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CASE STUDY

EUPopLink Country report - Albania

[version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

This country report examines the relationship between populist discourse and European Union integration in Albania. It follows the EUPopLink COST Action theoretical framework. Although Albania has been an EU candidate country since 2014 and formally opened accession negotiations in 2020, the integration process remains slow and politically salient. Despite consistently high public support for EU membership, delays and perceived external constraints have fostered frustration, enabling the emergence of populist communication as a dominant political style rather than a marginal ideology.

The report shows that populism in Albania is primarily embedded within mainstream parties, particularly the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party, both of which employ valence populist strategies. Prime Minister Edi Rama exemplifies personalised, media-driven leadership that combines pro-European commitments with critical, polity-based Eurosceptic rhetoric directed at EU institutions. The opposition Democratic Party similarly mobilises anti-elitist narratives but remains fragmented and less coherent. Smaller and newer parties have also adopted populist styles, though with limited institutional impact.

Regarding EU discourse, 'Europe' functions as a powerful symbol of modernity and legitimacy, yet is increasingly accompanied by critiques of EU bureaucracy and delays in accession. This produces a form of "soft Euroscepticism" that coexists with strong pro-European orientation. Overall, the Albanian case illustrates how populism can operate as a strategic communicative tool within pro-EU political systems, shaping domestic competition without fundamentally challenging the European integration project.

Keywords

Albania, populism, euroscepticsm

Open Peer Review

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

This article is included in the Linking Euroscepticism and Populism (EUPopLink) collection.

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1. Introduction

The present country report was prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action (Andreadis & Vasilopoulou, 2026) following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework and guidelines (Lorimer et al., 2026).

Albania has been an official candidate for European Union (EU) membership since June 2014, but due to insufficient progress on key reforms, accession negotiations formally began in March 2020. The process of EU integration occupies a central place in the country's political discourse and continues to shape the rhetoric and agendas of political actors across the spectrum. Political elites often frame integration as a national imperative, linking it to broader goals such as democratic consolidation, economic growth, and improved governance. As reported by the latest WeBalkans Perception Survey, public support for EU membership in Albania remains consistently high. Unlike many EU member states where scepticism towards European institutions has grown, Albania continues to exhibit broad pro-European attitudes among its population. However, the slow pace of accession and the repeated postponement of negotiations have generated frustration and as a result the integration process has been highly politicized. In this context, populist rhetoric has emerged not as an ideological commitment but rather as a strategic communication style. In the Albanian case, populism tends to be instrumental. It is employed by mainstream political actors to capitalise on widespread public dissatisfaction, particularly with perceived external injustices or elite failures (Bino et al. 2024). This report identifies the significantly slow advancement of EU accession negotiations as a particularly salient issue around which populist narratives are mobilised. These narratives often portray the EU as an unaccountable and obstructive actor by deflecting blame for the lack of progress and reaffirming the legitimacy of domestic leadership (Kazazi 2024). Although Prime Minister and leader of the ruling Socialist Party Edi Rama, as well as other mainstream political actors consistently affirm EU integration as Albania's only viable path to development, populist discourses that externalise blame, especially towards the EU, may risk to undermine public trust in European institutions (Bino et al., 2024). Also, the absence of successful outsider challengers, the ideological ambiguity of major parties, and a lack of substantive programmatic differences have positioned populism as the dominant strategy for political mobilization (Bino et al., 2024; Koxha & Heinisch, 2024).

As a result, rather than being the domain of outsider or radical actors, populist discourse in Albania is primarily articulated by dominant parties and leaders, particularly Prime Minister Edi Rama and the governing Socialist Party. As such, populism in Albania should be understood less as a coherent ideology and more as a political and discourse style, employed by actors across the political spectrum to assert closeness to "the people" and antagonism towards perceived elites, both domestic and international.

2. Populist political actors

In contrast to many European countries where populist parties operate on the political margins, in Albania populism is a feature of the mainstream. The country's two dominant parties, the centre-left Socialist Party (PS) and the centre-right Democratic Party (PD), both exhibit populist communication styles, despite belonging to different ideological profiles. Indeed, both can be categorized as valence populists. Following the 2025 general elections, these two parties remain the principal forces in parliament, alongside new smaller formations with limited political traction. A combination of factors accounts for the fact that these established parties turned to populism as a discourse strategy. First, there is the absence of a successful political outsider that would otherwise have functioned as a real political challenger to the establishment (Koxha and Heinisch 2024). Second, there is the lack of a distinctive ideological profile of the established parties, blurring the differences between them (Koxha and Heinisch 2024). The third factor that favours the rise of populist discourse in Albanian Politics can be attributed to the country's political culture. In Albania, parties are identified with their respective leaders and emphasizes the role of the latter rather than any ideological or programmatic content (Koxha and Heinisch 2024). The combination of these conditions explains why discursive populism became the most commonly utilized mobilization strategy in party political competition (Koxha and Heinisch 2024).

- **The Socialist Party (PS)**, led by Prime Minister Edi Rama since 2005, combines a nominally pro-European orientation with an increasingly centralised and personalised style of governance. The party, a successor to the former Party of Labour of Albania, is a centre left oriented party which after the fall of communism rebranded in favour of a modernisation-oriented platform. Nevertheless, it maintains continuity in its tight control over political institutions (Hajdari 2025) and its populist appeals to the will of the people. The PS is an associate of the Party of European Socialists and a member of the Socialist International. Since its foundation, in 1991, the Socialist Party has been led by only two leaders.

  The general national elections held in May granted the Socialist Party (PS) a landslide victory by cementing it as Albania's dominant political force, and securing Prime Minister Edi Rama a historic fourth consecutive term in power, the longest uninterrupted leadership since the 40-year rule of Enver Hoxha and the Communist Party of Labour. The results underscore Rama's firm grip on the country's political landscape. Now in his thirteenth year

in power, his political dominance leaves the fragmented opposition with little leverage or room for political influence whatsoever (Hajdari 2025).

Prime Minister Rama exemplifies what has been termed a "populist political style." He positions himself as a charismatic leader and an 'outsider within', distancing himself from conventional politics despite his long-standing political career. His public persona, characterised by unconventional attire, colloquial language, and frequent interaction with citizens via social media, emphasises his closeness to ordinary people. Rama's use of digital media is particularly strategic: through platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, his own podcast "Flasim" and his own personal broadcasting channel ERTV, he bypasses traditional media gatekeepers and speaks directly to citizens, often in emotive and simplified terms. His communications regularly feature storytelling, metaphor, and informal jargon, portraying a leader 'in touch' with the common citizen.

Populism in Rama's rhetoric is marked by anti-elitism, yet this is directed as much at international institutions, such as the EU, as it is at domestic opposition. The discourse around EU integration is illustrative: delays in the accession process are portrayed as injustices imposed by distant elites, thereby strengthening the Prime Minister's narrative of national victimhood and leadership resilience (Kazazi 2025). At the same time, his centralisation of power, including the growing role of the Council of Ministers and marginalisation of internal party dissent, reflects a wider trend of the personalisation of politics in Albania.

- **The Democratic Party (PD)**, traditionally defined by its anti-communist orientation, also engages in populist rhetoric, particularly in opposition. The Democratic Party is a centre right party and the largest opposition party in Albania since 2013. Founded in 1990, the PD is an associate member of the European's People Party and a full member of the International Democracy Union. Its platform was built around anticommunism and its membership includes average citizens as well as anti-communist activists and former political prisoners. Initial commitment to the issue of anticommunism resulted in the signing onto human rights agreements like the Helsinki Accords, a drive towards European modernization. The Democratic Party has always declared itself as pro-European achieving two important milestones like the visa liberalization with the EU and the NATO membership during its time in government. The party frequently frames itself as the defender of ordinary Albanians against a corrupt and autocratic government. The dichotomy of 'virtuous people' versus 'corrupt elite' is central to its critique of the Socialist government (Bino et al. 2024). However, internal fragmentation caused by the 2021 designation of former Prime Minister and PD founder Sali Berisha as 'persona non grata' by the United States has weakened its populist appeal and coherence. The resulting leadership dispute between Berisha and former party leader Lulzim Basha has undermined the party's ability to present a unified message. During the 2025 general elections the Democrats controversially hired American top campaign strategist Chris LaCivita and Paul Manafort, notably linked to Donald Trump and the MAGA movement. This move was criticized as culturally inappropriate and politically ineffective by both critics at home and abroad who doubted that Albanians would embrace Trumpian rhetoric (Hajdari 2025).

  In relation to the two main parties, it is worth to notice that, in both cases, populism operates not as a fringe ideology but as a political technique woven into the practices of the dominant parties. It manifests through appeals to national sovereignty, anti-elitist tropes, personalised leadership, and direct communication with citizens. Importantly, in the Albanian context, populist discourse often targets external actors such as the EU.

- **Smaller political actors** - Over the past three decades, several smaller parties, such as the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), founded by former Prime Minister Ilir Meta and now called the Freedom Party, have attempted to break the duopoly, often acting as kingmakers in coalition governments. Other parties, like the Republican Party or the Social Democratic Party, have occasionally won seats in parliament but failed to build lasting national influence. Despite frequent and public disillusionment with the two main electoral blocs, no third force has won broad support. Normally, political populism requires an outsider party or a group that transformed itself to appear like a political outsider in order to challenge the political establishment as corrupt and engaged in insider politics. Thus, the success of new parties usually depends on their status as 'challengers' or 'outsiders' as this underscores their credibility (Kelliçi and Bino 2013).

  However, the 2025 elections saw the entry of three new parties into parliament, all explicitly positioned against the political establishment. **Lëvizja Bashkë** or the Together Movement, led by left-wing university professor and activist Arlind Qori evolved from the protest movement *Organizata Politike* and ran on the slogan "The new is being born". **Shqipëria behet** a mixed ideology party led by Adriatik Lapaj employs a strong populist style centred on his image as a successful self-made lawyer offering simple solutions to complex problems.

Partia Mundesia, centre right party, led and financed by former Democratic Party MP and businessmen Agron Shehaj, also displays populist traits. During the electoral campaign Mr. Shehaj declared that what his party aimed is a change of the establishment rather than a rotation of leadership.

3. Positions on 'Europe' and the populism–euroscepticism nexus

In Albanian political discourse, 'Europe' functions as a powerful symbolic and aspirational reference. As a concept, it evolved from the political discourse that took place after the fall of the socialist regime and came to represent the people's authentic hopes, especially concerning freedom and democracy, and their aspirations for taking Albania into European countries (Qori 2015). Although political discourse in Albania is formally pro-European, recent years have seen the emergence of a more critical tone in the rhetoric of key political actors, particularly the ruling Socialist Party under Prime Minister Edi Rama. Prior research on the topic suggests that historically The PS made no references to a cultural affinity with Europe, and the theme of European integration is highlighted only from 1996 onwards in terms of institutional integration. PS's discourse on Europe reached its peak during the 2011 parliamentary elections, during which Albania's European affiliation was strongly emphasized (Koxha and Heinisch 2024). This discourse remains relevant today. While support for EU accession remains a declared strategic goal across the political spectrum, scepticism towards the EU's functioning and decision-making processes has become increasingly visible in public discourse. This critique, however, is not a rejection of European integration per se, but rather a form of 'soft' Euroscepticism, reflecting frustrations with the pace and perceived unfairness of the accession process.

The Prime Minister has taken a leading role in articulating this critical stance. His discourse frequently targets the "bureaucratic" nature of EU institutions and questions the logic behind certain decisions made in Brussels. One particularly contentious issue has been the decision to couple Albania's accession path with that of North Macedonia, a move perceived by Rama as detrimental to Albania's progress and symbolic of EU inefficiency. These critiques are primarily rooted in polity-based Euroscepticism: while not rejecting the EU as a project, Rama challenges the institutional logic and political behaviour of the Union, often using emotional and performative rhetoric to highlight perceived injustices.

A notable response to the perceived stagnation of the EU accession process has been the launch of the Open Balkans initiative, also known as the Mini-Schengen. Framed as a regional cooperation platform involving Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia, the initiative is promoted by the government as a pragmatic step towards regional economic integration. However, its timing and emphasis have led some observers and opposition voices to interpret it as an implicit alternative to EU membership. Critics, particularly from the Democratic Party, argue that since this initiative runs in parallel with the Berlin Process, a platform set up by the EU to increase cooperation between the Balkan Countries, it undermines Albania's European path and diverts attention from necessary reforms tied to EU accession.

Despite these critiques, Rama's overall discourse on the EU retains an optimistic undertone. He continues to present EU membership as Albania's natural and historical destiny and positions the country as a legitimate part of Europe based on its cultural and historical heritage. His speeches often invoke a narrative of civilisation belonging and call for the EU to fulfil its historical mission by integrating the Western Balkans (Kazazi 2024). This balancing act, between critique and affirmation, exemplifies the ambivalence of Albanian Euroscepticism: rhetorical opposition to certain EU decisions is not accompanied by a rejection of the integration project itself.

A clearer populist framing of Euroscepticism emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Albanian government expressed strong dissatisfaction with the EU's initial response to vaccine distribution. In this context, Rama accused several EU member states of selfishness and cynicism, contrasting their behaviour with Albania's needs as a small, aspiring member state. This episode further entrenched the Prime Minister's populist narrative of "us versus them," portraying the EU as an exclusive elite insensitive to the needs of ordinary people in candidate countries. The rhetorical strategy positioned Albania as both morally superior and unfairly treated, reinforcing domestic legitimacy while deflecting blame for delays in the integration process.

The populist dimensions of these critiques align with a broader pattern in Rama's communication style: he appeals to national pride, leverages emotional narratives, and situates himself as the authentic voice of the Albanian people against foreign politicians. This is evident in his claim that the EU is not complete without the accession of the Western Balkans and that the EU's credibility is contingent upon the inclusion of Albania and its neighbours. In such narratives, national interest and European destiny are intertwined—but conditional on the EU living up to its own ideals.

In contrast, the Democratic Party and other opposition parties have often adopted a more consistently pro-European line, taking an adversarial stance towards the government's Eurosceptic rhetoric. Looking at the political discourse of the PD,

we find that Europeanization has been a central theme, especially during the first years after the fall of the old regime (Qori 2015). However, similarly to PS's rhetoric the PD's discourse on Europe relies on the identification of the Albanian people with the peoples of Europe, first in terms of adherence to the values of democracy and freedom as the highest goods, and then by referring to Albania's historical kinship with European civilization.

Overall, in relation to the process of European Integration, their critiques focus on the perceived instrumentalisation of EU discourse by the ruling party and the potential reputational damage caused by attacks on the EU. This divergence highlights the extent to which the EU remains a contested but central axis in Albanian political discourse—both a source of legitimacy and a target of populist frustration.

4. Responses to euroscepticism

Overall, Prime Minister Edi Rama's government period has coincided with important milestones in Albania's path toward European Union membership, most notably the formal launch of accession negotiations in July 2022. Also, the European Commission's progress reports acknowledge several positive reforms, including the streamlining of customs procedures and the adoption of parts of the EU acquis communautaire. However, these reports also highlight ongoing challenges, particularly in prosecuting high-level corruption and money laundering cases, which remain modest in their results (Hajdari 2025). Rama describes this as a "work in progress," emphasizing gradual improvements, while opposition politicians argue that enforcement continues to be selective and politically motivated.

The notion of Europe and European integration as both a civilizational advantage and an aspirational goal remains a central theme across the political spectrum in Albania. It features prominently in the programs and electoral platforms of the country's main political parties. Despite this broad pro-European consensus among the public and politicians alike, Albania presents a compelling example of the coexistence between strong support for EU integration and the widespread use of populist discourse by mainstream political actors.

Unlike in many other contexts where populism emerges from outsider movements, in Albania it is embedded within the practices of dominant parties, especially the ruling Socialist Party (PS), and to a lesser extent, the Democratic Party (PD). Populism here does not represent a consistent ideological stance but rather functions as a flexible political style. It is strategically deployed to tap into moments of public discontent, often linked to the perceived slow pace or difficulties in the EU accession process, without fundamentally questioning the goal of European integration itself.

Rama's political communication exemplifies this dynamic. While officially committed to EU membership, his rhetoric often blends a cautious, polity-based Euroscepticism with appeals to national pride. The EU is frequently portrayed as a distant, bureaucratic institution that fails to adequately recognize Albania's merits and efforts. This populist tone was especially pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the EU was framed as an elite club indifferent to the needs of candidate countries. Nonetheless, formal progress toward accession continues under Rama's leadership.

Opposition parties, notably the PD, maintain a rhetorically pro-European stance but have struggled to offer a distinct alternative to the PS's populist strategy. Meanwhile, newer political actors, though critical of the establishment, also situate their visions firmly within a European framework.

5. Short conclusion

To conclude, 'Europe' remains the central symbol of legitimacy and political aspiration in Albania. The country's experience highlights how populist communication and European integration can coexist, and even converge, within the same political framework. This alignment invites a broader reflection on its implications for the EU accession process where populist communication does not necessarily translate into Eurosceptic policy positions. In such contexts, populism may serve as a domestic political resource while still accommodating, or even advancing, formal commitments to European integration. Understanding this dynamic becomes essential for assessing how the EU engages with accession states whose internal political styles may appear confrontational, yet whose strategic direction remains firmly oriented toward Europe.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

No primary data were collected for this study. The report is based on existing public reports and scholarly literature, all of which are cited in the references list.

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Summary:

This report examines the relationship between populism and European integration in Albania within the EUPopLink framework. It argues that, unlike in many European countries, populism in Albania is primarily embedded within mainstream political parties rather than outsider movements. Both the governing Socialist Party and the opposition Democratic Party employ populist communication strategies, although they remain broadly committed to European integration.

The report shows that Albania combines exceptionally strong public and political support for EU membership with increasing criticism of the EU's institutions and accession process. Prime Minister Edi Rama in particular is portrayed as using a populist political style that blends pro-European commitments with rhetoric critical of perceived EU bureaucracy, delays, and unequal treatment of candidate countries. Such criticism is characterised as a form of soft or polity-based Euroscepticism that challenges certain EU practices without rejecting the broader integration project.

The report concludes that the Albanian case demonstrates how populist discourse and support for European integration can coexist. In Albania, populism functions primarily as a strategic communication tool employed by mainstream political actors to mobilise support and respond to public frustrations, while the goal of EU membership remains largely uncontested across the political spectrum.

Referee comments for constructive revision:

This country report offers a strong and informative report that successfully fulfils its stated purpose. It is up to date, engages with relevant literature, and provides a clear overview of the

relationship between populism and European integration in Albania. The report is particularly accessible to readers who may not be familiar with Albanian politics, and it offers a useful synthesis of recent developments and scholarly debates.

I have three suggestions that could further strengthen the report.

First, the report would benefit from a more explicit conceptual discussion of populism. While the text consistently identifies political actors, discourses, and strategies as populist, it largely assumes a shared understanding of what populism is. The report sometimes oscillates between treating populism as a communication style, a political strategy, and a discursive phenomenon. Given that populism is a contested concept with multiple definitions in the literature, a brief discussion of how the report understands populism, and of the expectations that follow from this definition, would help readers assess how the Albanian case compares with more conventional manifestations of populism elsewhere. This would also strengthen the analytical foundation of the report.

Second, the discussion of Albania's relationship with the EU around 2020 could be developed further. The report notes that the opening of accession negotiations in March 2020 marked an important step forward in Albania's European integration process. At the same time, a later section discusses tensions that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly concerning vaccine distribution and perceptions of unequal treatment by the EU. These developments are all highly relevant to the report's central argument, but the connection between them could be made more explicit. A clearer discussion of how positive integration milestones coexisted with frustrations toward the EU would provide a more nuanced account of the evolution of public and political discourse during this period.

Third, the final sections feel comparatively brief. Section 4 ("Responses to Euroscepticism") and the concluding section are significantly shorter than the preceding parts of the report. Expanding these sections would allow the author to draw together the main findings more systematically and provide a stronger concluding reflection on the implications of the Albanian case for understanding the relationship between populism and European integration.

Overall, I found this report well-written and valuable. The suggested revisions mentioned above are intended to clarify the conceptual framework, strengthen the narrative coherence of the analysis, and provide a more balanced distribution of attention across the different sections.

AI assistance statement: Microsoft Copilot was used for language editing and stylistic refinement. The content of the review, including all assessments and recommendations, reflects my own independent judgment.

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: European integration, populism, European politics, enlargement.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.