



Albania's Governance Dynamics: Insights from the Rule of Law Index (2012–2024)

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Abstract. Between 2012 and 2024, Albania's governance trajectory has been strongly influenced by the country's ambition to join the European Union (EU). Key legal and institutional reforms, particularly in the areas of judicial independence, anti-corruption, and transparency, have aimed to align Albania with the Copenhagen criteria and the broader EU rule of law. However, regional geopolitical pressures, economic instability, and persistent domestic challenges have complicated the implementation and sustainability of these reforms. This study analyses Albania's governance using the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index, which measures performance across six dimensions: Limited Government Powers, Absence of Corruption, Order and Security, Fundamental Rights, Open Government, and Regulatory Enforcement. While improvements were registered until 2015, particularly in terms of anti-corruption and transparency, these gains were followed by periods of stagnation and even decline due to internal systemic weaknesses and external shocks. The study thus underscores the interdependence of governance dimensions, demonstrating how the progress in transparency and anti-corruption has fostered public trust, while the setbacks in judicial independence and regulatory enforcement have exposed deeper structural deficiencies. Considering Albania's path within the broader European context, the study argues that a sustainable rule of law reform requires institutional resilience, judicial and administrative independence, and consistent public engagement. It also examines how EU conditionality and external pressure, including requirements from the European Commission and the Council of Europe, have shaped Albania's approach to democratic consolidation and the rule of law reform.

Keywords: Albania, governance, rule of law, judicial reform, anti-corruption, EU integration, democracy, institutional reform, transparency, public trust

1. Introduction

Since the establishment of democratic order in the early 1990s, Albania has made considerable efforts to embed the rule of law into its political, economic, and social structures. Guided by the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) of 2006, the country has aligned its institutions with the Copenhagen criteria, prioritizing judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, and fundamental rights. These reforms have been inextricably linked to Albania's European Union (EU) accession trajectory, with the Rule of Law Index offering a useful lens for evaluating its progress against European benchmarks. Albania's alignment to EU values is guided by legal benchmarks set out in the Treaty on European Union (TEU), particularly Articles 2 and 49, which frame the rule of law and democratic governance as accession criteria.

The country is widely recognized as a transitional democracy – one in which democratic institutions formally exist but continue to evolve under the shadow of an authoritarian past. However, EU conditionality has played a transformative role in shaping these institutions. Therefore, to assess the effectiveness of such transformations and track Albania's progress under EU influence, a structured measurement tool is needed.

For instance, the Rule of Law Index, developed by the World Justice Project (WJP),¹ provides a comprehensive framework for assessing governance performance across six key dimensions: Limited Government Powers, Absence of Corruption, Order and Security, Fundamental Rights, Open Government, and Regulatory Enforcement. For Albania, these categories are particularly relevant, given its efforts to align with EU standards while tackling persistent governance challenges. Over the past decade, Albania has embarked on ambitious reforms: judicial vetting processes, anti-corruption initiatives, and open government practices aimed at enhancing transparency. Nevertheless, as reflected in the Rule of Law Index, from 2012 to 2024, the country's governance trajectory reveals an uneven path, marked by moments of improvement but also stagnation and regression. These fluctuations reflect the fragility of reforms when confronted with political volatility and economic instability.

Although the Index allows for a structured evaluation of Albania's rule of law performance, this study also addresses the EU's specific interpretation of the rule of law and Albania's legal and institutional responses to it. EU conditionality, expressed through instruments such as the 2014 Rule of Law Framework, European Commission Progress Reports, and Venice Commission opinions,² has significantly shaped domestic reform agendas as well as policy design.³

1 World Justice Project, 2024.

2 Venice Commission, 2016.

3 Kochenov, 2015; Sedelmeier, 2014; Venice Commission, 2020.

These instruments have not only guided institutional restructuring but have also set legal benchmarks for judicial independence, accountability mechanisms, and anti-corruption measures – in alignment with EU norms.

The transformative influence of the EU, particularly through legal approximation based on the *acquis communautaire*, has been conceptualized as a form of ‘transformative engagement through law’, whereby legal norms are exported as tools of external governance.⁴ This study analyses the jurisprudence of the Albanian Constitutional Court and draws comparative insights from the case-law of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). In this context, it examines Albania’s constitutional and legal debates regarding sovereignty, judicial independence, and alignment with supranational norms. It also considers the roles of the Albanian Constitutional Court, relevant national legislation, and public discourse in shaping the country’s institutional transformation. For instance, Decision No. 29/2017 of the Albanian Constitutional Court⁵ affirmed the legitimacy of the justice reform in the light of EU integration obligations by reflecting the constitutional accommodation of supranational requirements. Furthermore, landmark decisions by the CJEU on judicial independence (e.g. *Associação Sindical dos Juízes Portugueses* and *Commission v Poland*) offer relevant comparative standards by which Albania’s alignment with EU rule of law benchmarks can be assessed. These legal sources are cited to frame Albania’s evolving normative and institutional adaptation to EU requirements.

More importantly, several of Albania’s governance improvements – particularly in the areas of judicial vetting and anti-corruption – have materialized primarily in response to sustained international pressures, notably from the EU and the United States. This external influence has generated domestic debates over the balance between international conditionality and national sovereignty.⁶ Although Albania’s Constitution does not obstruct EU integration – and jurisprudential developments have generally supported this trajectory –, the public discourse often reflects ambivalence towards the perceived erosion of institutional autonomy.

In sum, this study aims to offer students, policymakers, and researchers a clear and analytically rigorous overview of Albania’s evolving governance model. It argues that, while notable progress has been achieved, a sustainable rule of law reform will require deeper institutional resilience, the depoliticization of governance processes, and long-term public engagement with democratic institutions.

4 Magen, 2007.

5 Constitutional Court of Albania, Decision no. 29/2017 on the Vetting Law (acknowledging balance between constitutional principles and EU alignment).

6 Dervishi, 2020.

2. Governance Dynamics in Albania through the Rule of Law Index

This review of scholarly works explores governance dynamics in Albania through the framework of WJP's Rule of Law Index, focusing on six key dimensions. Each dimension offers a unique perspective on governance challenges and progress, collectively offering a comprehensive framework for understanding Albania's governance landscape within its transitional democratic context.

The Rule of Law Index emphasizes governance as an interconnected system, where weaknesses in one dimension influence others, creating systemic effects.

Institutional strength is critical for sustaining effective governance systems, particularly in transitional contexts such as that of Albania.⁷ This interdependence is apparent in Albania, as limited judicial independence affects the protection of Fundamental Rights and erodes public trust. Robust formal structures are essential for maintaining governance balance, yet informal practices often erode their effectiveness.⁸ However, this dynamic is particularly pronounced in Albania, where informal institutions frequently undermine the rule of law.⁹

Limited Government Powers underscore the importance of checks and balances for maintaining accountability. Institutional theory highlights the role of independent judiciaries and legislatures in constraining executive power. In the Albanian context, several judicial reforms – including the vetting of judges and prosecutors – have aimed to reinforce these principles. However, the analysis of informal institutions explains why these formal reforms often fail to achieve lasting impact in Albania, as persistent political interference continues to weaken judicial independence despite the formal restructuring.¹⁰

Corruption remains a systemic issue in Albania, eroding public trust, distorting resource allocation, and hindering institutional performance.¹¹ This governance failure is rooted in weak institutional frameworks and a lack of accountability.¹² Entrenched clientelism and patronage networks continue to hinder progress, even in the face of external pressures such as the EU accession.¹³ The role of conditionality in driving anti-corruption reforms has been particularly evident in Albania.¹⁴ While Albania has made progress in creating specialized anti-corruption bodies, the persistence of clientelist networks continues to challenge reform effectiveness.

7 North, 1990; Ostrom, 1990.

8 March and Olsen, 1989.

9 Rose-Ackerman, 1999.

10 Helmke and Levitsky, 2006.

11 Klitgaard, 1988.

12 Klitgaard, 1988.

13 Rose-Ackerman, 1999.

14 Börzel and Risse, 2009.

Order and Security is critical to governance, as it reflects the state's ability to maintain public safety and enforce the rule of law. State capacity is foundational for effective governance.¹⁵ Albania's challenges with organized crime and trafficking align with the concept of 'strong societies and weak states', where informal networks undermine formal governance structures.¹⁶

Although Albania has made strides in regional cooperation and law enforcement, gaps in enforcement capacity, particularly in the rural and border regions, remain persistent obstacles.

Fundamental Rights reflect the protection of civil liberties, a cornerstone of democratic governance.¹⁷ Albania has demonstrated progress in advancing civil liberties, particularly under international oversight and the EU integration framework. However, transitioning democracies often struggle with judicial inefficiencies and political interference, limiting the full realization of these rights.¹⁸ This challenge is evident in Albania, where media freedom and protection for vulnerable groups continue to vary in quality and consistency.

Open Government focuses on transparency, public participation, and access to information, aligning with the theories of participatory governance.¹⁹ Albania's involvement in the Open Government Partnership (OGP) reflects its commitment to these principles. However, the effectiveness of participatory governance depends on the strength of civic engagement and on social capital.²⁰ In Albania, the political polarization and restrictions on media freedom reduce the transformative potential of open government initiatives.

Regulatory Enforcement examines the impartiality and effectiveness of rule implementation. The importance of independent regulatory bodies in ensuring compliance has been widely recognized.²¹ In Albania, selective enforcement and political influence undermine regulatory effectiveness, highlighting the need for depoliticization and institutional strengthening. Fair and impartial rule enforcement is critical for building public trust, a point particularly relevant to Albania's ongoing reforms.²²

The interdependencies among these six governance dimensions are crucial for understanding Albania's institutional performance. For instance, improvements in Open Government can enhance trust and accountability, thereby strengthening Regulatory Enforcement and Fundamental Rights. Conversely, weaknesses in

15 Fukuyama, 2004.

16 Migdal, 1988.

17 Sen, 1999.

18 Donnelly, 2013.

19 Fung, 2006.

20 Putnam, 1993.

21 Baldwin, Cave, and Lodge, 2012.

22 Levi-Faur, 2011.

Limited Government Powers and corruption can destabilize the entire governance framework, creating negative feedback loops that hinder progress.

The literature on governance in Albania underscores the complexity of building resilient institutions in a transitional democracy. Albanian scholars²³ have shown that the legacies of authoritarianism, politicized institutions, and weak rule of law continue to undermine the consolidation of democratic governance. The six dimensions of the Rule of Law Index offer a comprehensive framework for analysing the country's governance challenges and opportunities. While Albania has made significant progress, particularly due to the EU accession requirements, systemic barriers such as entrenched corruption, political polarization, and judicial inefficiencies continue to hinder sustainable reforms. A systems-oriented approach that recognizes these interdependencies and prioritizes institutional resilience and integrity is thus essential for Albania to advance towards democratic consolidation and fully align itself with the European rule of law. This analysis also contributes to the broader understanding of governance dynamics in transitioning democracies, offering valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and international partners.

3. Navigating Legal Reforms and Governance Challenges in Albania Amidst the EU Integration Efforts

The period from 2014 to 2024 has presented both new challenges and opportunities for Albania's governance trajectory. The country's path towards EU membership has been the primary driver of legal and institutional reforms, particularly following the signing of the SAA with the EU in 2006. This agreement placed the rule of law at the heart of Albania's accession efforts. However, the process has become increasingly complex, especially after 2014, as persistent institutional weaknesses hindered reform sustainability.

Despite the sustained encouragement from the EU to strengthen judicial independence and tackle corruption, Albania has faced notable irregularities, including politicized judicial appointments, selective regulatory enforcement, legislative ambiguities, and high-profile corruption cases. These recurring challenges have undermined internal oversight and contributed to a perception of executive dominance, particularly during crises.

As previously mentioned, the Rule of Law Index offers a structured framework to assess how these institutional shortcomings have affected governance over time. By tracking six key dimensions, the Index highlights both progress and regression between 2012 and 2024.

23 Çabiri, 2019, pp. 45–47; Gjevori, 2018, pp. 88–91.

While some improvement was recorded around 2015, the data ultimately reveal patterns of stagnation or decline in several areas. These fluctuations reflect the broader challenges Albania has been facing as a transitional democracy. The following sections explore in detail how each dimension evolved and the extent to which these trends align with Albania's EU integration commitments.

To assist with interpretation, *Figure 1* and the discussion below offer insights into the institutional, political, and socio-economic factors underlying these fluctuations.



Figure 1. World Justice Project Rule of Law Index: Overall score

The index starts at 0.49 for 2012–2013, indicating a moderate baseline. By 2015, the score peaks at 0.52, reflecting a period of significant governance improvement. This peak is attributed to the strengthened institutional reforms, enhanced transparency, and targeted efforts to combat corruption and promote accountability. However, the score declines slightly to 0.51 in 2016, signalling challenges such as governance disruptions and a limited capacity to sustain earlier improvements. This downward trend continues modestly until 2019 (0.51) and accelerates during the pandemic years, the score dropping to 0.5 in 2020 and further to 0.49 in 2021. Challenges such as weakened accountability, reduced public trust, and disruptions in institutional operations became more pronounced during this period.

Post-pandemic recovery appears limited, with the score stabilizing but not rebounding. By 2024, the score reaches 0.48, reflecting a continued erosion of governance quality. Its stabilization at a lower level suggests persistent systemic

challenges, such as political polarization, economic instability, or institutional weaknesses, which hinder significant recovery.

This long-term trend of modest decline reflects the fragility of the governance systems in Albania in the face of external shocks, political pressures, and resource constraints. The initial progress until 2015 has demonstrated that targeted reforms can yield measurable improvements in governance. However, the subsequent decline underscores the importance of institutionalizing these reforms to ensure their resilience against external challenges.

This trend mirrors the global governance patterns, in which transitioning democracies in particular struggle to sustain improvements in the rule of law due to entrenched corruption, political interference, and socio-economic disparities. By contrast, high-performing nations often exhibit stability and incremental improvement in their scores, supported by robust legal frameworks, independent institutions, and strong public trust.

The overall changes in the Index from 2012 to 2024 correlate strongly with Albania's justice reform (e.g. the 2016 vetting law), political instability (e.g. the opposition boycotts in 2019), pandemic-related governance disruptions (2020–2021), and renewed anti-corruption efforts post-2017 (e.g. the creation of the Special Anti-Corruption Structure [SPAK]).²⁴

4. Key Principles of Governance

Following the comprehensive analysis of the Rule of Law Index for Albania, as depicted in *Figure 1*, the next step is to disaggregate and examine the underlying factors that have contributed to its evolution. By breaking down the broader framework into core components, this section will explore the specific trends, challenges, and successes that have shaped Albania's governance landscape from 2012 to 2024. Each factor will be critically analysed to provide a nuanced understanding of how these dimensions have interacted and influenced the broader adherence to the rule of law in Albania. This approach will shed light on Albania's unique governance trajectory and offer insights into the reforms and systemic changes needed to further strengthen its rule of law framework.

4.1. Analysis of Factor 1: Limited Government Powers

The EU accession process emphasizes the separation of powers and judicial independence as critical governance benchmarks. Albania's judicial reform, particularly the 2016 vetting process for judges and prosecutors, was conducted

²⁴ See the European Commission Progress Reports (2016–2023), GRECO evaluation reports, and the 2023 Enlargement Package.

in response to EU conditionality. While these reforms initially bolstered governance scores, the subsequent decline of these scores reflects challenges in institutionalizing checks and balances amidst political interference and executive dominance. Although the reforms were upheld by Albania's Constitutional Court (Decision No. 29/2017), which confirmed their compatibility with the Constitution and Albania's EU integration obligations, the implementation revealed persistent tensions between formal compliance and substantive institutional independence.²⁵ As Vasili notes, the constitutional and legal basis of the vetting process presented both strengths and risks in terms of institutional legitimacy.²⁶ These tensions were explicitly addressed by the Albanian Constitutional Court in Decision No. 29/2017, which reaffirmed the legitimacy of the EU-aligned reforms.²⁷

Figure 2 reveals changes in the extent to which government powers have been limited by law and other institutional checks from 2012 to 2024.

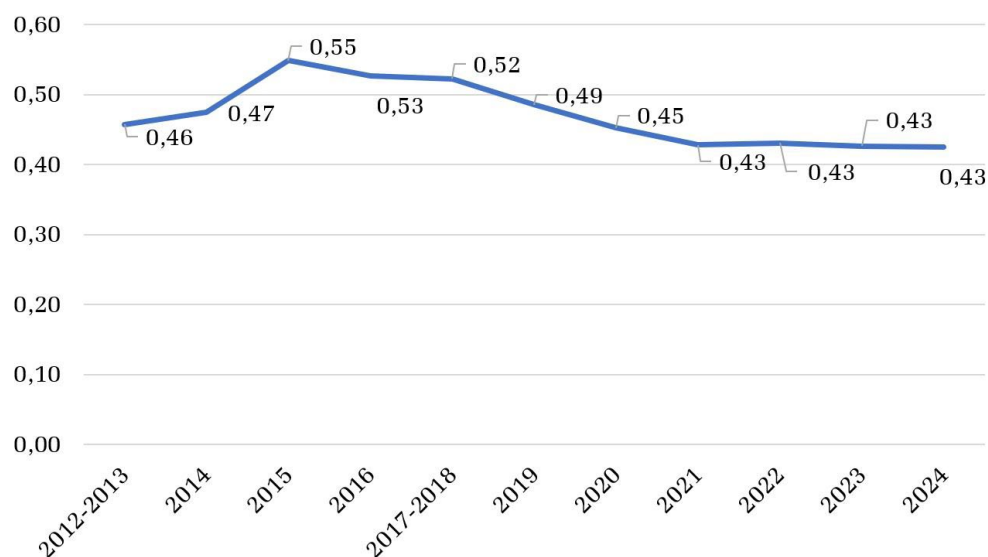


Figure 2. Factor 1: Limited Government Powers

The score starts at 0.46 during 2012–2013 and improves steadily, peaking at 0.55 in 2015. This initial upward trajectory is related to successful governance reforms and improvements, driven by stronger institutional frameworks. However, after 2015, the score exhibits a consistent decline. By 2024, it drops

25 Decision No. 29/2017 of the Constitutional Court of Albania on the compatibility of judicial vetting with constitutional provisions and EU accession obligations

26 Vasili, 2020, pp. 45–67; Albania Constitutional Court. Decision No. 29/2017, dated 16 June 2017 (Decision concerning the compatibility of the justice reform package with the Albanian Constitution in the context of EU integration).

27 Krasniqi, 2012, pp. 23–40.

to 0.42. This decline reflects growing concerns about executive dominance, delays in judicial appointments, and reduced parliamentary oversight following multiple opposition boycotts.²⁸ This trend illustrates deepening difficulties in maintaining the integrity and independence of the institutions designed to check governmental authority. During 2017–2018 and in 2019, the score remained relatively stable, around 0.52, before entering a sharper decline beginning in 2020. This decline indicates systemic erosion in the accountability, judicial independence, or balance of power mechanisms between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Notably, the Venice Commission has underlined in its opinions on Albania's constitutional amendments the importance of ensuring the genuine independence of judicial councils and reducing political influence in appointments – concerns that remain salient despite formal institutional restructuring. The score decline over the years reflects the need for renewed efforts to reinforce institutional independence and ensure robust accountability. Weaker governance mechanisms have led to a concentration of executive power, reduced trust in government, and increased susceptibility to corruption. Identifying and addressing the structural causes of this decline will be critical for reversing the existing trend and fostering long-term governance improvements.

The decline in Limited Government Powers post-2015 can be attributed to a combination of institutional factors that weakened the mechanisms designed to verify governmental authority. Politically, there was a shift towards consolidated power. This erosion of democratic norms was accompanied by increased political polarization and restrictive measures targeting the media and to a lesser degree the civil society, which limited the capacity of these groups to hold governments accountable.

Economically, uncertainties placed additional pressure, often leading to the centralization of decision-making under emergency measures. This centralization bypassed institutional processes and reduced the independence of oversight mechanisms. Resource constraints also played a role here.

Institutionally, many governance systems experienced a decline in judicial independence. The government often exerted control over the judiciary through appointments or financial pressures, thus reducing its ability to act as a check on executive power.²⁹ Legislatures also became less effective in providing oversight due to the marginalization of opposition voices.³⁰ According to the European Commission and OSCE/ODIHR assessments, the judicial appointment process and budgetary dependence have, at times, raised concerns about executive influence over the judiciary in Albania. Additionally, parliamentary oversight has been weakened due to repeated opposition boycotts, as highlighted in the

28 European Commission, 2022; European Parliament, 2020.

29 European Commission, 2022; Venice Commission, 2016.

30 Freedom House, 2019; Balkan Insight, 2020.

2019 and 2022 Commission Reports.³¹ These interferences challenged the principle of judicial independence established under EU law, most notably in the *Associação Sindical dos Juízes Portugueses* (C-64/16) and *Commission v Poland* (C-619/18) cases,³² where the CJEU emphasized both structural and functional independence as essential to the EU rule of law.³³ These rulings provide a useful comparative benchmark for Albania's institutional development.

Many governance systems, including that in Albania, have experienced decline or stagnation in judicial independence despite formal reforms.³⁴ As noted in several European Commission Progress reports and Venice Commission opinions, these setbacks remain persistent regional challenges in the Western Balkans. In Albania's case, the European Commission noted that, while the justice reform and vetting process represented a major step forward, they have also led to transitional gaps and governance uncertainties.³⁵ The implementation of the justice reform continued to bring tangible results. However, further efforts are needed to ensure the full functionality of newly established institutions and reduce the case backlog. In several instances, the executive influence has persisted through judicial appointments, delays in filling vacancies, and pressure on judicial budgets.³⁶

For example, the 2022 European Commission Progress Report on Albania pointed to delays in appointments to the High Court and Constitutional Court, a lack of transparency in judicial budgeting, and concerns over institutional independence.³⁷ Furthermore, the legislatures in transitional democracies can struggle to maintain oversight authority when opposition voices are systematically excluded from parliamentary procedures. In Albania, political polarization has resulted in multiple parliamentary boycotts by the opposition, thus reducing the parliamentary scrutiny of executive power.³⁸

Albania follows a mixed model of court administration, combining elements of ministerial oversight with independent judicial governance bodies. The 2016 Justice Reform, enacted through constitutional amendments and the implementing laws, established the High Judicial Council and the High Prosecutorial Council, redistributing administrative and oversight powers to reduce political influence.³⁹ While the Ministry of Justice retains some administrative roles,

31 European Commission Progress Reports 2019, 2022; OSCE/ODIHR, 2021.

32 CJEU, Case C-619/18, *Commission v Poland* [2020].

33 CJEU, Case C-64/16, *Associação Sindical dos Juízes Portugueses v Tribunal de Contas* [2018].

34 Venice Commission, 2010, paras. 7–12.

35 European Commission, 2022, p. 19.

36 Council of Europe, Council of Europe, Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), 2018, paras. 73–77.

37 European Commission, 2022, pp. 17–18.

38 European Parliament, 2020, para. 8.

39 Law No. 115/2016 on the Governance of the Justice System; Constitutional amendments adopted in July 2016, notably articles 147–149 of the Albanian Constitution.

key responsibilities (e.g. career management, discipline, and budget proposals) lie with the High Judicial Council (HJC) and the High Council of Prosecutors (HCP). This model aims to reduce direct political interference, but practical implementation challenges (e.g. delays in appointments or budget dependence) have limited its effectiveness.⁴⁰ However, as the European Commission and CJEU jurisprudence clarify, the existence of formal bodies is insufficient unless their operation is free from political and financial interference.

Externally, migration issues, such as those related to the Balkan route, prompted the Albanian government to adopt centralized emergency-style governance that bypassed institutional checks. This trend aligned with populist leadership models, which prioritized executive dominance over institutional independence and accountability.

These factors collectively created an environment where the mechanisms that limit government powers were eroded, often in favour of centralized control and reduced oversight. Various stakeholders, including the European Commission and legal scholars, have pointed out the potential benefits of clearer legal safeguards against political interference in judicial appointments. For instance, debates have emerged around the need for greater autonomy of oversight councils such as the High Judicial Council and High Prosecutorial Council. These discussions often reference CJEU jurisprudence and Venice Commission opinions, which underline that formal institutional frameworks must be accompanied by guarantees of operational independence, both structurally and functionally.

The trajectory of Factor 1 illustrates that formal compliance with EU accession criteria (e.g. the establishment of independent judicial councils and the implementation of a comprehensive vetting process) does not automatically translate into substantive institutional autonomy. As the European Commission and the Venice Commission have repeatedly noted, effective checks and balances require more than structural reforms; specifically, they depend on consistent application, political will, and functional safeguards against interference.⁴¹ A gap between constitutional design and implementation is not unique to Albania. Comparative jurisprudence, including CJEU rulings on judicial independence,⁴² highlights the importance of both structural and operational guarantees in consolidating democratic governance. Albania's experience confirms that, while external conditionality can catalyse reform, its sustainability hinges on domestic commitment to constitutional norms and transparent institutional practices. These findings reinforce the importance of complementing legal reforms with measures that promote accountability, inclusive political processes, and civil oversight – elements that are essential for anchoring the rule of law within both national and European frameworks.

40 European Commission, 2022, pp. 17–19; Venice Commission, 2016, paras. 6–12.

41 Venice Commission, 2016; European Commission, 2022.

42 Court of Justice of the European Union, 2018; Court of Justice of the European Union, 2020.

4.2 Analysis of Factor 2: Absence of Corruption

The fight against corruption has been a cornerstone of Albania’s EU integration efforts. European Commission progress reports have consistently highlighted corruption as a systemic issue undermining institutional trust. Measures such as the establishment of anti-corruption bodies and increased transparency in procurement have been aligned with EU expectations, yet the modest pace of progress underscores the entrenched nature of clientelism and weak enforcement mechanisms.

Figure 3 captures changes in efforts to combat corruption in governance between 2012 and 2024. While the long-term trend demonstrates incremental progress, the relatively modest rate of improvement reveals persistent structural challenges.

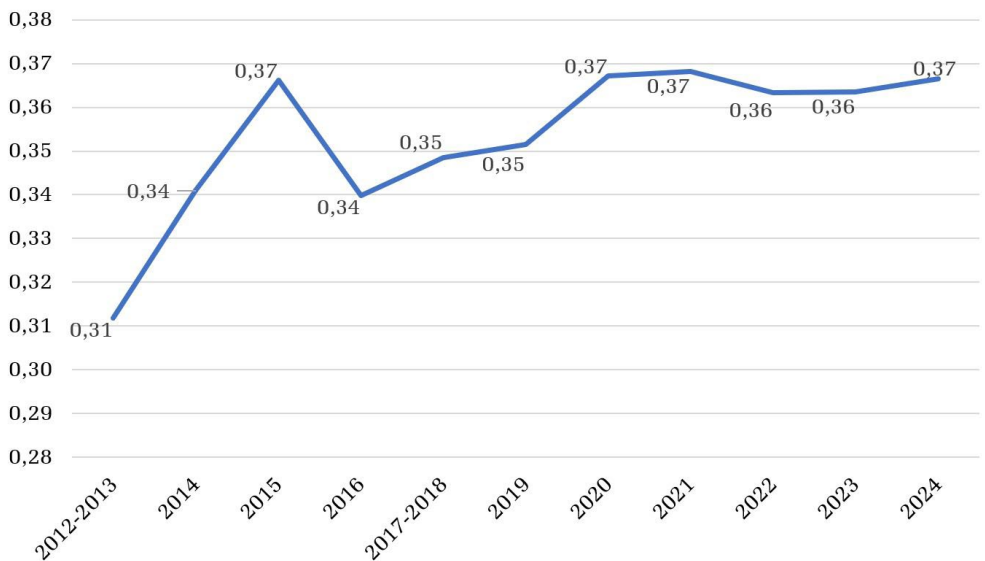


Figure 3. Factor 2: Absence of Corruption

The score begins at 0.31 during 2012–2013 and shows a steady albeit slow improvement over the years, reaching 0.37 in 2024. From 2012–2013 to 2015, there is a gradual increase in the score, peaking at 0.37 in 2015. This phase corresponds to heightened efforts to implement anti-corruption reforms, stricter enforcement of laws, and greater transparency in public governance. This early improvement reflects a growing focus on anti-corruption measures, including the implementation of justice reform, stronger legal enforcement, and enhanced transparency through online governmental platforms.

However, a slight decline is observed in 2016, with the score dropping to 0.34, signalling temporary setbacks. From 2017–2018 onward, the score recovers incrementally, reflecting renewed and sustained efforts driven by international pressure, the adoption of new technologies for transparency, or increased involvement of civil society in holding governments accountable.

This improvement coincides with the operationalization of the SPAK and the High Inspectorate for Asset Declaration and Audit (HIDAACI), as part of the broader EU-guided justice reform. These institutions undertook high-profile prosecutions and conducted systematic asset verifications during this period.⁴³

By 2020, the score reaches 0.37, surpassing its earlier peak in 2015. In 2021, the score remains at 0.37, followed by slight declines in subsequent years, reflecting the enduring challenges of addressing deeply rooted corruption networks, resource limitations, or fluctuating political commitment to reform. By 2024, the score returns to 0.37, but without significant breakthroughs.

The long-term trend reflects ongoing efforts to address corruption, which include international pressure, civil society engagement, or advancements in technology to enhance transparency and accountability. Despite these positive trends, the slow pace of the improvement highlights the systemic challenges in eradicating corruption. Structural factors such as entrenched networks of corruption, weak enforcement mechanisms, or limited resources have hindered faster progress. Additionally, periodic dips, such as the one in 2016, underscore the vulnerability of anti-corruption efforts to external disruptions, including economic crises and political shifts.

Overall, the trend for Factor 2 indicates that anti-corruption measures have achieved moderate effectiveness. However, the slow pace of progress and occasional regressions highlight the need for more robust and systemic interventions to ensure long-term and sustainable improvements. Addressing structural barriers, enhancing institutional capacity, and maintaining political will are also essential for accelerating these efforts.

While the upward trend in Albania's corruption scores reflects incremental institutional improvements, it also highlights the resilience of systemic challenges. Scholarly analyses of transitional democracies frequently emphasize that corruption persists not solely due to weak legal frameworks but also because of informal political networks and institutions that resist accountability.⁴⁴ In the Albanian context, the gradual improvement aligns with EU-driven conditionality mechanisms, yet enforcement gaps, limited prosecutorial independence, and politicization of anti-corruption bodies continue to undermine effectiveness.⁴⁵ Comparative studies suggest that anti-corruption progress in EU candidate

43 Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), 2018; European Commission, 2020a.

44 Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015; Grzymała-Busse, 2007.

45 The European Commission, 2022; Transparency International, 2021.

countries often stalls when reforms are not complemented by structural changes in political culture and judicial autonomy.⁴⁶ Albania's trajectory exemplifies this pattern, as its legal compliance has advanced but transformative change remains partial. Therefore, the data on Factor 2 should be interpreted not just in institutional terms but also within the broader context of state capture, public trust in institutions, and the functional independence of oversight bodies.

4.3. Analysis of Factor 3: Order and Security

Figure 4 assesses the ability of a state to maintain peace, ensure the safety of its citizens, and uphold public order. From 2012 to 2024, the trend reveals significant fluctuations, reflecting varying levels of success in maintaining security and public order throughout the period.

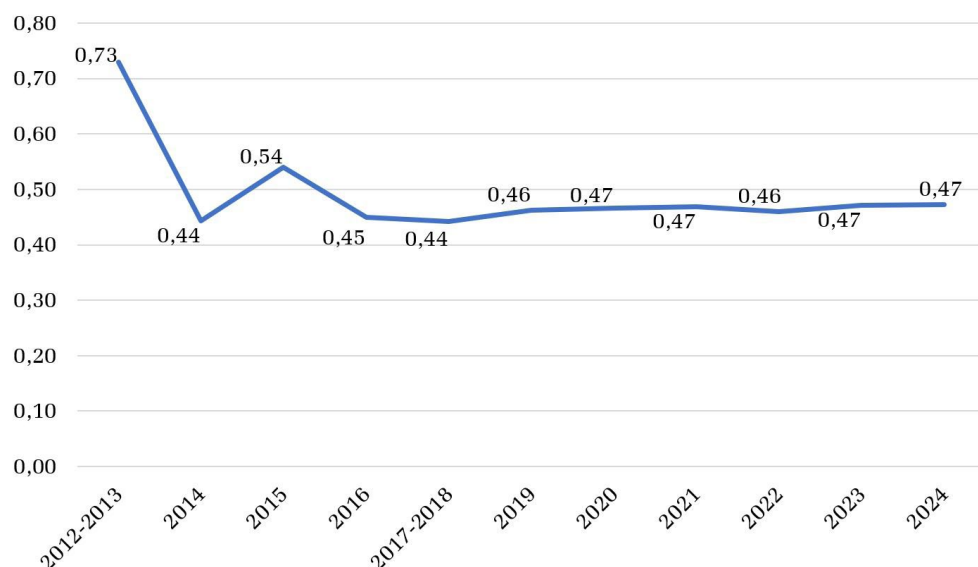


Figure 4. Order and Security

During 2012–2013, the score stands at its peak, 0.73, reflecting a period of strong performance in maintaining order and security. However, it drops sharply by 2014 to 0.44, indicating a substantial deterioration. This period coincides with increased organized crime activity and law enforcement inefficiencies, particularly in border areas. The 2013 parliamentary elections also mark a shift in political control, contributing to institutional instability.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Sedelmeier, 2014; Dimitrova, 2020.

⁴⁷ European Commission, 2014; US Department of State, 2014.

From 2015 to 2019, the scores exhibit moderate recovery, increasing from 0.54 in 2015 to 0.46 in 2019. This period reflects the efforts to restore security and address factors contributing to instability, although the progress is uneven and incomplete. The decline from 2015 to 2016, with the score dropping to 0.45, further highlights the challenges in achieving consistent improvements. This drop occurred amid the political deadlock and reduced transparency in public procurement procedures, as reported in the national audit findings.⁴⁸

After 2019, the scores demonstrate a slow but steady upward trend, reaching 0.47 by 2024. While this recovery reflects the efforts to strengthen law enforcement capacity, counter security threats, and improve governance frameworks, the scores remain well below the initial levels of 2012–2013. This indicates persistent challenges, such as fragile institutions, when it comes to maintaining public order.

The long-term trend for Factor 3 highlights difficulties in sustaining order and security amidst external shocks and internal governance weaknesses. Despite some recovery, the significant decline in the early period underscores the importance of building resilient institutions capable of responding to crises and ensuring public safety over the long term. Strengthening local governance, improving law enforcement, and addressing the root causes of instability will be critical for achieving sustained improvements in this dimension.

Order and Security remains often one of the more polarizing governance dimensions, as it is deeply tied to a country's socio-political context, economic stability, and historical legacy. The initial peak score of 0.73 during 2012–2013 shows that Albania was performing above the global average. However, the subsequent decline to 0.44 in 2014 highlights vulnerabilities common in many regions facing weak institutional structures.

Governance failures have also played a key role. Weak or corrupt institutions, reduced law enforcement efficiency, or political crises that disrupted government functioning led to public safety deterioration. Gaps in funding, training, and coordination between law enforcement agencies undermined public order enforcement, especially in rural and border regions.⁴⁹ This challenge was underlined in European Commission's 2023 Enlargement Package, which noted that 'operational and logistical capacities of police units remain uneven, and the enforcement of public order is affected by insufficient resources and fragmented planning'.

Natural disasters, such as the 2019 earthquake, have strained public safety systems, diverting critical resources away from security operations. These issues often intersect with governance weaknesses and socio-economic inequalities, creating a feedback loop that makes recovery more difficult.

48 Supreme State Audit Reports, 2016; Open Government Partnership Independent Reporting Mechanism.

49 European Commission, 2023, p. 42; Freedom House, 2023.

This decrease illustrates the fragility of public order systems when faced with compounded challenges. It also underscores the need for robust and resilient institutions that can respond effectively to crises while maintaining public trust and safety. Rebuilding from such a decline typically requires addressing the root causes of instability, including governance reforms, economic stabilization, and investments in law enforcement and public safety infrastructure.

The fluctuations in Albania's order and security indicators mirror the broader patterns observed in post-authoritarian and transitional states, where public safety is deeply interlinked with institutional capacity, political volatility, and socio-economic vulnerability.⁵⁰ In Albania, progress has often been reactive – spurred by crises – rather than proactive and systemic. Scholarly analyses underline that the security institutions in fragile democracies tend to be underfunded, fragmented, and vulnerable to politicization, limiting their effectiveness in crisis response and everyday enforcement.⁵¹

The European Commission's 2023 report on Albania also notes persistent operational deficits in the police force, weak inter-agency coordination, and limited coverage in border regions – factors that compromise the state's ability to ensure sustainable security. Moreover, these findings suggest that security sector reform alone is insufficient unless complemented by broader governance reforms that enhance transparency, reduce political interference, and foster inter-institutional trust.

Comparative cases from the Western Balkans demonstrate that the investments in community policing, cross-border intelligence sharing, and post-crisis institutional rebuilding are necessary for durable improvements.⁵² Albania's trajectory thus reflects the *structural and political constraints that hinder sustainable gains in public order and highlights the centrality of institutional resilience in security governance*.

4.4. Analysis of Factor 4: Fundamental Rights

Figure 5 assesses the extent to which individuals' rights are protected, focusing on freedoms such as speech, assembly, and association, as well as procedural rights. The scores from 2012 to 2024 reflect significant fluctuations, with an overall declining trend, followed by partial recovery.

For 2012–2013, the score on Fundamental Rights stands at 0.63, indicating a relatively strong protection of individual rights. However, by 2014, the score falls sharply to 0.43, indicating a significant erosion of rights within a short period, and continues to decline to 0.38 in 2016, coinciding with increasing political

50 Brinkerhoff, 2005; Sedelmeier, 2014.

51 Ottaway, 2003; Levitsky and Way, 2010.

52 Caparini and Marović, 2022.

instability and constraints on civil liberties. From 2017 onward, the score begins to recover, reaching 0.47 in 2019 and 0.55 in 2021, which reflects institutional reforms and growing international pressure.

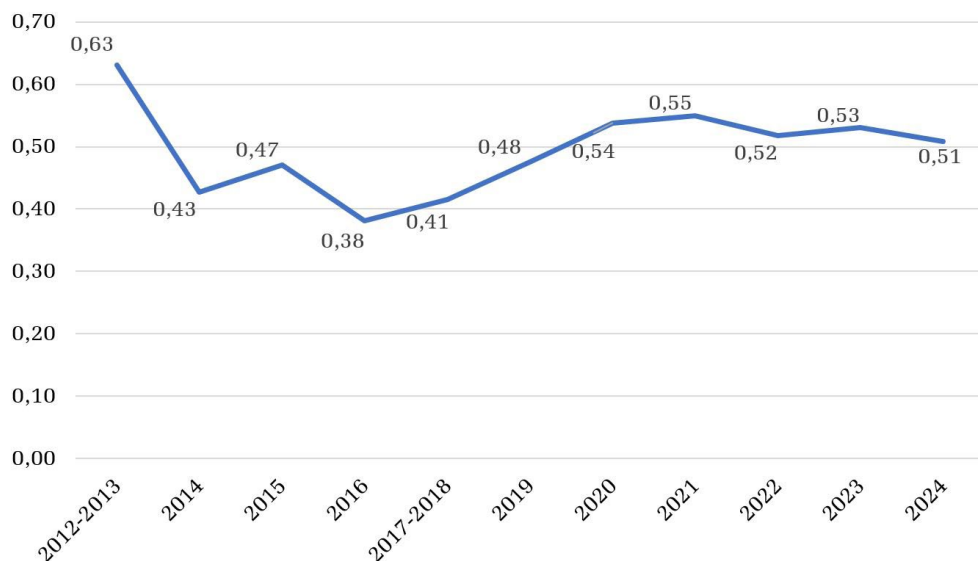


Figure 5. Fundamental Rights

The European Commission, in its annual Progress Reports, consistently highlighted the deficiencies in fundamental rights protections and called for alignment with the EU *acquis* and Council of Europe standards, particularly in the areas of anti-discrimination, freedom of expression, and access to justice. Notably, several recommendations stressed the need to comply with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), particularly in strengthening judicial remedies and protecting journalists.

Nevertheless, the partial recovery of the score did not fully restore rights to their earlier levels, with the score declining again to 0.50 by 2024. This trend suggests that structural shortcomings (e.g. weak enforcement mechanisms and political interference) persist. The long-term trend shows that, while significant progress has been made since the lowest point in 2016, the score remains below its initial level during 2012–2013. This indicates that the systemic issues affecting the protection of rights have not been fully resolved.

The factors contributing to this phenomenon include lack of accountability for violations, political interference in judicial decisions, and limited media freedom. For instance, press freedom has been repeatedly undermined by the political pressure on public broadcasters, verbal attacks on journalists by political

leaders, and misuse of defamation laws to intimidate critical voices – a pattern condemned by the ECtHR in comparable regional cases such as *Lingens v Austria* and *Cumpănă and Mazăre v Romania*. Regarding judicial protection, unequal access to legal remedies, delays in adjudicating fundamental rights cases, and weak enforcement of judicial decisions – especially in discrimination or domestic violence cases – have been identified by both the Venice Commission and the European Commission as key deficits.

The recovery observed from 2017–2018 onwards, reflected in a score of 0.55 by 2021, mirrors the judicial reform efforts and indicates meaningful progress. However, the subsequent decline to 0.51 in 2024 indicates lingering challenges such as systemic issues in governance and weak institutional safeguards. Globally, higher-performing nations typically maintain scores above 0.7 that reflect robust legal frameworks and strong judicial independence, while lower-performing countries fall below 0.4. Albania's score places it in a transitional category, as some progress has been made, but protections remain unstable and below EU expectations.

While Albania's constitutional framework (articles 17–18, 22–23, and 42) enshrines fundamental rights and the Constitutional Court has issued landmark rulings on freedom of assembly and non-discrimination, enforcement remains inconsistent. Many rulings, particularly in politically sensitive cases, have faced delays or selective implementation – weakening the credibility of judicial protection.

In summary, the scores for Factor 4 compare to those of nations with persistently low Fundamental Rights scores and lag behind global leaders in this area. The partial recovery demonstrates resilience and progress, but the inability to return to the initial levels underscores the need for structural reforms, stronger enforcement of constitutional and ECHR standards, and consistent vigilance to safeguard individual freedoms.⁵³

The fluctuations in Albania's Fundamental Rights scores reflect more than temporary shifts. Instead, they highlight the persistent fragility of rights protections in transitional democracies. Scholars such as Sadurski⁵⁴ argue that the mere adoption of formal rights frameworks, especially in EU-aspiring countries, does not ensure their enforcement in practice.⁵⁵ This gap between law and implementation is visible throughout Albania's partial recovery after 2016, where institutional reforms were undertaken, but structural enforcement mechanisms remained weak. The decline of the score to 0.50 in 2024 suggests that, while reforms responded to external incentives (notably EU accession

53 European Commission, 2022, pp. 24–27; Reporters Without Borders, 2022; European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL), 2021.

54 Sadurski, 2019.

55 Sadurski, 2005.

conditions), their sustainability is vulnerable to domestic political dynamics and institutional capture.⁵⁶

This dynamic aligns with the broader scholarship that cautions against equating formal alignment with the *acquis communautaire* for substantive compliance.⁵⁷ The observed plateau after 2021 may reflect the limits of externally driven reform in the absence of deep-rooted accountability structures and a politically insulated judiciary.

4.5. Analysis of Factor 5: Open Government

Figure 6 evaluates the extent to which government institutions operate transparently, engage with the public, and provide access to information. It reflects the challenges of maintaining transparency and public engagement amidst fluctuating governance conditions.

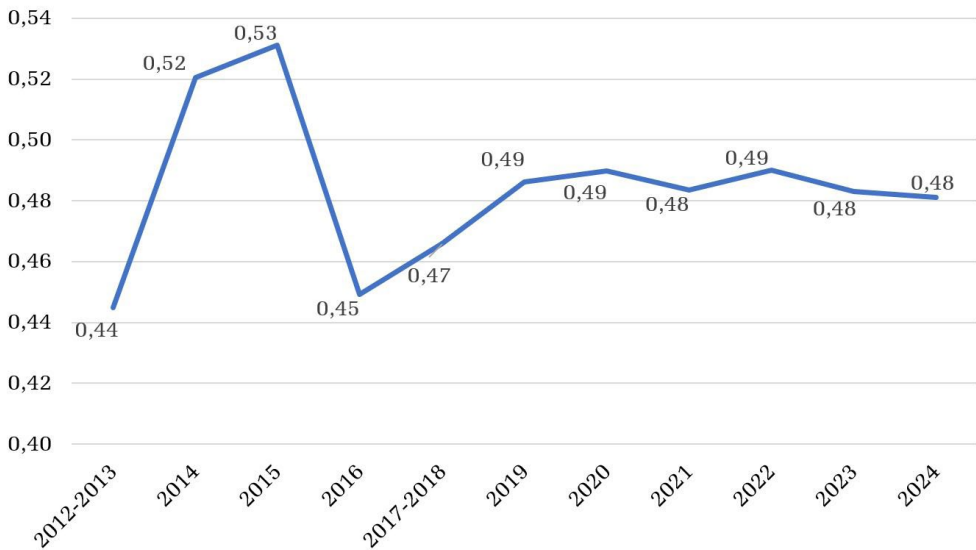


Figure 6. *Open Government*

The scores from 2012 to 2024 reveal periods of improvement, decline, and relative stability, reflecting evolving efforts to promote openness and accountability. During 2012–2013, the score of 0.44 indicates a moderate baseline for transparency. This improves to 0.53 in 2015, demonstrating significant progress driven by reforms enhancing access to information, participatory decision-making, and transparency.

⁵⁶ Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015.

⁵⁷ Börzel, 2017, pp. 278–296.

By 2016, the score drops to 0.45, effectively erasing earlier gains. This decline can be attributed to challenges in implementing and sustaining reforms amid broader governance disruptions, including political instability and diminished focus on transparency initiatives.

Between 2017 and 2020, the score stabilizes and begins to recover, reaching 0.49. This recovery reflects the renewed efforts to strengthen open government principles, supported by international commitments and technological advancements, most notably the launch of the *e-Albania* platform, which improved the public access to administrative services.⁵⁸ However, experts caution that centralizing services on a single platform without parallel data protection safeguards and independent oversight bodies risks creating new vulnerabilities in terms of transparency and citizen trust.⁵⁹

By 2024, the score slightly declines to 0.48, suggesting ongoing challenges in sustaining openness. These include limited institutional capacity, resistance from entrenched interests, and external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which diverted political and administrative attention away from the transparency reforms.

From a comparative perspective, Albania's 2015 peak score of 0.53 remains below those of high-performing countries, which typically exceed 0.7 and are characterized by robust legal guarantees for transparency, empowered oversight institutions (e.g. independent information commissioners), and an embedded culture of civic engagement. Albania's trajectory mirrors that of other states where open government reforms have been adopted but not institutionalized, leaving them vulnerable to reversals during periods of political or economic strain.

The fluctuations in Factor 5 highlight the interplay between governance practices and external pressures. The initial improvement from 0.44 in 2012 to 0.53 in 2015 coincides with the global trends favouring open government initiatives such as the OGP. The subsequent 2016 decline reflects broader regional patterns of reform stagnation during political crises. The literature on transparency reforms in the Western Balkans stresses that initiatives lacking sustained citizen engagement, legislative entrenchment, and institutional independence are at risk of remaining largely symbolic.⁶⁰

Regional parallels show that open data and e-governance initiatives often face pushback when political leadership changes or when increased transparency exposes inefficiencies or misconduct. In Albania's case, the gradual recovery post-2017 reflects a recommitment to transparency supported by EU accession incentives, donor funding, and technological adoption; however, the inability to surpass the 2015 peak underscores the persistence of institutional weaknesses and inconsistent political will.

58 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2020.

59 European Commission, 2023.

60 Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015.

The slight decline from 2021 to 2024 further emphasizes the need for the long-term institutionalization of transparency mechanisms, including guaranteed independence of the Commissioner for the Right to Information, enhanced parliamentary oversight, and structured civil society participation. In the EU accession context, Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 10 (Information Society and Media) set explicit transparency and public participation benchmarks. Albania's alignment with these requirements – particularly through *e-Albania* and legislative amendments to the Right to Information Law – demonstrates partial progress. However, structural barriers such as political polarization, administrative capacity deficits, and uneven implementation hinder the full compliance with EU *acquis* standards.⁶¹

Studies on e-governance in South-East Europe consistently emphasize that digital platforms must be complemented by administrative capacity-building, independent monitoring, and civic empowerment to achieve lasting openness. The Albanian case illustrates that, while progress in open governance is achievable, sustainability requires embedding principles into robust institutional frameworks insulated from political interference.⁶²

4.6. Analysis of Factor 6: Regulatory Enforcement

Regulatory enforcement is a critical governance dimension, as it directly affects the rule of law, economic competitiveness, and public trust in state institutions. It measures the fairness, effectiveness, and impartiality with which regulations are implemented and enforced, and it is a key indicator of whether legal norms are applied consistently across political and economic actors.

During 2012–2013, the score is 0.43, indicating moderate effectiveness. A slight improvement to 0.45 in 2014 suggests progress in ensuring that regulations are applied fairly and consistently. However, this improvement is short-lived, as the score declines to 0.41 in 2015. This drop reflects selective enforcement practices, gaps in administrative oversight, and corruption that undermined regulatory integrity.

A rebound occurs in 2016, with the score returning to 0.45 – the highest value in the dataset –, coinciding with reforms aimed at strengthening regulatory institutions and reducing arbitrariness in enforcement. From 2017 onwards, however, scores exhibited modest declines, stabilizing around 0.43 by 2024. This stabilization indicates a plateau, suggesting that initial gains were not fully institutionalized.

61 European Commission, 2020b.

62 United Nations Development Programme, 2022.

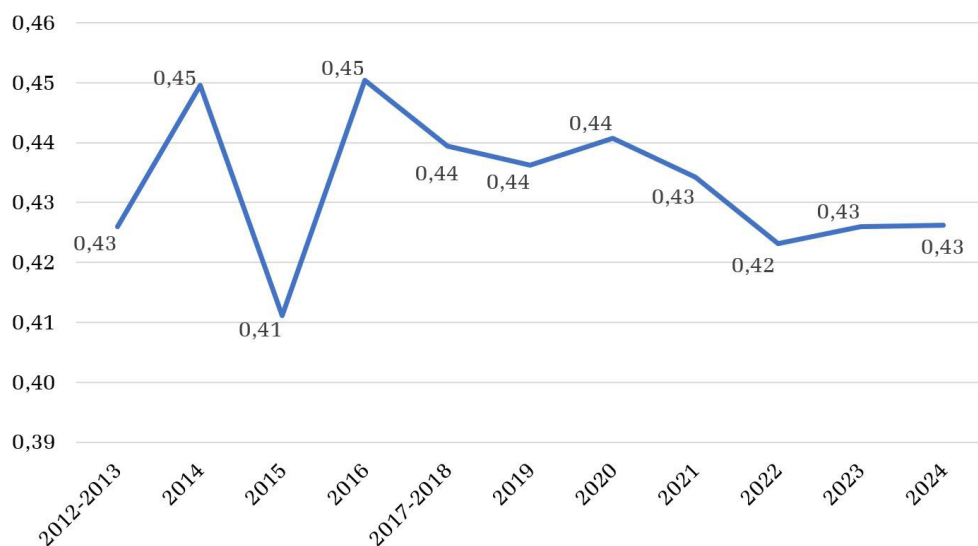


Figure 7. *Regulatory Enforcement*

The above trend mirrors the findings in comparative governance research, which show that regulatory reforms in transitional democracies often falter when driven primarily by external pressure rather than sustained domestic commitment.⁶³ In Albania's case, entrenched bureaucratic inefficiencies, institutional politicization, and limited financial and human resources have hindered sustained progress.⁶⁴

Globally, countries with well-established rule-of-law frameworks often score above 0.7 in this factor. Albania's position in the mid-range places it alongside other states with developing regulatory systems that struggle with enforcement consistency, impartiality, and capacity. Inconsistent or weak enforcement undermines investor confidence, economic growth, and citizens' perception of fairness, exacerbating inequality and discouraging compliance.

Scholars emphasize that sustained improvements in regulatory enforcement require both horizontal accountability (i.e. independent oversight bodies, functioning judicial review) and vertical accountability (i.e. citizen feedback, accessible complaint mechanisms).⁶⁵ In Albania, both remain underdeveloped. Reliance on EU accession conditionality without broad domestic buy-in has produced formal compliance but substantive enforcement gaps, particularly in politically sensitive sectors.⁶⁶

⁶³ Lodge and Gill, 2012, pp. 69–86.

⁶⁴ Transparency International, 2021.

⁶⁵ Hillebrandt, Meuwese, and Vos, 2014, pp. 473–504.

⁶⁶ Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004, pp. 661–679.

Compared to other governance factors, Regulatory Enforcement is more volatile in transitional economies. While factors such as Order and Security or Absence of Corruption may display slow, steady trends, Regulatory Enforcement is more sensitive to changes in political will, economic downturns, and leadership turnover. This sensitivity reflects the need for continuous institutional capacity building and depoliticization.

Notably, Albania's regulatory enforcement bodies (e.g. State Inspectorate and sectoral regulatory agencies) struggle with overlapping mandates, limited monitoring capacity, and procedural delays.⁶⁷ Weak appeal mechanisms for regulatory violations further erode public trust in the state's ability to enforce laws impartially.⁶⁸

In the EU *acquis* framework, Chapter 5 (Public Procurement) and Chapter 28 (Consumer and Health Protection) require predictable, impartial enforcement mechanisms. Albania has adopted elements of these frameworks but faces persistent challenges in ensuring that laws are applied without political interference and that regulators operate with functional autonomy.

In summary, the 2012–2024 data reflect moderate but inconsistent performance in regulatory enforcement, marked by moments of reform-driven improvement followed by stagnation or decline. While progress has been made, systemic barriers – politicization, resource scarcity, and weak institutional safeguards – limit sustainability. Overcoming these obstacles requires embedding enforcement within independent, well-resourced institutions, ensuring transparency, and fostering a legal culture where compliance is the norm rather than the exception.

5. Overall Analysis of Key Factors

WJP's Rule of Law Index revealed both notable advancements and persistent challenges in Albania's governance trajectory, underscoring the central role of EU integration as a reform driver. Improvements in governance dimensions such as Absence of Corruption and Fundamental Rights reflect Albania's responsiveness to EU conditionality. However, enduring weaknesses – particularly in Limited Government Powers – underscore structural vulnerabilities that undermine the sustainability of reforms.

The dataset from 2012 to 2024 covers key dimensions such as Limited Government Powers, Absence of Corruption, Order and Security, and Fundamental Rights, offering valuable insights into their evolution over time. While progress is evident in some areas, persistent declines – especially in checks on executive power – highlight institutional fragility and incomplete reform consolidation.

67 European Commission, 2023, p. 50.

68 Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), 2022.

Albania’s governance trajectory mirrors the broader reform and consolidation challenges faced by the transitional democracies in the Western Balkans. Regional geopolitical competition, including the influence of non-EU actors, further complicates reform efforts, making EU alignment both a pathway to accession and a strategic response to these pressures.

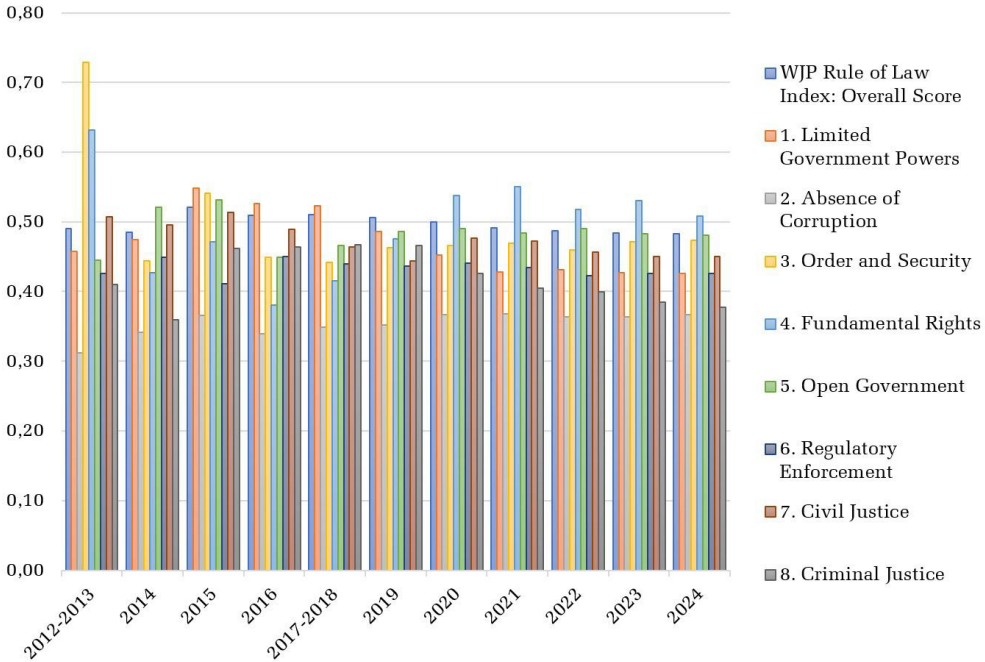


Figure 8. Overall trends in Albania’s Rule of Law Index (2012–2024):
Key dimensions

Between 2012 and 2024, Albania’s overall score fluctuated modestly, starting at 0.49 in 2012–2013, peaking at 0.52 in 2015, and declining to 0.48 by 2024. This pattern reflects a weakening adherence to core rule of law principles over the past decade.

The data reveal sharp decreases in most factors between 2014 and 2016, coinciding with domestic socio-political turbulence and governance disruptions. Although some dimensions (e.g. Fundamental Rights and Absence of Corruption) show partial recovery, the steady decline in Limited Government Powers is particularly concerning, suggesting the erosion of institutional safeguards designed to check governmental overreach. Dimension-by-dimension insights include:

Limited Government Powers: Early improvements gave way to a sustained decline, reflecting executive dominance, weakened judicial independence, and erosion of democratic norms.

Absence of Corruption: A slow but steady improvement points to the positive although modest impact of anti-corruption measures; however, systemic corruption remains entrenched, requiring more robust enforcement and transparency mechanisms.

Order and Security: Highly volatile, with a sharp drop in 2014 linked to instability and law enforcement weaknesses; subsequent recovery suggests targeted security measures but also underscores the fragility of gains.

Fundamental Rights: The 2012–2016 decline, followed by partial recovery, indicates periodic regression in civil liberties during political crises, partially offset by judicial reforms and EU-driven alignment efforts.

The geopolitical and temporal patterns reinforce that the significant downturn around 2014–2016 coincided with broader regional instability and economic shocks. While recovery after 2016 demonstrates some resilience, the plateau or regression in key accountability metrics highlights the limits of externally driven reform without deep domestic institutionalization.

Long-term sustainability requires embedding reforms within independent, transparent, and resilient governance structures. The gains in anti-corruption and rights protection are undermined by weaknesses in government accountability, politicization of institutions, and insufficient judicial autonomy. To achieve durable progress, Albania must implement context-specific reforms that strengthen institutional checks, foster public trust, and enhance crisis resilience.

In conclusion, the 2012–2024 trends illustrate that Albania's governance and rule-of-law improvements are fragile and reversible without sustained commitment. The path forward demands multi-pronged strategies combining EU accession conditionality, domestic political will, and structural reform to address systemic barriers and secure long-term democratic consolidation.

6. Conclusions

Albania's governance dynamics between 2012 and 2024 reflect the dual challenge of aligning with EU integration benchmarks and addressing entrenched domestic governance deficits. The peaks of progress – most notably in 2015 – underscore the transformative potential of EU-driven reforms, particularly in judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, and open governance. However, the persistence of systemic barriers, including political interference, weak institutional safeguards, and socio-economic vulnerabilities, reveals the fragility of these achievements and the difficulty of sustaining reform momentum.

Over the decade from 2014 to 2024, Albania implemented ambitious rule-of-law reforms motivated by EU accession aspirations. While these measures demonstrated the country's capacity for meaningful progress, recurring governance

challenges (e.g. entrenched corruption, irregularities in public procurement, and political instability) highlight the limits of external incentives when domestic institutions lack robustness. EU integration remains a powerful motivator for change, but its effectiveness ultimately depends on deep institutionalization, strong political commitment, and active civic participation.

The long-term democratic sustainability and prosperity of Albania hinge on its ability to build resilient, independent institutions that uphold the rule of law by ensuring both short-term achievements and long-term stability. For Albania, the decisive test lies not only in adopting reforms but in their consistent, impartial enforcement. These efforts must be firmly anchored in EU standards, thereby fostering trust among citizens and enhancing international credibility.

Performance across the Rule of Law Index dimensions illustrates Albania's dual reality: a country striving towards European integration while contending with persistent systemic weaknesses. Improvements in Open Government and Absence of Corruption, catalysed by EU conditionality, have generated positive spillover effects in areas such as Regulatory Enforcement and Fundamental Rights. However, setbacks in Limited Government Powers and Order and Security revealed the fragility of institutional reforms under political and economic pressures.

For instance, Limited Government Powers peaked at 0.55 in 2015 before declining to 0.42 in 2024 – a clear indicator of weakened checks and balances and rising executive dominance. Similarly, the Absence of Corruption improved gradually from 0.31 to 0.37, reflecting measurable progress but also exposing the persistence of deep-rooted corruption networks. Order and Security showed pronounced volatility, dropping sharply between 2012 and 2014 before recovering to 0.47 in 2024, thus highlighting the difficulties of sustaining stability in transitional governance contexts. Fundamental Rights followed a similar trajectory, eroding significantly by 2016 and only partially recovering to 0.50 in 2024, thus underscoring the need for continuous safeguards for civil liberties and democratic norms.

Albania's trajectory also mirrors the broader challenges of transitional democracies in closing the governance gap with EU Member States. While outperforming some regional peers, Albania continues to lag behind EU countries in judicial independence, regulatory consistency, and public trust in institutions. Closing these gaps requires sustained political will, institutional resilience, and an empowered civil society.

Ultimately, Albania's governance trajectory offers both cautionary lessons and reasons for optimism. The interdependence of governance dimensions demonstrates that progress in one area (e.g. transparency) can generate momentum in others, while deterioration in accountability can undermine wider reforms. To achieve its aspirations of EU membership and democratic consolidation, Albania must prioritize systemic resilience, institutional autonomy, and active public engagement.

Finally, the Albanian case underscores the transformative role of EU integration as both a destination and a guiding framework. However, reform sustainability depends on embedding EU-aligned principles into the political culture and institutional architecture of the state. Strengthening these foundations will be essential for Albania to align with global best practices and navigate the complex and evolving geopolitical landscape of the Western Balkans and Europe.

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