



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Albania social briefing:  
2021 and the Albanian social stagnation  
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## **2021 and the Albanian social stagnation**

### **Summary**

*The pace of change and transformation in the Albanian society is very slow, and 2021 has once again demonstrated this tendency. It was expected a swift rebound in economic terms that would translate into social adjustability but it proved to be unattainable. Development trends continue to be stagnant, the reforms are at a standstill, and long-terms strategies are remaining only in paper. As COVID-19 is still not under control, the vaccination process is slow, demographic trends remain with the same characteristics as in the past, what this year had to offer to the Albanian society is again perplexity and hopelessness. This briefing is an overview of the issues that mostly affected the Albanian society in 2021.*

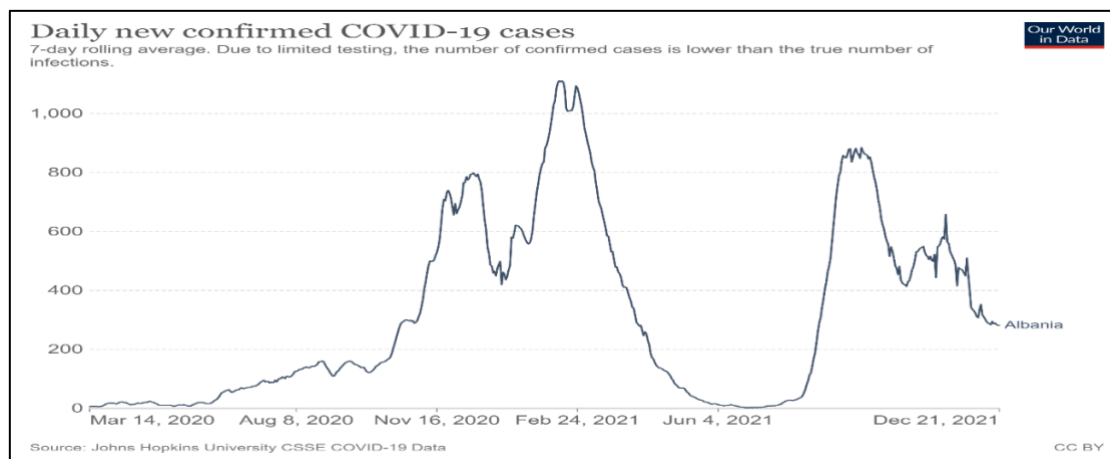
### **Introduction**

The Albanian society in 2021 has been struggling to recover from the great losses of the year prior and to pave a better existence with the somehow under control pandemic. However, the burdens were difficult to shake off, because for one reason or the other, recovery in social terms is at a standstill. The most visible of the burdens is financial, for households and individuals. As living becomes more expensive, so does the need of people to try to find better alternatives on procuring the basics for a decent livelihood.

### **Attempts to contain and fight COVID-19**

The first quarter of 2021 has registered some of the highest figures of COVID-19 cases as well as deaths. While restrictions were imposed, the general obedience to those restrictions was minimal. After almost one year under limited activities Albanians started to take matters in their own hands, and mostly due to financial needs. On the other hand, the authorities many times ignored this behavior because of the elections to be held in April. Indeed, with the virus ravaging the country and no vaccines, electoral meetings were the order of the day. Gathering of larger groups became the norm and the attitude was as careless as it could get.

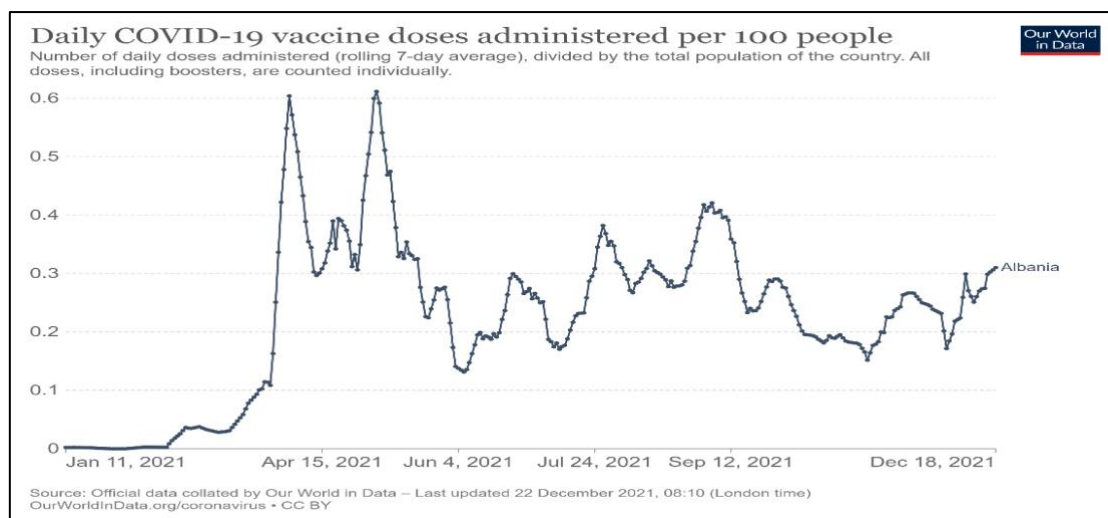
The table below portrays the situation with the situation of new cases by month.



### **Vaccination process and vaccine hesitancy**

As new cases continued to spiral upwards, frustration was spiraling as well. The challenge of securing the vaccines was overcome by beginning of April when the first batch of half million Sinovac vaccines arrived in the country. At risk categories and the elderly started the process until by the beginning of August almost all were eligible for taking the vaccines. As of late December 2021, Albania's vaccination rate is close to 34%, an extremely low number if compared not only to European Union average, but also the one of the region (Western Balkans). During the summer the hesitancy came also due to low number of cases, yet as September started to witness a rise in new cases, still the vaccination process did not progress smoothly. It is inconceivable how this could happen but 1 out of 3 Albanians only decided to do so. What has fueled hesitancy is neglect in the rural areas and in urban areas the very vocal "anti-vaxxers". Conspiracy theories against the vaccine are present on a national television and on social media, by crippling so the logics of science and ultimately lifesaving approach.

The table below portrays the situation with the situation of vaccines administration by month.



The mistrust on the vaccination process is also linked to the same mistrust in the healthcare system. This attitude is only amplified in times of health crises as the pandemic.

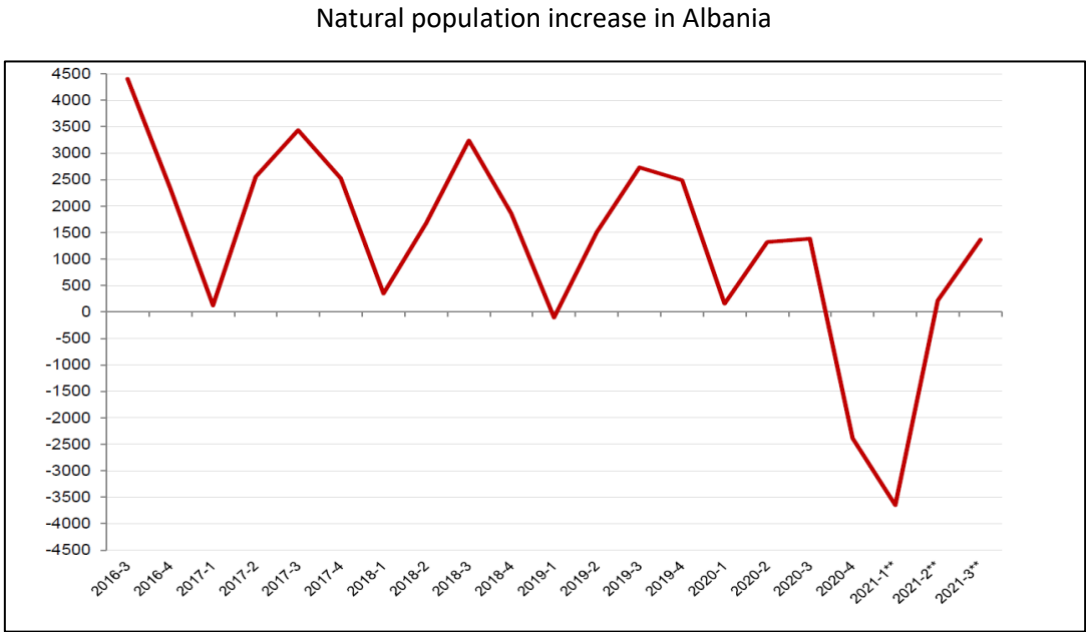
## Education

In 2021, for the education system in Albania the problems were larger, but the budget was lower. Budget spending increased at the highest rate of the decade, but funding for the education sector downsized. In June 2021, with a normative act, the government cut the education budget by 3.5%, or 12 million Euros. With the recent crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the education sector is being considered as the cornerstone of recovery. Improving the ability to adapt to technology and be competitive in a global market has increased the attention of governments to education around the world. In Albania, education had no government support in these difficult online and hybrid classes. Teachers claim that the learning achievements of an entire generation have been severely impaired. Experts argue that there are irreparable damages on the making.

## Demographic trends

As of 2021 the Albanian population is 2.8 million resident inhabitants, and there is an estimation of 1.8 Albanians living abroad. During 2020, with the outspreads of COVID-19 movement of citizens within or outside the country shrank, but in 2021 there was a kind of awakening of the major trends meaning rural-to-urban migration as well as emigration. The

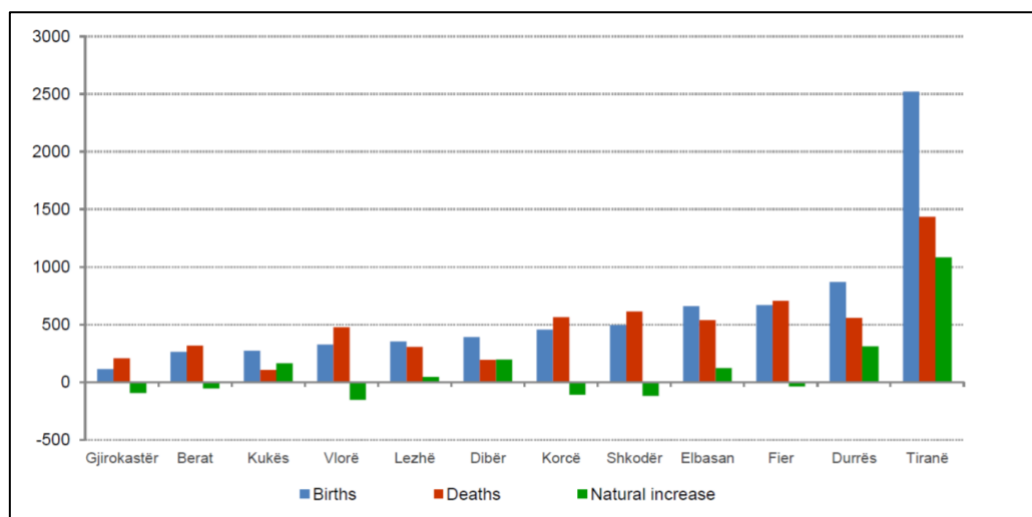
ongoing crises of decades of a shrinking population went on to be persistent also during this year. According to the Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), the latest available data record a decrease of the number of births overall. For example, the number of births for the third quarter of 2021 is 7,404 marking a decrease by 7.5% compared to the third quarter of one year prior, while for the same period, the number of death is 6,037, marking a decrease by 8.9%. In an overall estimation, the situation unfolds as the table below:



Source: INSTAT

Concerning demographic mobility, the data show that Albanians are moving to the capital and the coastal city of Durres, leading to the emptying of other parts of the country. Out of 12 counties in total, only two regions have seen population growth last year, while the rest have shrunk significantly. The latest data available on natural population increase are also an indicator of where Albanians are mostly oriented on moving within the country.

Births, deaths and natural increase by prefecture (Q3 -2021)



Source: INSTAT

The move from the peripheral regions to the industrialized ones also shifts the distribution and weight of the economy towards the latter, where there is more space to work and better livelihood opportunities. Consequently, the focus of development projects is oriented towards them, leaving the rest underdeveloped. The mass emigration of Albanians due to difficult economic conditions and few job opportunities is emptying the cities and villages of the country. The lack of supportive policies to encourage births is also leading the population to aging. Failure to intervene to curb this phenomenon could cause the country to soon be dominated by the elderly and suffer from a lack of work force.

### **Workers conditions and wages**

The economic difficulties as consequence of the recession, stagnation of labor market and most of all the fear of an uncertain future, increase exponentially anxiety and bitterness throughout the society. Taking into account the fact that Albania is the country with the lowest wages in the region, the poverty gap can be widened if supportive and mitigating measures are not taken.

By the end of December 2021 one of the most critical data leak hit the Albanian society, the wages of more than 637,000 employees were made public in an excel spreadsheet. These were wages of the public and the private sector with the also the ID number of the employees. According to Labor Force Survey estimates from INSTAT, the total labor force is 1,407,934 persons, thus, for 45% of Albanians their salary is now an information of public domain. This

situation demonstrated that there is a top percentage of Albanians that earn huge sums monthly and the majority are insured in the system with minimal or close to minimal wage.

### **Rising prices for basic living expenses**

Rising prices is another serious issue, especially considering that about 41% of an Albanian family expenditure goes on food. Albania is the first country in the region with the highest percentage of food expenditures. As the economy gradually opened up but the country is already facing rising prices, which have affected basic foods from bread, meat and dairy to oil. Poverty was already rising but the pandemic worsened the situation. The increase was caused by the contraction of tourism and related services sectors, which in recent years has been the main generator of employment in the country. The rise of prices for the necessities does affect mostly the poorest and the ones without additional support.

### **No progress on social and welfare reforms**

The Government of Albania (GoA) and the United Nations (UN) Programme of Cooperation for Sustainable Development is a framework that guided the work of the GoA, the UN Country Team (UNCT), and their partnerships until 2021. The highlights of this program were in Social Cohesion: Health, Education, Social Protection, Child Protection, and Gender-Based Violence. The main aims was to invest in people and social cohesion with objectives related to a modern educational system, a universal and quality health care system, expanded employment opportunities, a stronger social protection system, gender equality and social inclusion. This program of Cooperation for Sustainable Development UN Sustainable Development Framework 2017-2021 was supposed to end by 2021. Its full implementation required an estimated total of USD \$108,918,481. By the end of 2021, there is no feedback on any of the above materialized in deeds.

## **Conclusion**

Another year went by in limbo for the Albanian society, waiting for conditions to improve and struggle to overcome difficult situations. Stagnation becomes a lifestyle and progress is an unknown word. It is difficult for a society to function as a whole in pursue of development, when the individual has to fight for the minimal necessary. Promoting changes in social protection, in line with international standards should be a priority. Strengthening social development measures and mechanisms, at national and local levels, with clear targets that reflect social inclusion should be the pressing issue going forward, otherwise stagnation will become the norm.