

EDITORIAL

*From Authoritarianism to Democracy:
Thirty-Five Years of Political
and Social Transformation
in Albania (1990–2025)* _____

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Thirty-five years after the collapse of the authoritarian regime, Albania continues to represent a compelling and complex case study for the analysis of democratic transition, institutional reform, and profound socio-economic transformation. The period between 1990 and 2025 does not merely mark a chronological shift from one political system to another, but rather a prolonged and often fragmented process of state reconfiguration, democratic experimentation, and societal change.

One of the central pillars of Albania's post-authoritarian transformation has been economic reform. The transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented system involved rapid privatization, market liberalization, and a redefinition of the state's role in economic governance. While these reforms facilitated economic growth and integration into regional and European markets, they also generated structural challenges, including social inequality, informality, and weak regulatory capacity. The Albanian experience illustrates the extent to which economic reforms, when implemented under fragile institutional conditions, can both enable and constrain democratic consolidation.

Equally significant to the democratic transition have been reforms in criminal law, particularly amendments to the Penal Code and the broader system of criminal justice. Under the authoritarian regime, criminal law functioned primarily as an instrument of political control and repression. In the post-1990 period, it has been gradually reshaped to align with constitutional principles, human rights standards, and international legal norms. Nevertheless, the tension between effective crime control, judicial independence, and the protection of fundamental rights remains

a persistent challenge. Penal law reforms thus serve as a key indicator of the evolving relationship between state authority and individual freedoms in post-authoritarian Albania.

Within this broader reform agenda, corruption has emerged as one of the most enduring and destabilizing phenomena of the transition period. Corruption has undermined institutional effectiveness, distorted economic reforms, and weakened public trust in democratic governance. Despite the adoption of comprehensive anti-corruption legislation and the establishment of new accountability mechanisms—particularly in the context of European Union integration—the gap between formal legal frameworks and their practical enforcement continues to pose serious challenges. The fight against corruption remains central to debates on the quality, credibility, and sustainability of Albania’s democratic institutions.

At the same time, foreign policy has played a crucial role in shaping Albania’s political and institutional trajectory. The country’s clear Euro-Atlantic orientation, marked by NATO membership and the ongoing process of European Union accession, has significantly influenced domestic reform agendas. External conditionality and international norms have functioned both as incentives and as sources of pressure for political, legal, and economic transformation. Albania’s post-1990 foreign policy reflects an effort to redefine national identity, ensure regional stability, and anchor democratic development within a broader European framework.

This special issue brings together contributions that examine these interrelated dimensions—economic reform, criminal justice transformation, foreign policy orientation, and corruption—as integral components of Albania’s broader post-authoritarian transition. By combining theoretical perspectives with empirical analysis, the articles explore the extent to which formal reforms have translated into substantive democratic change and institutional resilience.

Reflecting on thirty-five years of transformation, this issue does not aim solely to assess successes and failures, but to foster critical academic debate on the unresolved challenges and future prospects of democracy in Albania. In this sense, Albania should not be viewed as a peripheral case, but as an integral part of wider comparative discussions on post-communist transitions and the evolving nature of democracy in Europe and beyond.