

EDITORIAL

Challenges of EU Integration and the 2025 Parliamentary Elections in Albania

(Democracy, Media Freedom and European standards)

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The year 2025 marked another decisive moment in Albania's post-communist trajectory. The parliamentary elections once again placed European integration at the center of political debate, reminding us that accession to the European Union remains the country's most enduring strategic objective. At the same time, these elections revealed the persistent challenges that continue to shape Albania's democratic development, institutional performance, and relationship with its European partners.

This issue of the journal is dedicated to examining the interplay between integration and domestic politics in Albania, with a special focus on the 2025 elections. Our aim is not only to assess where Albania stands in the accession process, but also to reflect critically on how integration is framed, contested, and instrumentalized within the political arena.

The contributions gathered here shed light on three interrelated dimensions. First, they explore the institutional and governance challenges that remain central to the EU's conditionality framework: judicial reform, anti-corruption efforts, and democratic accountability. Second, they consider the political dimension, focusing on the way integration shaped electoral strategies, party competition, and the broader public discourse in 2025. Finally, they engage with the societal aspect, asking whether integration still functions as a mobilizing vision for citizens or whether "integration fatigue" has begun to emerge after decades of waiting.

Taken together, these perspectives underline a key paradox: Albania is formally closer to the EU than ever before, yet substantively, the credibility of the process is fragile. Integration is celebrated across the political spectrum, but often reduced to rhetoric rather than embedded as a consistent policy program.

Our intention is to frame this issue as a contribution to the wider scholarly and policy debate on this topic. Albania's experience in 2025 illustrates both the promise and the limits of EU enlargement in the current context: the promise of transformation through conditionality and alignment, but also the limits posed by domestic polarization, weak institutions, and uncertainty within the EU itself.

We invite readers to approach this collection as an opportunity to think critically about the future of integration. The 2025 elections have confirmed that EU membership remains a shared aspiration, but they also remind us that the path to accession is as much about consolidating democracy and trust at home as it is about meeting criteria abroad.

By highlighting these tensions, this issue hopes to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges that lie ahead for Albania.