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# (DE)POLITICIZATION OF CITIZENS' CONCERNS ON SECURITY IN ALBANIA'S PUBLIC DEBATE: UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING THE MISMATCH

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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## Klaudia Koxha

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Albania's membership path to the EU has become one of the most politicized issues in the Albanian political context. Considering the new accession methodology, the process of European integration is even dynamic. With the clustering of the negotiation chapters, candidate countries are expected to advance in several areas simultaneously rather than fulfil the chapters individually in a row. Among the cluster of fundamentals (first chapters to be opened and last to be closed) are issues of security. In this regard, this policy paper will address citizens' perceptions of security, as shown by the 2020 Albanian Security Barometer survey, with a special focus on the socio-political factors that shape these perceptions. Additionally, it will undertake an evaluation of the responsiveness of parties towards citizens' concerns about security, how parties address these concerns, how they engage with security issues, and the ongoing reforms in several state institutions and government branches.

The focus on parties is particularly relevant given that in a parliamentary system such as in Albania, parties represent the legislators and thus carry the weight of pushing reforms forward. Despite attempts to encourage civic participation and empower civil society to engage in decision-making, looking at international reports (e.g. Freedom House, Transparency International, OSCE) throughout the years, the assessment of civil liberties in the region remains rather discouraging. In this regard, parties not only represent legislators but in the face of a rather weak civil society, continue to be the most important subjects for carrying out reforms, especially the most important ones at the core of the accession process to the EU. Thus, parties remain the most crucial subject in the politicization of issues and are the main drivers of the overall political debate.

The policy paper will be enriched with a broader contextual analysis of democratic backsliding in the recent years in Western Balkans, indicated both by data on measures of democracy and human rights such as Freedom House as well as scholars in the field of political science. The aim is to draw a clearer picture of political tendencies in the region and the challenges that they bring to accountability, transparency, and representation which, in turn, may have an impact on public perception of security.

The analysis will be two-fold. On the one hand, this paper relies on data drawn by the Albanian Security Barometer[1], which captures public perceptions of security. On the other hand, it relies on party programs and public statements of political leaders, to capture the importance that parties give to security and conclude the extent to which they address citizens' concerns about security. In the frame of Albania's accession process to the EU and the ongoing negotiations, a special focus will fall on *acquis* chapters 23 and 24, which are included in the cluster on fundamentals, respectively the chapters on Judiciary and Fundamental Rights and Justice, Freedom, and Security. In this regard, the 2020 European Commission report on Albania's progress will be used as an additional reference in stating the salience of security within the accession process and the politicization in the Albanian political context.

The policy paper will conclude with a set of recommendations that aim both at enhancing responsiveness towards citizens' concerns and at improving the carrying out of some of the most prominent reforms in particular state institutions.

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[1] Arjan Dyrmishi, "Albanian Security Barometer National Survey 2020", Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance, Tirana, November 2020. Accessible at: http://csdgalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Security_barometer_2020_ENGLISH-WEB.pdf

Democratic backsliding in the continent is a phenomenon exemplified in the cases of Hungary and Poland, which show clear signs of authoritarian leadership and highlight the Union's inability to impose sanctions.[2] Countries in the Western Balkans are not immune to such phenomenon either, especially taking into consideration the challenging democratization process that they have gone through since the fall of the former socialist regimes. Despite the close EU presence, influence, and assistance in the region, the transformative power of the EU in incentivizing democratization has weakened over time.[3] Moreover, the EU's concerns about stability in the region may have facilitated to some extent an autocratic style of leadership leading to "concessions internationally (especially on geopolitical and security issues) at the cost of civil society development, media independence and democratic pluralism domestically".[4] Together with relatively weak democratic structures in the Balkan region, these have established a form of a competitive authoritarian regime.[5]

The EU's focus on maintaining stability in the region has arguably affected domestic political conflicts in the sense that criticism is often addressed in a non-constructive manner and/or discarded. Looking at parties' stance on security issues should allow us to get a clearer perspective on how these issues are addressed, to what extent do parties engage in constructive criticism, and whether these stances correspond to and thus, represent public concerns.  Additionally, the following section will focus on the EU's involvement in Albania's reform process, on the new methodology for the Western Balkans, and whether it addresses the above-mentioned concerns of democratic backsliding in the region and

[2] Jacques Rupnik and Jan Zielonka, "Introduction: The State of Democracy 20 Years On: Domestic and External Factors," *East European Politics and Societies* 27, no.1 (2013): 3–25; Ulrich Sedelmeier, "Anchoring Democracy from above? The European Union and Democratic Backsliding in Hungary and Romania after Accession," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 52, no.1 (2014): 105–121.; Lise Esther Herman, "Re-evaluating the Post-Communist Success Story: Party Elite Loyalty, Citizen Mobilization and the Erosion of Hungarian Democracy," *European Political Science Review* 8, no.2 (2016): 251–284.; R. Daniel Kelemen and Mitchell A. Orenstein, "Europe's Autocracy Problem," *Foreign Affairs*, January 7, 2016. Accessible at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/poland/2016-01-07/europes- autocracy-problem.; Licia Cianetti, James Dawson and Seán Hanley, "Rethinking 'democratic backsliding' in Central and Eastern Europe – looking beyond Hungary and Poland," *East European Politics* 34, no.3 (2018): 243–256.

[3] Florian Bieber, "Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans," *East European Politics* 34, no. 3 (2018): 337–354.

[4] Cianetti et al., "Rethinking 'democratic backsliding' in Central and Eastern Europe", 246.

[5] Bieber, "Patterns of competitive authoritarianism", 337–354.

how this relates to the argument about EU's weakened democratization-incentivizing power.

## 3. EU'S INVOLVEMENT IN ALBANIA'S REFORM PROCESS

### 3.1 "THE FUNDAMENTALS FIRST" APPROACH

In a press release in 2013, the European Commission stated that: "The enlargement strategy adopted today confirms the continued relevance of the fundamentals of the Copenhagen membership criteria agreed by the EU 20 years ago. These include the rule of law, which remains firmly anchored at the heart of the enlargement process. The countries concerned need to tackle issues such as judicial reform and the fight against organized crime and corruption early in the accession negotiations, to demonstrate a solid track record of sustainable results".[6] In 2020, the general perspective is the same, yet the methodology[7] has been adapted:

- Chapters are organized in clusters of specific thematic areas, the accomplishment of which will guide the future of negotiations for the respective countries. Chapters 23 and 24, respectively on 'Judiciary and fundamental rights' and on 'Justice, freedom, and security' are included within the fundamentals.

- Despite the emphasis on judicial reform, other issues included in the fundamentals are economic development and competitiveness, public administration reform, and fundamental rights. All these are key issues to be addressed at an early stage of negotiations before other clusters can be opened. The main aim of the revised methodology is to prevent the reform process in the Western Balkans from backsliding. Concerning the latter, the revised strategy foresees sanctioning, from slowing down negotiations to adjusting funding and withdrawing benefits of closer integration.

- Also, considering internal cleavages within the EU Member States, which would otherwise shift the focus of these states from EU enlargement, the EU proposals of

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[6] European Commission, "EU enlargement: priorities for 2014", *Press release*, Brussels, October 16, 2013. Accessible at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_13_930

[7] European Commission, "Revised enlargement methodology: Questions and Answers", Brussels, February 5, 2020. Accessible at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_182

2020 aim to increase engagement between member states and candidates through regular summits and ministerial meetings.

## 3.2    EC PROGRESS REPORT 2020 ON ALBANIA: AN OVERVIEW

The 2020 Commission's report on Albania considers the country's judicial system as moderately prepared.[8] The level of preparation for the public administration reform is also moderate. Strengthening administrative capacities and professional standards of bodies charged with the implementation of the EU *acquis* is an ongoing challenge.[9] Regarding the fight against corruption and fight against organized crime, Albania has some level of preparation and needs to further structure and increase efforts especially concerning the number of prosecutions and final convictions. Concerning fundamental rights, the implementation of international human rights instruments needs to be strengthened. The Law on the Protection of National Minorities needs to be implemented. Freedom of expression remains a concerning aspect, though Albania is evaluated as moderately prepared in this regard. Particularly problematic is the draft media law, its censorship aspect, and the possible restrictions to freedom of expression it could cause. About the economic criteria, the legal certainty of businesses needs to be improved alongside the skills gap, lack of entrepreneurial know-how, and quality of infrastructure.

The Commission acknowledges some progress concerning the above-mentioned policy areas, such as:

- The adoption of amendments to the electoral code per the 5 June 2020 agreement thus meeting the condition for the first IGC (p. 4);

- Some progress in enforcing the guidelines on regulatory impact assessments across line ministries, in developing the legislative package related to policy planning, in increasing the number of e-services and improving transparency in data collection and human resources management between central and local level (p. 5);

- The selection of three non-magistrate candidates for the High Court, thus allowing one of the chambers of the Court to function and meet the related condition for the first IGC (p. 5);

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[8] European Commission, "Albania 2020 Report", *Commission Staff Working Document*, SWD(2020) 354 final, Brussels, October 6, 2020. Accessible at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/albania_report_2020.pdf

[9] European Commission, "Albania 2020 Report", 8.

- Finalizing the establishment of the Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure and Special Prosecution Office together with the appointment of the Director of the National Bureau of Investigation, fulfilling, thus, the condition for the first IGC (p. 5);

- Advancing the vetting process, hence meeting the condition for the first IGC (p.5);

- Strengthening operational, coordination, and monitoring capacities in the fight against corruption, thus meeting the condition for the first IGC (p. 5);

- Strengthening the fight against organized crime, including through cooperation with EU Member States and through the action plan to address the Financial Action Task Force recommendations, hence meeting the condition for the first IGC (p. 6);

- Adoption of 'Moneyval package' addressing the recommendations issued by Moneyval in 2018 (p. 6);

- Implementing the objectives of the Joint Action Plan on counterterrorism for the Western Balkans (p. 6).

## 3.3    THE POLITICAL MEANING OF THE NEW ACCESSION METHODOLOGY

After Albania and North Macedonia were denied the opening of accession negotiations with the EU in October 2019, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama considered the arguments of France's President Emmanuel Macron as related to internal EU controversies and not a reflection on the two countries' progress in the fulfilment of the criteria. However, France's request for a revision of the accession methodology for Albania and North Macedonia clearly relates to concerns about backsliding throughout the process.

The new methodology adopted subsequently by the European Commission reflects France's requests not only about the restructuring of the chapters (the 'Fundamentals First' approach) but also about the prevention of regression. As such, the new methodology "proposes more decisive measures proportionally sanctioning any serious or prolonged stagnation or backsliding in reform implementation and meeting the requirements of the accession process. Negotiations could be put on hold in certain areas, or in the most serious cases, suspended overall, and already closed chapters could be re-opened; benefits of closer integration, like access to EU programs, could be paused or withdrawn, and the

scope and intensity of EU funding could be adjusted downward".[10] Moreover, the new methodology clearly emphasizes the political nature of the accession process by increasing the role of member states in monitoring the process through closer cooperation and exchange between member states and candidate ones via intergovernmental, ministerial conferences. It also highlights political procedures such as the electoral reform which was particularly important in the Albanian context.

The new approach was accompanied by scepticism, especially from experts in candidate countries who stated that it politicizes the process to the point that it ceases to reflect the objective achievements of candidate countries.[11] However, in the context of growing discontent and democratic backsliding tendencies in the region, the argument is that this approach may restore the credibility of the accession process but also strengthen the ongoing influence, especially the corrective power of the EU for democracy in the Western Balkan region.

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[10] European Commission, "Revised enlargement methodology: Questions and Answers".

[11] European Western Balkans, "The Catch 22". What could the new enlargement methodology mean for Albania?", Tirana, March 2, 2020. Accessible at: https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/03/02/the-catch-22-what-could-the-new-enlargement-methodology-mean-for-albania/

According to Freedom House report 'Nations in Transit'.[12]:

- The National Democratic Governance rating for Albania in 2020 saw a slight decline from 3.50 to 3.25)[13] due to a series of crises affecting Albania's governing institutions, including the *en bloc* resignation of the parliamentary opposition, an impeachment procedure against the president, and clashes between the courts and the parliament.

- The rating for the electoral process also declined from 4.50 to 4.25 due to stalled electoral reform and political conflict around snap local elections that led to a lack of meaningful choice. As a result, Albania's Democracy Score declined from 3.89 to 3.82 and the classification under transitional/hybrid regime still holds.

- Some of the areas in which Albania scores the lowest are corruption, government's transparency, free and independent media, freedom for trade unions and other labour organizations, an independent judiciary, right to own property, and establish a private business without interference from state or non-state actors, domestic violence, and equality of opportunity.

The assessment of the state of Albania's civil sector is that the country's political crises and institutional conflicts effectively neutered civil society's lobbying power in areas such as improving law-making processes, media freedom, electoral integrity, and public consultation related to draft laws and policies.[14] The European Commission 2019 report for Albania underlines concerns with the government's approach to citizen participation in decision-making and public consultations, highlighting the need for more meaningful cooperation with civil society, comprehensive feedback, and follow-up mechanisms as well as the government's limited use of the public consultation portal and ineffective consultations with the private sector.[15] All in all, despite a set of policies implemented in cooperation with or concerning civil society such as the National Strategy and Action Plan on Countering Violent Extremism, Roadmap for the Government policy towards a more

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[12] Gjergji Vurmo, "Nation in Transit 2020 Albania: Executive Summary", *Freedom House*, 2020. Accessible at: https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/nations-transit/2020

[13] The assessment varies from 1 to 7, with 1 being the lowest score and 7 the highest.

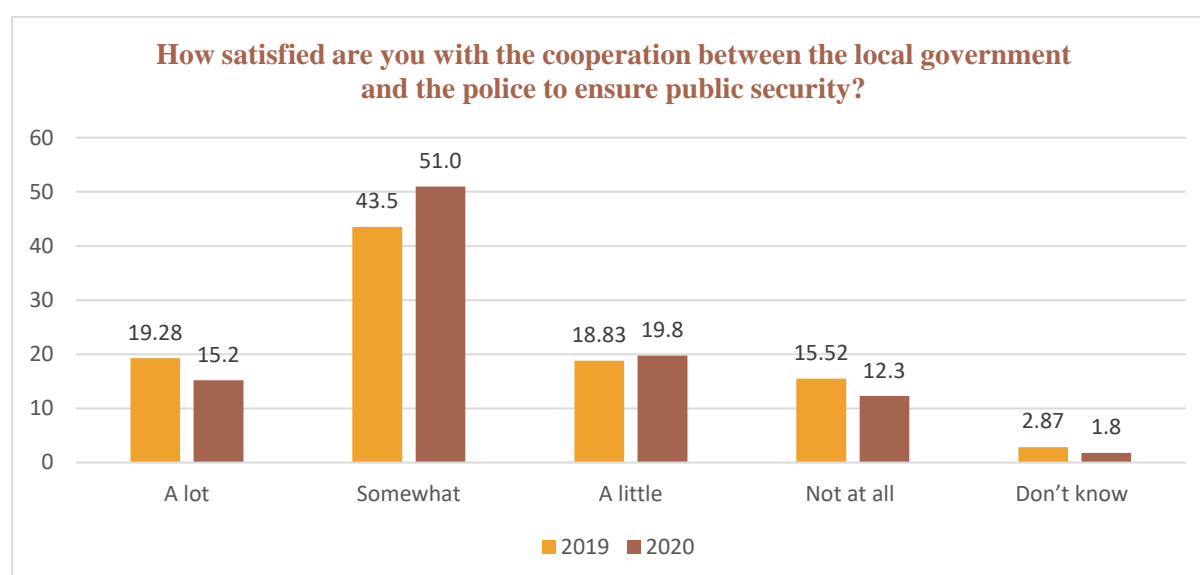[14] Gjergji Vurmo, "Nation in Transit 2020 Albania: Executive Summary".

[15] Ibid.

enabling environment for civil society development 2019-2023, and the National Resource Center for Civil Society, their impact is not yet visible and only minor improvements have been reported e.g. by USAID's CSO sustainability index.[16]

To conclude, the analysis of a broader political phenomenon such as democratic backsliding, which challenges the consolidation of democracy, as well as the particularities of the Albanian political context and the ongoing need to strengthen civil society, which would otherwise have a larger impact on policymaking, explain the relevance of focusing on party discourse. It is necessary to examine how parties address citizens' concerns regarding security and how they engage with the process of European integration, specifically in matters of security.

## 4.1    THE STATE POLICE AND MINISTRY OF INTERIOR

Specifically, the percentage of respondents that are very or somewhat satisfied with the level of cooperation between the police and local government decreased from 19.28% to 15.2% compared to the 2019 Albanian Security Barometer.[17] As shown in graph 1, about one-third of respondents, 32.1%, think that this cooperation is not satisfactory. This is slightly higher for respondents living in rural and suburban areas, namely 33.4%.



**How satisfied are you with the cooperation between the local government and the police to ensure public security?**

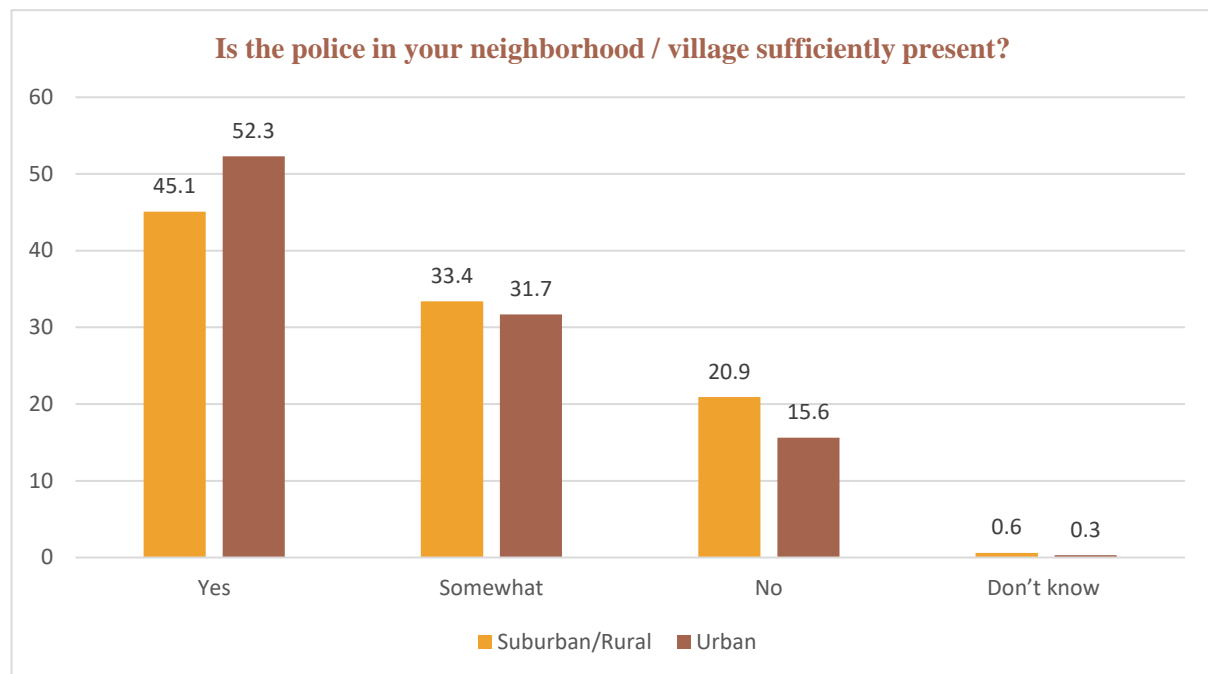| | A lot | Somewhat | A little | Not at all | Don't know |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2019 | 19.28 | 43.5 | 18.83 | 15.52 | 2.87 |
| 2020 | 15.2 | 51.0 | 19.8 | 12.3 | 1.8 |

*Graph 1: Level of satisfaction with the cooperation between local government and police on issues of public safety.*

Some small differences are recorded when considering citizens living in rural and suburban areas, who feel that police presence is less sufficient than those living in urban areas (as shown in graph 2).

**Is the police in your neighborhood / village sufficiently present?**

| Answer | Suburban/Rural | Urban |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 45.1 | 52.3 |
| Somewhat | 33.4 | 31.7 |
| No | 20.9 | 15.6 |
| Don't know | 0.6 | 0.3 |

*Graph 2: Level of satisfaction with police presence from those living in urban areas compared to rural/suburban ones.*

Additionally, the number of citizens who consider the municipal police as a contributor to security has dropped significantly compared to the previous year, from 4% to 1.8% (see graph 3). Overall, a comparison of the recent and previous Security Barometer data shows a tendency of decreasing satisfaction with the police, especially with the municipal police and the cooperation between the police and local government. This is reflected, although slightly, in the overall perception of the State Police as a contributor to security for which a decrease of 3.8 percent is recorded compared to previous data.

**Which of these plays the most important role for your day-to-day security?**

| Category | 2020 | 2019 |
|---|---|---|
| Private security | 1.1 | 0.54 |
| Other | 2.1 | 0.9 |
| Residentia administrator | 0.4 | 1.08 |
| Municipal executive | 2.1 | 1.97 |
| Community representative | 4.1 | 3.14 |
| Municipal police | 1.8 | 4.04 |
| Yourself | 32.7 | 28.88 |
| State police | 55.7 | 59.46 |

■ 2020  ■ 2019
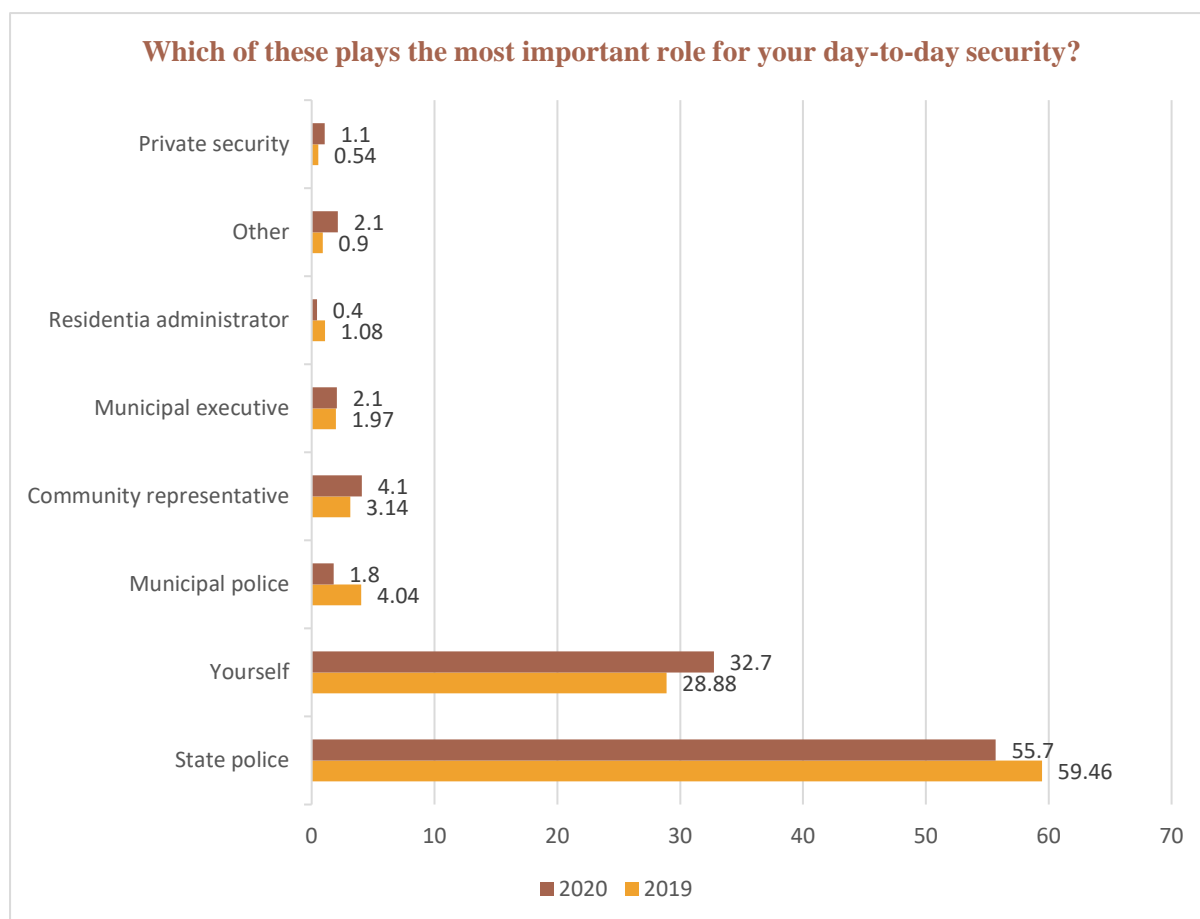
*Graph 3: Results on the most important institution for providing security.*

Differences are noticeable in the perceptions of urban and rural/suburban residents with the latter showing more concerns regarding the role of the police on security and the overall level of security in the places they live (see graph 4).

**How satisfied are you with the security situation where you live?**

| Category | Suburban/Rural | Urban |
|---|---|---|
| A lot | 24.7 | 31.9 |
| Somewhat | 54.1 | 50.6 |
| A little | 15.5 | 11.6 |
| Not at all | 5.6 | 5.6 |
| Don't know | 0.2 | 0.3 |

■ Suburban/Rural  ■ Urban
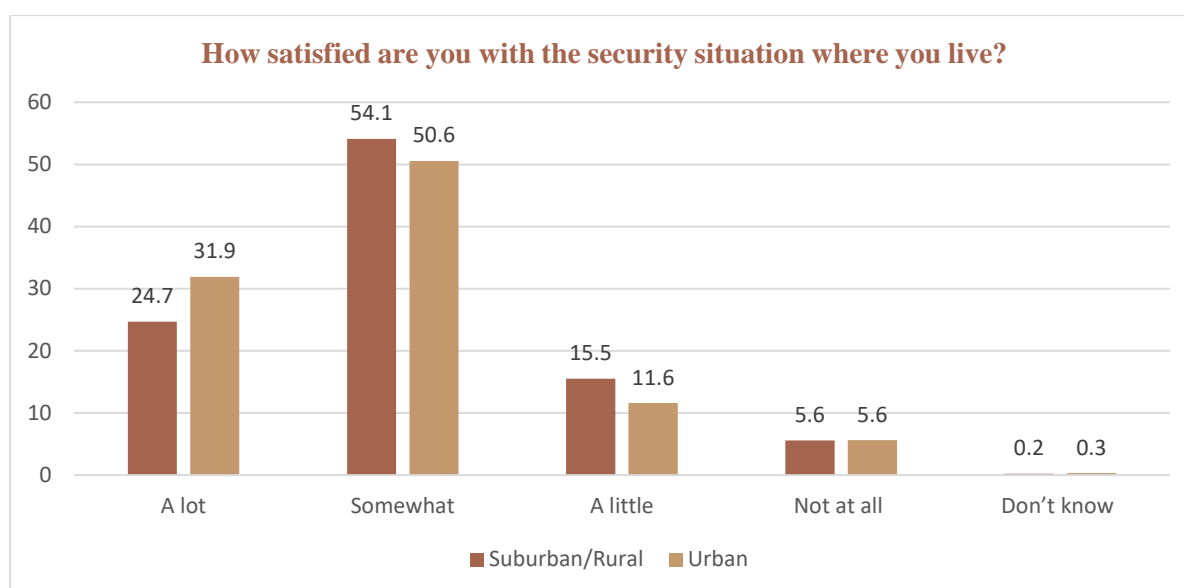
*Graph 4: Level of satisfaction with security in the place of residence by residential area.*

These results call for an evaluation of police authorities respectively in urban and rural/suburban areas as well as the municipal police. Lack of adequate infrastructure, unsatisfactory conditions in the working place, lack of computers, internet, access to the general police network/database in rural areas must be addressed and improved. An evaluation should also be made in terms of means of transport and number of trained personnel as well as living conditions in rural areas which might contribute to a demotivation of police officers in their daily work. Another aspect that may have discouraged police officers is the vetting process which has put the State Police under the spotlight and has increased pressures on police officers. The prolonged, resource-consuming process as well as the public pressure it creates needs to be revisited.

A striking difference between public perceptions in suburban/rural and urban areas is the perception regarding municipal executives in the role of security (see graph 5), with 4.6% of respondents in the former considering them as the most important security provider compared to 0% of respondents in the latter.



**Which of these plays the most important role for your daily safety?**

| | Urban | Suburban/Rural |
|---|---|---|
| Yourself | 33.5 | 31.8 |
| Other | 2.3 | 2 |
| Community representative | 3.7 | 4.6 |
| Private security | 1 | 1.2 |
| State police | 56.4 | 54.9 |
| Municipal police | 2.3 | 1.2 |
| Municipal executive | 0 | 4.6 |
| Residential administrator | 0.8 | 0 |
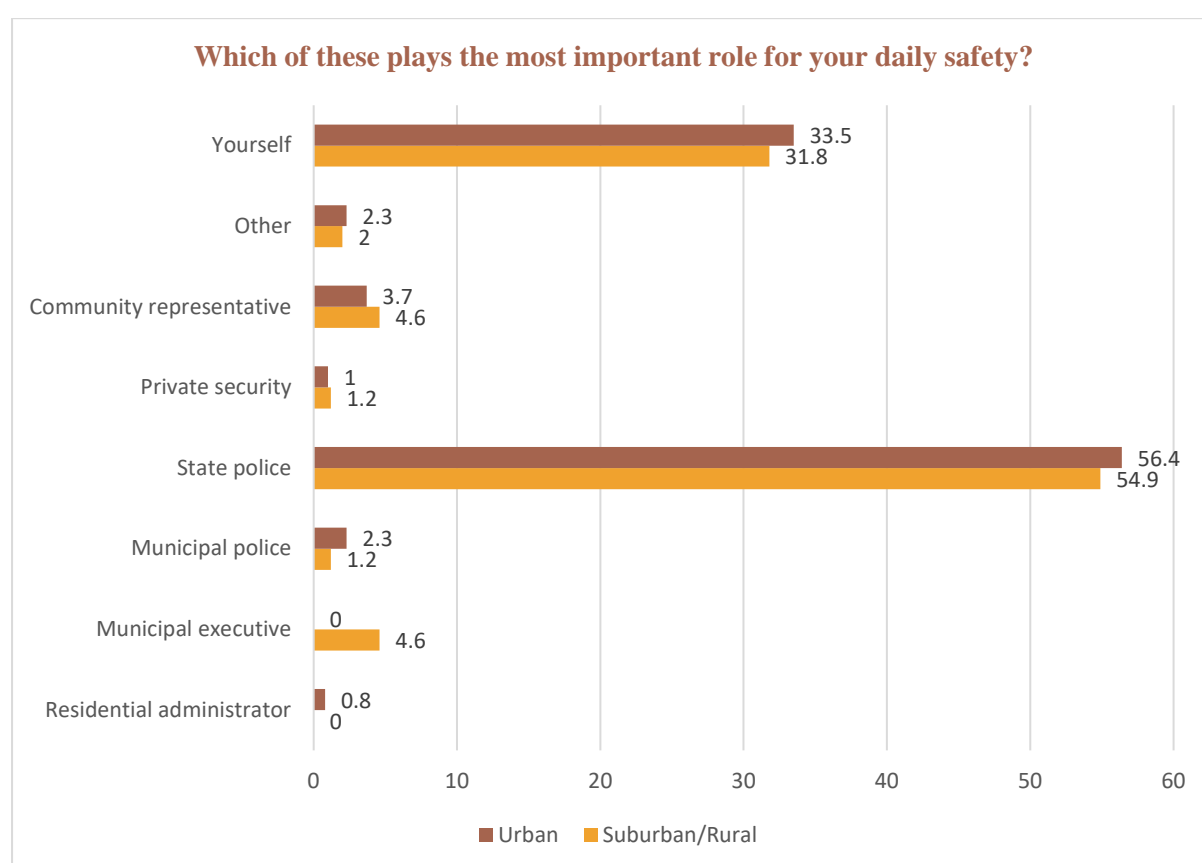
*Graph 5: The most important provider of security by the place of residence.*

This indicates possible differences in the way municipal executives engage with communities, depending on the type of area (suburban/rural and urban). Additionally, it may be an indicator of the specific personal relations that people build in suburban/rural areas (e.g. shared experiences with family or relatives of local representatives) which still

mark, to some extent, the political landscape in these areas, namely the personalization of politics at the level of local connections and personal relations.

Overall, the above data may be generally interpreted as a decrease of public trust in the police, more or less significant depending on which aspect (e.g. cooperation, different police branches, etc.). The mediatization of crime, the increasing out-in-the-open conflicts of criminal groups, fatal cases of domestic violence, especially towards women, are some of the contributing factors that shape such public perceptions. For instance, perceptions of domestic violence as one of the main threats to personal security more than doubled in terms of percentage of results from the previous year (1.61 to 3.38% compared to last year's data).[18]

Additionally, the last two years have been marked by two political conflicts firstly between the two leading parties, the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party, and secondly between the President's Office and Prime Minister's Office. The opposition's relinquishing of mandates[19] in 2019 was followed by constant attempts at mobilizing the electorate against the government. Furthermore, the demolition of the National Theatre building[20] in 2020 and the difficulties of online learning[21] triggered protests by civil society and students. On each of these occasions, the confrontation between protesters and the State Police deteriorated into violence. The prime minister's 'applauding' of the State Police and constantly propagating its importance has created room for the opposition to engage in harsh rhetoric, accusing heads of this institution of siding with the government and denouncing the repressive actions of the State Police as commanded by the ruling party. Thus, another contributing factor in shaping citizens' perceptions of security is the political context which has put several government institutions under the spotlight, one of them being the State Police, thus undermining the impartiality of this institution and its autonomy.

Regarding the Ministry of Interior, data in graph 6 show a decrease in public trust of 6.55 percentage points compared to the 2019 Barometer data. On the other hand, 45.6% of

[18] Arjan Dyrmishi, "Albanian Security Barometer National Survey 2020", 27.

[19] Gjergj Erebara, "Albania Opposition MPs to Quit 'Mafia' Parliament", Balkan Insight, Tirana, February 18, 2019. Accessible at: https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/18/albania-main-opposition-party-gives-up-its-parliamentary-seats/

[20] Alice Taylor, "Ombudsman: Albanian Police Used Unreasonable Violence and Endangered Life During National Theatre Protests", Exit.al, Tirana, November 19, 2020. Accessible at: https://exit.al/en/2020/11/19/138170/

[21] Exit.al, "Albanian Students Protest Against Online Learning During COVID-19 Pandemic", Tirana, November 2, 2020. Accessible at: https://exit.al/en/2020/11/02/albanian-students-protest-against-online-learning/

respondents say that they have little or no trust in this ministry, a figure slightly higher than the 44.65% of the 2019 Security Barometer.

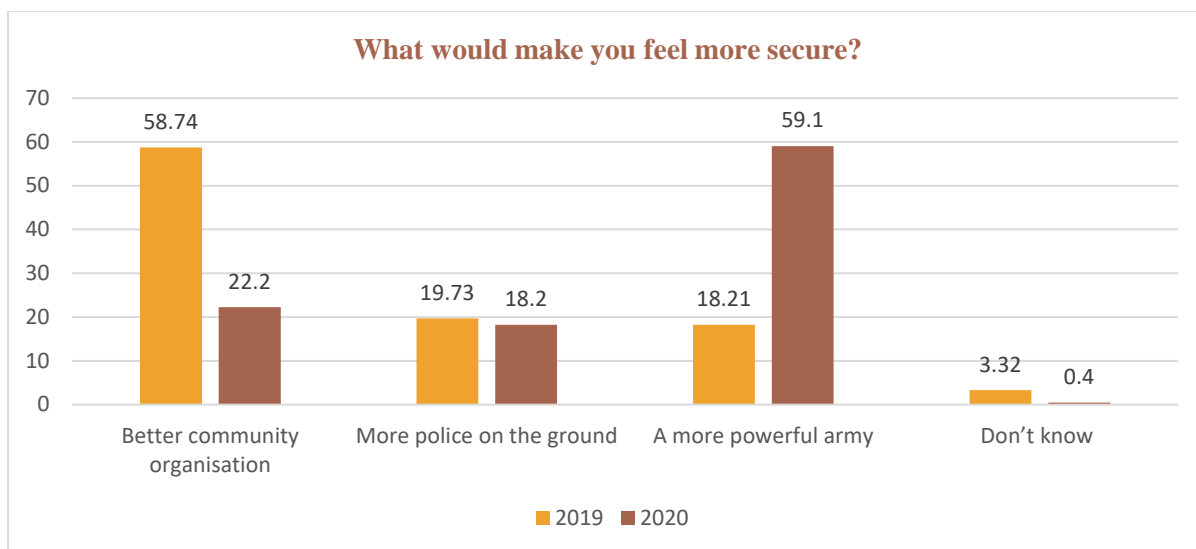**How much trust do you have in the Ministry of Interior?**
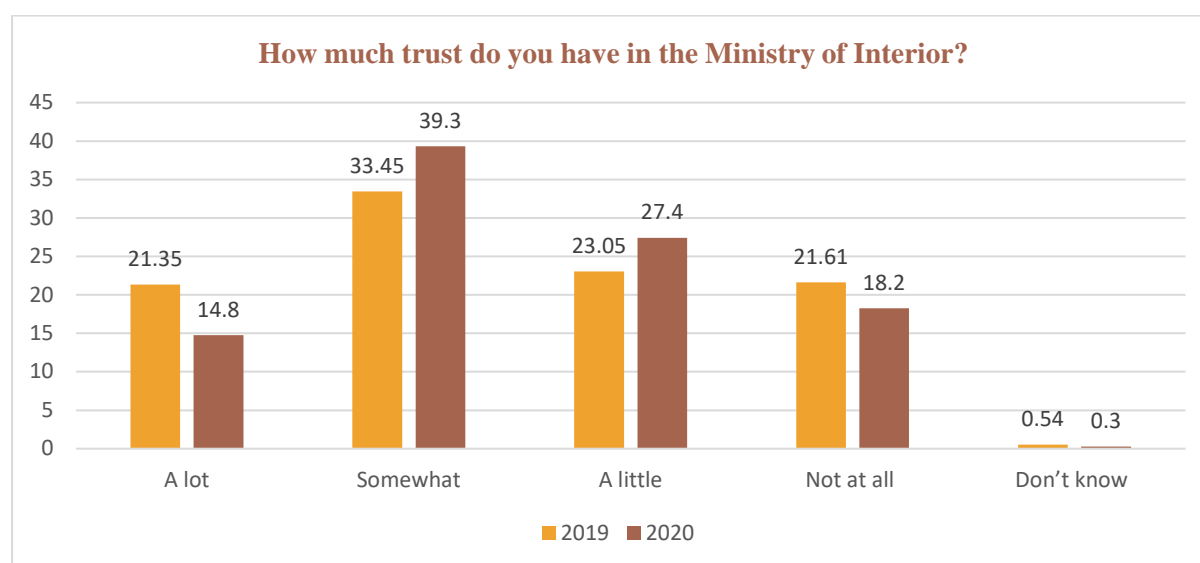


*Graph 6: Perception of trust in the Ministry of Interior.*

Some of the problems that may be reflected in the overall perception of this ministry are problems related to the management of public procurement and the intervention of high-level politicians in institutional competencies or specific operations. Indicators of the latter include frequent media appearances by the Minister of Interior on police operations or cases that should be carried out by representatives at a professional and operational level within the State Police. Another worrisome indicator concerns changes in higher-up positions within the State Police following changes of leadership at the government and/or ministerial level.

## 4.2 THE ARMED FORCES AND MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

Alongside the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defence is one of the least trusted institutions by almost half of respondents from this year's Barometer data. The level of trust has fluctuated somewhat compared to 2019 (see graph 7). Nonetheless, in terms of increasing the feeling of security, this year's survey shows a large increase in favour of a stronger military with some 59.1% sharing this opinion in 2020 compared to 18.2% in 2019.

**What would make you feel more secure?**

| | Better community organisation | More police on the ground | A more powerful army | Don't know |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2019 | 58.74 | 19.73 | 18.21 | 3.32 |
| 2020 | 22.2 | 18.2 | 59.1 | 0.4 |

*Graph 7: Perception of measures that would improve security.*

Research shows to a large extent that domestic roles of armed forces are expanding.[22] Aside from its traditional role, it is not uncommon for the military to deal with environmental disasters.[23] Moreover, there is some evidence that military organization has the most appropriate organizational dimensions to prevent and manage crises.[24] As such, the common expectation is that the Ministry of Defense will deploy the military in times of crisis and emergency such as natural disasters in an effective and timely manner. Thus, the lack of trust can be explained by the low level of emergency response from the side of this ministry, especially taking into consideration the devastating earthquake that hit Albania on 26 November 2019.[25].

Shortly after, the COVID-19 pandemic occurred causing a health disaster worldwide. Fear and insecurity against the virus were reflected in the harsh measures that were undertaken in many parts of the world, including Albania. Curfews, electronic procedures to register

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[22] s. Timothy Edmunds and Marjan Malešič, *Defence Transformation in Europe: Evolving Military Roles* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2005).; John L. Clarke, *Armies in Homeland Security: American and European Perspectives* (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 2006).; Michael Head and Scott Mann, *Domestic Deployment of the Armed Forces: Military Powers, Law and Human Rights* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009).; Albrecht Schnabel and Marc Krupanski, "Evolving Internal Roles of the Armed Forces: Lessons for Building Partner Capacity," *Prism* 4, no. 4 (2014): 118–137.; Jori Pascal Kalkman, "The Expanding Domestic Role of Western Armed Forces and its Implications," *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management* 16, no. 1 (2019).

[23] Florian Opillard, Angélique Palle and Léa Michelis, "Discourse and Strategic Use of the Military in France and Europe in the COVID-19 Crisis," *Journal of Economic and Human Geography* 111, no. 3 (July 2020): 239 − 259.
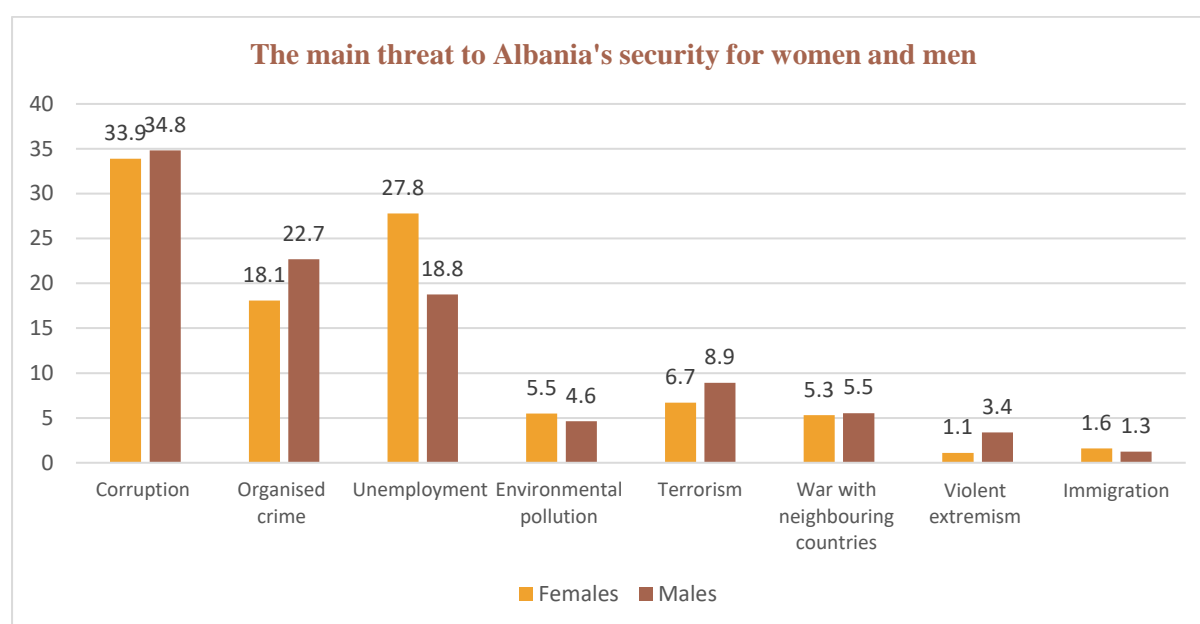
[24] Giorgio Gabrielli, Vincenzo Russo, and Andrea Ciceri, "Understanding organizational aspects for managing crisis situations: A comparison between military and civil organizations: Part I." *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 33, no. 1 (January 2020).

[25] RFI, "Death toll climbs in wake of devastating earthquake in Albania", Tirana, November 26, 2019. Accessible at: https://www.rfi.fr/en/europe/20191126-deadly-earthquake-albania-injures-over-one-hundred-considerable-damage

movements, and restrictions indicated by one's social group made Albania's lockdown in March 2020 one of the harshest in the region and possibly on the continent. Military tanks were paraded in the capital adding to the sense of fear and insecurity and creating the perception that people were at war with the 'invisible enemy'. As such, two major emergencies, a natural disaster, and a pandemic may have contributed not only to a decrease in satisfaction with the Armed Forces and Ministry of Defence but also to the increase in public perception in favour of a stronger military.

## 4.3    A SHIFT TO MATERIAL SECURITY?

This year, most respondents identified corruption, organized crime, and unemployment as the biggest threats to security in general, but, unlike last year, the percentage of citizens who identify unemployment and organized crime as the main threats has increased. Additionally, compared to last year's data, fewer citizens regard terrorism, war with neighbouring countries, and violent extremism as the main threat. In terms of gender differences, as shown in graph 8, a much larger percentage of women than men (27.8% versus 18.8%) see unemployment as the greatest threat.
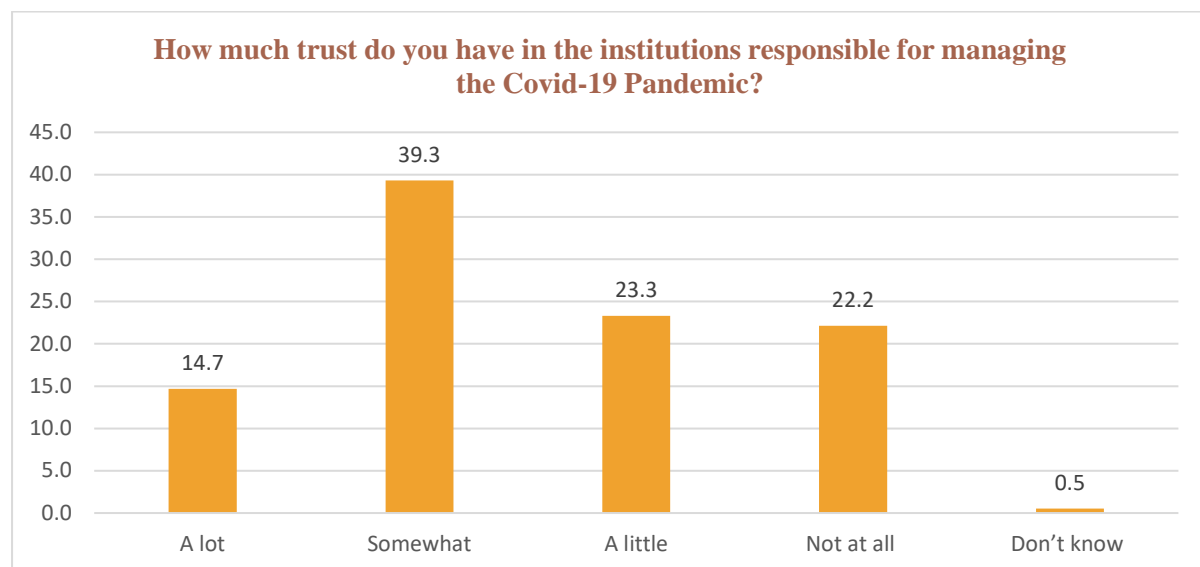


**The main threat to Albania's security for women and men**

| | Females | Males |
|---|---|---|
| Corruption | 33.9 | 34.8 |
| Organised crime | 18.1 | 22.7 |
| Unemployment | 27.8 | 18.8 |
| Environmental pollution | 5.5 | 4.6 |
| Terrorism | 6.7 | 8.9 |
| War with neighbouring countries | 5.3 | 5.5 |
| Violent extremism | 1.1 | 3.4 |
| Immigration | 1.6 | 1.3 |

*Graph 8: Perception of the greatest threat to Albania's security by gender.*

Regardless of their position in the family, unemployment will be perceived as a major threat both by those women who are employed and contribute as providers, as well as those women who maintain their household based on their husbands' income, state assistance, or other external support, and have seen their income drop.

The percentage of respondents this year identifying themselves as the main contributor to their security increased by 3.9%.[26] Likewise, a high percentage of respondents this year identify community representatives and private security companies as contributors to their security. The latter perceptions may be related to the vital role that community organization played during the earthquake emergency as well as the devastation that led many to consider securing their home and property in private companies.

Some 73.3% of the respondents think that the pandemic has harmed the security of the country, while 19.6% think that it has not played a role (see graph 9). Overall, about three-quarters of those asked think that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on the country's security and 61% think it will also have such an impact in the coming year.[27]



**How much trust do you have in the institutions responsible for managing the Covid-19 Pandemic?**

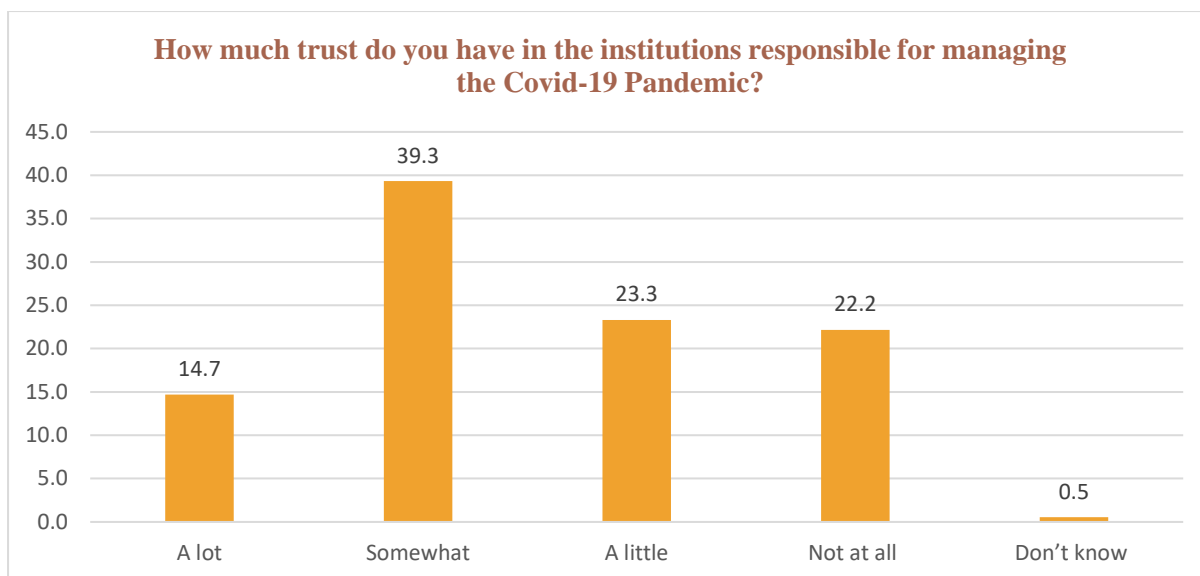| Category | Value |
|----------|-------|
| A lot | 14.7 |
| Somewhat | 39.3 |
| A little | 23.3 |
| Not at all | 22.2 |
| Don't know | 0.5 |

*Graph 9: Perception of trust in the institutions responsible for managing the Covid-19 pandemic.*

Data on trust in institutions responsible for managing the pandemic is somewhat equally split between citizens who have little or no trust in these institutions, 45.5%, and those who say they have some or a lot of trust, 54% (see graph 10).

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[26] Arjan Dyrmishi, "Albanian Security Barometer National Survey 2020", 35.

[27] Arjan Dyrmishi, "Albanian Security Barometer National Survey 2020", 17.

**How much trust do you have in the institutions responsible for managing the Covid-19 Pandemic?**

| A lot | Somewhat | A little | Not at all | Don't know |
|-------|----------|----------|------------|------------|
| 14.7 | 39.3 | 23.3 | 22.2 | 0.5 |

*Graph 10: Perception of trust in the institutions responsible for managing the Covid-19 pandemic.*

The portrayal of the pandemic in the media may have played a great role in this split. On the one hand, media coverage of health specialists was high, turning some of the doctors and health specialists into media 'superstars' and there was a narrative espousing their professionalism in managing the pandemic. On the other hand, infection rates and reported hospitalizations and deaths remained highly concerning so the salience in the professionalism of healthcare institutions did not appear to have been able to balance out the negative perceptions caused by this reporting. Furthermore, the pandemic also brought attention to difficult conditions in hospitals which gained salience particularly with the case of whistle-blower Dr. Ilir Allkja,[28] whose battle received major media attention which in turn had an impact on citizens' perceptions of the overall management of the pandemic.
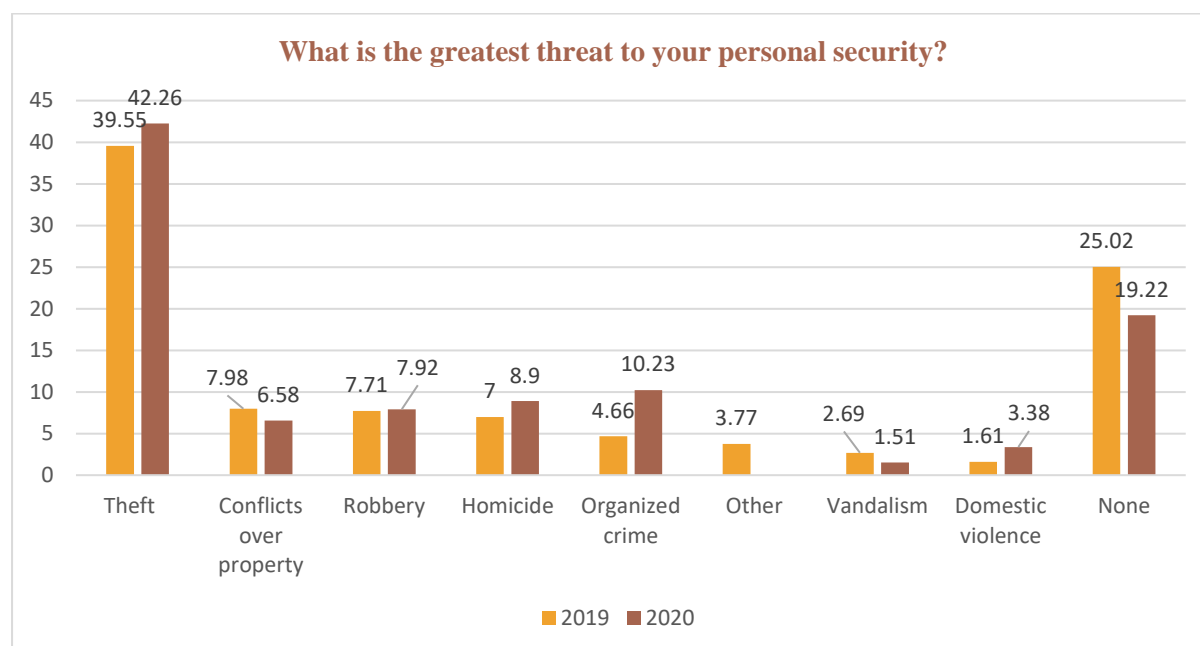
In terms of personal security, theft, conflicts over property, robbery, homicide, and organized crime are perceived as the main threats (see graph 11). Insecurity among women is also higher. They constitute the largest percentage of respondents who identify theft, robbery, and domestic violence as the main threat to their security.[29] Compared to the previous barometer, organized crime (4.66 to 10.23%) and domestic violence (1.61 to 3.38%) more than doubled in terms of the percentage of results from the previous year.[30]

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[28] Ben Andoni, "Chronicle of a dismissal foretold, or how much the truth costs in Albania", *Southeast Europe Coalition on Whistleblower Protection*, May 20, 2021. Accessible at: https://see-whistleblowing.org/chronicle-of-a-dismissal-foretold-or-how-much-the-truth-costs-in-albania/

[29] Arjan Dyrmishi, "Albanian Security Barometer National Survey 2020", 29.

[30] Ibid., 27.

It is also worth noting the decrease, by about 6 percentage points, in those who did not identify any threats to their personal security compared to the previous survey.[31]

**What is the greatest threat to your personal security?**

| | Theft | Conflicts over property | Robbery | Homicide | Organized crime | Other | Vandalism | Domestic violence | None |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2019 | 39.55 | 7.98 | 7.71 | 7 | 4.66 | 3.77 | 2.69 | 1.61 | 25.02 |
| 2020 | 42.26 | 6.58 | 7.92 | 8.9 | 10.23 | | 1.51 | 3.38 | 19.22 |

*Graph 11: The greatest threat to personal security.*

The growing concerns regarding theft, conflicts over property, robbery, homicide, and organized crime over other areas indicate a shift in primary/material security. The latter is particularly noticeable in women, indicating once again clear gender differences which shape gendered interest groups. Especially the greater emphasis on unemployment on women's side confirms their vulnerable position in the work market and their role as providers.

Although the amount of those who regard corruption as a major threat has declined compared to the previous year, a significant majority of respondents, over one-third, still see corruption as the main threat to Albania's security. On the one side, corruption remains one of the most politicized problems and widespread practices with which people are constantly confronted. As such, it influences public perception of corruption as a major threat. To conclude, this data will have to be observed throughout the years, alongside an evaluation of anti-corruption measures. The slight decline might indicate either improvement because of anti-corruption tools and strategies or the fact that people have shifted to concerns of immediate, material security instead and are losing trust in

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[31] Ibid.

institutions and politics in their fight against corruption so that this problem is becoming more or less a societal norm.

Another highlight of this year's data is the increase in the percentage of citizens who saw the threat of environmental degradation/pollution and foreign migrants as the main threat. Natural catastrophes spreading out around the globe, the rising of temperatures, and the immediate effects of the climate crisis on everyday life, economic activities e.g. crops, as well as the overall working conditions may explain the increased emphasis on environmental degradation. The perceived threat from foreigners calls for better management of the refugee situation in terms of allocation of refugees across the country, their living conditions, and integration with locals. The recent eviction of students from their dormitories in Tirana,[32] to make place for refugees from Afghanistan (even though arguably a temporary move) is also a sign of mismanagement which could lead to the antagonization of refugees.

Even though the perceived threats are related to personal security e.g. perceptions of terrorist contingents among migrants and refugees from the East, there is a chance that perceptions of migrants and refugees as a threat in the near future may be based on economic grounds as well. Specifically, manufacturing and other businesses in service and tourism branches have reported having hired workers from Bangladesh,[33] a country that has become an attractive source of workforce given its population (163 million) and annual per capita income ($ 2,227) almost 2.5 times lower than Albania. This labour migration from the East may raise concerns over financial security in Albania if there is an increase in competition in the work market or wages decrease. Concerns over environment and migration indicate a possible emergence of new social and cultural cleavages in the future Albanian political context.

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[32] Euronews Albania, "1.200 beds to accommodate Afghan refugees, staying 2-3 weeks at the Student Dorms", Tirana, August 18, 2021. Accessible at: https://euronews.al/en/albania/2021/08/18/1200-beds-ready-afghan-refugees-will-only-stay-2-3-weeks-at-the-university-dorms/

[33] BIRN, "Bizneset marrin punëtorë nga Bangladeshi, ABC News, July 2, 2021. Accessible at: https://abcnews.al/bizneset-marrin-punetore-nga-bangladeshi/

## 5. POLITICAL RHETORIC AND REPRESENTATION OF SECURITY CONCERNS IN PARTY PROGRAMS

The 2021 parliamentary elections were held under the context of a pandemic, namely the COVID-19 pandemic, which influenced how electoral campaigns were carried out. In the absence of the usual large gatherings and close contact with citizens, the campaign was mostly carried out online. Given the circumstances, for this study the Twitter posts of the two main political leaders, Edi Rama.[34] and Lulzim Basha.[35], alongside the websites of their respective parties/coalitions were analysed.

Firstly, it is striking that there is no evidence of the party programs online, even though the parties held presentations on their programmatic points. Representatives of the Socialist Party expressed that their program was a continuation of the program for 2017-2021. The Democratic Party has summarized the programmatic points on its website, however, is a form of short paragraphs or speech-like form from the leader. We can conclude that this represents a lack of consistency concerning the type and style of representation of what should be official party documents, namely the electoral party programs. The newly constructed website of the DP does contain the main programmatic points; however, they are largely interpreted within a normative system of reference, based on principles, values, and beliefs. The section titled 'The program – Programi' was found on the dedicated website of the alliance 'Albania wins – Shqipëria fiton'. Although organized in chapters and containing some policy proposals, the content resembles a speech as if the opposition leader is directly addressing the electorate. This makes it harder for an expert to properly evaluate the content and separate the core values of the party from its concrete proposals and their feasibility.

Subsequently, the remaining part of this section of the paper will focus on the representation of citizens' concerns on security from the programmatic contents found on parties' websites as well as analyse the rhetorical style of the two main political leaders via social media, namely Twitter.

The SP program 'Alliance for European Albania – Aleanca për Shqipërinë Evorpiane' is generally characterized by an attempt to formally identify more with the left ideology, more on the normative sense and somewhat through policy proposals (e.g. increasing

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[34] https://twitter.com/ediramaal

[35] https://twitter.com/lulzimbasha_al?lang=de

wages, pensions, providing public healthcare for all, etc.). In terms of reforms, the opening of the program by emphasizing the judiciary reform indicates its importance at the political level. Subsequently, the program summarizes a set of values that the SP stands for. A separate chapter is dedicated to the description of the country under the rule of DP as a miserable one, which comes off as an attempt to justify the slow progress regarding the previous promises they made to the electorate. The usage of charts, graphs, and statistics tend to show a certain level of expertise. Alongside a section covering promises that the government argues to have kept, a large part of the program addresses the 'unfulfilled' promises of the 2013 campaign not as a failure but as ongoing goals to be fulfilled in the next mandate. As such, this makes it difficult for voters to be informed about realistic goals and for other stakeholders (experts, journalists, civil society) to engage in a constructive debate about actual, pressing citizens' concerns.

Regarding some of the citizens' concerns about security, there is a mismatch between what the data shows and what the party states. For instance, the socialists state in their program that through their reforms, they have increased citizens' trust in the State Police. However, the Albanian Security Barometer data shows a tendency of decreasing trust in this institution. Furthermore, problems with this institution are not specifically mentioned and addressed in the form of policy proposals. Regarding the discontent with the Ministry of Defence, health institutions responsible for managing the pandemic, perceptions in favour of a stronger military, are not represented in this program. However, we keep in mind that this program was designed before events such as the pandemic and natural disasters. Yet, this shows that designing electoral programs should not only be about long-term ambitious promises and/or ideological stances but should also refer to data capturing actual citizens' concerns and thus properly address them and offer solutions.

An analysis of the programmatic points of the Democratic Party shows a clear focus on the financial security of citizens above other concerns. Most policy proposals are directly linked to financial security by creating more jobs, offering more social assistance to poorer families, lowering taxes, increasing wages and pensions, etc. Some policy proposals address corruption and rule of law; however, the latter is mostly referred to in a normative rather than practical sense. Concerning women, the DP again stresses the economic inequalities and inequality of opportunities in general. Domestic violence is not specifically addressed or mentioned as such yet the proposal to increase funds for women activists might be indirectly linked to the work of NGOs in fighting domestic violence. Yet, the scepticism or criticism regarding the impact of projects tackling domestic violence is not properly addressed in terms of how this work can be strategically and materially improved. The European Union is mainly considered as a partner, especially since there is a large focus on foreign/European investments. Also, in line with the right-wing ideology, the

DP proposes a set of policies in favour of businesses. The DP continues to stress its democratic legacy and promises to give back to all persecuted people who have been neglected by the state. Furthermore, there is a constant attempt at making the program believable and feasible especially by frequently mentioning the technical support of European partners, especially right-wing parties in Europe and liberal experts.

The analysis of Twitter posts of Prime Minister Rama during the official electoral campaign is characterized by accusations toward the opposition for disrupting stability such as in the frequently mentioned strike of the airport personnel.[36] Furthermore, Rama puts a lot of emphasis on the strike by arguing that it was disrupting the vaccines from being transported to Albania, thus aiming to shift perspectives to increase public sensitivity to the pandemic. The language obtains popular expressions, mostly negatively connotated towards opposition leader Lulzim Basha and President Ilir Meta. Some of the accusations also involve the risk of spreading the virus by 'reckless' opposition rallies and meetings.

In contrast, Lulzim Basha's Twitter posts during the electoral campaign engage specifically with campaign material such as posters, videos, publicity spots, curated material showing the leader's meetings in several cities, as well as announcements or clips of his presence on TV. Most common references were made to the future membership of Albania in the EU and the promise to bring about change if elected as prime minister. The latter shows a typical campaigning strategy which consists of constantly repeating and increasing visibility of the campaign's main message and theme.

To conclude, the campaign discourse of Prime Minister Rama and opposition leader Basha aim at mobilizing voters on a rather emotional basis. Even though the topic of EU membership is salient to some extent, there is a lack of substantial debate on what this means for Albania and the country's future position in the EU's internal conflicts and dynamics. Concrete policy proposals regarding security issues and some of the most important security institutions and public concerns are generally lacking. Parties tend to address economic insecurities significantly more than issues such as theft, conflicts over property, robbery, homicide, and organized crime which are perceived as the main threats to personal security according to the Albanian Security Barometer data.

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[36] Bledar Qalliu, "Albanian Prime Minister Accuses President of Attempted Coup", Exit.al, April 7, 2021. Accessible at: https://exit.al/en/2021/04/07/albanian-prime-minister-accuses-president-of-attempted-coup/

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This policy paper began by placing Albania in a broader context of democratic backsliding in the region, based on scientific articles and data of democracy index. Despite some progress in different policy areas, as shown in the 2020 progress report by European Commission, concerns remain, not only in the policy aspect but as I have argued, also at the political/party level and especially regarding the politicization of state institutions. Data shows that citizens have various security concerns which are not only related to the aftermath of natural catastrophes (the earthquake on 26 November 2019) and the COVID-19 pandemic and their (mis)management by responsible authorities but also widespread criminality and weak performance of several state institutions in providing security. This paper, thus, contextualized citizens' concerns about security as shown in the Albanian Security Barometer and explored some of the potential factors that shape these concerns. Additionally, it emphasized some areas of improvements in the performance of some institutions as well as analysed the representation of citizens' concerns in party programs and statements of political leaders under the context of national elections. It also raised concerns about how politics may affect the impartiality of institutions. The analysis shows a need to build institutional capacity concerning e.g. State Police or the Armed Forces, as well as a need towards professionalization of political content and better representation of citizens' concerns about security. Thus, this last section is dedicated to a set of recommendations that derive from the overall analysis:

### 6.1   TO THE POLITICAL PARTIES:

- Parties should improve their online content by better structuring their programs and making them available for broader audiences.

- Parties should design their electoral programs by consulting, among other sources of data, the available data on public perceptions of different issues so that they update the content accordingly and engage better with citizens' concerns.

- Parties should refrain from making promises that are too ambitious to be achieved within one mandate so that voters are properly informed before the elections about what can be realistically achieved in the upcoming mandate.

- Political leaders should engage in more constructive criticism that addresses citizens' concerns rather than in personal attacks towards their opponents.

- The ruling party should objectively address criticism and refrain from automatically discarding it as non-representative of citizens' concerns.

- Specific short-term goals should be addressed by parties regarding the county's accession process to the EU. Alongside the politicization of the latter, parties should engage in a more substantial debate about the EU itself and its internal dynamics.

## 6.2   TO THE GOVERNMENT AND STATE INSTITUTIONS:

- Differences in police capacities in urban and rural/suburban areas should be evaluated. Improvements are needed especially in the latter case regarding infrastructure, means of transport, and communication which would then facilitate the access of police structures in these areas to the general police network/database.

- Overall, the working and living conditions of police officers in rural areas should be improved to increase motivation at work and efficiency in responding to citizens.

- The police vetting should be reconsidered in terms of efficiency and fairness. Rather than pushing forward a resource-consuming, never-ending process, the parliament should opt for regular integrity checks to be incorporated as general practice in the State Police.

- The politicization of the State Police must come to an end. Especially higher-up positions should reflect stability and professionalism independent from changes in political leadership, be it at the government as well as ministerial level.

- The Armed Forces should be better prepared to respond to emergencies. The emergency plan should reflect improvements in Armed Forces both in strategic and material aspects.

- The situation of refugees coming to Albania should be managed better in terms of allocation of refugees, living conditions, and integration with locals to decrease the perception of refugees as a threat to security.

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