

Country Profile

Albania

Liliya Yakova

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This Country Profile provides a brief overview of religious diversity and its governance in the above-named state. It is one of 23 such profiles produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents. More detailed assessments are available in our multi-part Country Reports and Country Cases.

Countries covered in this series:

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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Total population: 2.8 million

Religious affiliation (percent)

Muslim (Sunni)	56.70
Roman Catholic	10.03
Othodox Christians	6.75
Bektashi	2.09
Evangelicals	0.14
Other Christians	0.07

Source: Albania Population and Housing Census 2011

Role of religion in state and government

State-religion relations in Albania take the form of a dual autonomy whereby both the state and religion are independent of each other. Nonetheless, the state does exert its influence in engaging religion as a valuable partner in aspects such as inter-religious peace and countering radicalisation. During the Communist period, there was a total ban on state religion by the state, yet in the 1990s the Albanian state encoded religious freedom and corresponding individual rights into its Constitution. Key provisions within the Albanian Constitution inform the present-day conditions of tolerance: Article 10 provides that there is no official religion in the Republic of Albania, that the state stands neutral on questions of belief and conscience, and that the state recognises the equality of all religious communities. Article 10 also emphasises the manner in which religion and the state may cooperate. That cooperation occurs through agreements between the Council of Ministers and representatives of religious communities, whereby the latter are deemed juridical persons (similar to NGOs) with administrative independence in managing their properties to the extent that they do not infringe upon third party interests.

On the basis of this, some scholars hold the opinion that although the Albanian Constitution does not utilise the precise terminology, Albania has a particular form of the French *laïcité* adapted to the conditions of Albania's own state of affairs and state-religion relationship. This form of *laïcité* marks an amalgamation of Albania's pluralism of ethnicities and religion, its aspiration towards modernity and European integration, the state's oversight of religion via partnership and cooperation, and the affording of certain privileges to religious communities (e.g. negotiation rights, recognition, property restitution, financial support, tax exemptions, etc.).

Freedom of religion

Freedom of religion in Albania is legally safeguarded in a plethora of ways: from key provisions in the Constitution and the Criminal Code (prohibiting interference with the practice of religion) to Albania's own Law on Non-Discrimination passed in 2012. Main tenets of the 1998 Constitution pertain to the prohibition on political parties that instigate religious, ethnic and racial hatred (Article 9); the recognition and protection of the expression of religion (Articles 10, 24); the equality and independence of religious communities (Article 10); and the prohibition on discrimination on the basis of religion (Article 18). Article 3 meanwhile engages the state in respecting and protecting minorities on the basis of mutual peaceful coexistence. A qualification to the right of administrative independence is noted in Article 10, relating to the "interests of third parties", which is mostly taken to enshrine the goal of defending the common good. The Constitution grants the freedom to choose and change one's religion or belief system and express them both in individual and collective manner, privately or publicly, without being forced to or prohibited from doing so. Additionally, the Albanian national law endows specific governmental bodies with the responsibility of processing discrimination complaints, regulating state-religion cooperation, assisting in the drafting of relevant legislation, and promoting inter-faith dialogue. These bodies include the Office for the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, and the State Committee on Cults under the Office of the Prime Minister. The Albanian state has also signed and ratified key international human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights, provisions of which guarantee the freedom of religion and the free expression of faith and beliefs.

It is evident from the Constitution that the Albanian version of *laïcité* diverges from absolute secularism and embraces close cooperation between the state and religion, whereby the state vows to take action to safeguard freedom of religion. This corresponds to public perceptions on the matter. Religious tolerance and freedom of religious expression are seen as a basic value by Albanians, embedded in their societal traditions and culture. The Albanian population's experience with freedom of religion is reflected in the results of a 2018 UNDP nationally representative public opinion study in which 95% of participants stated that they have never experienced religion-based discrimination or exclusion. There is a lack of commonplace stereotyping based on religious affiliation among Albanians; between 60 and 79 percent of those interviewed saw no connection between religious affiliation and positive or negative character traits. The survey results also point out that Albanians are overwhelmingly tolerant in their inter-religious relations, i.e. they are highly accepting of persons of different faith and belief as neighbours, co-workers, friends and family members. Some scholars and sociological studies argue that this state of inter-faith acceptance is due to the cohesive power of nationality, secularism, and the common hardships experienced during the Communist period.

Religiously inspired radicalisation

The post-Communist Albanian state witnessed the introduction of alternative, sometimes extremist, interpretations of Islam and allowed some citizens to become members of terrorist organisations. Public opinion polls point out that over one tenth of Albanians support Shari'a law as the official law. Some Albanians see suicide bombing as a justifiable means of defending Islam. One in ten believe that individuals in their communities promote religious extremism. Evidence of recruitment for radical causes is seen in the arrests made on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack in connection with the 2016 FIFA World Cup, accounts of persons leaving Albania to participate in the activities of ISIS and Al-Nusra, and reports concerning the activity of returned fighters in Albania. Radicalised Albanians have performed extremist acts outside of Albania, but only one (unsuccessful) attack has been classified as domestic. Since 2017, cases of people travelling abroad to join ISIS/Al-Nusra have plummeted, and there has been no increase in the number of reported recruits. This is due in part to multi-level counter-radicalisation measures.

While various factors contribute to religious radicalisation in Albania, two types can be identified as key: political factors and socio-economic factors. The political drivers include the post-Communist governance model (which afforded self-regulation to religious communities at the expense of public authority) and local-level weakness of the State Committee on Cults that allowed easier access to recruits. Another political factor was the non-cohesive role of the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC). Having failed to bring together all Muslims in Albania, the AMC did not establish control over all mosques. Thus they did not succeed in preventing the use of religious education as a tool of extremism. They thereby allowed Muslim sub-groups to turn to alternative radicalised interpretations of Islam. Beyond that, public dissatisfaction with governance shortcomings such as corruption and insufficient rule of law may have made it easier to attract supporters to extremist causes. With respect to socio-economic factors, a number of drivers can be observed, such as: feelings of social exclusion, radicalising social dynamics, discrimination, impeded access to employment, unmet socio-economic needs, and illegal economic activities which can amount to the willingness to seek refuge (economic and spiritual) in extremist narratives.

The state, however, has introduced a multitude of measures to counter radicalisation. Internationally, Albania has signed conventions, treaties and initiatives by the UN, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe. It has entered into bilateral cooperation with neighbouring states and hosted a Balkans Summit on Countering Violent Extremism in 2015. Domestically, the state has taken a multi-level approach to countering extremism, from implementing strategic documents on terrorism and organised crime to criminalising foreign extremist activity and creating a police force to counteract the risk of terrorism. Additional measures include promoting religious tolerance in schools, active registering of mosques across the country, engaging the NGO sector in public discussion, and information activities aimed at preventing radicalisation and promoting inter-faith harmony.

Religious diversity governance assessment

To ensure that religious communities in Albania have representation, recognition and relative equality, the state has afforded religious communities juridical personhood similar to that of non-governmental organisations. This facilitates their legal relations with the state. There is no requirement for a religious community to undertake the registration procedure which grants it legal personhood, yet it is a prerequisite for the receiving of assistance and privileges from the state via specific agreements.

The Albanian government has entered into agreements with all five of the main religious communities - the Sunni Muslim, the Bektashi, the Catholic, the Orthodox, and the Evangelical communities for the provision of privileges such as property restitution, financial support, and tax exemptions. Four of these communities (all but the Evangelicals) acquired financial support from the state amounting to some 109 million lek in 2018. And in 2017 the government agreed to subsidise the cost of water and electricity for places of worship.

The Evangelical community has complained that the state has treated the other four religious communities more favourably when it comes to providing them with financial support, even though it has entered into a formal agreement with the state. Religious communities can additionally manage educational institutions such as universities, schools, kindergartens, orphanages, etc. that offer religion studies electives when those are licensed by the Albanian Ministry of Education. The relative independence in decision-making and management of affairs of the religious communities is illustrated through the Interreligious Council - a consortium of the leaders of the five biggest religious communities, which provides a discussion forum on topics such as religious harmony, social stability and diversity of faith. The activism of the Interreligious Council in encouraging and preserving inter-faith peace and understanding was acknowledged by the Polish government, which presented the Council with an award in 2018. Finally, the Albanian government - through its Agency for the Treatment of Property (ATP) - deals with land acquisitions by the religious communities in terms of claims for title, defending existing titles, and obtaining ownership. In 2017-2018 the government continued legalising places of worship for all religious communities, which is also a measure for countering radicalisation. Despite this, most religious communities have reported difficulties with registration, claim defence and claim acquisition and have expressed dissatisfaction with the slow pace of claim adjudication by the ATP.

The practical evidence of religious tolerance policies and of cooperative efforts between the state and the religious communities is thus seen by the state as a means of bringing the country closer to modern European values, which emphasise governmental protection and respect for religious diversity and freedom of religion. In this sense, the Albanian state has engaged religion as a tool to achieve its international political agenda by having the religious communities support national goals of securing peace, respect for religious plurality, and EU integration.

About the GREASE project

Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE)

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to:

Professor Anna Triandafyllidou, anna.triandafyllidou@eui.eu

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