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Op-Ed

# How the State Department Pushed Albania from Democracy to Narco-State

By Michael Rubin

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On May 11, 2025, Albanians will head to the polls to elect a new parliament. If Prime Minister Edi Rama, head of the Socialist Party of Albania has his way, it could be the Balkan country's last. What once was a model for post-Communist transition, now teeters once again on the brink of



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dictatorship. Ham-handed State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) interventions have also transformed one of the most promising economies in the Balkans into a narco-state.

## Albania's Rise from Communist Dictatorship

Albania was long a post-Cold War success story. During the Cold War rule of [Enver Hoxha](#), Albania was as repressive as [North Korea](#). After Hoxha's death and the fall of the Soviet Union, however, Albania rebounded.

Its people shed their state-imposed anti-Americanism and became some of the most enthusiastic supporters of the United States. Albania [votes](#) with the United States at the United Nations as much as Australia does, and even more than erstwhile allies like the Netherlands, Spain, or [Sweden](#).

Much of the credit for Albania's transformation rests with Sali Berisha, a cardiologist who had gained increasing prominence in 1990 when he led calls for the Albania Party of Labor to end its monopoly on power. He repeatedly chastised Hoxha's successor Ramiz Alia for the superficiality of reforms. Ultimately, Berisha founded the Democratic Party of Albania, an unabashedly center-right party. In Albania's first free elections in 1991, Berisha won more than one-third the vote, despite Alia's near-monopoly over media and society. A year later, the Democratic Party took nearly 60 percent of the total vote and Berisha became president.

It was a transformative time. Berisha privatized both land and homes. Within just a few years, the new Albanian

**Misbaha?"**

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private sector accounted for three-quarters of gross domestic product. He reduced **inflation** to the single digits and allowed religion to again flourish after decades of Communist repression.

Agency for  
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Not everything in his tenure was positive. Albanians lost life savings in Ponzi schemes at a time when the Democratic Party had near total control. Violence erupted as Albanians blamed the government. When any party has a monopoly, arrogance and a sense of impunity also grow. Albanians took their democracy seriously, though. In 1997, Albanians punished the Democratic Party. The Socialist Party won more than half the vote and Berisha gracefully transitioned into leader of the opposition. Berisha returned to power as prime minister eight years later and worked closely with President George W. Bush to win Kosovo independence. Road-building and other infrastructure development characterized his premiership.

### **Edi Rama's Betrayal of Democracy**

After losing in 2013, however, Berisha resigned from party leadership, though he remained a hugely influential figure and so a political target, much the same way, perhaps, as **Ronald Reagan**, or Barack Obama's influence extended long after they left office. The difference between America and Albania, of course, is once Reagan and Obama finished their second term, even their political adversaries did not worry that they would return.

For Edi Rama, the Socialist Party leader who became prime minister in 2013, however, the ghost of Berisha loomed large. Not content to beat Berisha at the ballot box, he dedicated himself to discrediting and disqualifying Berisha.

Here, unfortunate, Rama had an ally in Obama and many in the State Department who distrusted the center-right. Rama soon discovered any dispersions he cast toward Berisha would find credulity in Washington. Certainly, Albanian corruption was real. In 2010, Albania ranked 116th in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Worse than any European country besides Belarus and [Russia](#). A decade later, after seven years of Rama, Albania scored only marginally better, coming in at 104th, but edging out Bosnia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

## **The State Department Kneecapped Albanian Democracy**

As combating corruption was a major issue, the Obama administration and U.S. Agency for International Development ([USAID](#)) supported the Special Structure against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK). It was a good idea, poorly executed. Just as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan took over the banking auditing bureau to shut down his adversaries, so too did Rama weaponize SPAK. His prime target? Berisha and his supporters.

Enter [Yuri Kim](#), a career diplomat who became the U.S. ambassador to Albania in 2020; it was her first ambassadorial post. She embraced Rama, [literally](#) and figuratively, openly favoring Rama and belittling the Democratic Party and the opposition, famously [telling](#) Berisha to "eat grass." Secretary of State Antony Blinken's ideological animosity toward the center-right, Kim's partisanship, and USAID Administrator Samantha Power's willingness to allow Rama to turn SPAK into a political weapon combined into a disastrous decision by the State Department to sanction Berisha and his family

persona non grata and revoke their visas to the United States. To appease Kim and the State Department, the Democratic Party expelled Berisha. It did not work. As Rama grew more corrupt and the Albanian Democratic Party kept losing elections, they again rallied around Berisha who in 2022 resumed his role as the leader of the opposition.

There are three parallels to what the State Department and Obama and [Biden administrations](#) have done to Albania, all of which today come to a head. The first is Zimbabwe where, for ideological reasons, the Carter administration embraced Robert Mugabe long after it became clear his leftist rhetoric had less to do with social justice and more to do with consolidating dictatorship.

The second is Turkey, where wishful thinking and a desire by successive ambassadors to prioritize personal relations with Erdoğan over democracy led the Turkish leader to conclude he could target opponents and civil society with impunity. In Turkey, it was Selahattin Demirtaş, [Osman Kevala](#), and Ekrem İmamoğlu; in Albania, it is Berisha, former Defense Minister Fatmir Mediu, elected mayor [Fredy Beleri](#), and former Deputy Prime Minister Arben Ahmetaj.

The third is [Panama](#), where Rama is quickly turning into the Balkan equivalent of Roger Noriega. Not only has Rama made Albania into a hub for the [cocaine](#) and opium trade from [Turkey](#) into Europe, but Rama's decision to legalize marijuana cultivation has upended Albanian agriculture. Albanians today speak openly about the "Marijuanization" of their economy. Albania's real estate development—a sector that both progressive scion Alex Soros and Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner now engage—has become the focal point for money laundering as Albanian leaders spend \$800

million on some developments but claim to spend five times that amount. There is no allegation that either Soros or Kushner are involved in such things—both do due diligence and know they are under the spotlight—but the Albanian real estate market is both booming and has become the wild west.

### **Will Next Month's Elections be Albania's Last?**

Just as Erdoğan one likened democracy to a street car—you ride it as far as you need and then step off, so too does Rama now prepare to step off the pretense that he respects democracy.

There is an irony that while the State Department continues to target Berisha and other pro-American politicians for alleged corruption, evidence suggests that the corruption lies with Rama and those Americans whom he has compromised. In February 2024, a New York court convicted Charles McGonigal, former special agent in charge of the FBI's counterintelligence division in New York, for **taking** \$225,000 from an Albanian agent to help promote business with Rama and his proxies. Many Albanians hope that the **Trump administration** will also audit USAID payments to SPAK as well as Kim's tenure in the embassy, if only to resolve suspicion and conspiracy theories surrounding both.

Meanwhile, **Secretary of State Marco Rubio** should recognize that Rama's goals in throwing legal challenges at Berisha have less to do with clean government and more with delivering a knock-out blow to the 80-year-old Berisha and, through him, the center right. The Department of Government Efficiency (**DOGE**) has forced groups like the

National Democratic Institute and the International Republic Institute to stop monitoring elections. Fair enough, but this does not mean that the State Department should not. The question for Rubio is whether he will rely on his Albania team and those put in place by the agenda-driven Kim, or whether he will shift more neutral diplomats on a temporary basis to monitor the polls. Rubio must also recognize that Blinken's sanctions against Berisha were as politically driven and mendacious as his lifting of sanctions against the [Houthis](#).

Albania may be small, but Albanians are one of the most pro-American peoples. The United States should not betray them. The danger of picking sides is two-fold. First, it betrays democracy when the State Department uses dirty tricks to put its finger on the scale and, second, because those who whisper sweet nothings to American ambassadors play them to their own individual advantage, not because they care about the United States and its national interests. The clock is ticking; [Rubio](#) must act now.

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