

Fair Elections and European Integration in Albania's 2025 Parliamentary Elections: Education, Minority Inclusion, and Democratic Challenges

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Abstract

Albania's May 2025 parliamentary elections the first since the country opened European Union (EU) accession negotiations represent a crucial test of democratic consolidation and European integration. This paper examines how electoral reforms and enduring challenges will shape the fairness of the 2025 vote, and how education, youth engagement, and minority inclusion factor into Albania's democratic trajectory. A qualitative analysis of legal reforms, election observation reports, survey data, and media discourse reveals both progress and persistent issues. Notable reforms (such as diaspora voting rights and partially open candidate lists) indicate responsiveness to past criticisms, but problems like vote-buying, abuse of state resources, and opposition fragmentation continue to threaten election integrity. Voter turnout has declined to under half of the electorate, reflecting public apathy—especially among disillusioned youth. Meanwhile, ethnic minorities have stronger legal protections on paper yet remain underrepresented in politics, raising questions about alignment with European standards. The study also highlights the role of media and public discourse

in shaping citizens' perceptions of election legitimacy, European integration, and the value of political participation. Ultimately, while EU conditionality has driven some democratic reforms, domestic political will and societal engagement will determine whether the 2025 elections become a turning point toward deeper democracy or entrench Albania's challenges.

Keywords: *Albania; Parliamentary Elections; European Integration; Youth Participation; Minority Inclusion; Media and Public Discourse*

Introduction

Albania's upcoming parliamentary elections in May 2025 come at a pivotal moment as the country stands at the doorstep of the EU. These elections are the first national vote since Albania officially began EU accession talks, and they are widely seen as a critical benchmark of the country's democratic credibility. Fair, transparent, and inclusive elections are not only a domestic imperative for Albania's stability but also a key requirement of the EU's political criteria for membership (European Commission, 2024). International observers and EU officials have long viewed the conduct of Albanian elections as an indicator of readiness for integration serious irregularities in 2025 could jeopardize the accession process. The media and public discourse in Albania have accordingly put the upcoming vote under intense scrutiny, amplifying debates on electoral integrity and reform.

Three core challenges frame the context of the 2025 elections: (1) persistent democratic deficits in the electoral process, (2) the engagement of youth through education in politics amid the EU integration drive, and (3) the political inclusion of ethnic minorities. The first challenge involves ongoing issues with election fairness ranging from vote-buying and misuse of administrative resources to questions about media freedom and the dominance of the ruling party. The second pertains to the widespread apathy among young voters and how educational initiatives and EU-backed programs might boost youth political participation. The third concerns the extent to which Albania's ethnic minorities are represented and empowered in political life, in line with European norms on minority rights. These challenges are deeply interlinked with Albania's European ambitions: progress in each area would strengthen Albania's democracy and support its EU bid, whereas failure to address them could stall integration.

This paper explores each of these areas in depth. It is informed by democratization theory recognizing that genuinely free and fair elections are a cornerstone of democracy (Huntington, 1991) and by Europeanization perspectives that suggest EU accession frameworks can drive domestic reforms (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). Albania's democracy remains a work in

progress: Freedom House (2024) rates Albania as only “Partly Free,” noting that while elections are competitive, politics are highly polarized and often personality-driven. Such polarization is reflected in Albanian media and public discourse, which often mirror the country’s partisan divides. Against this backdrop, the 2025 elections offer an opportunity for Albania to demonstrate that its institutions are strengthening rather than stagnating on the path to EU membership.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. A brief literature review situates Albania’s current challenges in the context of democratization and European integration scholarship. Next, the methodology of the study is outlined. The results are then presented in three thematic sections corresponding to the challenges above: democratic shortcomings in the electoral process, youth participation and education, and minority political integration. Throughout these sections, the influence of media coverage and public narratives on public perceptions is highlighted. This is followed by a discussion that integrates the findings and provides policy recommendations to ensure the 2025 elections and their aftermath advance Albania’s democratic and European trajectory. Finally, a conclusion reflects on the broader implications of the 2025 elections for Albania’s future.

Literature Review

Democratization and Elections

Free and fair elections are widely regarded as the bedrock of democratic consolidation. Classic democratization studies argue that competitive elections with genuine uncertainty of outcome are essential for a democracy to deepen (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Huntington, 1991). In practice, post-communist Albania has struggled to fully institutionalize this principle. Elections since the 1990s have been pluralistic but frequently contested, with allegations of fraud and episodes of political crisis following close results. Scholars warn that prolonged one-party dominance and weak opposition can erode democratic competition. Levitsky and Way’s (2010) concept of “competitive authoritarianism” regimes that hold elections but skew the playing field in favor of incumbents has at times been applied to countries in democratic transition that exhibit chronic electoral irregularities. In Albania, the ruling Socialist Party’s increasingly long tenure and the opposition’s fragmentation raise similar concerns about an uneven playing field. The role of the media is central here: in a healthy democracy, media serve as watchdogs and forums for balanced debate, but Albania’s media landscape is often partisan or subject to political influence, which can shape public perceptions of whether elections are truly fair.

European Integration and Reforms

The prospect of EU membership has been a major driver of reforms in Albania, reflecting a broader pattern of “Europeanization” in Eastern Europe (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). The EU’s conditionality requiring aspiring members to meet strict political and institutional standards has prompted Albania to adopt various democratic reforms, from strengthening the judiciary to improving minority rights frameworks. European Union progress reports (European Commission, 2024) consistently underline areas needing improvement, such as electoral laws, corruption, and media freedom. However, scholars note that EU leverage is not omnipotent: domestic political will and public pressure are decisive in implementing reforms. Albanian public discourse remains strongly pro-European, and media coverage of the EU integration process is generally positive, but translating EU recommendations into on-the-ground changes can be slow. Frequent political bickering and episodes of polarization have stalled reform efforts in the past (Freedom House, 2024). Thus, while EU accession goals provide an impetus for democratic improvements, internal dynamics including how politicians use the media to frame EU-related reforms affect the pace and sincerity of implementation.

Youth Engagement and Civic Education

Civic culture literature emphasizes the importance of an informed, engaged youth for the sustainability of democracy (Dahl, 1971; de Tocqueville as cited in modern civic education studies). In Albania, however, surveys have documented a significant trust gap among young people. A report by Civil Rights Defenders (2021) found that a majority of Albanian youth believe that democratic principles (like equality before the law and freedom of speech) are not fully respected in their country. High youth unemployment and pervasive corruption feed cynicism, leading many young Albanians to disengage from formal politics or consider emigration as a better path (“exit” over “voice”). The education system historically placed little emphasis on civic education, although recent initiatives often supported by EU funds and international organizations aim to change this. Studies suggest that interactive civic education and direct involvement in community projects can improve political efficacy among youth, but these practices are only gradually being introduced in Albania. Media and technology are double-edged factors: on one hand, social media networks provide youth with alternative spaces for expression and mobilization (witness the student protests of 2018 that were organized largely online), on the other hand, the spread of misinformation or partisan propaganda online can further alienate young citizens from constructive engagement.

Minority Rights and Political Inclusion

Inclusion of ethnic minorities is recognized as a cornerstone of liberal democracy and a requirement under EU criteria (European Commission, 2024). Albania's population includes small Greek, Macedonian, Roma, Aromanian (Vlach), Serb-Montenegrin, and Egyptian communities. While ethnic relations have been largely peaceful, the literature on minority rights in the Balkans highlights that formal peace can mask political marginalization. Albania has made strides in improving its legal framework for example, the 2017 Law on the Protection of National Minorities expanded minority rights and recognition (aligning with the Council of Europe's standards) yet research and reports indicate an implementation gap (Council of Europe, 2023). Political scientists have observed that minorities often struggle to gain representation in Albanian institutions due to structural factors like electoral thresholds and geographic dispersion. Comparative studies show that many countries in the region and EU have mechanisms (reserved seats, lower thresholds, minority electoral districts) to ensure minority representation, whereas Albania's system offers no such facilitation, making it an outlier in this regard. Public discourse about minorities in Albania tends to be sporadic: outside of isolated incidents (like a high-profile arrest of a Greek minority politician in 2023 that sparked international controversy), minority issues seldom dominate media coverage. This low visibility can lead to a lack of public pressure to address minority concerns, even as meeting minority rights standards is imperative for EU integration.

Media and Public Discourse in Democratization

A thread running through all these themes is the role of media and public discourse. Democratic theory underscores that a pluralistic and independent media environment is vital for informed citizen participation and government accountability. In transitioning democracies, media narratives can either bolster reforms by highlighting successes and calling out abuses, or they can entrench divisions by echoing partisan lines. Albania's media scene, characterized by a mix of vibrant outlets and others aligned with political or business interests, has a profound impact on public trust. When media report credibly on election integrity issues or give voice to youth and minority perspectives, they can build momentum for positive change. Conversely, if media are seen as biased or are muzzled, citizens may become cynical, assuming that "nothing will change" a sentiment common among Albanian youth and opposition supporters. As this review suggests, the media's influence intersects with each of the challenges discussed, making it a crucial factor in Albania's 2025 election context.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, analytical approach to examine Albania's 2025 parliamentary elections in context. It draws on a combination of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official documents and reports such as Albania's electoral code amendments, Constitutional Court decisions (notably the 2022 ruling on diaspora voting), OSCE/ODIHR election observation reports from 2013 and 2021, European Commission annual progress reports, and national statistics on voter turnout and demographics. Secondary sources include scholarly analyses of Albanian politics and EU integration, survey data on youth attitudes (e.g., Civil Rights Defenders, 2021), and news media investigations of electoral malpractices. Media commentary and public discourse including coverage by major Albanian news outlets and statements by political leaders on social media were also reviewed to gauge prevailing narratives around the 2025 elections.

Historically oriented analysis is used to compare the 2025 election preparations with past election cycles (2009, 2013, 2017, 2021), identifying patterns in reforms and recurring problems. The role of education and minority rights is examined through policy analysis (reviewing education strategies, minority laws) and by comparing Albania's practices with regional examples. Throughout, an emphasis is placed on triangulating information: for instance, correlating claims of election fraud reported in media with findings from international observers, or comparing youth turnout statistics with survey responses about political trust. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the factors at play. The analysis is structured around the three thematic areas identified, ensuring balanced attention to each. While largely descriptive and analytical, the study's findings form the basis for normative policy recommendations presented later. All data and sources were evaluated for credibility, and APA 6th edition citation style is used to reference the materials.

Results

Democratic Challenges in the 2025 Elections

Albania's electoral process has historically been fraught with irregularities and intense partisanship, and many of these issues persist as the 2025 vote approaches. Politically, the ruling Socialist Party (SP) is seeking an unprecedented fourth consecutive term in power (having governed since 2013). No other administration in post-communist Albanian history has won four terms, and even a third term

was unprecedented before Prime Minister Edi Rama's tenure. This accumulation of power has raised concerns among observers about potential democratic backsliding. A fragmented opposition exacerbates these worries. The main opposition Democratic Party (PD) is split between rival factions one led by ex-premier Sali Berisha (who has been sanctioned by Western allies) and another aligned with former PD leader Lulzim Basha leaving voters with a weakened alternative to the ruling party. With the opposition in disarray, the SP faces little effective competition, a scenario that democratic theorists argue can undermine accountability and genuine choice in elections.

Indeed, prolonged one-party dominance, especially in a polarized media environment, risks moving the country toward a "dominant power" system resembling competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Multiple reports indicate that the playing field ahead of the 2025 elections may still be uneven. Allegations of vote-buying and misuse of government resources for campaigning have become a perennial feature of Albanian elections (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021). There are also persistent concerns about media bias: the ruling party is often accused of exerting influence over media outlets and blurring the line between state and party media coverage. For example, critical observers note that state-run broadcasters and government-friendly private channels tend to give the incumbents disproportionately positive coverage, shaping public perception in their favor. In past elections, investigative journalism (including wiretaps revealed in 2019) uncovered instances of organized crime figures allegedly coordinating vote-buying for the ruling party. Such episodes, widely covered in the press, fuel public cynicism. They illustrate what Levitsky and Way (2010) describe formal democratic processes exist, but the incumbents' abuse of resources and media dominance tilt the contest.

Despite these challenges, Albania has enacted several reforms ahead of 2025 that aim to improve electoral integrity. One landmark change is the introduction of voting rights for citizens living abroad. Following a Constitutional Court ruling in 2022 that mandated diaspora voting, the authorities established a framework for Albanians overseas to vote by mail. This is a significant step given Albania's large diaspora (with estimates of 1 to 1.3 million citizens abroad). By March 2025, nearly 300,000 expatriate Albanians had applied to register as voters, and election authorities approved roughly 233,000 of these registrations (Albanian Times, 2025). The inclusion of diaspora voters could enhance the representativeness of the election, as these citizens have long been excluded from the political process despite maintaining ties to the homeland. However, implementation has been rocky. Many overseas applicants encountered cumbersome online registration and documentation requirements, and questions remain about the logistics of delivering and counting mail-in ballots on time. Moreover, a separate issue threatens to limit diaspora participation: only citizens with valid biometric IDs

are eligible to vote, and it is estimated that about 120,000 Albanians abroad lack up-to-date biometric identification, effectively disenfranchising them unless they renew their documents (Biometric Update, 2025). Thus, while the diaspora voting reform is a milestone for inclusivity, its initial execution is testing administrative capacity and may yield lessons (and further reforms) after 2025.

Another reform involved modifying the electoral system to allow a degree of open-list voting. Prior to 2021, Albania used closed party lists, meaning party leaders effectively decided which individuals entered Parliament. In response to public pressure for greater accountability, the Electoral Code was amended in 2020 to let voters express preferences for certain candidates on the party lists. In theory, this partial open-list system should make MPs more accountable to voters rather than just party bosses. In practice, however, the reform has been limited. The law still reserves the top portion of each party's list as effectively "fixed" those top candidates win seats as long as the party passes the threshold, regardless of preference votes. A lower-ranked candidate can only leapfrog into a seat if they obtain more individual votes than the average votes of those top-tier candidates, a threshold so high it has rarely been met (Exit News, 2021). Consequently, party leaders continue to secure parliamentary spots for their favored candidates by placing them at the top of lists, and the open-list element has not yet produced significant changes in representation. As the 2025 election candidate lists were announced, they featured many familiar veteran politicians at the top, signaling continuity. This suggests that while the reform was symbolically important, further steps would be needed to truly empower voters over party hierarchies.

To address recurring problems like fraud and intimidation, Albanian institutions have ramped up enforcement efforts. The Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK), a prosecutorial body established as part of a broader judicial reform formed a task force specifically to monitor and prosecute election-related crimes in 2025. By early April, authorities reported investigating dozens of cases of alleged vote-buying and had arrested several individuals for electoral offenses. These developments have been publicized in the media, potentially deterring some would-be violators.

Observers note, however, that most arrests so far have been of low-level activists; skepticism remains as to whether major political figures will be held accountable if implicated. Additionally, the government has invited robust election observation: OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) deployed a full mission with hundreds of international observers, and the EU and domestic NGOs will also monitor extensively. This heavy scrutiny, frequently discussed in Albanian news coverage, underscores the high stakes any blatant irregularities are likely to be quickly reported and could spark public outrage or opposition protests.

Voter turnout is another critical barometer of the election's legitimacy. Turnout in Albania's parliamentary elections has been on a declining trend, reflecting

public disillusionment. In 2009 and 2013, about 53% of registered voters cast ballots; by 2017 and again in 2021, turnout fell to roughly 46%.

This means more than half of eligible voters effectively sat out the last two general elections. Analysts have pointed to several reasons for this apathy: frustration with unfulfilled promises, a sense that election outcomes won't bring meaningful change, and dismay at corruption and scandals. Notably, young voters have the lowest participation rates (Civil Rights Defenders, 2021). Low turnout not only signals democratic malaise but can exacerbate problems; for instance, if only the most loyal or mobilized segments vote, practices like vote-buying or pressure on public sector employees can have a larger impact on results. Comparatively, Albania's turnout now lags behind many neighboring countries. For example, Serbia and North Macedonia often see above 50% turnout, and even in Kosovo where voting is voluntary for its diaspora the 2021 election drew about 48% participation. The mid-40s turnout in Albania is a worrying indicator that large portions of the populace feel disconnected from the political process. Albanian media commentary has debated this issue, with some outlets launching get-out-the-vote messages and others cynically suggesting that voters are "fed up" with politics.

In summary, the 2025 elections pose a dual reality. On one hand, reforms like diaspora voting, better technology (biometric voter identification was successfully implemented nationwide by 2021), and targeted anti-fraud efforts show that Albania is responding to past criticisms and aligning more with European best practices. On the other hand, entrenched problems including governing-party advantages in resources and media exposure, opposition weakness, and public cynicism persist. Public discourse ahead of the vote reflects these contradictions: optimism about new reforms tempered by skepticism rooted in decades of political turmoil. The true test will be whether the election is conducted cleanly and whether its results are broadly accepted without the post-election crises that marred earlier cycles (such as the opposition's parliamentary boycott after the disputed 2019 local elections). A credible election, widely affirmed by citizens and the press as fair, would mark a significant step forward, whereas a flawed process could reinforce Albania's democratic deficits and tarnish its EU aspirations.

EU Integration, Education, and Youth Participation

Young people in Albania are often described as both the future drivers of change and the most disillusioned segment of society. Albania has a relatively young population compared to many European countries, yet youth turnout and engagement in formal politics are strikingly low. In recent national surveys, Albanian youth have expressed deep frustration with the status quo. For instance, in a 2021 survey, 79% of respondents aged 18-29 felt that the principle of equal

justice is not upheld in Albania, and about 70% believed that exercising freedoms like protest or political association can result in negative consequences (Civil Rights Defenders, 2021). Such perceptions paint a picture of a generation that views the system as unfair, corrupt, and unresponsive to their needs. Albanian media reports frequently highlight youth emigration stories and interviews where young graduates say they see no future at home. Indeed, economic hardship underlies much of this cynicism: while overall unemployment has declined in recent years, youth unemployment remains around 20%, roughly double the national average (World Bank, 2023). Many employed youth are stuck in low-paying jobs unrelated to their education, fueling a sense of stagnation.

As a result, a large share of Albanian youth express a desire to leave the country in search of better opportunities. Surveys and regional studies consistently show over 60% of young Albanians would emigrate if given the chance. This “brain drain” of the ambitious and educated not only deprives Albania of talent but also has political consequences: those who might agitate for reforms are opting to build their lives elsewhere. Sociologist Albert Hirschman’s classic framework of “Exit, Voice, or Loyalty” is often cited to describe this dynamic facing dissatisfaction, many youth are choosing exit (leaving the country) rather than voice (engaging to change conditions). The outcome is a vicious cycle: the more youth disengage or depart, the less pressure there is on leaders to enact changes that would appeal to young citizens, and thus the alienation grows.

Voter participation among youth starkly illustrates this problem. In Albania’s 2021 parliamentary elections, turnout among voters under 25 was significantly below that of older age groups. The trend worsened in the 2023 local elections, where overall turnout was only 37.8%, but among newly eligible young voters (those voting for the first time) it was estimated at merely 13.5%. In other words, nearly seven in eight first-time eligible voters did not bother to vote. Such a gap is alarming. It suggests that traditional methods of voter outreach have failed to motivate the youngest electorate. Additionally, political parties in Albania have not prioritized youth issues in their platforms, nor have they recruited young candidates in meaningful numbers the share of MPs under 30 is negligible, and youth wings of parties are often inactive or tokenistic. Media and campaign messaging tends to target middle-aged and older voters, who are seen as more reliable voting blocs, further sidelining youth concerns in public debates.

Yet, Albanian youth are not uniformly apathetic. When issues resonate directly, they have shown willingness to mobilize outside the formal political arena. A watershed moment came in December 2018 when tens of thousands of university students launched mass protests in Tirana and other cities over tuition fees and campus conditions. These demonstrations, organized autonomously and largely via social media, were non-partisan but highly political in their demands for accountability and better governance in education. The movement pressured the

government into negotiating a “Pact for the University” and pledging increased funding and reforms for higher education (some of which were only partly realized). The significance of the 2018 protests lies in revealing that Albanian youth care deeply about policy when it affects them directly and when they believe they can achieve results. Similar youth-led civic actions have occurred in environmental campaigns (opposing certain hydropower projects) and community initiatives. The challenge is channeling this civic energy into ongoing political participation rather than occasional protest.

Education is a critical part of the solution. Recognizing the need to foster a more civically engaged generation, Albanian authorities under guidance from the EU and Council of Europe have started reforming civic education curricula in schools. New high school programs include modules on democratic institutions, the Constitution, and Albania’s EU integration process, often delivered in more interactive ways than the old rote memorization approach. Teachers are being trained (with EU project support) in civic education and critical thinking pedagogies (Council of Europe, 2020). Additionally, the government adopted a National Strategy for Education 2021-2026 aiming to modernize teaching and emphasize skills like critical analysis and community involvement. If effectively implemented, such educational reforms can incrementally increase young people’s understanding of and confidence in democratic processes. However, funding remains a major bottleneck. Albania invests only around 34% of its GDP in education (Brokenchalk, 2023), one of the lowest rates in Europe, limiting improvements in school infrastructure and teacher salaries that are necessary for real change.

The EU integration process explicitly encourages youth engagement as part of preparing the country for membership. The European Commission’s reports (European Commission, 2021) have praised the creation of bodies like the National Youth Action Plan and local youth councils, urging Albania to involve young people in decision-making. Through the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA), the EU has funded youth-focused programs and regional initiatives like the Western Balkans Youth Lab and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO, headquartered in Tirana), which

promote dialogue and exchange among youth in the Balkans. These efforts not only broaden youths’ horizons but also empower youth organizations domestically. For example, RYCO support has enabled Albanian NGOs to run projects that bring together young people from different ethnic or regional backgrounds, indirectly strengthening social cohesion and civic skills.

In the run-up to the 2025 elections, there have been targeted campaigns to inspire youth participation. The Central Election Commission (CEC), in partnership with civil society, has rolled out voter education workshops at universities and high schools. One notable initiative was the “Active Youth in Elections” project in 2021, which trained first-time voters about the electoral process and even recruited many as volunteer election observers (Election-Watch, 2021).

Participants in such programs reported feeling more motivated to vote and engage their peers. Moreover, political communication is slowly adapting: some political figures and NGOs are increasingly using Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok to reach younger audiences with content about voting and EU integration. In 2021, popular Albanian singers and online influencers joined a non-partisan campaign urging youth to vote an approach that, while having limited measurable impact, signaled new thinking in outreach.

The intersection of media with youth engagement is particularly evident in social media usage. Albanian youth, like their global counterparts, rely heavily on online platforms for information. While this provides opportunities (messages about civic duty or European values can spread quickly online), it also poses risks, as misinformation and polarizing content can discourage participation or distort understanding. During previous elections, rumors and fake news circulated widely on Facebook, sometimes leading young voters to doubt the point of voting or to believe conspiracy narratives about the election being “decided in advance.” Combating this requires proactive communication both state institutions and independent media need to provide clear, factual information and positive narratives about the importance of voting. Encouragingly, some independent media outlets and fact-checking organizations have focused on debunking election-related misinformation, aiming to keep the discourse honest.

In summary, Albania’s youth stand at a crossroads much like the country itself. They are highly supportive of the idea of a European future for Albania and are less burdened by the communist past than older generations, which could make them champions of democratic reform. However, socioeconomic struggles and disillusionment have led to disengagement. Reversing this trend requires investing in education (to build civic competence), improving economic prospects (so that young people see a future for themselves in Albania), and innovating in how politics engages youth (through digital media, youth-inclusive policies, and giving young people real stakes in decision-making). If the 2025 elections see greater youth turnout and activism, it will be a positive sign that Albania’s democratization is regenerating from the ground up. If youth apathy persists or worsens, it will remain a critical weakness in Albania’s democratic fabric and a concern for its European integration, since an EU-bound country needs an active, not absent, next generation.

Political Integration of Minorities

Ensuring the political inclusion of ethnic minorities is both a democratic principle and an explicit EU membership criterion for Albania. The country’s minorities including Greek, Macedonian, Roma, Aromanian, Egyptian, and others collectively

constitute only a small percentage of the population (official figures are debated, but likely under 58% combined, depending on definitions). Albania has largely avoided ethnic conflict, and interethnic relations are generally cordial in everyday life. However, this social peace can obscure the political underrepresentation of minorities in governance.

Legally, Albania has taken steps to bolster minority rights. The Framework Law on National Minorities, adopted in 2017, was a landmark piece of legislation. It formally recognized several communities that previously had ambiguous status (for example, the Bulgarian minority gained official recognition) and guaranteed minorities rights in areas of language use, education, and cultural expression. This brought Albania's legal framework closer to European norms, aligning with instruments like the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on National Minorities. The European Commission's 2024 progress report acknowledges that Albania's minority rights legislation is largely in place (European Commission, 2024). However, the same report and other assessments (Council of Europe, 2023) point out that implementation is lagging. By 2025, key by-laws and regulations such as those detailing how minority languages can be used in contacts with authorities or in official signage in areas with substantial minority populations were still pending or only partially enacted. This delay means that many minorities have yet to experience tangible improvements in their daily interactions with the state, despite what the law promises.

Political representation remains the area of greatest disparity. Albania's electoral system does not have any provisions to ease minority entry into Parliament. All parties, including those representing minorities, must clear the national threshold (currently 1% of the vote) to gain seats in the 140-member Assembly. Minorities like Greeks (the largest minority, often estimated around 2% of the population) have managed to elect representatives mainly through the Unity for Human Rights Party (UHRP), which traditionally aligns with larger coalitions to win a seat or two. In the 2021-2025 Parliament, the UHRP holds one seat, secured via a pre-election coalition with a major party. Other minority-oriented parties for Macedonians, Roma, or others have not won any seats, as their communities are too small nationally to surpass 1%. A few individuals of minority background have been elected from the major parties, but they typically do not publicly assert a minority platform. Notably, Albania has never had a Roma or Egyptian MP, despite those communities facing significant issues.

This situation contrasts with practices in several neighboring democracies. Many European countries guarantee minority representation through reserved seats or relaxed thresholds. For instance, Croatia reserves eight parliamentary seats for various minority groups, Slovenia reserves two, and Romania ensures each significant minority gets at least one representative via special provisions. In the Western Balkans, Montenegro's election law lowers the threshold to

0.7% for minority parties (benefiting its Albanian and other minorities), and Serbia exempts minority parties from the usual 5% threshold entirely (enabling Hungarian, Bosniak, and other minority parties to enter Parliament with small vote shares). Because Albania lacks such mechanisms, it effectively expects very small minorities to achieve what might be unrealistic vote totals for representation, rendering their political voices largely absent at the national level (Council of Europe, 2023).

Geography further complicates minority representation. The Greek community is concentrated in certain southern areas (such as Gjirokastrë and Sarandë), which has allowed them local representation there have been ethnic Greek mayors and local councilors, and the Greek minority language is used alongside Albanian in some municipal settings due to legal provisions from a 2015 decentralization law. Macedonians are concentrated in one municipality (Pustec) where they have local presence. Roma and Egyptians, however, are dispersed across various cities and often live in marginalized settlements, which dilutes their electoral impact anywhere. Thus, even at local levels, Roma and Egyptian representation in councils is minimal.

Recent events have highlighted minority grievances and their international dimensions. In the May 2023 local elections, a controversy erupted in the town of Himarë, where the population includes many ethnic Greeks. An ethnic Greek independent candidate, Fredi Beleri, won the mayoral race but was arrested on allegations of vote-buying on the eve of the vote. He remained in custody after winning, preventing him from being sworn in. This incident sparked a diplomatic dispute with Greece: Greek officials and media portrayed Beleri's arrest as politically motivated suppression of the Greek minority's will, while Albanian authorities insisted it was a legitimate anti-corruption action. Greece's Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis went as far as to link Albania's EU accession path to the treatment of the Greek minority, explicitly citing the Beleri case and other longstanding issues like property rights for Greeks in southern Albania (Brussel Signal, 2024). By late 2024, Mitsotakis warned that Greece would hold Albania accountable on minority rights as part of the EU negotiations process. The Beleri case thus demonstrated how quickly minority rights can escalate into high-level international issues. In Albanian domestic discourse, the case was polarizing some media and nationalists framed it as Albania enforcing its laws without foreign interference, while others worried it tarnished Albania's image regarding minority rights and could indeed slow its EU bid.

Beyond the Greek community, other minorities continue to face systemic challenges. The Roma and Egyptian communities are among the most socioeconomically disadvantaged groups in Albania.

Many Roma/Egyptian families live in poverty, often in informal settlements with limited access to services. Educational attainment is low; there are instances

of de facto segregated schools with predominantly Roma students who have fewer resources and support, leading to high dropout rates. Such social exclusion feeds into political exclusion: without education and economic opportunities, individuals from these communities are less likely to engage in civic matters or have the means to run for office. They also encounter bureaucratic obstacles for example, some Roma lack personal identification documents, which complicates voter registration and accessing government programs.

While the government has adopted an Action Plan for the Integration of Roma and Egyptians (aligned with EU frameworks for Roma inclusion) and anti-discrimination laws, on-the-ground progress has been limited (Council of Europe, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2024). Reports from civil society indicate that during elections, Roma communities are sometimes targeted by local powerbrokers for vote-buying or pressured in bloc, given their vulnerable status. These issues seldom make major headlines, but they are known to observers who study Albania's elections.

Institutionally, Albania created a State Committee on National Minorities to advise on minority issues. However, both the European Commission and Council of Europe have critiqued this Committee's effectiveness and representativeness. The process for appointing its members has been seen as top-down, with the government selecting individuals purported to represent each minority, rather than the minorities electing or delegating their own representatives. This has raised questions about the committee's legitimacy in the eyes of minority communities. In its 2024 report, the European Commission recommended reforming the Committee to make it more inclusive and capable of monitoring minority rights implementation (European Commission, 2024).

Strengthening such bodies could give minorities a greater voice and channel their concerns to the central government, instead of relying on foreign diplomats to raise issues (as happened in the Greek minority's case).

In Albanian public discourse, minority political inclusion is not a highly politicized issue for the majority, which perhaps contributes to the slow pace of change. However, there is a general understanding, especially among the political elite and informed media, that meeting European standards on minority treatment is a necessary part of the EU accession journey. As EU negotiations progress, particularly Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights), Albania will be assessed on this front. Thus, the 2025 elections are a chance not only to test electoral reforms but also to demonstrate commitment to minority inclusion. If minorities feel their electoral rights are respected for instance, seeing bilingual ballots in their areas or witnessing minority candidates campaigning freely and getting fair media coverage, it could improve trust. Conversely, any flare-up (like another incident akin to Himarë) could be detrimental.

In summary, Albania's ethnic minorities enjoy a climate of general tolerance but remain on the margins of formal politics. Aligning with European democratic

norms will require creative solutions to include these communities politically. This could involve legal electoral adjustments, proactive inclusion by major parties, and better enforcement of minority rights laws. The media can play a constructive role by highlighting minority contributions and issues in non-sensational ways, helping build broader public support for their inclusion. Ultimately, a democracy is measured also by how it treats its smallest communities. For Albania, moving from nominal minority rights to substantive minority representation is an ongoing challenge directly tied to its European integration aspirations.

Discussion

The findings above illustrate that Albania's path to a consolidated democracy and EU membership is contingent on overcoming a set of interrelated challenges. Election integrity, youth engagement, and minority inclusion are not isolated issues; progress (or backsliding) in one affects the others. A fair electoral process can encourage broader participation, while higher participation (especially by youth and minorities) can, in turn, improve the fairness and representativeness of the process.

Conversely, if elections are widely perceived as flawed, it reinforces apathy among young voters and skepticism among minority communities about the value of engagement.

Media and public discourse emerge as cross-cutting influences in all these areas. The media shapes citizens' perceptions: investigative journalism and balanced reporting can expose problems and demand accountability, whereas partisan or repressive media practices can distort reality and entrench divisions. In recent years, Albanian public discourse has at times been progressive for instance, strongly pro-EU and supportive of reforms but also prone to polarization and sensationalism. How the 2025 elections are discussed in the public sphere will likely impact public trust. If the narrative, driven by media and officials, emphasizes transparency, calls out misconduct, and highlights positive engagement (such as youth initiatives or minority participation), it could build confidence. If instead the discourse is dominated by accusations, propaganda, or ethnic scapegoating, it may inflame tensions and discourage voters. Thus, strengthening independent media and ensuring open dialogue is part and parcel of democratic consolidation.

When viewed considering the literature, Albania's situation validates certain theoretical expectations while challenging others. Democratization theory reminds us that building democracy is a long-term process of institution-building and norm internalization (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

Albania has made important institutional changes like judicial reforms and new election laws often spurred by EU recommendations (European Commission, 2024). Yet, consistent with Europeanization scholarship, external incentives alone

cannot guarantee deep change; domestic actors must internalize democratic values. We see this in how some reforms (like biometric voting or minority laws) have been adopted but not fully implemented or embraced in spirit. Political will at the highest levels remains a decisive factor. For example, the ruling elite's commitment to truly fair play in elections will determine whether abuse of state resources is curbed in 2025. Similarly, the opposition's commitment to democratic norms will determine whether they accept results or resort to boycotts if they lose.

One encouraging sign is the growing involvement of civil society and citizens' groups in promoting democracy. The presence of thousands of domestic election observers, the activism of youth NGOs, and advocacy by minority associations indicate a more vibrant civic sphere than in decades past.

These actors often work closely with or are amplified by media outlets and social networks, gradually strengthening public oversight of the political process. Their role will be crucial in the 2025 elections and beyond, acting as watchdogs and raising awareness on issues like vote-buying or inclusion.

Of course, challenges persist. Political polarization in Albania remains high much political discourse is framed as government versus opposition, with little middle ground. This zero-sum mentality can hamper consensus on reforms and is often reflected in media coverage that is split along partisan lines. Overcoming polarization requires building trust between rival factions, perhaps through mechanisms like the all-party pledge for election conduct (as suggested among recommendations) or mediated dialogues. The EU and international community can facilitate these confidence-building measures, but ultimately Albanian leaders must choose cooperation over confrontation in the national interest.

Another challenge is ensuring that improvements are not just one-off for the sake of EU scrutiny, but sustainable. For instance, if the government cracks down on vote-buying in 2025 under the EU's watchful eye, will that rigor continue in subsequent local elections or once EU pressure eases?

Similarly, will youth engagement initiatives persist after the election buzz, or fade out? Institutionalizing positive practices (like regular civic education or permanent minority consultation forums) is key to lasting change.

In integrating the findings, it becomes clear that Albania is at a democratic crossroads in 2025. The optimistic scenario is one where the elections proceed with minimal issues, youth and minorities see greater representation and responsiveness, and all parties accept the outcome, thereby boosting Albania's EU accession momentum. The pessimistic scenario is a disputed election that triggers political instability (as seen in 2019) and feeds a narrative of democratic failure, potentially slowing EU negotiations and causing public disillusionment to spike (with more youth emigrating and minorities feeling alienated). The most likely outcome lies somewhere in between, but concerted effort can nudge it toward the positive end.

To maximize the chance of a positive outcome, a multifaceted set of actions must be taken. The following policy recommendations are proposed to address the identified challenges in an integrated way.

Policy Recommendations

To ensure that Albania's 2025 parliamentary elections are free, inclusive, and supportive of its European integration trajectory, the following measures are recommended:

- 1. Guarantee Free and Fair Elections:** Fully enforce electoral laws and close loopholes to prevent fraud. Authorities should crack down on vote-buying and voter intimidation by dedicating sufficient resources to investigative bodies like SPAK and by making high-profile examples of offenders. Stricter oversight of campaign financing and a clear separation between government and party activities are needed, for instance, public employees must not be coerced into campaign events. The Central Election Commission should enhance transparency by live-streaming vote counts and promptly publishing detailed results for each polling station to build public confidence. Technical issues in the diaspora voting process must be resolved (e.g., expedite mailing of ballots and provide return postage) so that overseas votes are counted accurately and on time. Crucially, the media and civil society must have unrestricted freedom to monitor and report on the election process: regulators should ensure all parties receive fair coverage and penalize any blatant bias, especially on public broadcasters. Albania should also welcome extensive international observation beyond the OSCE/ODIHR mission, invitations can be extended to European Parliament delegations or international NGOs to further attest to the election's integrity. A visibly clean and well-conducted election will remove a major obstacle in Albania's EU path.
- 2. Empower Youth through Education and Engagement:** Combat youth apathy by making young people stakeholders in Albania's democracy. The education system should integrate practical civic education at all levels not just as a textbook subject, but through interactive methods like debates, student elections, and community service projects. The Ministry of Education, with EU support, can train teachers to deliver these modules effectively and include information about the EU and democratic rights in curricula. Outside the classroom, successful pilot programs should be scaled up nationally: for example, the "Active Youth in Elections" workshops that prepared first-time voters could be organized in every county, possibly by

creating a network of youth ambassadors or peer educators who travel to high schools. Establish formal channels for youth input in governance, such as youth advisory councils in municipalities and a national “Youth Parliament” event where young people simulate legislative debates on current issues. To give youth a voice in Albania’s EU integration, the government could form a Youth Advisory Board on EU Negotiations, involving young professionals and students in discussions about accession reforms this would signal that their perspectives matter. Political parties must also rejuvenate their ranks by recruiting and promoting young members; this can be incentivized through public recognition or support for parties that meet certain youth representation targets. Given that only 13.5% of first-time voters cast ballots in the last local elections, creative ideas to make voting easier for youth are warranted: mobile polling stations on university campuses, early voting days for students, or even exploring secure online voting for young overseas voters as a pilot. Additionally, sustain programs like the Youth Guarantee for employment and training (Brokenchalk, 2023) so that young citizens feel they have opportunities at home a youth who sees a future in Albania is more likely to engage in its civic life. Finally, leverage social media and pop culture to reach youths: non-partisan campaigns with influencers, musicians, and sports figures should continuously promote messages that voting and civic participation are “cool,” impactful, and patriotic.

3. **Strengthen Minority Representation and Rights:** Translate Albania’s legal commitments to minorities into real political inclusion. The government and Parliament should consider electoral reforms to lower barriers for minority representation for example, waiving the 1% national threshold for parties that represent recognized minorities, or introducing a small number of reserved seats (as an interim measure for one or two election cycles) to ensure communities like Roma or Macedonians can have a voice in the Assembly. In the meantime, major parties should be publicly encouraged and held accountable (through civil society “scorecards” and media scrutiny) for placing minority candidates in winnable positions on their electoral lists. Election administration must accommodate minority needs ballots, voter information booklets, and polling place signage in areas like Himarë or Pustec should be bilingual (Albanian and the local minority language) in compliance with the law. Poll workers in those areas should receive training in assisting voters in the minority language to avoid confusion. The State Committee on National Minorities should be reformed to increase its legitimacy its members could be chosen via nominations from minority associations rather than direct government appointments, and it should be empowered to review policies and raise concerns publicly. Allocating a robust budget to this Committee would allow it to conduct outreach, such

as workshops informing minorities of their voting rights or consultations to gather minority policy priorities. In light of recent tensions, it is imperative to build trust: the handling of cases like the 2023 Himarë mayoral incident must be transparent and in strict accordance with due process, to dispel perceptions of bias. Albanian authorities might also initiate a high-level dialogue with minority community leaders (e.g., a roundtable convened by the President or Prime Minister) to discuss and address lingering grievances whether they concern property restitution, language use, or local governance issues. Demonstrating respect and proactive inclusion of minorities in the 2025 election period perhaps through symbolic gestures like featuring minority cultural performances in official election-related events or public service announcements celebrating Albania's diversity can turn a potential point of friction into a strength. Such steps would not only meet EU expectations but also improve Albania's bilateral relations (as with Greece) and social cohesion internally.

4. **Maintain Momentum on EU-Aligned Reforms:** Use the election year as an opportunity to double down on governance reforms, showing that Albania's commitment to European values is unwavering even amid political competition. Anti-corruption and rule-of-law efforts should continue unabated during the campaign: institutions like SPAK must operate free of political interference and pursue investigations even if they involve high-ranking officials or candidates. This will send a message that nobody is above the law, boosting public trust. The government and opposition could agree on a "democratic code of conduct" for the election period possibly facilitated by the National Council for European Integration (a multi-party body) pledging respect for the electoral outcome, repudiation of violence or inflammatory ethnic rhetoric, and cooperation on implementing any recommendations from election observers after the vote. Such a pact, if publicized, would reassure citizens that stability will be maintained whichever side wins. Albanian leaders should continuously communicate to the public the link between a successful election and progress toward EU membership, framing every reform (whether it's cleaning up voter lists or promoting minority rights) as part of "getting our house in order for Europe." This narrative helps build a shared national purpose that rises above partisan interests. Furthermore, Albania should embrace assistance from the EU and international experts in strengthening election administration, media monitoring, and civic education during this period showing openness to best practices. For example, inviting an EU expert mission to advise the CEC, or utilizing EU funding for media fact-checking initiatives around the elections, can improve quality and credibility. The momentum of reform must also be carried into the post-election phase:

irrespective of which government comes to power, there should be a rapid return to the business of meeting EU accession benchmarks (such as judicial vetting, civil service reform, etc.), avoiding the traditional post-election slowdown. All parties would benefit from signaling to Brussels that Albania is steadfast in its European course. Consistently linking election integrity and inclusive governance with the goal of EU accession in public statements can help align the incentives of politicians and voters alike toward the long-term prize, rather than short-term wins. In essence, Albania should treat the 2025 election not as a distraction from reforms, but as an integral part of the reform process an opportunity to showcase and solidify democratic progress.

These recommendations, while ambitious, are feasible with collective effort from Albania's institutions, civil society, media, and international partners. Even if not every measure can be fully implemented before the 2025 vote (for instance, substantial electoral law changes might take time), initiating them and demonstrating intent can send a powerful positive signal. The goal is to leverage the 2025 elections as a turning point breaking with patterns of the past and moving decisively toward the standards of an EU democracy.

Conclusion

As Albania prepares for the 2025 parliamentary elections, the nation finds itself at a crossroads between its tumultuous political past and the prospect of a more democratic European future. The analysis in this paper underscores that ensuring fair elections, engaging youth, and including minorities are not merely boxes to tick for EU accession, but fundamental steps to strengthen Albania from within. These facets of democracy reinforce each other: cleaner elections give disillusioned citizens (especially young people and marginalized groups) reasons to participate, and broader participation in turn can lead to more legitimate and representative governance.

Albania's post-communist journey has seen milestones like joining NATO and achieving EU candidate status, but also repeated setbacks, often around elections that ended in disputes or boycotts. The 2025 elections offer a chance to break that cycle. A genuinely well-run election, one accepted by winners and losers alike, would be a historic achievement, potentially the first in decades without major contestation. Such an outcome could build momentum to tackle other longstanding issues, from corruption to economic reform, in an environment of greater political stability. On the other hand, if the election were to be marred by significant irregularities or political crisis, it could derail Albania's EU integration

progress and deepen public cynicism, squandering the hard-won gains of recent reforms.

The stakes are high, but so are the potential rewards. By implementing the recommended measures prioritizing electoral integrity, civic education, and minority rights Albania can use the 2025 elections as a springboard for democratic deepening. Success will bolster Albania's credibility in the eyes of its European partners, helping to accelerate accession talks. Equally important, it will strengthen the social contract at home: citizens will be more likely to trust institutions and engage constructively if they see evidence that their voices are heard and that the rule of law prevails.

European integration has often been called Albania's "strategic objective," but 2025 is the year to demonstrate that this objective is underpinned by genuine domestic transformation. If Albania can deliver an election that meets international democratic standards and is perceived as fair by its own people, it will send a powerful message to its citizens, its neighbors, and the EU that the country has matured politically. In practical terms, a smooth election followed by a responsible post-election cooperation (for instance, a graceful concession by the losers and a commitment by the winners to govern inclusively) would improve the political climate. It could reduce the zero-sum, winner-takes-all mentality that has plagued Albanian politics and replace it with a more consensus-driven approach aligned with European democratic norms.

It is important to recognize that the 2025 elections are not an end point but part of an ongoing process. Democratization does not conclude with one good election, nor does EU integration end at the negotiating table. However, pivotal moments like this can accelerate positive trends or, conversely, exacerbate negative ones. The coming months are therefore critical. Albania's institutions, media, and civil society must work in concert to uphold transparency and fairness. The populace, including its youth and minorities, should be encouraged to take ownership of the process by voting and participating, showing that democracy is a shared responsibility.

In conclusion, Albania's ability to conduct a fair, inclusive, and peaceful 2025 election will be a litmus test of its democratic maturity. A successful election would mark the start of a new chapter one in which Albania moves forward with confidence and unity towards full European integration. By contrast, a failure would serve as a cautionary tale and likely delay the nation's European dream. The optimistic view and the one this paper advocates is that Albania will rise to the occasion. With the right actions and attitudes, the 2025 elections can become a catalyst for Albania's long-sought democratic consolidation, ensuring that the country's future particularly the vision of EU membership rests on the solid foundation of shared values and accountable governance.

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