The Deeper Meaning of Balkan Protests

by Antonia Colibasanu - February 12, 2026

It isn't every day that we get to address the geopolitical importance of Albania, but that's a testament to its relative stability in an otherwise unstable region. A NATO member since 2009 and an EU candidate country, Albania has helped to stabilize the Balkans, which are still beset by unresolved ethnic tensions, Russian influence and fragile democratic institutions. Its ports on the Adriatic, growing defense cooperation with Croatia and Kosovo, and consistent pro-Western alignment make it a key player in regional security architecture. The country is also symbolically and politically important among ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and North Macedonia; what happens there, in other words, can spill across borders. This is precisely why violent protests in Tirana matter.

The demonstrations began on Feb. 8, when citizens and civil society groups gathered to demand accountability over a growing corruption scandal and call for the resignation of the government. The object of the criticism was Deputy Prime Minister Belinda Balluku, who has been accused by Albania's special anti-corruption prosecution unit of interfering in major public tenders and favoring specific companies. (Balluku has denied the allegations.) The demonstrations intensified over the following days, drawing thousands of people into the streets.

Though nominally about corruption, the protests are symptomatic of a broader sentiment stoked over the past decade under Prime Minister Edi Rama. His Socialist Party has won four consecutive parliamentary elections (2013, 2017, 2021 and 2025), consolidating control over both the executive and legislative branches. The political opposition – primarily the Democratic Party – argues that his tenure has weakened institutional checks and balances, politicized state structures, and fostered networks of patronage, particularly in public procurement.

These claims have spurred intermittent protests for years. In 2018-19, mass demonstrations focused on alleged vote-buying and corruption, culminating in the resignation of opposition lawmakers who hoped to delegitimize the political process. In 2020-21, protests were triggered by controversies over urban governance, including the demolition of Tirana's National Theater, which many viewed as emblematic of opaque decision-making. Between 2022 and 2023, cost-of-living pressures, rising inflation and additional corruption allegations reignited public discontent. And though none of these movements ousted the government, they built networks of activists, refined protest tactics and sustained a narrative of systemic dissatisfaction.

The parliamentary elections of May 2025 complicated matters further. The vote was held on schedule and resulted in another victory for the Socialist Party, but the campaign period was bitterly polarized. Opposition parties alleged misuse of state resources, pressure on public sector employees, and blurred lines between party and state. International observers highlighted concerns about administrative resources, the media environment and the intensity of partisan rhetoric. Though the results were confirmed, they did not ease political tensions. If anything, the outcome reinforced perceptions of entrenched power and the marginalization of opposition politics.

Thus is the context for the most recent protests. They reflect not just the outrage over a specific case of corruption but accumulated anger following a contentious electoral cycle and more than a decade of one-party leadership.

Things escalated on Feb. 10, when clashes between demonstrators and police turned violent. Protesters threw incendiary devices, flares and fireworks toward government buildings and police lines near state institutions. Riot police responded with water cannons and tear gas to disperse the crowds. At least 13 people were arrested, and dozens more – including police officers and protesters – were injured. It was the most serious test of Albania's stability in years. Protests are also likely to continue, with opposition leader Sali Berisha **alluding** to new demonstrations for Feb. 20 – a day that marks the 35th anniversary of modern Albania and the downfall of the most notorious dictator in Albanian history, Enver Hoxha.

Incidentally, Transparency International released its latest Corruption Perceptions Index around the same time protests broke out. In it, TI **noted** that corruption is not just a uniquely Albanian problem but a broader regional issue. It says that many Western Balkan countries continue to struggle with weak institutions, opaque decision-making and misuse of public funds, with a general sense of "serious stagnation" in anti-corruption reforms across the region. So while the protests in Tirana were sparked by specific allegations and political dynamics, they resonate with broader public frustration across the Balkans over entrenched corruption and insufficient institutional accountability – a pattern visible in several neighboring countries.

In Serbia, long-running demonstrations that began after the deadly Novi Sad railway canopy collapse in late 2024 continue today. Student-led demonstrations in Belgrade so far this year have demanded accountability, transparency, and an end to corruption and political negligence. The protests have kept pressure on the government and the public focused on issues of integrity and responsibility, but because they are largely leaderless, they have resulted in no real political change.

In North Macedonia, protests are tied directly to criticisms over governance. After the nightclub fire in Kocani in March 2025 that killed dozens of people and injured many more, thousands of citizens took to the streets throughout the country. Protesters explicitly framed the disaster not simply as an accident but as a consequence of systemic corruption, alleging that the venue had been allowed to operate (despite safety violations) thanks to bribery and lax enforcement. Here, the protests prompted a series of institutional responses. The government ordered emergency inspections of entertainment venues across the country, temporarily closed dozens of establishments found to be in violation of safety codes, and launched criminal investigations into local officials and business owners connected to the licensing process. Prosecutors opened cases against individuals suspected of abuse of office and negligence, while opposition parties called for resignations of higher-ranking officials. Although the demonstrations gradually subsided, public debate over corruption in regulatory bodies continues.

Taken together, the protests evince a generational shift in the Western Balkans. Each country has its own political triggers, but they share a common involvement of younger citizens – students, first-time voters, digitally connected urban professionals – who frame corruption and other ills not as partisan issues but as obstacles to normal, functional statehood. This suggests a cohort shaped less by the post-conflict narratives of the 1990s and more by institutional performance, transparency and quality of life.

At the same time, these protests highlight a paradox inherent in the EU integration process. For two decades, accession to the bloc was a strategic goal for Europe, partly because of the institutional reform membership requires. Anti-corruption measures, judicial independence, administrative modernization and rule-of-law standards were presented as prerequisites. But as enlargement slowed and timelines stretched, EU accession seems increasingly distant for countries in the Balkans. For citizens, the promise of membership is no longer a credible short-term incentive for reform. Yet, the transformation that accompanied the accession process has already reshaped expectations. Populations in these countries have internalized the language of rule of law, accountability and institutional responsibility – not only as EU conditions but also as attributes of a “normal,” modern state.

In this sense, current protests reflect both frustration and maturation – frustration in that reforms have stalled as EU membership remains uncertain, and maturation in that accusations are leveled against the government rather than rival ethnic groups. Institutional modernization is now an expectation. Citizens who grew up during the accession era were taught that law enforcement integrity and institutional accountability are foundational to prosperity and social trust. Those standards persist as

internal benchmarks against which governments are judged.

So the protests across the Balkans are not simply anti-government movements; they signal a generational recalibration of political priorities. While EU membership may no longer be the immediate trigger for reform, the transformation initiated under the accession framework continues to shape public demands. The result is a region where the rhetoric of Europeanization has been absorbed into domestic political culture — and where citizens increasingly mobilize not only for geopolitical alignment but also for matters of practicality.

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