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## BLOG — POST

# The Flamingo Movement: Why Albania needs a new political contract



Since May 30, thousands of Albanian citizens have taken to the streets to protest against the deal<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister Edi Rama has made with Jared Kushner’s company Affinity Partners for a luxury investment project worth €1.4 billion along parts of Albania’s protected Vlora coast. At the heart of the anger is not only the project itself, but also the way the decision<sup>2</sup> was made, known to be without public or political consultation and with a striking lack of transparency. The project had been unpopular since it was first publicly announced in December 2024, drawing criticism<sup>3</sup> from citizens and environmental activists, but the protests escalated only last week, when preparations for construction began in the Vlora area. Since then, the movement has grown in Tirana and Vlora, while the Albanian diaspora and its supporters are also gathering in European capitals<sup>4</sup> to rally around the protesters and their demands.

The messages are clear: “My country is not for sale”, “Ivanka, keep your hands off Narta”, while flamingos have become the visual language of the protests. This choice of symbol is not accidental. The Narta Lagoon, located in the lower part of the Vjosa River where one of the investment sites is planned, is a protected natural area of salt marshes, wetlands and sand dunes, vital to Albania’s coastal biodiversity and to migratory birds such as flamingos and pelicans. The main part of the deal however concerns the development of a luxury tourism complex on Sazan Island, a former military zone which has been closed to the public for decades. But this is also Albania’s largest island, strategically positioned at the entrance of the Bay of Vlora in the southern Adriatic Sea, and part of the country’s national marine park<sup>5</sup>.

Behind the flamingo symbols, the protests reveal a darker malaise in Albanian society. Signs reading “Edi in jail, Berisha in jail” and “Time to change” show that protesters are using this moment to express a deeper frustration with the country’s political elites. Since the early 1990s, Albanian politics have been dominated by two major parties – the Socialist Party led by Edi Rama in power since 2013 and the Democratic Party led by Sali Berisha, former Prime Minister (2005-2013) and President (1992-1997). Over time, this two-party dominance has produced an extremely toxic and polarised political environment<sup>6</sup>, leaving little space for credible alternative forces to emerge. Albania’s main opposition is not only weak, but its leadership is also burdened by serious corruption allegations, international sanctions and a deep loss of public trust. As a result, successive elections have often felt less like a choice between competing democratic programmes than a choice between compromised options. This may also partially explain Albania’s population decline, from 2.82 million in 2011 to 2.4 million in the latest 2023 census<sup>7</sup>.

These protests are therefore giving citizens space to express a broader fatigue with both the ruling party and the opposition. They reflect anger at political elites considered to have abused power and institutions, captured parts of the media landscape<sup>8</sup> and instrumentalised the laws for partisan purposes<sup>9</sup>.

For some time, Rama’s assertive style of governance appeared to many as the price to pay for pushing forward difficult but important processes, along with above all, Albania’s EU accession path and the reforms required to sustain it. But over time, this personal style has also become associated with the concentration of power and decision-making, often at the expense of democratic processes such as parliamentary dialogue or civil society consultation. Rama’s reaction to the latest protests were telling: “There is no chance that the project will stop as long as I am here<sup>10</sup>”, he said in a statement that captured the arrogance with which he has often addressed both the public and the opposition.

This is not the first time Rama has pushed ahead in the face of civic resistance. In 2020, his government proceeded with the demolition of Tirana’s National Theatre despite strong opposition from artists, activists and parts of the public<sup>11</sup>. More recently, the corruption scandal involving his former deputy prime minister, Belinda Balluku<sup>12</sup>, exposed what many saw as an attempt by the government to interfere with justice and disregard citizens’ calls to protect the work of SPAK<sup>13</sup>, Albania’s anti-corruption agency.

After the arrest of the former mayor of Tirana<sup>14</sup>, the former President<sup>15</sup> and other senior political figures, Albania’s rule-of-law institutions had begun delivering on the anti-corruption reform agenda, including by holding high-level officials accountable. The Balluku case however, marked a sharp reversal in that momentum. Despite serious accusations by SPAK over the alleged manipulation of public procurement procedures for major infrastructure projects worth more than €200 million, Rama stood by her. He criticised SPAK<sup>16</sup>, delayed her dismissal from office until February 2026 (even if the first corruption charges had been raised in October 2025) and in March, his Socialist Party in parliament voted against<sup>17</sup>, hence blocking SPAK’s request to lift Balluku’s parliamentary immunity. This marked a significant setback for Albania’s rule-of-law and justice reforms, which since 2016 had raised hopes that the country was finally ready to confront the endemic corruption that has long obstructed its EU integration.

There is also growing concern that Rama is entering into deals with foreign governments and private partners involving public land and critical infrastructure through opaque processes. This is most visible in tourism development projects, but also in strategic infrastructure, such as the agreement with the UAE-linked Eagle Hills project<sup>18</sup>, for the redevelopment of Durrës Port and its surrounding area into a modern tourism and marina complex, or the deal with Italy to host migrant centres in Albania<sup>19</sup>, which raised serious human rights concerns. The agreement with Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner follows the same model of handling the country's modernisation agenda: decisions made at the highest executive level, with limited political procedures or public scrutiny. Additionally, the luxury foreign investment projects have contributed to growing frustration about housing affordability. The real estate prices have sharply increased<sup>20</sup> in recent years, both in the capital and coastal areas, making it unaffordable for ordinary citizens.

These developments are unfolding at a time when the EU has shown its strongest support for Albania's accession process since the country applied for membership in 2009. In just one year, between 2024 and 2025, Albania opened all 33 negotiating chapters<sup>21</sup>. It has also recently received the Interim Benchmark Assessment Report for the Fundamentals cluster<sup>22</sup>, which allows it to move towards setting the closing benchmarks for negotiations. Yet despite this progress, the EU and its member states are watching rule-of-law and justice reform developments with concern. If democratic backsliding persists, it could significantly slow, or even block, Albania's accession momentum.

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Edi Rama deserves credit for supporting EU reforms, developing international partnerships, modernising parts of the country's infrastructure and promoting a more positive image of Albania abroad. He often makes the news, be it for provocative and unfiltered public messages to Europeans, or for his avant-garde ideas such as introducing the first AI-generated virtual minister to oversee public procurement processes. Yet the latter was typically a lot about PR, which could help avoid the harder political question of who controls tenders, oversight and accountability in the country.

Albania's future cannot be a "one-man show". The success of Albania's democratic and European trajectory will depend on the government's ability to address citizens' concerns, protect their interests, and make Albania a country where the population feels safe, sees a future for itself, and is not still forced to leave in search of opportunities abroad. Citizens also want to be able to afford a home, whether in the capital or by the seaside.

The Flamingo movement reflects a desperate need for fresh air and a new political contract. But for that to happen, both Rama and Berisha must open the space for fair political competition and allow a new political class to emerge.

## FOOTNOTES :

- <sup>1</sup> See Mian, M. (2025, June 24). Sold to the Trump family: One of the last undeveloped islands in the Mediterranean. *The Guardian*.
- <sup>2</sup> See Goga, F., & Sito-Sucic, D. (2025, January 16). Albania approves luxury resort project linked to Jared Kushner's company. *Reuters*.
- <sup>3</sup> See *Albanian Times*. (2025, January 16). Jared Kushner's company secures strategic investor status for \$1.4 billion island resort in Albania.
- <sup>4</sup> See *Reuters*. (2026). Protest outside the Albanian embassy against the Trump-Kushner resort. *Reuters Connect*.
- <sup>5</sup> See The National Tourism Agency. (n.d.). Karaburun–Sazan National Marine Park. *Official Tourism Website*.
- <sup>6</sup> See Freedom House. (2025). *Albania: Freedom in the World 2025 country report*.
- <sup>7</sup> See INSTAT. (n.d.). *The population of Albania*.
- <sup>8</sup> See Freedom House. (2024). *Albania: Nations in Transit 2024 country report*.
- <sup>9</sup> See European Commission. (2025). *Albania 2025 report*.
- <sup>10</sup> See *The Guardian*. (2026, June 4). Protests in Albania grow over Jared Kushner-backed luxury resort.
- <sup>11</sup> See *The Architect's Newspaper*. (2020, May 19). Protests erupt over historic theater demolition and BIG's involvement.
- <sup>12</sup> See *Reuters*. (2026, February 26). Albanian PM fires deputy as corruption investigation heats up.
- <sup>13</sup> See Xhaferri, D. (2026, June 4). Balluku affair sends shockwaves across Albania. *Transitions*.
- <sup>14</sup> See OCCRP. (2025, February 10). Tirana mayor arrested in €1m corruption, fraud scandal.
- <sup>15</sup> See *Associated Press*. (2025, April 1). Albanian ex-President Ilir Meta charged with corruption and money laundering.
- <sup>16</sup> See *Albanian Daily News*. (2026, February 16). Prime Minister Edi Rama criticizes Albanian justice system over SPAK request.
- <sup>17</sup> See *European Western Balkans*. (2026, March 12). Parliament of Albania blocks the arrest of the indicted former Deputy Prime Minister.
- <sup>18</sup> See *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. (2025, December). Rules or deals? The EU's challenge in regulating corrosive capital in the Western Balkans.
- <sup>19</sup> See *Migration and Asylum Policy Systems*. (n.d.). Offshoring migration, risking rights: The Italy-Albania migration protocol in the EU's externalization playbook. *MED-MA*.
- <sup>20</sup> See *Hashtag.al*. (2025, September 24). BSH: Housing price index increased by nearly 42% in the first half of the year.
- <sup>21</sup> See European Commission. (n.d.). *Albania. Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood*
- <sup>22</sup> See Council of the European Union. (2026, May 26). *Enlargement: Albania meets interim benchmarks for fundamentals cluster*.