

RELEASED IN FULL

Albania



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

REVIEW AUTHORITY: Archie Bolster, Senior Reviewer

Bureau of Democracy,
Human Rights and Labor
March, 2006

ALBANIA: PROFILE OF ASYLUM CLAIMS AND COUNTRY CONDITIONS

<u>TABLE OF CONTENTS</u>	<u>Page</u>
I. INTRODUCTION	2
II. CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW	2
III. CLAIMS AND RELEVANT COUNTRY CONDITIONS	3
A. Claims Based on Political Opinion	3
B. Claims Based on Race and Ethnicity	6
C. Claims Based on Religion	7
E. Claims Based on Social Group	7
F. Torture and Other Police Misconduct	8
IV. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADJUDICATORS	8
APPENDIX I – Chronology of recent significant events	10
APPENDIX II – Political Groups and Personalities	13
APPENDIX III – Visa Procedures	15

I. INTRODUCTION

Country conditions profiles are produced by the Department of State's Office of Country Reports and Asylum Affairs for use by the Executive Office of Immigration Review and the Bureau of Homeland Security in assessing asylum claims. By regulation, the Department of State may provide information on country conditions that may be pertinent to the adjudication of asylum claims. The purpose of these profiles is to provide information relating to such conditions; they are not intended to convey a description of all of the circumstances from which legitimate asylum claims may arise.

Profiles are prepared by State Department officers with expertise in the relevant area and are circulated for comment within the Department, including to overseas missions, and to other agencies if appropriate. Adjudicators may also wish to review the applicable chapter of the Department of State's annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices on line at: www.state.gov/ and other publicly available material on conditions in this country.

II. CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

Albania is one of the poorest and least developed countries in Europe. From World War II until 1990, its inhabitants – now estimated at 3.1 million – were isolated from the outside world by an exceptionally repressive and idiosyncratic Communist regime. While Albania still lags behind most of the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe in establishing a market economy, it has had the fastest economic growth of any nation in the region and is rapidly developing.

The Communist regime began to disintegrate and freedom of travel was restored in 1990 there was an immediate mass exodus of Albanians, primarily for economic reasons. Presently about one in seven Albanian citizens lives abroad. Interest in immigration to the U.S., where there has been a well-established Albanian community for many decades, remains high. The majority of immigrants are drawn by the prospects of higher wages and standard of living. Many Albanians have family ties with long-established members of the large Albanian communities in such cities as Boston, New York, and Detroit that go back several generations.

The repressive policy of the Communists persisted until 1988, when enforcement ended, although the persecutory laws were not taken off the books until 1990. A number of political parties participated in an emerging democratic system during the highly volatile and sometimes violent transitional period of 1990-1992. Two of them, the Democratic Party (DP) and the Socialist Party (SP), have been dominant throughout the subsequent history of the country, and governing power has shifted between the two. There are currently 12 political parties represented in the National Assembly.

The country has made steady progress toward democratization and economic stabilization despite the chaos of 1997, when the collapse of pyramid investment schemes cost many Albanians their life savings, and the ensuing crisis led to an almost total breakdown of the state. In many cases citizens, criminal bands, and other groups seized local power -- especially in the south -- and roughly 700,000 firearms were looted from military depots. However, an agreement in March 1997 by all major political parties to form a government of national reconciliation proved to be a turning point, and the authorities established sufficient public order to permit new elections in June. The Socialist Party was victorious in those elections, deemed by international observers to have reflected the will of the electorate, and its coalition retained a parliamentary majority until the most recent parliamentary elections held in July 2005.

The July 2005 national parliamentary elections, Albania's sixth general election since the fall of communism, were conducted in a noticeably improved environment with little of the violence or intimidation that marred previous elections. However, official election results were delayed for weeks due to the allegations of some irregularities complex complaint and appeals and procedures, and the need to re-run the elections in several zones. On September 2, 2005 President Alfred Moisiu convened the new Parliament and nominated Sali Berisha, the leader of the Democratic Party to replace outgoing Socialist Prime Minister Fatos Nano

Albania remains a country with a high degree of organized crime and endemic corruption. However, there have been no outbreaks of political violence since 1998, and the available evidence suggests that neither the Government nor the major political parties engage in policies of abuse or coercion against their political opponents. While serious political repression existed in the past, there are no indications of systemic political persecution in Albania at the present time.

III. CLAIMS AND RELEVANT COUNTRY CONDITIONS

A sampling of Albanian claims reviewed by this office indicates that a majority are based on political opinion.

A. Claims Based on Political Opinion

The political history and environment of Albania can be separated into distinct periods based on political conditions.

Under the Communists: Many asylum applicants claim that they and/or their families were mistreated during the Communist reign from 1945 to 1990. With the exception of the Party elite, most Albanians suffered under a regime characterized by police brutality and concentration and labor camps. The rare case of political dissent was dealt with harshly, both for the individual responsible and his or her entire family. In contrast to most other Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the Albanian authorities banned

religious observance entirely and eliminated all vestiges of private property. Repression was so severe that open defiance was extremely rare.

With the end of the Communist period, the nature of the political system changed fundamentally. Fifteen years have passed since repressive measures were lifted. The rejection of the former Communist regime, its methods and policies, appears to be total. In contrast to some other former Communist countries, there is no indication that former Communists (who are few in number, thoroughly discredited, and powerless) -- whether in the Government, opposition, or enforcement organizations -- have sought retribution against opponents of the Communist regime or the many individuals who have returned to Albania after having fled abroad.

Violence and Politics - 1997: Many applicants seeking asylum have reported violence suffered as a result of participation in elections or election campaigning in 1997, the most chaotic year in recent Albanian history due to the collapse of the pyramid investment schemes. In the largest number of politically based claims sampled, the applicants assert that they are members of the opposition Democratic Party and that they were, or would be, persecuted by the Socialist Government or the Socialist Party. There are no indications that the Socialist Party, either through its own organization or through government authorities, has been engaged in a pattern of repression or violent behavior against its opponents.

At the beginning of 1997, following the collapse of the pyramid schemes, there was a general breakdown of order and civil society. Unofficial estimates were that more than 2,000 people were killed during the first 6 months of 1997. Rioters attacked government and police offices, broke into armories, and insurgent groups occupied towns and regions. There were many deaths, injuries, and large-scale flight from the country. The Socialists -- the opposition party at the time -- blamed the Democratic Party Government for the crisis, and charged that the Government condoned the use of brutal police force against them during the first half of the year; the Democratic Party charged the opposition with using violence to topple the government. However, most of the violence resulted from a mix of pent-up frustrations with the economic disaster and a breakdown of law and order that facilitated common criminality and the settling of old scores.

Further deterioration was prevented when the President and Democratic Party leader Sali Berisha agreed to the formation of a temporary administration comprised of all parties, and the holding of general elections in June. There were isolated instances of violence during the election process, but most independent domestic and international observers judged the elections themselves to have been generally fair. The elections led to an overwhelming Socialist Party victory. The Democratic Party protested the results of these and later elections and periodically boycotted national and/or local Government institutions until 2002.

1997-1998: Public order was restored after the chaos of 1997. Although Democratic Party officials alleged that over 21 party members, supporters, and local government officials were killed by police or Socialist Party supporters between 1997 and 1999, none

of these cases has ever been confirmed either by Albanian authorities or by independent human rights organizations. The most notorious of these events, mentioned in many asylum claims, was the September 12, 1998 murder of Democratic Party leader Azem Hajdari. Although three individuals were eventually tried and convicted for his murder, Democratic Party activists continue to argue that the Socialist Party played a role in the crime. Albania's political climate immediately after Hajdari's murder was extremely turbulent. There were a large number of demonstrations, and armed mobs attacked government buildings. In the midst of this, on September 14, Prime Minister Nano fled to Macedonia to escape the angry mobs; he later returned and resigned his office. Order was restored soon thereafter with the election of Socialist Party General Secretary Pandeli Majko as Prime Minister.

Since 1998: Albania's human rights record has improved steadily since 1998 when the Socialist Party came to power. The Socialist Party evolved as the primary center-left heir to the former Communist Party and its leadership. However, certain elements of the communist party also joined the Democratic Party, and both major parties repudiated thoroughly the communist party and its legacy. Party loyalties are fierce on all sides and there have been instances of politically motivated violence in the past, but there are no indications that the Socialist Party, either through its own organization or through Government authorities, is engaged in a pattern of repression or violent behavior against its opponents. The consensus of observers from international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is that in recent years Albanians have been able to exercise freely their right to change their government through democratic means. Such a right necessarily includes the ability - of individuals and political parties - to organize and campaign broadly free from Government interference.

Nation-wide local elections held in October 2000 were carried out in a calm and orderly manner with some electoral irregularities but very few incidents of violence. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe (COE), and other international monitors judged the election to have been generally free and fair, although they cited police interference in a limited number of instances as a problem. Instances of politically motivated violence appear to have been limited to one isolated case in Kavaja during the 2000 pre-election campaign, in which, according to Amnesty International, the police beat Democratic Party supporters.

Despite the positive conclusions of international and human rights observers that the elections were generally free and fair, Democratic Party members charged that the elections had been rigged and staged daily demonstrations in November 2000 in Tirana. There were a number of incident in which demonstrators attacked government buildings and police. There were large-scale, but generally short-term, arrests. At the end of November, a Democratic Party demonstration in the northern town of Bajram Curri ended in clashes between police and armed men in which one man died and others were wounded.

Parliamentary elections in 2001 were generally peaceful, according to international observers. There were again a number of allegations of electoral irregularities and police

harassment, but no systemic or organized mistreatment has been documented. Municipal elections were held in October 2003 and, although hotly contested, were also generally free of violence and were carried off with no police interference. The one documented incidence of violence was limited to small-scale clashes between individual competing party supporters in the town and region of Himara. There were no cases of politically motivated killings in the period 2001-2003.

In 2005, Parliamentary elections were conducted in relative peace and with few reports of intimidation. However, election results were not finalized for weeks, due to some irregularities, complex procedures, appeals and re-runs. On September 3, 2005 President Moisiu nominated Democratic Party leader Sali Berisha to form a new government, replacing outgoing Socialist Prime Minister Fatos Nano. The Democrat Party and its allies took control of Parliament with 81 of the 140 seats, and following a smooth transition of power the new government was sworn in on September 11.

Election Monitors and Commission Members: A number of asylum applicants indicate that as local election-day observers for their party in the 1990s, they were subject to severe and repeated physical reprisals. In light of the heated atmosphere surrounding Albanian elections, occasional acts of violence against one or another of the participants cannot be ruled out. However, a review of recent reports by international observers and human rights organizations turned up no mention of such occurrences, suggesting that there has not been a pattern of such behavior since the 1997 elections. Although there appear to have been an isolated number of such allegations, including in Himara in 2003, these were minor in nature. The current electoral code provides that each local election commission include members from the most popular parties and that observers be permitted from all political parties and a variety of non-governmental and international organizations. Decisions on validating or not validating a particular ballot are taken by vote. Party and NGO observers were given the opportunity to submit formal complaints about the process. International observers who monitored the October 2003 municipal elections and the recent 2005 parliamentary elections reported that these procedures were generally followed. The behavior of party and NGO election observers, including those who filed formal complaints, did not suggest any fear of subsequent retaliation.

Fear of the SHISH: Albania's State Intelligence Service (SHISH), formerly known as SHIK, has both internal and external intelligence functions. Following the 1996 parliamentary elections, public perception was that SHISH was a Democratic Party tool used by Sali Berisha to advance his and his party's aims. Consequently, the National Reconciliation Government reached a compromise in 1997: SHISH was put under a jurist, and the Government appointed a former Central Election Commission deputy chairman as its head. The size of the intelligence service has been substantially reduced through attrition, resignation, and restructuring. Today, SHISH continues to increase its level of professionalism and there is no evidence that the organization is engaged in political activity.

B. Claims Based on Race or Ethnicity

Albania is largely homogenous racially and ethnically, despite clan loyalties and a traditional rivalry between north and south reflecting a historic division between the dialects of the Gheghs in the north and the Tosks in the south. Regional identifications do not result in patterns of mistreatment. Clan and family rivalries sometimes result in blood feuds over personal or business matters.

The Greeks are the largest ethnic minority in Albania, followed by small groups of Macedonians, Montenegrins, Aromanians (also known as Vlachs), Roma and an Egyptian community. There are doubtless instances of personal discrimination on ethnic grounds, but there are no restrictions based on legal, institutional or government policy. The ethnic Greek minority, led by their cultural association Omonia, collectively pursued grievances with the Government regarding Greek-language education, property rights, and government acceptance of documentation confirming their ethnicity. There are five ethnic Greeks -- the only minority group represented in Government -- in Parliament and two ethnic Greek ministers in the Cabinet. Albanians able to prove Greek heritage are often eligible for special visas and/or work permits from the Greek government, allowing free movement to Greece and employment rights there.

The Roma and the Egyptian communities are among the most neglected groups in the country. There have been reports that police target Roma for abuse. In addition to societal discrimination, these groups generally suffer from high illiteracy, poor health conditions, lack of education, and marked economic disadvantages.

C. Claims Based on Religion

Albanians as a whole are not strongly religious and the country is recognized for its religious tolerance. Sunni Muslim, Bektashi Muslim, Albanian Orthodox, and Roman Catholicism represent the major faiths practiced in Albania. According to a census conducted in the 1970's (the last time questions about religion were included in census surveys), roughly 70 percent of the population was either Sunni or Bektashi Muslim. There is a small, but growing, number of Protestants, and all religious groups freely practice their faith. Inter-marriage between adherents of different faiths is common. The leadership of the country reflects the religious diversity of the population. There has been no evidence to indicate any pattern of government mistreatment of individuals on the basis of religious belief. Moreover, the government has been quick to address cases of discord among religious groups. For example, in 2003 when Albanian Bektashis complained that they were being harassed by Albanian Sunnis – who were paid by non-Albanian Sunnis – the Government stepped in quickly to stop the harassment.

D. Claims Based on Membership in a Social Group

Homosexuals: Claims of mistreatment based on the grounds of homosexuality have been few. However, cultural and religious traditions generally weigh against the open practice of homosexuality and under the communist regime homosexuals received sentences of up to seven years. The new penal law of 1995 repealed article 137 proscribing homosexuality, and a gay association has been officially registered. In the 2005 Human Rights report NGOs claim that police often targeted the homosexual community for physical and verbal abuse. In one specific incident in June, according to the ombudsman's office, police at the Tirana police commissariat detained, insulted, and physically mistreated a member of the Gay Albanian association. Medical experts verified the mistreatment.

Victims of Trafficking: A small but increasing number of asylum applicants are young women who express fear that they will be trafficked into forced prostitution. A 2002 Ministry of Public Order study indicated that approximately 5,000 Albanian women have been trafficked since 1992.

Generally victims of trafficking are either deceived with false promises of marriage and job offers, or in some cases are aware that they will work in prostitution but are not aware that they will be forced into virtual slavery. Traffickers generally target poor, uneducated women. Family members are sometimes involved in recruiting or selling relatives to traffickers. The use of force and kidnapping for trafficking, though rare, has been reported. Some government authorities are complicit in trafficking, and the government has initiated cases against some such officials.

Women lucky enough to escape from their traffickers often do not file formal charges with the police out of fear that their pimps will retaliate against them or their families. Those who do press charges are frequently threatened with death and some women in this

situation live as virtual prisoners in NGO-operated shelters. Despite the existence of a witness protection law, witness security and protection is virtually impossible. Lack of real security impedes the Government's ability to build strong cases against traffickers, although ad hoc cooperation from the international community led to the protection and relocation of five witnesses outside of the country. However, few countries (including the United States) have laws in place to allow for the entry and permanent residence of these women. Because the number of countries able to accept these witnesses is so small, it is unclear how long the international community will operate this ad hoc witness protection assistance. The Government is currently drafting witness protection legislation and will assume this responsibility upon its implementation.

Although returning victims of trafficking received little help from the authorities in the past, this is changing. NGOs operate a few small shelters for trafficked women and the Government operates a reintegration center for trafficking victims and illegal migrants. The police have an anti-trafficking unit and have increased cooperation with service-providing NGOs.

E. Torture and Police Misconduct:

The Albanian Constitution prohibits torture. Two human rights organizations, the Albanian Helsinki Committee and the Albanian Human Rights Group, report that police forces nationwide continue to use inhumane or excessive treatment; however, both noted that such behavior is declining. Often, maltreatment occurs in pre-trial detention facilities and involves strong-armed tactics to force evidence from individuals charged with or suspected of crimes.

There are no known cases, as of the date of this report, of individuals in prison or detention for political reasons. In 2003, many countries increased deportations of illegal Albanian residents back to Albania in large numbers. Albania signed a readmission agreement with the EU in 2005 which will become effective in 2007. No reports or evidence of any mistreatment of returnees at the hands of police or others have been received.

IV OTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADJUDICATORS

Victims of Blood Feuds and Criminal Groups: The country continues to experience high levels of violent crime. A number of killings are the result of individual or clan (*fis*) vigilante actions connected to traditional "blood feuds." Blood feuds, practiced primarily in north and northeastern Albania, are based on the medieval Code of Lek Dukagjini (also known as the "kanun"). According to the Ministry of Public Order, more than 10 individuals were killed in blood feuds in 2004. Under the kanun, only adult males are acceptable targets for blood feuds; however, women and children often are killed or injured in the attacks. The National Reconciliation Committee, an NGO focused on the issue of blood feuds, estimated in 2004 that 670 families were self-imprisoned at home and that 160 children were prevented from attending school due to fear of revenge, a

considerable reduction from prior years. It has become common today to describe any type of revenge killing as a blood feud. However, in many contemporary cases these involve criminal gangs and their relevant networks rather than historical family kinship groups.

High Emigration Rates: Since 1990, emigration from Albania has been by far the highest of any European post-Communist country. At least 700,000 -- compared to the roughly 3.1 million Albanians who live in Albania -- reside abroad. Poverty (Albania is generally rated the second poorest country in Europe, after Moldova) and a high birth rate are major contributing factors. In a 1998 survey published by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 63% of respondents reported that they probably or definitely would emigrate.

APPENDIX I

CHRONOLOGY OF RECENT SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

January 1997	Several popular pyramid investment schemes collapse; demonstrations begin in the southern city of Vlore.
March 1997	Previous Meksi government resigns; angry crowds attack warehouses and army depots -- stealing weapons -- after the collapse of pyramid schemes; Albanian Parliament declares "State of Emergency" all over the country; Democratic Party leader Sali Berisha reelected President by Parliament; Government of National Reconciliation set up under Prime Minister Fino; U.N. Security Council authorizes Multilateral Protection Force (MPF).
June 1997	Elections lead to landslide victory for Socialist Party of Fatos Nano and rejection by referendum of Leka Zogu's claim to the throne.
July 1997	Parliament convenes, elects Rexhep Meidani as President; Prime Minister Fatos Nano takes office.
August 1997	Democratic Party ends boycott of Parliament; MPF departs.
February 1998	Rioters and rebel police units take control of northern city of Shkoder in worst outbreak of violence since March 1997.
June 1998	Partial local elections held; Socialist Party-led coalition wins.
July 1998	Democrats boycott Parliament as sign of protest for removal of immunity of Sali Berisha.
September 1998	Leader of Student Movement of 1990 and prominent Democratic Party leader Azem Hajdari assassinated; angry armed crowds attack main state buildings; Prime Minister Nano flees to Macedonia, later returns and resigns.
October 1998	Socialist Party General Secretary Pandeli Majko elected Prime Minister.
November 1998	New constitution approved by referendum.
March-September 1999	Nearly 500,000 refugees from Kosovo enter Albania.

- July 1999 Democratic Party agrees to end boycott of Parliament after assurances that Socialist Party government will investigate Hajdari's murder.
- October 1999 Pandeli Majko replaced by Deputy Prime Minister Ilir Meta.
- October 2000 Socialists win local elections that are deemed improvement over previous elections by international community.
- January 2001 Genc Pollo, a Democratic Party reformer, splits from the party and creates the New Democrat Party. Albania and the former Yugoslavia re-establish diplomatic relations broken off during the Kosovo crisis in 1999.
- April 2001 A U.N. report warns that thousands of Albanians are being poisoned on a daily basis by fatal toxins in their environment. The report says that toxic levels are thousands of times higher than those permitted in EU states, and calls on the international community to help.
- July 2001 Governing Socialist Party wins general elections, securing a second term in office. Prime Minister Meta states that his priorities will be European integration and an end to energy shortages. Starting in September, Meta heads a new coalition government.
- December 2001 A rift opens between Meta and his Socialist Party Chairman Fatos Nano. Nano pressures three ministers to resign and blocks the appointment of their replacements.
- January 2002 Failing to resolve the internal party feud, Meta resigns as Prime Minister.
- February 2002 Pandeli Majko becomes Prime Minister and forms a new government, as rival Socialist Party factions agree to end their infighting.
- June 2002 Parliament elects Alfred Moisiu President after political foes Nano and Berisha (with help from the European Parliament) reach a compromise. The Democratic Party ends its boycott of local government institutions. The royal family returns from exile, but Leka Zogu maintains a low profile, and Albanians appear indifferent to his presence.

- August 2002 Fatos Nano becomes Prime Minister (his fourth time in the position) after the governing Socialist Party decides to combine the roles of Prime Minister and party chairman.
- January 2003 Albania and the EU begin Stabilization and Association Agreement negotiations, as a tentative first step towards EU membership. It is understood, however, that this goal is a long way off.
- Spring-Summer 2003 Consensus between the two rival parties starts to unravel, pointing towards increased political tensions in anticipation of local elections in October.
- October 2003 Municipal elections conducted in generally free and fair manner, as observed by OSCE's Office of Democracy and International Human Rights. Socialist Party loses some support, while Democratic Party support remains steady. Deepening rift within Socialist Party threatens party's parliamentary majority.
- December 2003 Fatos Nano re-elected Socialist Party chairman. Cabinet reshuffled, but tensions between rival factions within the party remain.
- July 3, 2005 National Elections for Parliament. Complex procedures, numerous appeals, and the need for re-run elections in several zones marked an otherwise improved process that moved Albania closer to meeting international standards for democratic elections.
- September 2, 2005 The new Parliament convenes with a 81-140 seat majority for the Democratic Party and its allies. The following day the leader of the Democratic Party, Sali Berisha, is nominated by President Moisiu to form a new government.
- September 11, 2005 PM Berisha and his DP government sworn in

APPENDIX II – Political Groups and Personalities

Time for Change Coalition (DP + BF)

composed of the Democratic Party (PDSh), Republican Party (PR), New Democratic Party (PDR), Christian Democratic Party (CDP), Liberal Union Party (LUP), Agrarian Party (AP), and the Human Rights Union Party (HRUP)

PDSh leader: Sali Berisha

Seats won in 2005 Parliamentary elections: 81

Note: The majority of Albanian asylum applications claim persecution based on membership in the Democratic Party.

Socialist Party (SP)

Leader: Fatos Nano

Seat won in 2005 Parliamentary elections: 42

Note: Was originally the Albanian Workers' Party (PPSh), which ruled during Communist times; changed its name in 1991.

Socialist Democratic Party

Leader: Skender Gjinushi

Seats: 7

Democratic Alliance

Leader: Neritan Ceka

Seats: 3

Independents

Seats: 1

Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI)

Leader: Ilir Meta

Seats: 5

Prime Ministers, since 1982:

Adil Cracani (PPSh), Jan 1982 – Feb 1991

Fatos Nano (PPSh), Feb 1991 – Jun 1991

Ylli Bufi (PPSh/PS), Jun 1991 – Dec 1991

Vilson Ahmeti (no party), Dec 1991 – Apr 1992

Alexander Meksi (PDSH), Apr 1992 – Mar 1997 (Sali Berisha President)

Bashkim Fino (SP), Mar 1997 – Jul 1997

Fatos Nano (SP), Jul 1997 – Sep 1998

Pandeli Majko (SP), Oct 1998 – Oct 1999

Ilir Meta (SP), Oct 1999 – Jan 2002

Pandeli Majko (SP), Feb 2002 – Jul 2002

Fatos Nano (SP), Jul 2002 – Sep 2005

Sali Berisha (PDSH), Sep 2005 – present

Appendix III NON-IMMIGRANT VISA PROCEDURES

The Tirana NIV section interviews 99% of all applicants. The remaining 1% who are not interviewed are applicants for diplomatic or official visas, Class A referrals, and exchange visitors who are sponsored by the U.S. Government.

To apply for a visa, applicants must make an appointment for an interview. At this time, there is a backlog of approximately three weeks.

On the day of their interview, applicants present their documents to the cashier and pay a application fee. (The fee is currently \$100.00.) The applications are pre-screened, their data entered into the system, and their cases ready for interview.

Only visa applicants are allowed into the waiting room. Usually only one adult comes to the interview window at a time, although married couples are generally interviewed together. Adults traveling with children usually bring their children with them to the window. Parents must apply for minor children. Group members are interviewed separately. If an interpreter is needed, a locally employed staff member from the consular section provides this service.

All tourist, student, and work/travel visa decisions are made at the window, before the applicant leaves, unless a necessary US-issued document is missing (e.g., I-20, DS-2019, approved petition). Individual documents do not play a major role in visa adjudication, as the level of reliability of Albanian documents has proven to be low. For the same reason, the consular section has not found it productive to investigate individual documents. On the other hand, if systematic fraud is suspected, the matter is referred to the consular fraud analyst.

If the visa is refused, the passport is stamped "Application Received" with the date. If the applicant is refused based Section 221(g) (missing documents), the officer writes "(g)" below the stamp. Upon their return with the document(s), the interview will be concluded.

If a visa is approved, the applicant is given a numbered ticket and instructed that the visa will be returned by courier service within 2-3 working days. The Embassy currently contracts with Union Express, which has offices throughout Albania. Applicants are called by Union Express and instructed to come to the nearest office to retrieve their passports. Applicants must pay a delivery fee of 500 lek (US \$5) directly to Union Express.

Over the past fiscal year, post's refusal rate was 60%.