The national courts of law did not convict any traffickers. The government did not report any cases in which government officials would have been suspected of involvement in trafficking crimes – a few such cases had been uncovered in 2020 and 2021 within the police. Following a judicial reform, SPAK and the Special Court of Appeals on Corruption and Organized Crime have jurisdiction over trafficking cases related to organized crime, while GPO and district courts handle the rest. (Ibid.)

In 2022, the Albanian government and NGOs identified 110 potential victims and two official victims of trafficking³⁶ (U.S. Department of State 2023). Of the 110 persons, 61 were potential victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, 35 potential victims of labour trafficking (including 26 potential victims of forced begging), and 14 potential victims of forced criminality. 32 of all victims were women, four men, 48 girls and 26 boys. Nearly all identified victims were Albanians; two victims were Syrian and one Kosovan. Mobile victim identification units (MIUs) which operate in nine regions and consist of NGO social workers and police officers identify the majority cases each year – in 2022 they identified 75 potential victims. While the government adopted new screening methods to identify victims in irregular migration flows, the ASP did not screen individuals involved in commercial sex for trafficking indicators during raids, for example. The labour inspectorate also lacked training to identify victims of forced labour. Potential cases of forced marriages involving forced labour and domestic servitude in Roma and Balkan-Egyptian communities were reportedly dismissed and treated as “traditional cultural practices”. (Ibid.)

The European Commission (2023a, 46) has argued that the identification of potential victims of trafficking is inadequate within Albania, including among vulnerable migrants entering the country and those residing in reception centers. The Commission calls for increased anti-trafficking efforts, stating that NGO-run shelters are underfunded, and that investigations and prosecutions are not conducted consistently with a focus on the victim and with a gender-responsive approach (ibid.). The Commission highlights as a very posi-

tive development the creation of an investigative sector in the border and migration police, with the aim of preventing, detecting and countering cross-border illegal activity, including people smuggling and human trafficking (ibid., 55).

3.3.2 Assistance and interventions

There are four specialized shelters³⁷ in Albania that form the National Coalition of Anti-Trafficking Shelters (NCATS) and which support victims in a broad variety of ways, from providing food, accommodation and health care services to offering educational and employment services, and post-reintegration follow-up (U.S. Department of State 2023). State-funding for shelters increased in 2022, as in addition to other funding, the government transferred (the equivalent of) over 200,000 USD to them from a fund of seized criminal assets – a significant increase from 95,000 USD in 2021 (ibid.). One of the experts interviewed for this paper stated that Albania’s EU accession process has had a positive impact on anti-trafficking measures, because increased service provision for victims as well as fighting serious and organized crime have been seen by the government as measures that enhance the country’s chances of joining the EU. Nevertheless, NGO-run shelters continued to struggle with resources in 2022, and municipal governments did not give funding to shelters because support services for trafficking victims were reportedly not seen as a priority (ibid.).

Foreign victims of trafficking have access to the same services as Albanian victims, are entitled to a three-month reflection period, and are permitted to work for up to two years in Albania (U.S. Department of State 2023). In 2016, standard operating procedures (SOPs) were established for transnational cooperation and case management regarding victims of trafficking that may move between Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro, and in 2018, SOPs regarding the protection of (potential) victims of trafficking were put in place (Haarr 2022, 13).

UNICEF has been involved in anti-trafficking measures in Albania. Together with six international and local organizations, they implemented a programme called “Transforming the National Response to Human Trafficking in and from Albania” during 2019–2022, with funding from United Kingdom government. An evaluation report published in 2022 concluded that the programme was effective at transforming national and municipal responses to trafficking, at improving knowledge and attitudes towards preventing trafficking, and at identifying and reintegrating victims into their communities and families (Haarr 2022, vi). The programme encountered difficulties in getting regional and municipal authorities from different

³⁷ The shelters are Different & Equal, Other Vision, the National Reception Centre for Victims of Trafficking, and Vatra Psycho-Social Centre.

³⁶ Identification of potential victims can be done by e.g., the police, social services, labor inspectorates, regional education or health directorates, and civil society organizations (GRETA 2016, 21). Official/formal identification is done by a team consisting of a police officer from the Anti-Trafficking Section and a social worker. The victim is interviewed, has to consent to being formally identified and must sign a confidentiality clause. (Ibid.) According to the law, equal services are offered to both potential and officially recognized victims (U.S. Department of State 2023).

sectors to cooperate and coordinate to meet the needs of victims and their families. More specifically, these difficulties included, e.g., a lack of trust and absence of consensus among agencies and/or governing bodies, siloed and fragmented work, different expectations and prioritizations across organizations, highly centralized and bureaucratic structure of government entities, lack of sufficient resources to combat trafficking, ineffective leadership, and high staff turnover (ibid.).

In 2023, the OSCE Presence in Albania (2023a) and the School of Magistrates organized a training-of-trainers workshop with the school's academic staff, judges and prosecutors to introduce a mock-trial methodology for human trafficking cases, which had been tailored to the Albanian legal framework. The UNODC (2023) also reported of a mock-trial exercise program in partnership with the School of Magistrates in 2023. Furthermore, the OSCE Presence in Albania (2024) organized a hackathon against human trafficking in February 2024, where participants from state institutions and civil society organizations trained together to detect online human trafficking and child sexual exploitation. The goal was to increase participants' awareness of the ways in which technology is misused to facilitate exploitation and of the platforms and websites utilized by traffickers (ibid.).

3.3.3 Domestic human trafficking and Albania as a source and destination country

Domestic human trafficking

Most cases of human trafficking identified in Albania concern domestic trafficking, that is, cases where the victim is an Albanian national who is trafficked within the country. Domestic trafficking has in particular been identified in relation to the trafficking of Albanian women and children for the purpose of sexual exploitation within the country, which increases during tourist seasons (GI-TOC 2023, 3).

According to a 2022 UNICEF Albania study, the trafficker is commonly someone close to the victim: a boyfriend, a friend, or a family member (Davy 2022). 30 trafficking survivors who had been trafficked by someone they knew closely were interviewed for the study. Most of the interviewees were women (27 persons), had been trafficked by an intimate partner, a friend or a family member (26 persons), domestically (23 persons), and for the purpose of sexual exploitation (23 persons), and their trafficker was involved in a small or medium-sized crime group (14 persons), in drug trafficking, theft and/or robbery (13 persons), and/or had exploited other victims (12 persons) (ibid., 9–10). Traffickers may employ the so-called lover boy

method, which refers to grooming girls or women, establishing a relationship with them under false pretenses and eventually exploiting them. The identification and "recruitment" of potential victims often happens through social media. Means of control may include threats, violence, confinement, confiscation of identity and travel documents and mobile phone, drugging, artificial debts, threats against the victim's family members, and social isolation. (Ibid., 10–11.) Victims of trafficking often face considerable stigmatization, and may be rejected by their families or lose job opportunities upon exposure, for example (Ramaj 2023, 418–419).

An expert interviewed for this paper stated that a significant part of Albanian trafficking victims are minors, who have completed only a basic level of education and who are often deceived by the perpetrators with false promises of jobs, food, accommodation, marriage, or jobs/studies abroad. The expert had also observed that there seem to be more and more cases of forced criminality, also with links to national organized crime, where groups of 20–40-year-old men recruit vulnerable young boys who come from violent homes and have experienced abuse before. Child victims are commonly forced by traffickers to beg, sell small items, or participate in burglaries or the cultivation and distribution of drugs (U.S. Department of State 2023). Children who are trafficked by family members rarely understand the situation, but rather are, for instance, pressured into earning money for the family or intimidated with the prospect of having to live on the streets (Davy 2022, 10–11). Children of Roma and Balkan-Egyptian minorities are reportedly at heightened risk of child trafficking due to circumstances such as poverty, low levels of education and a lack of housing (Haarr 2022, 12).

Albania as a source country for human trafficking

Trafficking of Albanian girls and women abroad for sexual exploitation was a major problem in the 1990s, peaking between 1997 and 2001. Despite the decline, sexual exploitation of Albanian victims in Western Europe still remains the most prevalent form of human trafficking in Albania (GI-TOC 2023, 3). Recent data is scarce but in the European Commission report on Data collection on trafficking in human beings in the EU, Albania ranked as the second most common non-EU country of citizenship, and overall the third most common country of citizenship after Nigeria and Romania, for registered victims of trafficking (all forms of THB) exploited in the EU in 2015–2016 (Francis et al. 2018, 81–85). An expert interviewed for this paper argued that the efforts of the border police and immigration authorities should be harmonized to prevent the border crossings of Albanian and, e.g., Syrian and Afghan minors in transit through the country,

who are potentially exiting Albania with their traffickers.

According to the U.S. Department of State (2023) TIP report, traffickers exploit Albanian victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in countries across Europe, e.g., in Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, Kosovo, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. One of the methods used by the perpetrators is to recruit women and girls online with fake job offers (GRETA 2020, 8). Cases have been identified, for example, featuring the recruitment of Albanian women to work in nightclubs in the neighboring countries of Kosovo, Greece and Macedonia, and subsequently being forced into prostitution (Rama 2021, 118–119). According to Intelligence Fusion (2023, 16), trafficking for sexual exploitation is no longer as important to Albanian organized crime groups and is mainly perpetrated by groups that are multi-crime oriented. Furthermore, sex trafficking may be used to sow corruption. Criminals may seek to advance their business operations by trying to bribe police officers, the judiciary or individuals working in shipping or logistics with sexual favors from the trafficked women (ibid.).

Men and boys in particular have reportedly been trafficked to engage in criminal activity, such as drug harvesting and distribution and theft (UK Home Office 2022c). They may be held in debt bondage for, e.g., travel costs into EU countries or the United Kingdom, and are forced to partake in illegal activities to pay off their debt (Haarr 2022, 12). As an example of this, the UK media reported about a 16-year-old boy who was smuggled by boat into the country in 2022 and abducted to work in a cannabis farm (The Guardian 2023). The boy was reportedly locked inside the cannabis house for three months until the police raided the site (ibid.).

Cases of labor exploitation have been reported, for instance, from Switzerland, where Albanian women have allegedly been exploited as nannies (BNN Breaking 2024) and from the UK, where some of the Albanians whose asylum applications are in process or have been rejected work in the grey economy where unscrupulous employers take advantage of their situation (The Guardian 2023).

As an example of Albanian perpetrators working abroad, in 2021, four Albanian entrepreneurs were arrested in Italy for exploiting their employees (Politiko 2021). The entrepreneurs owned seven companies operating in a Venice shipyard with about 200 Albanian, Romanian, Italian and asylum-seeking employees in total. The workers were reportedly paid minimum wage, were denied leave and compensation for working overtime, and faced threats towards themselves and their families. The entrepreneurs also allegedly bribed the shipyard managers to secure tenders. Italian authorities seized 1.3 million EUR in assets from the entrepreneurs during the investigation. (Ibid.)

Albania as a destination country for human trafficking

Albania is also, to a lesser extent, a country of destination for human trafficking. The number of identified cases of trafficking and exploitation of migrants in Albania remains low with fewer than ten victims identified annually (see chapter 3.3). The emigration of local employees has resulted in significant labor shortages in sectors such as manufacturing and food processing – sectors that are characterized by relatively low-skilled jobs, low salaries, and long supply chains. These type of sectors are also associated with an increased risk of labour exploitation.

Albanian footwear factories, for instance, have recruited workers from Nepal and the Philippines (Albanian Daily News 2022) and meat and fish processing companies from Bangladesh – a practice reportedly encouraged by the Albanian Prime Minister (Balkan Insight 2021). Employees often come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are mostly women. Staff shortages are also common in the (seasonal) tourism industry, e.g., in hotels and restaurants. (Ibid.) In a 2016 study on footwear manufacturing, researchers conducted field research during which they interviewed 179 shoe workers from 12 factories in six countries, including Albania (Luginbühl and Musiolek 2016). One in three of the workers interviewed in Albania did not receive the legal minimum wage, even when taking into account overtime and bonus payments, and women were reportedly paid less than men for the same work. Informal work and thereby, a lack of social coverage, was common. None of the workers interviewed had been involved in a labor inspection nor attended a training session on occupational health and safety. The workers also had little trust in the integrity of trade unions and labor inspectors. (Ibid.)

Recruitment fees, which may result in debt bondage, have been identified as factors that may increase the risk of labor exploitation. Albania has a legal framework in place for regulating and licensing private sector employers and recruitment agencies, which also prohibits worker-paid recruitment fees (U.S. Department of State 2023).

3.3.4 Challenges

According to the U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report (2023), GRETA and other observers have noted that Albanian district prosecutors do not have the experience and capacity to successfully prosecute trafficking cases. Cases are prosecuted with a lesser charge instead of trafficking, and some prosecutors seem to falsely believe that cases of trafficking must always include a transnational element. Trafficking investigations are hampered by law enforcement authorities' limited resources and capacity and a high staff turnover.

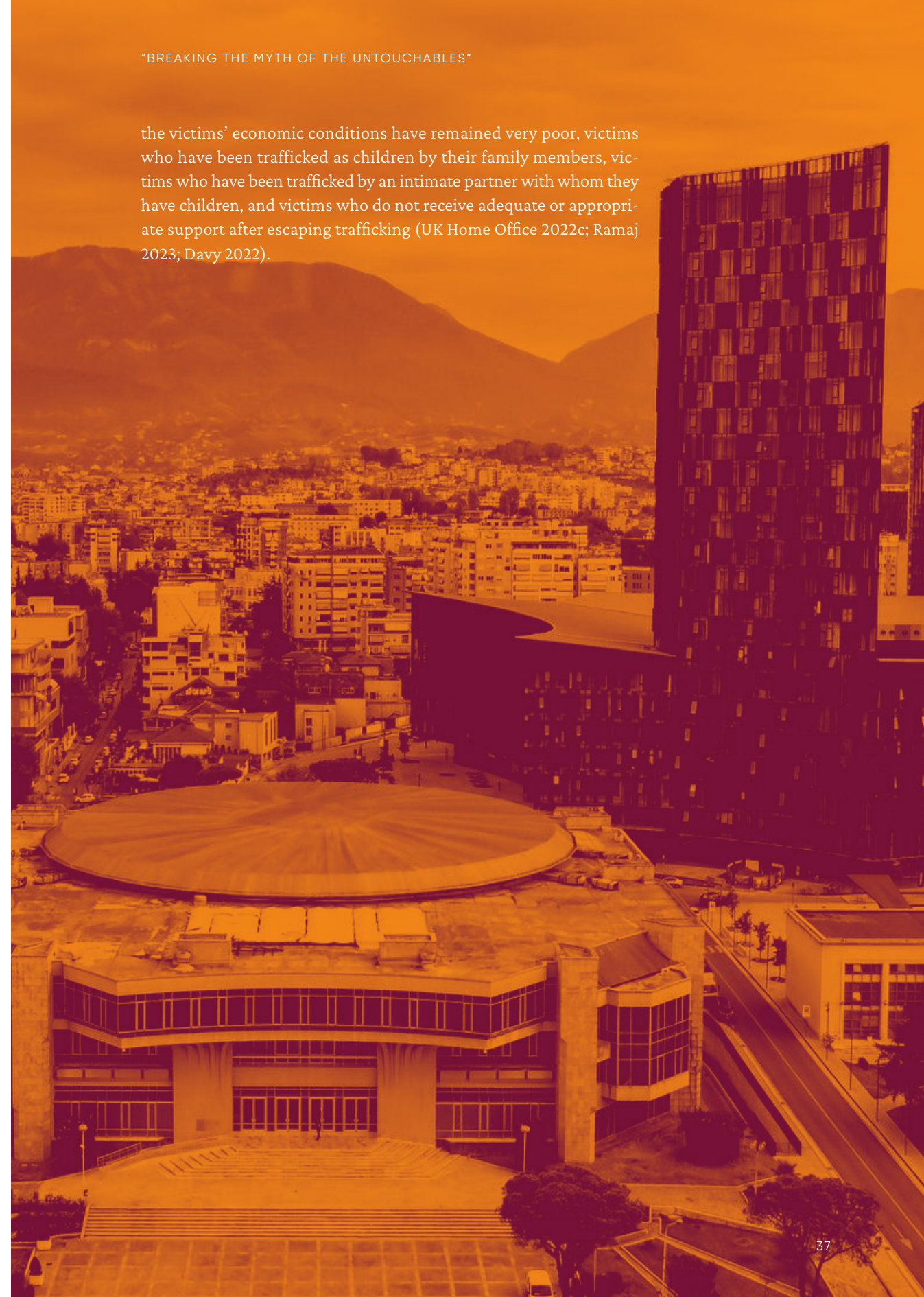
The government, with the help of NGOs and international organizations, has implemented trainings for criminal justice practitioners and victim coordinators on anti-trafficking issues. (U.S. Department of State 2023.)

Recommendations given to Albania in the Trafficking in Persons Report (2023) include, e.g., enhancing trafficking investigations and prosecutions; seeking adequate penalties for traffickers; training law enforcement officials, prosecutors and judges; implementing victim-sensitive approaches during criminal justice proceedings; increasing NGO-run shelters' funding; and improving access to reintegration and mental health services for victims. GRETA (2020) recommended after its third evaluation round for Albania that the Albanian authorities take measures to ensure comprehensive collection of evidence during criminal investigations of human trafficking cases and ensure the full implementation of the legislation regarding preventive measures, and the seizure and confiscation of assets arising from criminal activities (to support victims' compensation claims). Moreover, GRETA (2020) suggested taking concrete steps to build the professional skills of lawyers and attorneys who support victims in filing claims and/or lawsuits, and training prosecutors and judges. In terms of compensation, Albanian authorities should use a special fund for compensating victims of THB.

One of the experts interviewed for this paper claimed that the police does not proactively identify cases, or at times, initiate investigations of trafficking in human beings because of corruption. The interviewee described, as an example, cases in which the police has allegedly not taken action concerning nightclubs that employ foreign dancers who provide sexual services because the police has received bribes from the nightclub owners. Another problem the expert had identified was that cases are often not prosecuted as trafficking in human beings. Instead, they are prosecuted as a lesser offence such as exploitation in prostitution (CC Article 114/2) or maltreatment of children, which also have a lower penalty scale and thus, lesser consequences for the perpetrators.

The Country Policy and Information Note (CPIN) on Albania and human trafficking by the UK Home Office (UK Home Office 2023) acknowledges that while Albania is a safe state, a risk of re-trafficking and other harm remains for some victims of trafficking on return to the country, and states that the risk is likely greater for women than men. According to the Note, when claiming asylum, the applicant must credibly show evidence that they face a risk of persecution of serious harm on return and are unable to benefit from the protection measures available to them in Albania (UK Home Office 2023). Re-trafficking risks seem to concern, in particular, situations in which

the victims' economic conditions have remained very poor, victims who have been trafficked as children by their family members, victims who have been trafficked by an intimate partner with whom they have children, and victims who do not receive adequate or appropriate support after escaping trafficking (UK Home Office 2022c; Ramaj 2023; Davy 2022).



4. Effects of Albanian criminality on the European level.

A threat to the rule of law and democracy?

Most of the interviewed experts working in law enforcement, research and civil society identified several common threats posed by Albanian organized crime groups. Drug trafficking was seen as a major threat. Money laundering activities take place to a large extent in Albania, where, according to an interviewee, illicit money goes into influencing politicians and distorts the free market economy. Overseas, the harms are faced by both local societies as well as the Albanians living abroad through the criminals' recruitment activities and the potential prejudice towards the diaspora, cases of which have been detected in, for example, the United Kingdom (see e.g., The Guardian 2023).

One interviewee argued that the presence of Albanian-led organized crime is actually "more visible" abroad: the Albanian market is very small, and criminal activities such as drug distribution are mainly carried out abroad in countries like the Netherlands, UK and Spain. An interviewee summarized the issue as "Albanian organized crime is European organized crime", and stated, regarding the Nordic countries, that as the Albanian OCGs access new territories, they are very violent at first to claim their turf. After their reputation has been established there is less need for extreme violence.

Further research on the topic of Albanian-led criminality is needed. According to a Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime report (Djordjevic 2023) analyzing research on illicit economies in the Western Balkans, there is a large body of recent research on organized crime and corruption in the region, but it is limited and mostly focused on national laws and policies. The author also argues, based on comparison with the data of the Global Organized Crime Index³⁸, that there is a mismatch between the most critical risks and the current research focus, and therefore, suggests that more studies should be conducted in the areas of "i) mafia-style groups, criminal networks, state-embedded actors, foreign actors, and gender and crime; ii) cyber, financial and environmental crime as emerging criminal markets; and iii) crime-prevention strategies focusing on youth, vulnerable groups and confiscation of criminal assets" (ibid., 24–25, 27).

³⁸ [Global Organized Crime Index | GI-TOC](#)

5. Rule of law development in Albania and the effects of future EU enlargement

The rule of law together with democracy and fundamental rights are considered the founding values of the European Union and form the core factor in Europe's political stability and economic prosperity (European Commission 2023b, 1). The rule of law refers to transparent, accountable, democratic and pluralistic law-making process; legal certainty; prohibition of arbitrariness of the executive powers; effective judicial protection, including access to justice by independent and impartial courts; separation of powers; and non-discrimination and equality before the law (European Union 2020). EU accession requires fulfillment of three elements: 1) political criteria including stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; 2) economic criteria including a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces; and 3) administrative and institutional capacity to effectively implement the EU acquis and ability to take on the obligations of membership.³⁹

The EU assesses that Albania is making some progress in the implementation of justice reform, but still needs to strengthen e.g., public administration reform and public financial management reform. It also significantly needs to strengthen the fight against corruption and strengthen its efforts to tackle organized crime. There is an overall lack of sufficient prosecutions and convictions, especially in high-level cases. Additional emphasis needs to be placed on countering cybercrime, money laundering and trafficking in human beings.

³⁹ [Accession criteria | European Commission](#)

On migration, Albania has contributed to the management of migration flows, but needs to better address the needs of unaccompanied minors and align its visa policy with that of the EU. (European Commission 2023a.)

Hoxhaj (2020, 144) has argued that for rule of law initiatives to have a lasting impact, it is not sufficient only to focus on the vetting of the judiciary, in Albania, to strengthen the rule of law. Overall, the experts interviewed for this paper agreed that Albania is making progress towards EU accession and mentioned that the vetting process seems to have been impactful but identified continued problems with regard to effective legal proceedings against organized crime, access to justice and victims' rights, as well as anti-corruption.

Various donors work in the Western Balkans in an effort to tackle organized crime and corruption, many of them linking their assistance with the EU accession process and a rule-of-law context (Djordjevic 2023, 26). Projects focus on topics such as anti-corruption, justice reform, and technical assistance to law enforcement (ibid.). According to the European Court of Auditors (2022), despite many positive developments, EU efforts in the region have had a limited overall impact on its fundamental rule of law situation mainly due to insufficient political will. The auditors recommended that EU institutions emphasize rule of law reforms, support for civil society and media, conditionality in pre-accession assistance, as well as project reporting and monitoring (ibid.).

One of the concerns raised within the EU at large is that Albanian membership would open up for additional influence of Albanian organized criminal groups in Europe. Interviewed experts noted that while Albania's EU accession would create benefits for Albanian organized crime groups, these benefits would be counterbalanced by the overall benefits EU membership would bring to the country as a whole. One of the interviewed experts noted that disputes among criminals or criminal groups are usually settled in Albania, so killings or abductions are less often done on EU grounds, which at the moment makes it easier to escape indictment. Currently, SPAK cooperates with Europol, Eurojust and bilaterally with EU countries, and when an Albanian is indicted in another country, their assets are confiscated also in Albania. This is a measure that one interviewee highlighted as a successful practice for disrupting criminal activity and contributing to the rule of law development in the country. The interviewees argued that after EU accession, concrete measures for tackling organized crime such as exchanging intelligence will likely become more efficient.

An interviewee working in law enforcement emphasized the need for strong (political) will within Albania to tackle the issue of or-

ganized crime, and on a more operational level, real-time exchange of information between police organizations as well as joint investigation measures. Another interviewee, working within civil society, expressed some concern for the future. Currently, Albania is receiving support for capacity-building, reforms, and other activities to strengthen the rule of law from, e.g., the United States and the European Union. The question remains whether the country will be able to keep up the positive development once it has to manage on its own.

Our interviewees brought up the central role of Albanian educational institutions in strengthening the rule of law development of the country. Albania suffers from "brain drain" because many young, academically-oriented people leave the country to study abroad and may have reservations about returning to Albania for work. The interviewees highlighted the importance of improving the quality of education and the integrity of Albanian universities in order to attract and retain students. This need has also been identified by the World Bank as the development should not be about preventing movement, but about creating the conditions in Albania so that especially the Albanian youth choose to stay rather than leave (World Bank 2024).

A recent study among Albanian university students shows that corruption is perceived as a significant problem at university: only 4 percent of the polled university students claimed that there was almost 'no corruption' in the education system and the majority thought that corrupt practices exist at their university (Dodaj, Hrnjaz, and Shumanovska Spasovska 2023). A minority of students report that they have themselves been requested bribes. However, 86 percent of the students stated that they would not report corruption at their university because of fear about possible retaliation (ibid.). Also, our interviewees spoke about corruption at higher educational institutions, and alluded to cases in which academic positions have been awarded through corrupt ties, and university management with linkages to organized criminal groups.⁴⁰ Advancements in quality and integrity are particularly relevant for law schools, magistrate schools, the policy academy, and departments of social sciences, for example. There should also be clearer policies and procedures for reporting corruption at universities.

One of the interviewed experts stated that the main ways of increasing the resistance of police, journalists and other professionals when they are being intimidated or corrupted is to spread awareness, increase professionals' financial status, improve recruitment processes, and enhance the status and reputation of the police. Corruption in law enforcement is being rooted out through the work of SPAK, for example, which may increase the public's trust in the police. However, it needs to be recognized that the establishment of

⁴⁰ see also [Identifying feasible and high-impact anti-corruption interventions: The case of Albania | U4](#)

good governance and a strong rule of law requires a holistic and long-term process, where fundamental societal structures are reformed and strengthened. It also requires both proactive and reactive measures to ensure continued adherence to the principles of the rule of law as well as transparency. Predictability of judicial processes, access to justice and trust in institutions are closely linked and are practical and concrete manifestations of the rule of law for common citizens. In terms of criminality, organized crime and resilience, the Global Organized Crime Index (GI-TOC 2023) indeed shows promising progress for Albania. The country had the most significant reduction in its criminality score between 2021 and 2023 out of the six Western Balkan countries.



6. Summary and conclusions

The aim of this background paper was to address the linkages between organized crime, corruption, and the effects on the rule of law in the Western Balkans, with a specific focus on Albania. The paper was commissioned by the Rule of Law Centre at the University of Helsinki with the aim of providing background information for the Centre's future activities in Albania. Next, we outline key recommendations based on the themes covered in this paper and suggest concrete activities that the Rule of Law Centre could take into account in upcoming programming cycles in Albania.

Support for democracy development and the rule of law

Albania can be characterized as a hybrid democracy (Freedom House 2023), a mid-range performer on democratic dimensions (International IDEA 2022), and as a lower bound electoral democracy, meaning that the country's multiparty elections are free and fair, the right to vote (i.e., suffrage) is satisfactory as is freedom of expression and freedom of association, but there is some of ambiguity regarding the elements of democracy (Nord et al. 2024, 14). Albania should however undertake additional reforms to solidify good governance, the rule of law, anti-corruption and the fulfillment of fundamental and human rights. To do so, Albania would benefit from continued support to implement the needed changes. In addition to supporting the electoral process in Albania, the Rule of Law Centre could continue to support media freedom and the freedom of association, including the freedom of civil society actors.

- Albania should ensure editorial independence and press freedom also in practice and strengthen the protection of journalists from violence by organized crime and state actors.
- In order to strengthen the freedom of civil society actors and counter interference by organized criminal groups, Albania should strengthen the possibilities for civil society to operate and function through funding and sufficient protection for freedom of association.

□ The Rule of Law Centre could support and strengthen independent media, press freedom and the protection of the integrity of journalism through cooperation with educational institutions training journalists and media, and by fostering a dialogue with independent media actors (e.g., in Finland).

□ The Rule of Law Centre could partner with and support the work of civil society organizations that promote and defend press freedom, freedom of speech and freedom of association.

□ The Rule of Law Centre could support democracy awareness-raising among the public, especially among young people, by partnering with and supporting civil society and grassroots organizations.

Support for efforts to counter corruption

Although Albania ranks among the most corrupt countries in Europe (see e.g., Transparency International 2024), it has taken significant steps in recent years with the actions of the Special Structure against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK). It has also implemented the Inter-Sectoral Strategy against Corruption 2015–2023. The fight against corruption has many dimensions, and ensuring public participation and oversight in decision-making is one of them.

- Albania should develop its public consultation and public participation processes to strengthen transparency and prevent corrupt activities. These include not only oversight of political decision-making (e.g., in Parliament), but also enabling the possibility for civil society actors and the public to contribute to legislative processes, ensuring transparency in public procurement, and upholding the right to information of the public and the media.

□ The Rule of Law Centre could support the strengthening of independent oversight institutions and support the strengthening of access to and openness of official documents. This could be done in cooperation with Finnish institutions and actors.

Support for higher education

A high share of young Albanians studies abroad and remains abroad, contributing to brain-drain from the country. At the same time, tertiary education opportunities in the country are limited, and there are allegations of linkages to organized criminal groups among university leadership. One approach to strengthen democracy as well as resilience to organized crime and corruption is to ensure that young people find educational opportunities of sufficient standard and quality.

- The integrity of academic institutions to organized crime and corruption in Albania should be strengthened. Student admission and the hiring of academic staff and leadership should be based on merit and aptitude. The vetting process could therefore be expanded also to academic institutions.

□ The Rule of Law Centre could support – through its affiliation with the University of Helsinki – the further development of merit-based selection of staff.

□ The Rule of Law Centre could develop courses for university students in cooperation with Finnish experts on anti-corruption, the rule of law and good governance, including concrete case examples, integrity building measures and practical exercises.

Support for reform and capacity-building for key judicial authorities

Despite major developments in recent years, structural reforms within the security and justice sector are still needed in Albania. SPAK is generally considered a promising practice and has supported the structural reforms of the judiciary and actions against corruption in Albania. However, the government, with support from external partners (most notably the EU), should continue to support the reform of key institutions, including the judicial reform and the reform of the police.

Albania has strengthened its judicial cooperation with EU Member States and EU agencies. There is still a need to enhance the capacity of judicial actors and the police, as well as investigative skills, in particular concerning financial investigation combined with different forms of organized crime, including human trafficking. The seizure and confiscation of assets also needs to be strengthened. To ensure access to justice and the necessary standard of respect for parties, including respect for rights of victims as well as the procedural rights of suspects, Albania should continue to strengthen the capacity and skills of key judicial authorities.

- Albania should ensure victim- and gender-sensitive approaches during proceedings, including how to encounter and hear parties, in particular victims but also suspects so as to strengthen investigation, prosecution and eventually conviction.
- Albania should also strengthen its treatment of children in the judicial process, especially child suspects (including young offenders involved in organized criminal activities) but also children as victims of e.g., human trafficking. Children should be encountered, treated and heard in a way that is not retraumatizing and that guarantees access to justice and fulfilment of their rights.

□ The Rule of Law Centre in cooperation with HEUNI could offer such capacity building and evidence-based training, which could focus on how to strengthen the understanding among key judicial actors (prosecutors and judges, but also the police) on how to encounter and hear parties.

□ The Rule of Law Centre could also support research on how parties consider that they have been treated in the judicial process, including access to justice and fair trials.

- In order to tackle financial and economic crimes as well as exploitation and trafficking, Albania should strengthen the capacity, skills and mandate of inspection authorities, including labour inspectors and tax authorities as a means of strengthening the rule of law and good governance.
- Relatively few cases of human trafficking are identified annually in Albania. It seems that the recognition and identification of the elements of trafficking in human beings remain a challenge, resulting in very few investigations and even fewer convictions of human trafficking crimes. The understanding of the nature of the crime of trafficking and investigation of such crimes should be strengthened in Albania.

□ The Rule of Law Centre in cooperation with HEUNI could offer and organize support for the inspection authorities and the police through training and co-creation of good intervention models.

□ The Rule of Law Centre could organize a study tour to Finland for Albanian judicial authorities (prosecutors and judges), as well as the police and key inspection authorities (labor inspectors, tax authorities) to learn about the Finnish model of addressing economic crimes, labor market crimes and human trafficking. Finland has developed some good practice in this regard, which may be useful also for other countries.



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