

Parallel Struggles: Comparative Anti-Corruption and Decriminalization Efforts in Albania and Georgia on the Road to EU Accession.

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Abstract:

This paper explores the comparative anti-corruption and decriminalization efforts in Albania and Georgia, analyzing their challenges and progress toward European Union (EU) accession. Despite differing historical trajectories, both countries face entrenched corruption and criminal influence in politics. By examining their reform approaches, this study identifies best practices and lessons for strengthening judicial independence, institutional integrity, and sustained political will.

Fieldwork conducted during the author's study visit to Georgia after its 2024 parliamentary elections informs the analysis. Meetings with former ministers, vice ministers, and high-ranking officials, along with firsthand observations of public protests, provided valuable insights into Georgia's socio-political dynamics. These interactions highlighted challenges posed by external actors like Russia, the role of civil society in democratic reforms, and efforts to address unresolved legacies of past governance through transitional justice mechanisms.

The research critically compares judicial reforms in both countries. Albania's vetting process for judges and prosecutors has been central to its anti-corruption strategy, restoring public trust in state institutions despite its disruptive nature. In contrast, Georgia's judicial reforms have focused on procedural transparency but lack mechanisms for personnel accountability, raising concerns about judicial independence. The influence of EU membership aspirations is a significant driver of reform. Albania, as an EU candidate, has implemented extensive governance, transparency, and rule of law reforms to align with EU standards. Georgia, once proactive in meeting EU norms, has experienced setbacks, including government decisions that have stalled EU negotiations, fueling protests and exposing vulnerabilities to Russian disinformation campaigns.

This study concludes that Albania and Georgia's reform journeys reveal the complex interplay between domestic and external factors in achieving sustainable political transformation. It argues that integrating transitional justice and a decolonial framework offers a valuable lens for addressing lingering power structures and fostering democratic resilience in post-communist contexts.

Disclaimer

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Their firsthand accounts of Georgia's reform processes, the challenges posed by external actors like Russia, and the evolving role of civil society were invaluable in shaping the perspectives presented in this manuscript. The author is particularly grateful for the open and honest dialogue that allowed a deeper understanding of the complexities of political transformation in Georgia.

The author also acknowledges the welcoming spirit and hospitality of those encountered during the visit, whose willingness to engage in meaningful exchange and share personal stories enriched both the research and the overall experience. These contributions were critical in capturing the nuances of Georgia's ongoing reform efforts and the broader socio-political context.

This research reflects the insights and lived experiences of those who are actively working to strengthen democratic governance in Georgia, and their voices are an integral part of this work.

Introduction

Albania and Georgia, both emerging from communist regimes in 1991, have faced significant challenges in combating corruption and addressing the legacies of authoritarianism. Despite their shared post-communist trajectories, the two countries have employed distinct approaches to transitional justice and institutional reform. Albania's negotiated transition, described by Huntington as a process where remnants of the old regime were incorporated into new democratic structures, contrasts with Georgia's more abrupt state-building efforts following independence from the Soviet Union.¹ These paths have shaped their respective strategies for dismantling entrenched systems of corruption and ensuring public accountability, crucial components of their EU accession aspirations.

At the heart of these efforts lies the recognition that systemic corruption and the lingering influence of communist-era practices undermine democratic consolidation. For Albania, institutional vetting serves as a cornerstone for addressing its past and preventing the perpetuation of authoritarian networks. Meanwhile, Georgia's comprehensive restructuring of law enforcement institutions after the *Rose Revolution* illustrates a bold approach to dismantling corrupt systems and fostering public trust. A closer examination of their strategies provides insights into the complexities of transitional justice in post-communist states and highlights the intersection of historical reckoning with modern governance reform.

Albania and Georgia share significant challenges related to decriminalization and combating corruption in politics, arising from similar historical contexts and institutional vulnerabilities. Both countries experienced prolonged periods of authoritarianism, with Albania under a rigid communist regime and Georgia under Soviet influence. As they transitioned to democracy in the early 1990s, both nations encountered challenges related to weak institutional frameworks, limited transparency, and vulnerability to organized crime.

As two aspirant EU member countries, Georgia and Albania have both made notable efforts to combat corruption within their public sectors. While Albania's status as an official EU candidate has resulted in stringent external pressure to comply with European anti-corruption standards, Georgia's voluntary alignment with these standards as an aspirant country reflects a different dynamic of political will and reform processes.² Comparing the paths taken by Albania and Georgia reveals both the successes and difficulties of their efforts, providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of anti-corruption initiatives and highlighting areas for improvement in both nations.

Furthermore, as Georgia continues its path toward EU integration, the effectiveness of its anti-corruption initiatives will play a pivotal role in demonstrating the country's commitment to the rule of law and good governance. By analyzing Georgia's anti-corruption efforts in the context of its regional counterparts, particularly Albania—an EU candidate country with a longer history of

¹ Huntington, S. P. (1991). How countries democratize. *Political Science Quarterly*, 106(4), 579–616. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2151795>

² Avagyan, M., Tsintsadze, A., & Turchak, K. (2024). *Responsibility, accountability, and participation: Toward good governance in Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine*. German Marshall Fund of the United States. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/responsibility-accountability-and-participation-toward-good-governance-armenia-georgia-and>

reform—valuable lessons can be gleaned. Georgia can benefit from Albania's experiences, particularly in strengthening the independence of anti-corruption institutions and ensuring that reforms are not merely superficial but translate into tangible outcomes.

This comparative analysis explores the anti-corruption strategies, political commitment, and the role of international influence, particularly EU pressure, in shaping reform trajectories in these two countries. It aims to underscore the importance of sustained political will and public accountability in overcoming institutional challenges and achieving meaningful progress in anti-corruption efforts. Moreover, the study sheds light on how transitional justice, through mechanisms like institutional vetting and comprehensive institutional reform, plays a critical role in fostering trust and aligning these nations with European standards of governance. Both nations offer unique lessons in confronting institutional weaknesses and ensuring a clean break from their authoritarian pasts, albeit through markedly different approaches.

The research incorporates insights gained during a study visit to Georgia conducted immediately after the parliamentary elections of 2024. This visit provided the author with an opportunity to engage with former ministers and vice ministers, who played pivotal roles in shaping the country's institutional and political reforms. Those meetings offered critical insights into the strategies employed to tackle corruption and foster good governance. These engagements were complemented by observations of ongoing protests, where the author interacted with former high-ranking public officials, and parliamentarians, as well as civil society activists. These conversations shed light on both the drivers of reform and the challenges of public resistance to entrenched systems of power.

These experiences have enriched the comparative analysis in this paper, providing nuanced perspectives on the reform trajectories of both nations. The dual engagement with institutional architects and protest participants allowed for a more holistic understanding of the dynamics driving Georgia's reforms. This comparative approach underscores the importance of historical reckoning, public accountability, and inclusive governance in building resilient institutions and fostering democratic consolidation in post-communist states, aligning their trajectories with the broader framework of EU integration.

Legislative Frameworks as a Foundation for Decriminalization

Both Albania and Georgia have made significant legislative advances in combating criminal influence and corruption within politics, yet their approaches to implementation reveal notable differences.

In Albania, the call for decriminalization in politics has intensified in recent years, particularly as the country confronts election cycles often overshadowed by allegations of criminal infiltration and systemic corruption. Albania's democratic process has been consistently undermined by weak institutions, a lack of transparency, and a judiciary susceptible to political influence, creating an environment where individuals with criminal connections can ascend to public office. Decriminalization has thus become both a legislative priority and a moral imperative, central to Albania's democratic integrity and its aspirations for greater integration into European political and economic frameworks. Without robust reform, criminal influence in politics risks eroding

public trust, deterring foreign investment, and stalling Albania's progress toward a more stable and democratic society.

Albania has also institutionalized its reckoning with its communist past through mechanisms like the Authority on Access to Information on the Former State Security Service. This authority plays a critical role in verifying whether individuals in high public offices—parliamentarians, ministers, mayors, prosecutors, and judges—collaborated with the former State Security Services (Sigurimi).³ By exposing and disqualifying former collaborators from positions of influence, Albania underscores its commitment to transitional justice and its determination to sever ties with authoritarian practices. This structured, case-by-case vetting process highlights a deliberate effort to confront historical injustices and promote institutional integrity.

Georgia's approach, while sharing a focus on institutional renewal, diverges sharply in its methods and scale. Following the *Rose Revolution* in 2004, Georgia embarked on a dramatic overhaul of its police force and internal security apparatus to address systemic corruption and dismantle Soviet-era practices. The government dissolved the Ministry of State Security (MSS), merging it with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), and dismissed all employees of both institutions, creating a new entity staffed by a unified candidate pool.⁴ This extensive restructuring led to the dismissal of over 30,000 officers implicated in corruption or predatory practices. For example, in Tbilisi alone, 83% of police officers were replaced. Unlike Albania's targeted vetting, Georgia opted for sweeping institutional reform, emphasizing mass dismissals and the recruitment of untainted personnel to establish a corruption-free police force.⁵

A defining moment in Georgia's reforms was the abolition of the traffic police in July 2004, which saw 85% of the force—approximately 15,000 officers—dismissed in a single day. Nationwide, half of the police force was replaced, with a focus on removing those with ties to the Soviet regime or records of corruption. This effort addressed deep-seated public mistrust of the police, which had been synonymous with corruption. The reforms also prioritized the recruitment of younger, untainted individuals and implemented a zero-tolerance policy for bribery and misconduct. Retraining opportunities were offered to remaining officers, and in 2013, a new Georgian Police Code of Ethics was established, emphasizing public service, liberty, and security.⁶

The enactment of Albania's *Decriminalization Law* in 2015 marked a formal acknowledgment of the problem and a legislative step toward cleaning up politics.⁷ However, while the law itself is robust on paper, its impact has been limited by systemic failures in checks and balances. These include weak institutional oversight, selective application of the law, inadequate political financing

³ Established by Law No. 45/2015, On the Right to Information on the Documents of the Former State Security Service of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania to enable the exercise of the right of access to information on the former State Security Service documents by any interested party, through a democratic and transparent process, protecting the personality of the individual, as well as the unity of national reconciliation.

⁴ Osmanov, F. (2020, May 11). *Police reform in Georgia*. Blavatnik School of Government. <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Osmanov%2C%20Police%20Reform%20in%20Georgia-1.pdf>

⁵ Devlin, M. (2007). *Seizing the reform moment: Rebuilding Georgia's police, 2004-2006*. Innovations for Successful Societies. https://successfulsocieties.princeton.edu/sites/g/files/toruqf5601/files/Policy_Note_ID126.pdf

⁶ Osmanov, F. (2020, May 11). *Police reform in Georgia*. Blavatnik School of Government. <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Osmanov%2C%20Police%20Reform%20in%20Georgia-1.pdf>

⁷ In 2015, under pressure from international partners, the Parliament adopted Law 138/2015 "on guaranteeing the integrity of persons elected, appointed or exercising public functions", otherwise known as the decriminalization law.

regulations, and insufficient independence within the judiciary. Political parties often aggravate the problem, driven by a reliance on substantial financial backing for their campaigns and, in some cases, prioritizing loyalty or patronage over ethical standards. This environment allows figures with troubling criminal associations to ascend to positions of power. Without rigorous checks and balances, Albania's political landscape remains vulnerable to corruption, reinforcing a cycle in which criminal networks, political elites, and organized crime maintain a presence within governance structures. The *Decriminalization Law* sought to address widespread public concerns over organized crime's influence in politics by prohibiting candidacies and office-holding for individuals convicted of specific offenses, including drug trafficking, organized crime, and corruption. The law represented a major step forward for Albanian governance and was welcomed by both domestic reform advocates and the EU as a positive step toward aligning with European standards.

Albania has instituted the Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK), encompassing both the Special Prosecution Office and the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), which specifically target high-level corruption and organized crime. SPAK was established as part of Albania's judicial reforms, a requirement imposed by the EU as part of the accession process.⁸ The High Inspectorate of Declaration and Audit of Assets and Conflict of Interests (HIDAACI) also plays a crucial role in overseeing public officials' asset declarations. The latest progress report of the European Commission highlights that despite progress in the fight against corruption, overall corruption is widespread in all areas of public and economic life, and that measures against it continue to have little impact, especially in vulnerable sectors.⁹ Even in the latest report by Transparency International, the corruption perception index in Albania remains high, marking a slight progress of one point compared to 2022, mainly due to the effective action of SPAK at the highest levels of the state.¹⁰ Furthermore, in response to EU conditionality, Albania has implemented an extensive judicial vetting process that assesses judges and prosecutors based on integrity, financial assets, and background. This rigorous approach has led to the dismissal of numerous judges and prosecutors, signaling a commitment to restoring public trust in the judiciary and reinforcing the rule of law.

Checks and balances play a crucial role in maintaining political integrity, and Albania's inability to enforce them effectively has profound implications for democratic stability. Effective checks and balances, when functioning correctly, not only act as a deterrent against corrupt individuals but also enhance accountability within the public office. In the case of Albania, however, oversight bodies such as the Central Election Commission (CEC) and the High Inspectorate for the Declaration and Audit of Assets (HIDAA) lack the independence and resources to perform their duties adequately. Political interference, selective prosecution, and limited resources all diminish the effectiveness of these institutions, allowing candidates with criminal histories or associations

⁸ The Special Courts against Corruption (SPAK – from its Albanian acronym) were established as part of a separate structure for the investigation, prosecution, and adjudication of corruption and organised crime cases, created by a constitutional reform package in 2016.

⁹ EU Commission progress report on Albania, 2023. Brussels.

¹⁰ Transparency International Perception Index, Albania 2023. <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/albania>

to bypass scrutiny. Consequently, the public is left with a political system in which accountability is selective and impartial enforcement of laws is compromised.

Georgia on the other hand, has made significant strides in anti-corruption efforts in recent years, positioning itself as a leader in the region with a commitment to eradicating political corruption and organized crime. While Georgia does not possess a singular decriminalization law explicitly aimed at addressing the infiltration of criminal elements into politics, it has instead implemented a suite of comprehensive anti-corruption measures designed to tackle various dimensions of corruption within its political system. This decentralized approach allows for multiple agencies, including the Anti-Corruption Bureau and a specialized anti-corruption department within the State Security Service (SSS), to address corruption-related investigations. However, the lack of complete structural independence within these agencies raises concerns regarding the robustness of high-level corruption investigations and the overall effectiveness of Georgia's anti-corruption framework.¹¹

Albania and Georgia's divergent paths reflect distinct transitional frameworks shaped by their historical and political contexts. According to Samuel Huntington's typology of transitions, Albania's shift aligns with a "negotiated transition," wherein remnants of the old regime played a significant role in shaping the new order. In contrast, Georgia experienced a more radical and revolutionary break from the USSR, culminating in the transformative changes brought about by the *Rose Revolution*. Huntington's analysis suggests that negotiated transitions, such as Albania's, often require sustained efforts to dismantle entrenched networks from the old regime, as evidenced by the work of the Authority on the Information of State Security Documents.¹² Meanwhile, Georgia's revolutionary approach enabled decisive institutional restructuring but introduced challenges in maintaining the long-term sustainability of reforms amid shifting political dynamics.

Both nations' reform trajectories have also been influenced by their aspirations for EU membership. As an official EU candidate country, Albania has undertaken extensive reforms driven by the need to comply with EU standards. Georgia, which initially demonstrated strong political will by voluntarily aligning with these standards prior to its application, has faced setbacks in recent years. Decisions by the Georgian government to regress from EU negotiations have raised concerns about potential democratic backsliding. These concerns have been further amplified by widespread protests and allegations of Russian disinformation influencing the regression. Such external pressures, coupled with internal challenges, underscore the need for sustained political commitment and robust institutional safeguards to advance EU accession efforts.

Judicial reforms in Georgia have focused on enhancing procedural transparency, particularly in the selection and promotion of judges. These reforms are critical for ensuring that the judiciary

¹¹ European Commission. (2022). *Evaluation of the EU's cooperation with Georgia: Final report*. European Commission, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations – DG NEAR. <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/GEO%20CSE%20-%20Final%20Report%20-%20September%202022.pdf>

¹² Huntington, S. P. (1991). How countries democratize. *Political Science Quarterly*, 106(4), 579–616. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2151795>

remains accountable and capable of enforcing anti-corruption measures impartially.¹³ However, Georgia's efforts lack the rigor of Albania's comprehensive judicial vetting process, which scrutinizes judges and prosecutors to ensure integrity and accountability. This disparity has raised questions about the independence of Georgia's judiciary, particularly at higher levels where political pressures may still hold sway.

While both Albania's *Decriminalization Law* and Georgia's anti-corruption initiatives are influenced by EU standards, their approaches differ significantly. Albania's Decriminalization Law directly targets criminal infiltration into politics, establishing a clear and explicit framework for addressing these issues. In contrast, Georgia's approach is broader, focusing on corruption within the context of asset forfeiture and criminal accountability. Albania's judicial vetting process stands out as a distinct and comprehensive measure of its commitment to aligning with EU expectations. Although disruptive, this reform has been instrumental in restoring public trust. On the other hand, Georgia's reforms are less interventionist, emphasizing structural transparency without implementing widespread personnel changes, which may slow progress in enhancing judicial accountability.

Albania's Decriminalization Law: Broad Scope, Limited Enforcement

In any effective anti-corruption and decriminalization effort, a strong legislative framework is critical for establishing clear standards, enforcing accountability, and ensuring consistent application across all levels of government. Both countries have challenges in building a robust legal framework that can adequately prevent individuals with criminal backgrounds or corrupt affiliations from entering or remaining in public office. Examining the legislative frameworks in both countries provides insight into the role laws play in the decriminalization process and highlights the need for continuous adaptation to address emerging issues.

Albania's approach to decriminalization formally began with the passage of the *Decriminalization Law* in 2015, a landmark piece of legislation aimed at barring individuals with criminal records from holding public office. This law was part of a broader package of reforms championed by the EU, which saw decriminalization as a prerequisite for Albania's eventual EU accession. The law mandates stringent background checks on candidates for parliament, mayors, and other public roles and covers a wide range of criminal offenses, including violent crimes, corruption, and organized crime affiliations. It also requires that existing officials who are found to have criminal connections or past convictions be removed from office.

Despite its comprehensive scope, enforcement of the *Decriminalization Law* has been inconsistent. Key issues lie in the lack of adequate mechanisms to investigate and verify candidates' backgrounds, as well as in the selective application of the law. While some figures with questionable backgrounds have been prevented from holding office, others have managed to evade scrutiny, often due to political connections. This discrepancy suggests that while Albania has the

¹³ Muižnieks, N. (2016). *Georgia should continue strengthening the independence and impartiality of judges*. Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights. Retrieved October 29, 2024, from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/georgia-should-continue-strengthening-the-independence-and-impartiality-of-judges>

legislative structure to enforce decriminalization, weaknesses in implementing and enforcing the law prevent it from achieving its full impact.

Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK) is a hybrid institution comprising the Special Prosecution Office and the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI). This structure is designed to focus exclusively on cases of corruption, organized crime, and the abuse of office by public officials. The dual approach of having both prosecution and investigative capabilities under one umbrella enhances operational efficiency and effectiveness. Additionally, the lack of robust oversight agencies and a clear framework for cooperation between law enforcement, anti-corruption agencies, and electoral bodies further limits the law's effectiveness. For example, SPAK, while tasked with investigating high-level corruption, does not always coordinate effectively with election authorities, resulting in gaps in the vetting process. This lack of coordination hinders the comprehensive application of the decriminalization law, allowing some individuals to bypass scrutiny during the election period.

The establishment of SPAK is a direct response to EU recommendations and the need for robust mechanisms to tackle high-level corruption. The EU has closely monitored the performance of SPAK, using benchmarks to evaluate its effectiveness in bringing cases against corrupt officials and public servants. The creation of SPAK has been part of broader judicial reforms aimed at restoring public trust in the judiciary. These reforms include a rigorous vetting process for judges and prosecutors to ensure that only qualified individuals with clean records are entrusted with sensitive anti-corruption cases. This initiative has led to the dismissal of numerous judges and has been crucial in reshaping the judiciary's credibility.

Georgia's Anti-Corruption Legislation: A Mixed Record of Success

The *Rose Revolution*, which unfolded in Georgia in late 2003, marked a pivotal moment in the country's modern history.¹⁴ The movement arose from widespread public dissatisfaction with the government of President Eduard Shevardnadze, characterized by widespread allegations of electoral fraud during the parliamentary elections. Growing frustration over rampant corruption, economic stagnation, and ineffective governance fueled mass protests across the nation. The revolution, led predominantly by a coalition of young activists and civil society groups, was notable for its peaceful nature, with demonstrators often carrying roses as symbols of non-violence and change.

Following the successful ousting of Shevardnadze, the new government, led by President Mikheil Saakashvili, embarked on a comprehensive reform agenda aimed at addressing the systemic issues that had plagued Georgia for years. The Saakashvili administration prioritized the establishment of transparent and accountable institutions. This included a significant restructuring of government agencies to enhance efficiency and reduce opportunities for corruption. Additionally, a merit-based

¹⁴ Lynch, D. (2006). *The Rose Revolution and after*. In *Why Georgia matters* (pp. 23–34). European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07058.6>

approach to civil service appointments was implemented, aiming to eliminate the patronage networks that had characterized the previous administration.¹⁵

One of the most significant outcomes of the *Rose Revolution* was the government's commitment to a zero-tolerance policy toward corruption. High-profile campaigns were launched to combat bribery and graft, resulting in the establishment of specialized anti-corruption bodies, such as the Anti-Corruption Bureau and the Financial Monitoring Service. These measures enhanced transparency in public procurement and budgetary processes, significantly reducing opportunities for corrupt practices. Furthermore, reforms in the judiciary were instituted to ensure independence and integrity, including a comprehensive vetting process for judges and prosecutors.¹⁶

Another significant outcome that emerged after the *Rose Revolution* was the creation and the empowerment of a dedicated anti-corruption unit responsible for investigating corruption-related offenses, within the State Security Service (SSS). This unit is tasked with addressing both high-level corruption and petty corruption that affects citizens' everyday interactions with government officials. While the SSS's anti-corruption unit has made strides in addressing corruption, its effectiveness is sometimes undermined by perceptions of political influence. Concerns have been raised about the independence of this unit, particularly in politically sensitive cases, which may hinder its ability to prosecute high-ranking officials.¹⁷

The *Rose Revolution* proved to be a watershed moment for anti-corruption efforts in Georgia, fostering a new political culture characterized by a strong commitment to accountability. The decisive actions taken against corrupt officials during Saakashvili's administration played a critical role in rebuilding public trust in state institutions. This renewed trust encouraged citizen engagement and support for reform initiatives, laying a strong foundation for ongoing efforts to combat corruption.¹⁸ International support and credibility also significantly increased following the revolution. The commitment to reform attracted attention from Western governments and organizations, bolstering Georgia's credibility in the eyes of international partners. This support translated into increased foreign investment and assistance, essential for sustaining reform initiatives and ensuring the implementation of anti-corruption measures.

While the *Rose Revolution* initiated significant progress in combating corruption, it also faced criticisms regarding issues of political repression and the concentration of power. Some critics argue that the government's aggressive stance against corruption led to the sidelining of political opponents and concerns about civil liberties. Balancing the need for accountability with democratic freedoms remains a challenge in Georgia's ongoing political development.

¹⁵ Russell, M. (2021, May). *Georgia's bumpy road to democracy: On track for a European future?* European Parliamentary Research Service. <https://chatgpt.com/c/6720b928-b160-8008-bd97-bd339f7ab197>

¹⁶ OECD (2022), *Anti-Corruption Reforms in Georgia: Pilot 5th Round of Monitoring Under the OECD Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan* <https://doi.org/10.1787/d709c349-en>

¹⁷ European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission). (2023, December 18). *Opinion on the provisions of the law on the fight against corruption concerning the Anti-Corruption Bureau: Georgia* (CDL-AD(2023)046). [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2023\)046-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2023)046-e)

¹⁸ Lili Di Puppò, *East European Politics* (2013): *The construction of success in anti-corruption activity in Georgia*, *East European Politics*, DOI: 10.1080/21599165.2013.846260 To link to this article:

(PDF) *The construction of success in anti-corruption activity in Georgia*. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271991646_The_construction_of_success_in_anti-corruption_activity_in_Georgia

Despite the legal foundation provided by this act, its enforcement has been inconsistent, largely due to political interference and limitations within itself. Like Albania, Georgia faces challenges in fully implementing its decriminalization laws, especially regarding the vetting of candidates and the removal of officials with criminal backgrounds. High-profile cases often stall due to a combination of limited political will and procedural delays, and allegations of selective enforcement continue to erode public confidence. Moreover, Georgia's Anti-Corruption Bureau's independence is frequently called into question, as the commission's leadership is appointed by the parliament, which opens the door to political influence and questions about the impartiality of its investigations.¹⁹

The Role of International Influence and EU Pressure in Anti-Corruption Efforts in Georgia and Albania

International influence, particularly from the European Union (EU), has been a critical driver of decriminalization and anti-corruption efforts in both Georgia and Albania. As aspiring EU member states, both countries prioritize meeting the Union's standards for transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. The EU's conditionality mechanisms have promoted legislative reforms and kept decriminalization efforts on the political agenda. However, while both countries have made progress, the sustainability and full impact of these reforms are often limited by local resistance, incomplete implementation, and political interference.

In Georgia, the EU's approach includes conditionality mechanisms such as the Association Agreement and the Eastern Partnership framework, which emphasize democratic governance and anti-corruption reforms. The achievement of visa-free travel to the Schengen Area in 2017 was contingent upon significant anti-corruption measures, which exemplifies how EU pressure has shaped the reform agenda.²⁰ Similarly, Albania's Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) outlines specific milestones in governance reform, anti-corruption measures, and decriminalization as preconditions for its EU accession negotiations. Both agreements serve as frameworks that not only provide external pressure but also outline clear expectations for reform.

Technical assistance and capacity-building support have been critical components of the EU's strategy in both countries. In Albania, the establishment of the Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK) and the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) has been supported by EU funding, aiming to equip these bodies with the necessary resources to investigate and prosecute high-level corruption. Likewise, Georgia has received technical assistance from international organizations to strengthen its anti-corruption institutions. However, in both cases, the operational effectiveness of these agencies has been hindered by political interference and resource limitations, underscoring the need for local political will to complement international support.

Monitoring and public accountability mechanisms are also vital in both contexts. The EU's periodic progress reports and evaluations serve as essential tools for public accountability,

¹⁹ European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission). (2023, December 18). *Opinion on the provisions of the law on the fight against corruption concerning the Anti-Corruption Bureau: Georgia* (CDL-AD(2023)046). [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2023\)046-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2023)046-e)

²⁰ European External Action Service. (2017, March 29). *Visa-free travel comes into effect for Georgia*. Retrieved from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/23697_en

detailing ongoing reforms and holding national governments accountable for unfulfilled promises. In Albania, EU reports have consistently highlighted issues such as selective enforcement of the Decriminalization Law, urging authorities to address these concerns to maintain public trust.²¹ Similarly, in Georgia, EU assessments highlight areas for improvement, reinforcing the government's responsibility to follow through on commitments. While these mechanisms expose deficiencies and keep reforms on track, they do not always lead to immediate action, illustrating the limitations of EU influence in driving change.²²

Despite the significant role of the EU, both countries face challenges in ensuring that anti-corruption reforms are fully implemented and have a lasting impact. Political resistance remains a common theme, as local elites in both Georgia and Albania may resist reforms that threaten their influence or expose their ties to corruption. Critics argue that the EU's pressure, while well-intentioned, may lead to superficial compliance, where reforms prioritize appearance over substance.²³ In both countries, legislative achievements have been undermined by gaps in enforcement and political interference, resulting in uneven application of anti-corruption laws.

As Georgia and Albania continue their journeys toward EU integration, the risk of "reform fatigue" looms large, particularly in Albania, which is still in the early stages of the accession process. The challenge of sustaining reform progress over the long term is exacerbated by shifting local political dynamics. To strengthen the sustainability and impact of decriminalization reforms, the EU could consider expanding its support to civil society organizations and independent media in both countries. This approach would foster a more resilient environment for accountability, as civil society can play a critical role in monitoring reforms and raising public awareness.

The EU's influence on anti-corruption efforts in Georgia and Albania has been significant yet complex. While conditionality, technical assistance, and monitoring have resulted in substantial legislative advancements in both countries, achieving lasting change requires a genuine local commitment to reform and stronger enforcement mechanisms. The EU's role remains essential; however, a multi-faceted approach that includes support for civil society and enhanced independence for anti-corruption agencies is critical for ensuring that decriminalization efforts lead to meaningful and sustainable improvements.

Institutional Challenges and Political Interference in Anti-Corruption Efforts in Albania and Georgia

Despite legislative advancements aimed at combating corruption, both Albania and Georgia grapple with significant institutional challenges that undermine the effectiveness of their anti-corruption frameworks. In both countries, the lack of independence within oversight institutions and susceptibility to political interference impede the fair application of the law and erode public

²¹ European Commission. (2023). *Albania 2023 report: Accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement policy*. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_690%20Albania%20report.pdf

²² Mahilaj, S., & Cenaj, M. (2023). The Venice Commission's contribution to anti-corruption measures: Case study of Albania, Georgia, and Ukraine. *European Journal of Law and Political Science*, 2(2), 71. <https://doi.org/10.24018/ejpolitics.2023.2.2.87>

²³ Bregu, M. (2024). The impact of the European Union on the endorsement of the justice reform in Albania. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 13(3), 312. <https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2024-0083>

trust in the judiciary. This comparison reveals that, while both nations have made strides in establishing anti-corruption measures, entrenched political dynamics significantly hinder their implementation.

In Albania, the enforcement of the Decriminalization Law often appears selective and politically influenced. High-profile arrests are frequently timed around electoral cycles, leading to concerns that the law is being utilized to target political opponents rather than genuinely addressing the influence of criminal elements within politics. Prosecutors, who are tasked with enforcing decriminalization measures, have been accused of delaying investigations into powerful figures, which fosters an impression that prosecutions may be strategically withheld or expedited based on political motives. This perceived lack of impartiality severely weakens public trust in the judicial process, casting doubt on whether Albania's decriminalization efforts are genuinely aimed at purging politics of corruption or are simply tools for political manipulation.²⁴

Similarly, Georgia faces significant issues with political interference within its anti-corruption institutions. Despite having established legal frameworks for decriminalization, the politicization of these institutions compromises their ability to function effectively. Anti-corruption agencies in Georgia, although equipped with mandates to investigate corruption, often find themselves under the influence of political considerations. This interference hampers the impartial enforcement of laws and raises questions about the integrity of anti-corruption efforts, ultimately undermining the public's confidence in these institutions.

Judicial independence and accountability are critical factors that significantly influence the success of anti-corruption efforts in both countries. In Albania, the judicial system has undergone significant reform through the Justice Reform Package introduced in 2016, driven by EU demands for improved judicial independence. This reform included a rigorous vetting process for judges and prosecutors, scrutinizing their financial backgrounds and potential connections to organized crime.²⁵ While this initiative has led to the removal of numerous officials deemed unfit, it has also been criticized for being politicized. Some argue that the vetting process itself has been exploited as a tool to undermine judicial independence by selectively targeting judges based on political affiliations or decisions in sensitive cases.

High-profile corruption cases in Albania often suffer from prolonged delays or abrupt dismissals, raising serious concerns about the judiciary's impartiality. Such delays feed the perception that the justice system is either unable or unwilling to hold politically connected figures accountable. In Georgia, similar challenges exist, where the judiciary's independence has been compromised by political pressures, making it difficult to enforce decriminalization laws and prosecute high-profile cases effectively. The lack of accountability within the judiciary in both countries signals that without ongoing reform efforts and transparent oversight mechanisms, anti-corruption initiatives may struggle to produce meaningful impacts.

²⁴ Plumbi, J. (2023). Kush janë hapat përpara për ligjin e dekriminalizimit? *Faktoje*. <https://faktoje.al/kush-jane-hapat-perpara-per-ligjin-e-dekriminalizimit/>

²⁵ European Western Balkans. (2020, March 3). Judiciary under reconstruction: Albania's EU-orientated reforms in progress. *European Western Balkans*. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/03/03/judiciary-under-reconstruction-albanias-eu-orientated-reforms-in-progress/>

Both Albania and Georgia have established anti-corruption agencies designed to investigate and prosecute corruption and organized crime. In Albania, SPAK serves as an independent agency tasked with tackling organized crime and corruption cases. However, like its Georgian counterparts, SPAK's effectiveness is often perceived as limited due to political interference. High-profile arrests in Albania frequently coincide with election cycles, raising suspicions that SPAK's activities may be strategically timed to shape public opinion or undermine political opponents. Additionally, SPAK's lack of resources and its dependence on a compromised judiciary further constrain its capacity to conduct impartial investigations. The experiences of both countries illustrate that without genuine independence of key institutions, particularly the judiciary and anti-corruption agencies, anti-corruption measures will likely fall short of their intended impact. Addressing these issues is crucial for rebuilding public trust and achieving sustainable reforms that can effectively limit criminal influence within politics.

In Albania, the political landscape is characterized by high polarization, where political parties often prioritize loyalty over genuine reform initiatives. This lack of bipartisan support for anti-corruption measures diminishes the effectiveness of parliamentary oversight.²⁶ The Albanian Parliament has, at times, resisted judicial reforms, passing amendments that limit the powers of oversight bodies or delay critical investigations. Such politicization erodes the potential for transparent and consistent enforcement of anti-corruption laws, ultimately undermining public confidence in government efforts. The lack of bipartisan support for anti-corruption initiatives diminishes the effectiveness of parliamentary oversight, allowing political elites to manipulate enforcement agencies to target opponents while shielding allies from scrutiny. Legislative bodies sometimes pass amendments that limit the powers of oversight institutions, further weakening judicial independence²⁷. Additionally, inadequate funding and resources for agencies like the Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK) restrict their operational effectiveness, signaling a lack of political backing for genuine reform efforts. This environment of selective prosecution and resource constraints severely undermines public trust in anti-corruption initiatives, leading citizens to perceive these efforts as mere tools for political maneuvering rather than serious attempts to cleanse the political landscape. Without strong, non-partisan oversight and a cross-party commitment to uphold judicial independence, Albania's decriminalization and anti-corruption measures risk being applied unevenly or inadequately.

Similarly, parliamentary oversight in Georgia is compromised by partisan interests and a lack of commitment to reform. Parliament's control over appointments to the judiciary and the Anti-Corruption Bureau has led to allegations of bias, with certain political elites appearing to be shielded from prosecution. This situation is exacerbated by historical struggles with entrenched corruption, where high-ranking politicians have sometimes openly resisted anti-corruption measures. This reluctance reflects a broader lack of political will, as leaders prioritize maintaining their positions over addressing systemic issues. Moreover, external pressures, particularly from Russia, exacerbate these challenges; the introduction of laws like the 'foreign agents' bill limits

²⁶ Gjeta, A. (2023, May 24). *The origins of political polarization in Albania*. Tirana Observatory. <https://tiranaobservatory.com/2023/05/24/the-origins-of-political-polarization-in-albania/>

²⁷ Mason, P. (2021, April). *Rethinking strategies for an effective parliamentary role in combatting corruption*. Westminster Foundation for Democracy. <https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Rethinking-strategies-for-an-effective-parliamentary-role-in-combatting-corruption-1.pdf>

civil society's ability to operate independently, further stifling domestic reform efforts.²⁸ Consequently, the lack of genuine commitment to reform leads to public disillusionment and perpetuates a culture of impunity, as corrupt actors continue to operate with minimal risk of prosecution. Legislative support for reforms tends to be tepid, particularly when such reforms threaten the interests of influential political figures. Consequently, the absence of consistent and impartial oversight mechanisms within the Georgian Parliament reinforces the perception that anti-corruption efforts are insufficiently robust.

Impact of Russian Political Interference in Albania and Georgia

Albania and Georgia, both aspirants for Euro-Atlantic integration, perceive Russian influence as a significant threat to their democratic institutions, sovereignty, and national security. In Albania, Russian influence manifests through disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining public trust in democratic processes and eroding support for NATO and EU integration. These efforts exploit societal divisions and target Albania's political stability through fake news and misinformation.²⁹ Another critical area of concern is Russian interference in Albania's economy. There have been documented attempts by Russian-linked entities to infiltrate vital sectors such as energy and telecommunications. These efforts are perceived as strategic moves to exert economic leverage and influence policy decisions. Such interference, particularly in critical infrastructure, poses a direct threat to national security by creating vulnerabilities that could be exploited in times of political tension.³⁰ Electoral processes in Albania have also come under threat from potential Russian meddling. The Albanian government has raised alarms over the possibility of foreign actors using manipulative tactics, including disinformation, to sway voter behavior and undermine the integrity of elections. Combined with targeted cyberattacks attributed to Russian entities, which have disrupted government institutions and compromised sensitive data, these threats highlight the extent to which digital vulnerabilities are being exploited to destabilize the country.³¹

In Georgia, Russian influence is similarly pervasive but takes distinct forms. Political interference includes support for factions favoring closer ties with Moscow, often through financial backing and media promotion to sway electoral outcomes. Economically, Russia maintains leverage over Georgia through trade dependencies and energy supplies. Despite efforts to diversify, a significant portion of Georgia's trade, particularly in sectors like wine and mineral water exports, remains tied to the Russian market. This dependency allows Russia to impose economic sanctions or embargoes as a means of coercion, as seen in previous instances where Russia banned Georgian products to exert political pressure.³²

Politically, Russia exerts influence by supporting certain political factions within Georgia that advocate for closer ties with Moscow, thereby undermining pro-Western parties and policies. This

²⁸ Berlinger, J., & Edwards, C. (2024, May 15). What is Georgia's 'foreign agents' bill, and why is Europe so alarmed? *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/13/europe/georgia-foreign-agents-law-explained-intl/index.html>

²⁹ Balkan Investigative Reporting Network. (2023). *Russian state-sponsored disinformation narratives in Albania*. Retrieved from <https://birn.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Russian-state-sponsored-disinformation-narratives-in-Albania.pdf>

³⁰ U.S. Department of State. (n.d.). *Countering corruption and Russian malign influence in the Western Balkans*. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/countering-corruption-and-russian-malign-influence-in-the-western-balkans/>

³¹ Albanian Times. (n.d.). *Albania's interior minister warns of Russian propaganda via Albanian-language portals*. Retrieved from <https://albaniantimes.al/albanias-interior-minister-warns-of-russian-propaganda-via-albanian-language-portals/>

³² Insights from authors study visit in Georgia meeting former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Economy

support often includes financial backing and media promotion, aiming to sway public opinion and electoral outcomes in favor of pro-Russian entities. Additionally, Russia's recognition and military backing of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia serve as leverage to pressure Georgia into aligning with Russian geopolitical interests.³³ Information warfare, including disinformation campaigns, aims to undermine public trust in Georgia's pro-Western orientation by promoting anti-Western narratives and exploiting societal divisions.

Militarily, the presence of Russian troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia since the 2008 war poses a direct threat to Georgia's territorial integrity and national security. These occupied territories serve as strategic footholds for Russia, enabling rapid military mobilization and exertion of pressure on the Georgian government. The ongoing occupation also hampers Georgia's efforts to join NATO, as unresolved territorial conflicts are a significant impediment to membership.³⁴

In the realm of information warfare, Russia employs disinformation campaigns to influence public opinion in Georgia. These campaigns often disseminate anti-Western narratives, promote pro-Russian sentiments, and exploit existing societal divisions to create confusion and distrust in democratic institutions. The objective is to weaken public support for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration and to portray Russia as a more suitable partner.

Both countries have adopted comprehensive strategies to counter Russian influence, focusing on political, economic, military, and informational dimensions. In Albania, a Special Parliamentary Committee has been established to oversee institutional actions against foreign interference, alongside legal reforms to enhance electoral and national security frameworks. Cybersecurity measures, supported by international partnerships, are prioritized to mitigate the risks of cyberattacks. Public awareness campaigns promote media literacy, empowering citizens to recognize disinformation. Additionally, Albania's collaboration with NATO and the EU strengthens its resilience through intelligence-sharing and strategic alignment. In response to these challenges, Albania has implemented a series of countermeasures to protect its democratic institutions and national sovereignty. Central to this effort is the establishment of a Special Parliamentary Committee tasked with coordinating and supervising institutional actions to combat disinformation and foreign interference.³⁵ The committee has undertaken a thorough review of Albania's legal frameworks, identifying and addressing gaps to bolster protections against external manipulation of democratic and electoral processes. These reforms include proposed legislative changes to strengthen national security laws and enhance institutional safeguards for critical sectors.

The Albanian government has also prioritized cybersecurity enhancements to mitigate the risks posed by Russian-linked cyberattacks. Investments in advanced technologies, capacity-building initiatives, and partnerships with international cybersecurity agencies have been key components

³³ Insights from authors study visit in Georgia meeting former Deputy Minister of Interior and Former Coordinator of state security.

³⁴ Insights from authors study visit in Georgia meeting former Deputy Ambassador of Georgia to NATO

³⁵ Albanian Parliament Special Commission. (2024). "On coordinating and overseeing all institutional actions to combat disinformation and other forms of foreign interference in the country's democratic processes.

<https://www.parlament.al/struktura/8e230ff7-5344-45fb-bd6c-510f927c6b92>

of this strategy. Furthermore, Albania has placed significant emphasis on public awareness campaigns designed to combat disinformation. By promoting media literacy and fostering critical thinking, these initiatives aim to empower citizens to recognize and resist malign foreign narratives.³⁶

Despite these efforts, challenges remain in fully addressing the complex nature of Russian influence. The establishment of the Special Parliamentary Committee represents a decisive step forward, providing a structured and coordinated approach to combating foreign interference.³⁷ However, the implementation of legislative reforms and cybersecurity measures requires sustained political commitment, adequate funding, and continuous international cooperation. Moreover, disinformation campaigns remain a persistent issue, necessitating ongoing public engagement and support for independent media to strengthen societal resilience.³⁸ However, the evolving nature of these threats demands adaptability and vigilance in policy responses. By maintaining a comprehensive and collaborative approach, Albania can continue to mitigate the risks posed by Russian influence while advancing its Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Georgia's countermeasures emphasize similar areas but with notable differences in approach. Politically, Georgia has implemented electoral reforms to enhance transparency and reduce foreign influence. Economically, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU enables diversification away from Russian markets.³⁹ Despite these efforts, the economic relationship with Russia remains substantial, necessitating ongoing strategies to mitigate potential coercion.

In response to these multifaceted threats, Georgia has implemented several measures to safeguard its sovereignty and democratic processes. Politically, the government has pursued policies aimed at strengthening democratic institutions and reducing vulnerabilities to foreign interference. This includes electoral reforms to enhance transparency and efforts to curb the influence of foreign money in politics. However, challenges remain, as evidenced by internal political strife and allegations of authoritarian tendencies within the ruling party, which some experts argue may inadvertently align with Russian interests.⁴⁰

In terms of military and security measures, Georgia has strengthened its defense capabilities and increased cooperation with NATO and other Western allies. Joint military exercises, capacity-building initiatives, and defense reforms have been implemented to enhance readiness and deter potential aggression. Additionally, Georgia has participated in international peacekeeping missions, demonstrating its commitment to global security and strengthening ties with Western military structures. To combat information warfare, Georgia has initiated public awareness

³⁶ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (n.d.). *Russian fake news and disinformation campaigns in the Balkans*. Retrieved from <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-fake-news-disinformation-balkans/33126528.html>

³⁷ <https://www.parlament.al/struktura/8e230ff7-5344-45fb-bd6c-510f927c6b92>

³⁸ Associated Press. (2024). *EU leader denounces Russia's "hybrid war" aiming to destabilize Western Balkan democracies*. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/article/04edfec4d473d88620793c5b9f9d6ed3>

³⁹ European Commission. (2024). *Georgia report 2024*. Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7b6ed47c-ecde-41a2-99ea-41683dc2d1bd_en?filename=Georgia%20Report%202024.pdf

⁴⁰ Gvineria, S. (2024, July 17). *The geopolitical causes of Georgia's political crisis: Analysis*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/geopolitical-causes-georgias-political-crisis>

campaigns to educate citizens about disinformation and improve media literacy. Efforts have been made to support independent journalism and fact-checking organizations to counter false narratives. Furthermore, collaborations with international partners have been established to monitor and respond to cyber threats and propaganda efforts emanating from Russia.⁴¹

Challenges and Effectiveness

Both countries face ongoing challenges in fully neutralizing Russian influence due to the complexity and adaptability of these threats. In Albania, despite proactive legislative reforms and cybersecurity enhancements, disinformation campaigns and electoral vulnerabilities remain persistent. The success of public awareness efforts and media literacy initiatives depends on sustained engagement and societal resilience. Albania's efforts benefit from strong international collaboration, underscoring the importance of NATO and EU partnerships in addressing external threats.

In Georgia, the effectiveness of countermeasures is tempered by internal political dynamics and economic dependencies on Russia. Political reforms have faced criticism for inadequately addressing vulnerabilities, while unresolved territorial conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain significant impediments to NATO membership and broader national security. Economic diversification efforts under the DCFTA have shown promise but require further momentum to mitigate coercive trade practices. Information warfare continues to evolve, demanding ongoing vigilance and adaptation in counter-disinformation strategies.⁴²

While Georgia has taken significant steps to counter Russian influence, the effectiveness of these measures varies. Political reforms have faced criticism for not fully addressing vulnerabilities, and internal political dynamics sometimes hinder a unified response to external threats. Economic diversification efforts have yielded positive results, yet the substantial economic ties with Russia persist, posing ongoing risks. Military cooperation with NATO enhanced Georgia's defense capabilities, but the unresolved status of occupied territories continues to challenge national security. Information warfare remains a persistent issue, with disinformation campaigns adapting to countermeasures, necessitating continuous vigilance and adaptation.

Albania and Georgia's experiences underscore the multifaceted nature of Russian influence and the necessity for comprehensive, adaptive, and collaborative responses. Both countries demonstrate a strong commitment to safeguarding their democratic institutions and advancing Euro-Atlantic integration. However, sustained political will, internal cohesion, and robust international support are critical to addressing the persistent and evolving challenges posed by Russian interference. By learning from each other's experiences and strengthening regional

⁴¹ U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. (2024, September). *Contesting Russia: The fight for influence in Europe and beyond*. Retrieved from <https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Contesting-Russia-Report-2.pdf>

⁴² European Commission. (2024). *Georgia report 2024*. Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7b6ed47c-ecde-41a2-99ea-41683dc2d1bd_en?filename=Georgia%20Report%202024.pdf

cooperation, Albania and Georgia can bolster their resilience and continue their respective paths toward democratic consolidation and integration with Western structures.

The public perception of anti-corruption efforts both in Albania and Georgia is significantly influenced by the institutional challenges and political interference prevalent in each country. In Albania, citizens often view the selective prosecution of cases and the timing of high-profile arrests—often aligned with election cycles—as indicative of political manipulation. Many Albanians believe that decriminalization efforts are used to target political opponents rather than address the systemic influence of criminality in politics. This perception of bias and lack of transparency in judicial processes exacerbates public distrust, creating a substantial barrier to effective reform.

In Georgia, public frustration is equally evident, as seen in widespread protests calling for judicial reform and accountability for compromised officials. The impact of Russian interference only deepens this dissatisfaction, as citizens express concern over the erosion of democratic norms and the increasing entrenchment of corrupt practices among political elites.⁴³ The failure of the Georgian government to combat corruption effectively, amidst external pressures and internal resistance, diminishes public confidence and raises doubts about the genuine commitment to reform.

In addition to internal political dynamics, Georgia faces the challenge of external political interference, particularly from Russia, which complicates the country's anti-corruption efforts.⁴⁴ The increasing Russian influence in Georgia's political landscape has manifested in various ways, including the introduction of controversial legislation, such as the 'foreign agents' bill.⁴⁵ This bill mandates organizations receiving more than 20% of their funding from abroad to register as "agents of foreign influence" or face severe penalties. Such measures not only threaten civil society organizations that play a vital role in monitoring governance and corruption but also serve to consolidate power among political elites loyal to Russian interests.⁴⁶

Public perception in Georgia has been heavily impacted by these developments, leading to widespread frustration and protests calling for judicial reform and accountability. The Russian influence exacerbates concerns that political elites remain insulated from justice, further undermining public trust in the political system.⁴⁷ Additionally, Georgia's relatively low rankings in transparency and corruption indices reinforce the belief that anti-corruption initiatives are more symbolic than substantive, heightening public skepticism regarding the intentions behind these reforms.

⁴³ Carothers, T., & Press, B. (2022, October). *Understanding and responding to global democratic backsliding*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/10/understanding-and-responding-to-global-democratic-backsliding?lang=en>

⁴⁴ OSCE. (2024, May 30). Georgia's "transparency of foreign influence" law incompatible with democratic standards and human rights law: International human rights office ODIHR. <https://www.osce.org/odihhr/569925>

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch. (2024, May 9). Georgia: 'Foreign influence' bill threatens rights. Reject measure; end police violence. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/09/georgia-foreign-influence-bill-threatens-rights>

⁴⁶ Berlinger, J., & Edwards, C. (2024, May 15). What is Georgia's 'foreign agents' bill, and why is Europe so alarmed? *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/13/europe/georgia-foreign-agents-law-explained-intl/index.html>

⁴⁷ Ionatamishvili, K. (2024, October 24). *Is this the end for Georgian Dream?* Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/georgian-dream-party-georgia-elections-eu-accession-bidzina-ivanishvili/>

The lack of political will in both countries has severe implications for their anti-corruption efforts. In Albania, public trust in these initiatives erodes as citizens witness selective enforcement and political maneuvering. This disillusionment can result in apathy or active resistance to reforms, as citizens perceive them as inauthentic. In Georgia, the combination of historical corruption and external pressures fosters public frustration, leading to protests and calls for judicial reform. Both countries face stalled progress in their aspirations for European Union integration, as the EU's conditionality mechanisms hinge on genuine political commitment to reform. Without a political environment that prioritizes anti-corruption efforts and supports independent institutions, both Albania and Georgia risk continued corruption and diminished prospects for sustainable reform.

Both Albania and Georgia face significant challenges regarding parliamentary oversight and political will in their anti-corruption efforts. While both countries have established frameworks for combating corruption, the politicization of these efforts—exacerbated by external influences, particularly in Georgia—limits their effectiveness. A lack of bipartisan support and accountability within Parliament, coupled with public skepticism about the sincerity of reform initiatives, underscores the necessity for genuine political will and comprehensive oversight to achieve meaningful and sustainable anti-corruption outcomes.

Comparative Outcomes and Lessons Learned

The experiences of Albania and Georgia illuminate the complexities and challenges associated with decriminalization and anti-corruption efforts, particularly as both nations aspire to join the European Union. While both countries have established legal frameworks intended to curtail corruption and enhance accountability, the effectiveness of these laws is significantly hampered by institutional weaknesses, political interference, and a lack of sustained political will. In both cases, reforms often appear superficial or selectively enforced, leading to public frustration and diminishing trust in democratic institutions. While Albania has been on the EU's doorstep for several years, navigating the intricate path toward membership, Georgia's recent status as an EU aspirant places it in a pivotal moment of transformation. Despite their differing timelines, both countries share a common goal of aligning with EU standards and values, and their journeys highlight the critical importance of institutional integrity, transparency, and public accountability in achieving this objective.

In Albania, the longstanding pursuit of EU integration has prompted the implementation of various reforms aimed at curbing corruption and enhancing the rule of law. However, these efforts have often been undermined by institutional weaknesses and political interference, leading to public skepticism regarding the genuine intentions behind anti-corruption measures. The political landscape remains highly polarized, with partisan loyalties frequently overshadowing a shared commitment to reform. This dynamic is reflected in the selective enforcement of the Decriminalization Law, where high-profile arrests often coincide with electoral cycles, raising suspicions that such actions are politically motivated rather than genuinely aimed at addressing corruption.⁴⁸ The perception of bias in judicial processes not only undermines the credibility of

⁴⁸ Ioannides, I., Armakolas, I., Nechev, Z., Popescu-Zamfir, O., & Zeneli, V. (2024). *EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: Where there is a will, there is a way*. Institute for Human Sciences. <https://www.iwm.at/europes-futures/publication/eu-enlargement-to-the-western-balkans-where-there-is-a>

anti-corruption initiatives but also weakens public confidence in the efficacy of governance as a whole. To break this cycle, Albania must prioritize the establishment of an independent judiciary, free from political interference, and cultivate robust oversight mechanisms that enhance accountability and transparency.

By doing so, Albania can not only restore public trust but also demonstrate its commitment to the democratic principles that underpin the EU's framework. Conversely, Georgia, as a new aspirant to EU membership, has the opportunity to learn from Albania's protracted experience in navigating the reform landscape. While Georgia has made significant strides in combating corruption since the *Rose Revolution* of 2003, recent challenges—particularly the resurgence of Russian political influence and the perceived lack of commitment from political elites—have hampered its progress. The public's growing frustration with perceived injustices and inadequate accountability further complicates the landscape, emphasizing the need for a genuine commitment to reform that transcends partisan interests. Strengthening the independence of anti-corruption agencies and ensuring that high-ranking officials are held accountable will be vital for restoring public trust and legitimacy in the government. By examining Albania's journey, Georgia can glean valuable insights into the importance of sustaining political will and bipartisan support for anti-corruption initiatives. Moreover, Georgia can focus on cultivating a more transparent political culture that prioritizes institutional independence, thereby mitigating the risks of politicization that have historically hindered reform efforts in both countries.

Both Albania and Georgia must recognize that their aspirations for EU membership hinge not only on legislative progress but also on the robust implementation of anti-corruption measures and the establishment of resilient democratic institutions. The fight against corruption is not merely a matter of policy but a cultural shift that requires a sustained commitment to integrity, accountability, and public trust. For Albania, this means reaffirming its dedication to reforms that promote transparency and combat corruption at all levels of government. For Georgia, it involves fostering a political environment that supports meaningful reform, ensuring that high-ranking officials are held accountable, and addressing the public's growing frustration with entrenched corruption.⁴⁹ Both countries must recognize that the path to sustainable reform requires not only robust legislative frameworks but also a cultural shift towards transparency, integrity, and accountability. This entails cultivating a political environment where reform efforts are supported across party lines and where the judiciary and oversight bodies operate independently and impartially.

In conclusion, the paths of Albania and Georgia toward EU integration serve as critical reminders that the effectiveness of decriminalization and anti-corruption measures is deeply intertwined with the strength of the institutions that enforce them. As both countries work to align themselves with EU standards, they must prioritize the cultivation of independent and effective judicial and oversight bodies, supported by a political culture that values transparency and accountability. While both countries have made strides in establishing legal frameworks, the true test of their

⁴⁹ Zweers, W., Ioannides, I., Nechev, Z., & Dimitrov, N. (2024). *Unblocking decision-making in EU enlargement: Qualified majority voting as a way forward?* Clingendael, DGAP, ELIAMEP, and Solutions. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/unblocking-decision-making-eu-enlargement>

effectiveness lies in the political will to support these reforms and in the resilience of the institutions charged with their enforcement. Only through a sustained commitment to institutional integrity and public accountability can both Albania and Georgia hope to achieve lasting progress in their anti-corruption efforts and foster a more democratic and transparent political landscape.

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