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## THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN ALBANIA

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27 April 2020

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### COVID-19 update

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- *Current Covid-19 situation:* The Ministry of Health of Albania monitors and holds daily press conferences on the COVID-19 outbreak. The detailed and updated number of cases – including statistics on patients in reanimation, number of new cases, deaths and total of positive tests for covid-19 – is published daily on the Ministry's [website](#).
- *Assessment of the health system:* According to the Albanian Ministry of Health, the country has at its disposal around 310 hospital beds for hospitalisation of patients with coronavirus. Two hospitals have been put in service of coronavirus patients in Tirana as “COVID 1” and “COVID 2”. Albania has the capacity of 500 COVID-19 tests a day with 7 491 persons tested to date. Additionally, the country ordered 84 new respirators. A hospital is being adapted to function as a quarantine hospital during the pandemic.

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### Economic impact

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#### **Short-term indicators of the economic impact**

- Real GDP growth is expected to decline by 5% in 2020 from the estimated 2.2% growth in 2019.<sup>1</sup> According to the Ministry of Finance and Economy, the first phase of lockdown will cost the economy EUR 16 million in tax revenues. The Prime Minister announced that losses to the revenues will amount to more than half a billion euros. The most affected sectors will be tourism, transport and trade. 50 000 jobs have already been lost due to the crisis.
- It is expected that the COVID-19 outbreak will instigate a recession in the economy, which heavily relies on trade with and investments from the EU (e.g. almost 50% of exports are directed to Italy)<sup>2</sup>. Within the domestic markets SMEs, manufacturing (6% of 2017 GDP) and tourism sectors (8.5% of 2018 GDP) will be among the most affected.<sup>3</sup> Unemployment rates (12.3% in 2018) may rise again and labour market conditions exacerbate, given that a notable share of the workforce lives abroad (around 30% of the population).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> International Monetary Fund (2020), *World Economic Outlook (April 2020)*, Washington, D.C., [https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP\\_RPCH@WE0/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020](https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WE0/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020)

<sup>2</sup> WITS (2018), *Trade summary for Albania*, <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/ALB/textview>

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2020), *Covid-19 crisis response in South East European economies*, [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129\\_129649-tclugxbw4j&title=COVID-19-Crisis-Response-in-South-East-European-Economies](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129_129649-tclugxbw4j&title=COVID-19-Crisis-Response-in-South-East-European-Economies)

<sup>4</sup> World Bank Group (2018), *Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2018*, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/565231521435487923/Western-Balkans-Labor-Market-Trends-2018>.

## **Financial Market**

- The government bond spread has increased by around 25% between 1 January and 31 March, signalling deteriorating investor confidence and higher perceived risk of Albanian sovereign debt.
- The Albanian currency, ALL, has depreciated by almost 7% since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. This depreciation can affect enterprises' ability to make payments denominated in foreign currency, which is a problem due to the high percentage of foreign exchange denominated loans.

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## **Policy reactions**

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- On 24 March, Prime Minister Edi Rama declared a 'state of natural disaster' across the country for a period of 30 days.

## **Extent of containment measures**

- *Containment.* The government has closed all schools, educational institutions, cultural premises, restaurants and non-critical stores. Only food stores, pharmacies and financial institutions remain open. As of April 13, there is a mandatory curfew from 17:30 to 05:00. Only one person from each household is allowed to go shopping per day for a limited period of two hours. Other travel, including by car, is only permitted for authorised employees going to work from 05:00-08:00 and returning from 16:00-17:30. On weekends, starting from 10 April, there is a strict curfew that lasts from 17:30 on Friday until Monday at 05:00 for all citizens including the activities that are allowed during the week. The elderly and children under ten are allowed to go out only at specific times during the weekend. Exceptions to these rules include the transportation of goods and foodstuffs, the state police, the armed forces, critical units of state services, media companies and deliveries.
- On 27 April, the government introduced areas called the Green Zones, which cover cities that have a lower risk than the rest of the country and where citizens are allowed to move without an authorisation from 09:30 to 17:30 and the elderly from 06:00 to 08:30. Personal vehicles are allowed to move inside the areas, with only one passenger in addition to the driver.
- As of 20 April, the government allowed economic activity to resume for 600 sectors such as agriculture and animal husbandry, food production, mining and textile industry as well as the fishing sector. On 27 April, a new wave of businesses was able to resume their activities, enabling 27 589 employees to return to work. They include different kind of stores such as clothing stores, shoe and leather goods shops, furniture and household items stores, florist shops, lighting, electronic and telecommunications equipment stores. Taxi service is now allowed for only one passenger per car.

## **Border measures**

- All border crossings in Albania are closed, with a few exceptions (mainly transport of goods, diplomatic corps). Tirana International Airport is closed to air traffic except for state, military, medical and emergency flights.
- Travellers returning to Albania from COVID-19 affected areas subject to a mandatory 14-day self-isolation regardless of their residence status.
- On 29 March, the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs in cooperation with the Diplomatic Representation of the Republic of Albania throughout the world started repatriation operations for Albanian citizens.

### **Measures to cope with the health emergency**

- On 3 April, Albania received 8 tons of personal protective equipment for medical staff, reaching a total of 23 tons of new equipment including masks, special clothing, goggles, protective helmets and other elements enabling the increase of the safety of doctors and nurses in dealing with COVID-19.
- An export ban has been placed on drugs and medical devices except if a special authorisation is provided by the Minister of Health.
- The elderly will receive their reimbursable drugs at home.
- Family physicians across the country are performing online counselling and treatment of patients with chronic diseases and monitoring all patients confirmed with COVID-19 who are at home with mild or moderate symptoms. Across the country, family doctors have performed more than 40 000 online consultations.

### **Monetary policy**

- As of 25 March, the Bank of Albania decided to reduce its policy rate from 1.0% to 0.5%. It reduced the interest rate for the overnight lending facility from 1.9% to 0.9% and maintained the interest rate for the overnight deposit facility unchanged, at 0.1%.
- The Bank of Albania has increased the operational capacities to guarantee the supply of the economy with currency and banknotes as well as to ensure the smooth functioning of the electronic payment system.
- The Bank of Albania has adopted the operational strategy of unlimited liquidity into the banking system. This sector, businesses, households and public sector, through this strategy, will have the possibility to withdraw at the Bank of Albania all the necessary liquidity required by them.
- The Supervisory Council decided to ease the postponement procedures by three months of loan instalments to businesses and households affected by the crisis, by providing the banking sector with the necessary regulatory space to do so.

### **Fiscal policy**

- On 19 March the government amended the 2020 budget through a normative act announcing a package of support measures of Lk 23bn (1.3% of GDP). The package is a combination of spending reallocations, spending increases and sovereign guarantees to support affected businesses.
- A total of USD 65 million was made available for the immediate needs for the most disadvantaged part of the population, for small businesses and for the potential unemployment due to the virus.
- USD 10 million was made available as a reserve fund to the Council of Ministers for any unforeseen emergencies.

### **Support to firms:**

- Support to salaries and firm liquidity: USD 100 million, through the instrument of a sovereign guarantee, for companies that have difficulties in paying employee salaries. The government will support businesses who stopped working due to the COVID-19 pandemic with a benefit of not more than USD 14 000 by paying their employees the minimum wage, ALL 26 000. The self-employed will also receive the same amount.
- Credit support: The government will permanently erase late payment interests for active debtors who are current energy consumers, family or small business, with a financial effect of up to USD 150 million.

- The government will reschedule the profit tax deadline to the second half of 2020 for all businesses with a turnover between USD 20 to 140 thousand.
- Postponement of balance sheet submission up to 1 June 2020 for businesses submitting balance sheets to NBCs online or directly.
- Expanded economic package: As of 20 April, 176 000 families will benefit from ALL 4 000 during the COVID-19 pandemic. That includes 100 000 employees in small businesses affected by the situation, 66 000 employees in large businesses and 10 000 employees in the tourism sector that were not included in the first package.

### ***Support to the population:***

- Included in the first economic package, unemployment benefits were doubled during the pandemic. Additionally, persons receiving social assistance will receive double the amount during the pandemic.
- Expanded economic package: As of 20 April, 176 000 families will receive ALL 4 000 during the COVID-19 pandemic. That includes 100 000 employees in small businesses affected by the situation, 66 000 employees in large businesses and 10 000 employees in the tourism sector.
- The unemployed jobseekers who were receiving unemployment benefits before March 10 will be able to process their demands online, and citizens that were unemployed after March 10 will be able to exceptionally apply online (by email) and receive unemployment benefits.
- The payment of rent will be postponed for the month of April and May for small businesses, families that have stopped working due to the COVID-19 situation and students that moved back home during the pandemic.
- Support for education: Albania has developed a range of televised courses for primary and secondary students that are aired on national TV channels. Distance learning is also available via online platforms such as google classroom, zoom and edmodo, and is organised at the school level.

### ***Additional measures***

- As of 20 April, citizens and businesses are able to get an authorisation online allowing them to go out or go to work.
- On 16 April, the parliament approved the government's proposal to introduce harsh prison sentences for those who violate COVID-19 measures and so change the Criminal Code.
- Any business that raises their prices abusively will be penalised.
- All passports and IDs that expire during the covid-19 pandemic will continue to be valid until the process to obtain new forms of identification becomes operational again.
- On 1 April, The Prime Minister announced that the doctors, nurses and health workers on the front line will receive an additional EUR 1 000 payment. The supporting personnel (including ambulance drivers) will benefit from an additional payment of EUR 500 during the COVID-19 crisis.
- The Council of Ministers decided for the salary of the Prime Minister, the government cabinet and the deputies to be halved for a period of three months, while the Presidency offered to voluntarily give up 50% of the salary. Additionally, the assembly called for 30 other constitutional institutions to voluntarily join the initiative to give something of their salaries.
- USD 20 million was made available to the Ministry of Defence for Humanitarian Operation.

## International support

- The EU is mobilising a package of over EUR 410 million in reallocated bilateral financial assistance to support the Western Balkans during the coronavirus emergency. Out of this package, Albania will receive EUR 4 million of immediate support for the health sector and EUR 46.7 million of support for the social and economic recovery.
- The Commission has adopted a proposal for a €3 billion macro-financial assistance (MFA) package to ten enlargement and neighbourhood partners to help them to limit the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic. Albania will receive USD 180 million out of this package.
- On April 10, the IMF approved USD 190.5 million financial assistance to Albania.
- Albania is receiving USD 700 000 in health assistance from the USA to help prepare the response of the health sector to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Albania is also receiving aid for its health care system from Turkey, China, Switzerland, Norway, Hungary and the UNDP.

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## Outlook

- *Situation prior to COVID-19:* In November 2019, Albania was hit by a high magnitude earthquake, which took a toll on physical infrastructure and economic activity, leaving a burden to the budget prior to COVID-19. Although in recent years the economy experienced a constant increase in real GDP growth, due to the earthquake and a decrease in energy production caused by a drought, it went from 4.1% to an estimated 2.2% in 2019. On the other hand, unemployment rates have been constantly declining, reaching 12.3% in 2018. The situation for youth has been improving (28% in 2019), as well as long-term unemployment (67.4% of all unemployment), although their high levels remain a concern. On the other hand, the share of informal workers kept increasing, reaching 37% in 2018. This situation has led to an outflow of the young and highly skilled from the country, with more than 30% of the population residing outside the country. Net FDI had been decreasing at an estimated 7.6%, after peaking in 2016 due to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline and the Devoll Hydropower projects. General government debt stood at 66.7% of GDP.
- Given the small size of the Albanian economy, the policy action is considerable and covers many groups affected by the containment measures. In Fall 2019, the projected GDP growth for 2020 in Albania was 3.4%,<sup>5</sup> while in April 2020 the GDP growth is projected to be -5%.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the coronavirus pandemic is expected to produce a notable recession of the economy, which heavily relies on trade with and investments from the EU, particularly Italy. Within the domestic market, SMEs, manufacturing and tourism sectors will be among the most affected. Unemployment may rise again and labour market conditions may deteriorate further given that a notable share of the workforce live abroad (around 30% of the population). Amidst the crisis, the European Commission decided to open accession negotiations with Albania.

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<sup>5</sup> World Bank (2019), *Western Balkans Regular Economic Report: Fall 2019*, Washington D.C., <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/western-balkans-regular-economic-report>

<sup>6</sup> International Monetary Fund (2020), *World Economic Outlook (April 2020)*, Washington D.C., [https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP\\_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020](https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020)

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## THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN ALBANIA

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2 June 2020

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### COVID-19 update

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- *Current COVID-19 situation:* The Ministry of Health of Albania monitors and holds daily press conferences on the COVID-19 outbreak. The detailed and updated number of cases – including statistics on patients in remission, number of new cases, deaths and the total of positive tests for COVID-19 – is published daily on the Ministry's [website](#).
- As the number of new cases decreases, the government has begun to put a de-confinement process in place to open the economy step by step, including the reopening of touristic activities under health and safety protocols and completely removing its curfew. On 1 June, Albania opened land borders with all neighbouring countries.
- *Assessment of the health system:* Two main hospitals were put into service for coronavirus patients in Tirana as “COVID 1” and “COVID 2”. According to the Albanian Ministry of Health, they had around 310 hospital beds for the hospitalisation of patients with coronavirus at their disposal. More hospitals have since been adapted to function as quarantine hospitals during the pandemic. Albania has the capacity of 500 COVID-19 tests per day with more than 15 000 persons tested to date. Additionally, the country possesses a total of 304 respirators. On 18 May, due to the decrease in the number of new cases, hospitals were allowed to start performing planned interventions and the “COVID 2” hospital returned to its usual activities.

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### Economic impact

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#### *Short-term indicators of the economic impact*

- Real GDP growth is expected to decline by 5% in 2020 from the estimated 2.2% growth in 2019.<sup>1</sup> According to the Ministry of Finance and Economy, the first phase of lockdown will cost the economy EUR 16 million in tax revenues. The Prime Minister announced that losses to the revenues will amount to more than half a billion euros. The most affected sectors will be tourism, transport and trade. 50 000 jobs have already been lost due to the crisis.
- It is expected that the COVID-19 outbreak will instigate a recession of the economy, which heavily relies on trade with and investments from the EU (e.g. almost 50% of exports are directed to Italy)<sup>2</sup>. Within the domestic market's SMEs, manufacturing (6% of 2017 GDP) and tourism sectors (8.5% of 2018 GDP) will be among the most affected.<sup>3</sup> Unemployment rates (12.3% in 2018) may rise

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<sup>1</sup> International Monetary Fund (2020), *World Economic Outlook (April 2020)*, Washington, D.C., [https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP\\_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020](https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020)

<sup>2</sup> WITS (2018), *Trade summary for Albania*, <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/ALB/textview>

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2020), *Covid-19 crisis response in South East European economies*, [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129\\_129649-tclugxbw4j&title=COVID-19-Crisis-Response-in-South-East-European-Economies](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129_129649-tclugxbw4j&title=COVID-19-Crisis-Response-in-South-East-European-Economies)

again and labour market conditions might be exacerbated, given that a notable share of the workforce lives abroad (around 30% of the population).<sup>4</sup>

### **Financial Market**

- The government bond spread has increased by around 25% between 1 January and 31 March, signalling a deterioration of investor confidence and higher perceived risk of Albanian sovereign debt.
- The Albanian currency, ALL, has depreciated by almost 7% since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. This depreciation can affect enterprises' ability to make payments denominated in foreign currency, which is a problem due to the high percentage of foreign exchange denominated loans. The depreciation of ALL against EUR and the strong increase in food prices caused the CPI inflation in Albania to pick up from 1.4% in 2019 to 2.1% in March 2020, although still below the 3% target.

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### **Policy reactions**

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- On 24 March, Prime Minister Edi Rama declared a 'state of natural disaster' across the country for a period of 30 days, which was later extended by two more months until 23 June.

### **Extent of containment measures**

- *Containment:* As of 1 June, remain closed are: public transportation, indoor bars and restaurants, swimming pools, theatres, cinemas and nightclubs, as well as indoor children's playgrounds. Mass gatherings, weddings, conferences, public hearings or gatherings of all kinds remain banned. Schools resumed only for high school graduates taking university admission exams and will resume for universities during the summer with fewer students per class.
- *Curfew:* As of 1 June, there is no longer a curfew in Albania. Cars are allowed to move freely in all of the country, as the separation between Green Zones (low risk) and Red Zones (high risk) was lifted.
- *Opening of the economy:* As of 20 April, the government allowed economic activity to resume for 600 sectors such as agriculture and animal husbandry, food production, mining and textile industry as well as the fishing sector. On 27 April, a new wave of businesses was able to resume their activities, enabling 27 589 employees to return to work. These include different types of stores such as clothing stores, shoe and leather goods shops, furniture and household items stores, florist shops, lighting, electronic and telecommunications equipment stores. Taxi services are now allowed for a maximum of two passengers from the same family per car. On 11 May, driving schools, hairdressers, barbershops, dental clinics and stores in shopping malls were allowed to resume activity. On 18 May, bars and restaurants resumed activities only on the exterior of their facilities. Museums, art galleries and archaeological sites also opened on 18 May and individual sports training resumed in open areas. On 24 May, places of worship opened for all religions under the necessary restrictions. The government plans to announce at the end of May the strategy on opening public transports gradually. On 1 June, kindergartens and day-care facilities reopened. In addition, sports championships are allowed only without an audience. All parks, educational and cultural training centres, internet centres and gyms will be opened under strict security rules.

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<sup>4</sup> World Bank Group (2018), *Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2018*, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/565231521435487923/Western-Balkans-Labor-Market-Trends-2018>.



- *Tourism:* Albania drafted a protocol for the summer season including measures such as thorough temperature checks for all beach goers, an anti COVID-19 coordinator overseeing the hygiene measures for staff, obligatory masks and gloves for staff, which must also be available for all tourists and more. From 1 June, beaches will open for hotels only and from 10 June, they will open for all tourists. A licensing authority will check to make sure all beach areas fulfil the required conditions.

### **Border measures**

- On 1 June, Albania opened land borders with all neighbouring countries. Although Greece has not opened its borders yet, starting from mid-May the two countries agreed for around 10 000 Albanian agriculture seasonal workers to go work in Greece temporarily.
- All other border crossings in Albania are closed, with a few exceptions (mainly transport of goods, diplomatic corps). Tirana International Airport is closed to air traffic except for state, military, medical and emergency flights.
- On 29 March, the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, in cooperation with the Diplomatic Representations of the Republic of Albania throughout the world, started repatriation operations for Albanian citizens.

### **Measures to cope with the health emergency**

- On 3 April, Albania received 8 tons of personal protective equipment for medical staff, reaching a total of 23 tons of new equipment including masks, special clothing, goggles, protective helmets and other elements enabling the increase of the safety of doctors and nurses in dealing with COVID-19.
- An export ban has been placed on drugs and medical devices except if a special authorisation is provided by the Minister of Health.
- The elderly receive their reimbursable drugs at home.
- Family physicians across the country are performing online counselling and treatment of patients with chronic diseases, and monitoring all patients confirmed with COVID-19 who are at home with mild or moderate symptoms.

### **Monetary policy**

- As of 25 March, the Bank of Albania decided to reduce its policy rate from 1.0% to 0.5%. It reduced the interest rate for the overnight lending facility from 1.9% to 0.9% and maintained the interest rate for the overnight deposit facility unchanged, at 0.1%.
- The Bank of Albania has increased the operational capacities to guarantee the supply of the economy with currency and banknotes as well as to ensure the smooth functioning of the electronic payment system.
- The Bank of Albania has adopted the operational strategy of unlimited liquidity into the banking system. Through this strategy, the banking sector, businesses, households and the public sector will have the possibility to withdraw at the Bank of Albania all the necessary liquidity required by them.
- The Supervisory Council decided to ease the postponement procedures by three months of loan instalments to businesses and households affected by the crisis, by providing the banking sector with the necessary regulatory space to do so.
- Until the end of June 2020, the distribution of dividends from 2019 and 2020 to banks is suspended. In addition, the supervisory board and top management of the Bank of Albania had their salaries halved for the duration of the pandemic.

- On 28 May, the Bank of Albania announced the temporary suspension of the payment of loan instalments for all categories of customers, for an additional period, from 1 June to 31 August 2020. It also suspended temporarily the creation of reserve funds for real estates obtained instead of the payment of loans until December 2020.
- As of 28 May, banks can restructure current loan agreements in order to find adequate solutions depending on borrowers' solvency until 31 December 2020 without additional provisioning costs and without deteriorating the status of the borrowers. The current regulation and requirements related to the restructuring of loans will be in place for one more year until January 2022.

### ***Fiscal policy***

- The government has allocated a total of ALL 45 billion (2.8% of GDP) through two support packages for the population and the private sector affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes budget spending, sovereign guarantees and tax deferrals.
- On 19 March, the government amended the 2020 budget through a normative act announcing a package of support measures of ALL 23bn (1.3% of GDP). The package is a combination of spending reallocations, spending increases and sovereign guarantees to support affected businesses.
- A total of USD 65 million was made available for the immediate needs of the most disadvantaged part of the population, small businesses and for the potential unemployment due to the virus.
- USD 10 million was made available as a reserve fund to the Council of Ministers for any unforeseen emergencies.

### ***Support to firms:***

- *Support to salaries and firm liquidity:* USD 100 million, through the instrument of a sovereign guarantee, was allocated to companies that have difficulties in paying employee salaries. The government will support businesses who stopped working due to the COVID-19 pandemic with a benefit of not more than USD 14 000 by paying their employees the minimum wage, ALL 26 000. The self-employed will also receive the same amount.
- *Credit support:* The government will permanently erase late payment interests for active debtors who are current energy consumers, family or small business, with a financial effect of up to USD 150 million.
- The government announced a sovereign guarantee of ALL 5 billion (0.9% of GDP), providing loans for working capital of the tourism sector and active processing exporting companies with the government bearing interest costs.
- The government will reschedule the profit tax deadline until after September for all businesses that had to stop their activity due to the pandemic. However, tourism, active processing and call centres, small businesses with less than ALL 14 million in turnover can defer payments of profit tax to next year.
- The General Directorate of Road Transport Services announced the payment of 100% of the annual tax for 2020 for 7204 transportation vehicles such as buses, amounting to ALL 170 million.
- Balance sheet submissions are postponed until 1 June 2020 for businesses submitting balance sheets to NBCs online or directly.

### ***Support to the population:***

- *Unemployment measures:* Included in the first economic package, unemployment benefits were doubled during the pandemic. As of 20 April, from the expanded economic package, 176 000

families will receive ALL 40 000 during the COVID-19 pandemic. That includes 100 000 employees from small businesses affected by the situation, 66 000 employees from large businesses and 10 000 employees from the tourism sector. Businesses that do not apply for their employees will be fined. The unemployed jobseekers who were receiving unemployment benefits before 10 March will be able to process their requests online, and citizens that were unemployed after 10 March will be able to exceptionally apply online (by email) and receive unemployment benefits.

- *Support for vulnerable groups:* Persons receiving social assistance will receive double the amount during the pandemic. The payment of rent will be postponed for the months of April and May for small businesses, families that have stopped working due to the COVID-19 situation, and students that moved back home during the pandemic.
- *Support for education:* Albania has developed a range of televised courses for primary and secondary students that air on national TV channels. Distance learning is also available via online platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom and Edmodo, and is organised at the school level. Online lectures will continue until the end of May.

### ***Additional measures***

- As of 20 April, citizens and businesses are able to get an authorisation online allowing them to go out or go to work.
- On 16 April, the parliament approved the government's proposal to introduce harsh prison sentences for those who violate COVID-19 measures, thus changing the Criminal Code.
- Any business that raises their prices abusively will be penalised.
- All passports and IDs that expire during the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to be valid until they are able to obtain new forms of identification. The renewal process has become operational again and citizens may now make their appointments online.
- On 1 April, the Prime Minister announced that the doctors, nurses and health workers on the front line will receive an additional EUR 1 000 payment. The supporting personnel (including ambulance drivers) will benefit from an additional payment of EUR 500 during the COVID-19 crisis.
- The Council of Ministers decided that the salary of the Prime Minister, the government cabinet and the deputies will be halved for a period of three months, while the Presidency offered to voluntarily give up 50% of their salary. Additionally, the assembly called for 30 other constitutional institutions to voluntarily join the initiative and give a part of their salaries.
- USD 20 million was made available to the Ministry of Defence for Humanitarian Operation.

### ***International support***

- The EU is mobilising a package of over EUR 410 million in reallocated bilateral financial assistance to support the Western Balkans during the coronavirus emergency. Out of this package, Albania will receive EUR 4 million of immediate support for the health sector and EUR 46.7 million of support for the social and economic recovery.
- The Commission has adopted a proposal for a EUR 3 billion macro-financial assistance (MFA) package to ten enlargement and neighbourhood partners to help them limit the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic. Albania will receive USD 180 million out of this package.
- On 10 April, the IMF approved USD 190.5 million in financial assistance to Albania.
- Albania is receiving USD 700 000 in health assistance from the USA to help prepare the response of the health sector to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Albania is also receiving aid for its health care system from Turkey, China, Switzerland, Norway, Hungary and the UNDP.

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## Outlook

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- *Situation prior to COVID-19:* In November 2019, Albania was hit by a high magnitude earthquake, which took a toll on physical infrastructure and economic activity, leaving a burden on the budget prior to COVID-19. Although in recent years the economy experienced a constant increase in real GDP growth, due to the earthquake and a decrease in energy production caused by a drought, it went from 4.1% to an estimated 2.2% in 2019. On the other hand, unemployment rates have been constantly declining, reaching 12.3% in 2018. The situation for youth has been improving (28% in 2019), as well as long-term unemployment (67.4% of all unemployment), although their high levels remain a concern. On the other hand, the share of informal workers kept increasing, reaching 37% in 2018. This situation has led to an outflow of the young and highly skilled from the country, with more than 30% of the population residing outside of the country. Net FDI had been decreasing at an estimated 7.6%, after peaking in 2016 due to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline and the Devoll Hydropower projects. General government debt stood at 66.7% of GDP.
- Given the small size of the Albanian economy, the policy action is considerable and covers many groups affected by the containment measures. In Fall 2019, the projected GDP growth for 2020 in Albania was 3.4%,<sup>5</sup> while in April 2020 the GDP growth is projected to be -5%.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the coronavirus pandemic is expected to produce a notable recession of the economy, which heavily relies on trade with and investments from the EU, particularly Italy. Within the domestic market, SMEs, manufacturing and tourism sectors will be among the most affected. Unemployment may rise again and labour market conditions may further deteriorate given that a notable share of the workforce live abroad (around 30% of the population). Amidst the crisis, the European Commission decided to open accession negotiations with Albania.

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<sup>5</sup> World Bank (2019), *Western Balkans Regular Economic Report: Fall 2019*, Washington D.C., <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/western-balkans-regular-economic-report>

<sup>6</sup> International Monetary Fund (2020), *World Economic Outlook (April 2020)*, Washington D.C., [https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP\\_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020](https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020)



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## THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN ALBANIA

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29 June 2020

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### COVID-19 update

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- *Current COVID-19 situation:* The Ministry of Health of Albania monitors and holds daily press conferences on the COVID-19 outbreak. The detailed and updated number of cases – including statistics on patients in remission, number of new cases, deaths and the total of positive tests for COVID-19 – is published daily on the Ministry's [website](#).
- As of May 2020, the government put a de-confinement process in place to open the economy step by step, including the reopening of touristic activities under health and safety protocols and completely removing its curfew. On 1 June, Albania opened land borders with all neighbouring countries. On 15 June, air borders with Greece opened. As of 9 June, the number of new cases started rising, putting the deconfinement process into question. As the situation continued, on 19 June, the government announced an increased monitoring of the measures (keeping distance, wearing masks etc.) and a zero-tolerance policy towards those who fail to comply. On 23 June, the state of natural disaster ended, public transportation resumed the next day, however the government reiterated their statement that there shall be a strict monitoring of the implementation of the measures.
- *Assessment of the health system:* Two main hospitals were put into service for coronavirus patients in Tirana as “COVID 1” and “COVID 2”. According to the Albanian Ministry of Health, they had around 310 hospital beds for the hospitalisation of patients with coronavirus at their disposal. More hospitals have since been adapted to function as quarantine hospitals during the pandemic. With a capacity of more than 500 COVID-19 tests per day, more than 20 000 persons were tested to date in Albania. On 18 May, due to the decrease in the number of new cases, hospitals were allowed to start performing planned interventions and the “COVID 2” hospital returned to its usual activities. At the beginning of June, another hospital, named “COVID 3”, was adapted to prepare for a possible new wave of infections.

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### Economic impact

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#### **Short-term indicators of the economic impact**

- Real GDP growth is expected to decline by 5% in 2020 from the estimated 2.2% growth in 2019.<sup>1</sup> According to the Ministry of Finance and Economy, the first phase of lockdown will cost the economy EUR 16 million in tax revenues. The Prime Minister announced that losses to the revenues will amount to more than half a billion euros. The most affected sectors will be tourism, transport and trade. 50 000 jobs have already been lost due to the crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> International Monetary Fund (2020), *World Economic Outlook (April 2020)*, Washington, D.C., [https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP\\_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020](https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020)

- It is expected that the COVID-19 outbreak will instigate a recession of the economy, which heavily relies on trade with and investments from the EU (e.g. almost 50% of exports are directed to Italy)<sup>2</sup>. Within the domestic market's SMEs, manufacturing (6% of 2017 GDP) and tourism sectors (8.5% of 2018 GDP) will be among the most affected.<sup>3</sup> Unemployment rates (12.3% in 2018) may rise again and labour market conditions might be exacerbated, given that a notable share of the workforce lives abroad (around 30% of the population).<sup>4</sup>

### **Financial Market**

- The government bond spread has increased by around 25% between 1 January and 31 March, signalling a deterioration of investor confidence and higher perceived risk of Albanian sovereign debt.
- The Albanian currency, ALL, has depreciated by almost 7% since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. This depreciation can affect enterprises' ability to make payments denominated in foreign currency, which is a problem due to the high percentage of foreign exchange denominated loans. The depreciation of ALL against EUR and the strong increase in food prices caused the CPI inflation in Albania to pick up from 1.4% in 2019 to 2.1% in March 2020, although still below the 3% target.

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### **Policy reactions**

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- On 24 March, Prime Minister Edi Rama declared a 'state of natural disaster' across the country for a period of 30 days, which was later extended by two more months and ended on 23 June.

### **Extent of containment measures**

- *Containment:* As of 24 June, remaining closed were: indoor bars and restaurants, swimming pools, theatres, cinemas and nightclubs, as well as indoor children's playgrounds. Mass gatherings, weddings, conferences, public hearings or gatherings of all kinds remain banned. Schools resumed only for high school graduates taking university admission exams and for universities during the summer with fewer students per class.
- *Curfew:* As of 1 June, there was no longer a curfew in Albania. Cars were allowed to move freely in all of the country, as the separation between Green Zones (low risk) and Red Zones (high risk) was lifted.
- *Opening of the economy:* As of 20 April, the government allowed economic activity to resume for 600 sectors such as agriculture and animal husbandry, food production, mining and textile industry as well as the fishing sector. On 27 April, a new wave of businesses was able to resume their activities, enabling 27 589 employees to return to work. These include different types of businesses such as clothing stores, shoe and leather goods shops, furniture and household items stores, florist shops, lighting, electronic and telecommunications equipment stores. Taxi services were allowed for a maximum of two passengers from the same family per car. On 11 May, driving schools, hairdressers, barbershops, dental clinics and stores in shopping malls were allowed to resume activity. On 18 May, bars and restaurants resumed activities, but only on the exterior of their

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<sup>2</sup> WITS (2018), *Trade summary for Albania*, <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/ALB/textview>

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2020), *Covid-19 crisis response in South East European economies*, [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129\\_129649-tclugxbw4j&title=COVID-19-Crisis-Response-in-South-East-European-Economies](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129_129649-tclugxbw4j&title=COVID-19-Crisis-Response-in-South-East-European-Economies)

<sup>4</sup> World Bank Group (2018), *Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2018*, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/565231521435487923/Western-Balkans-Labor-Market-Trends-2018>.

facilities. Museums, art galleries and archaeological sites also opened on 18 May, and individual sports training resumed in open areas. On 24 May, places of worship opened for all religions under the necessary restrictions. The government planned to announce at the end of May the strategy on opening public transports gradually. On 1 June, kindergartens and day-care facilities reopened. In addition, sports championships were allowed - only without an audience. All parks, educational and cultural training centres, internet centres and gyms are open under strict security rules. On 24 June, public transportation was allowed to operate again throughout the country, with masks being obligatory for everyone using it.

- *Tourism:* Albania drafted a protocol for the summer season including measures such as thorough temperature checks for all beach goers, an anti COVID-19 coordinator overseeing the hygiene measures for staff, obligatory masks and gloves for staff, which must also be available for all tourists and more. From 1 June, beaches opened for hotels only, and from 10 June, they would open for all tourists. A licensing authority will check to make sure all beach areas fulfil the required conditions. It is possible to apply online for the necessary certificate to use the beaches.

### **Border measures**

- On 1 June, Albania opened land borders with all neighbouring countries.
- On 22 June, Tirana International Airport was allowed to start broad operations of regular international flights. Maritime transport was allowed to resume for all international passenger transport lines
- On 12 June, a charter flight with 189 tourists arrived in Albania from Belarus. On 15 June, Albania began working towards resuming normal flight operations by opening borders for air traffic with Greece as well as resuming regular flights with Vienna and Belgrade. However, these measures only apply to residents of the corresponding countries, and only EU residents for the flights to and from Vienna. The Albanian government will reimburse citizens who received fines for exceeding their stays in a foreign country due to the closure of borders.
- On 29 March, the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, in cooperation with the Diplomatic Representations of the Republic of Albania throughout the world, started repatriation operations for Albanian citizens.

### **Measures to cope with the health emergency**

- On 3 April, Albania received 8 tons of personal protective equipment for medical staff, reaching a total of 23 tons of new equipment including masks, special clothing, goggles, protective helmets and other elements enabling the increase of the safety of doctors and nurses in dealing with COVID-19.
- An export ban has been placed on drugs and medical devices except if a special authorisation is provided by the Minister of Health.
- The elderly receive their reimbursable drugs at home.
- Family physicians across the country are performing online counselling and treatment of patients with chronic diseases, and monitoring all patients confirmed with COVID-19 who are at home with mild or moderate symptoms.

### **Monetary policy**

- As of 25 March, the Bank of Albania decided to reduce its policy rate from 1.0% to 0.5%. It reduced the interest rate for the overnight lending facility from 1.9% to 0.9% and maintained the interest rate for the overnight deposit facility unchanged, at 0.1%.

- The Bank of Albania has increased the operational capacities to guarantee the supply of the economy with currency and banknotes as well as to ensure the smooth functioning of the electronic payment system.
- The Bank of Albania has adopted the operational strategy of unlimited liquidity into the banking system. Through this strategy, the banking sector, businesses, households and the public sector will have the possibility to withdraw at the Bank of Albania all the necessary liquidity required by them.
- The Supervisory Council decided to ease the postponement procedures by three months of loan instalments to businesses and households affected by the crisis, by providing the banking sector with the necessary regulatory space to do so.
- Until the end of June 2020, the distribution of dividends from 2019 and 2020 to banks is suspended. In addition, the supervisory board and top management of the Bank of Albania had their salaries halved for the duration of the pandemic.
- On 28 May, the Bank of Albania announced the temporary suspension of the payment of loan instalments for all categories of customers, for an additional period, from 1 June to 31 August 2020. It also suspended temporarily the creation of reserve funds for real estates obtained instead of the payment of loans until December 2020.
- As of 28 May, banks can restructure current loan agreements in order to find adequate solutions depending on borrowers' solvency until 31 December 2020 without additional provisioning costs and without deteriorating the status of the borrowers. The current regulation and requirements related to the restructuring of loans will be in place for one more year until January 2022.

### ***Fiscal policy***

- The government has allocated a total of ALL 45 billion (2.8% of GDP) through two support packages for the population and the private sector affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes budget spending, sovereign guarantees and tax deferrals.
- On 19 March, the government amended the 2020 budget through a normative act announcing a package of support measures of ALL 23bn (1.3% of GDP). The package is a combination of spending reallocations, spending increases and sovereign guarantees to support affected businesses.
- A total of USD 65 million was made available for the immediate needs of the most disadvantaged part of the population, small businesses and for the potential unemployment due to the virus.
- USD 10 million was made available as a reserve fund to the Council of Ministers for any unforeseen emergencies.

### ***Support to firms:***

- *Support to salaries and firm liquidity:* USD 100 million, through the instrument of a sovereign guarantee, was allocated to companies that have difficulties in paying employee salaries. The government will support businesses who stopped working due to the COVID-19 pandemic with a benefit of not more than USD 14 000 by paying their employees the minimum wage, ALL 26 000. The self-employed will also receive the same amount.
- *Credit support:* The government will permanently erase late payment interests for active debtors who are current energy consumers, family or small business, with a financial effect of up to USD 150 million.
- The government announced a sovereign guarantee of ALL 5 billion (0.9% of GDP), providing loans for working capital of the tourism sector and active processing exporting companies with the government bearing interest costs.



- The government rescheduled the profit tax deadline until after September for all businesses that had to stop their activity due to the pandemic. However, tourism, active processing and call centres, small businesses with less than ALL 14 million in turnover were allowed to defer payments of profit tax to next year.
- On 5 June, the government announced a zero profit tax for small businesses with less than ALL 14 million (~EUR 100 000) turnover until 2029 as part of its National Plan “Albania 2030”.
- The General Directorate of Road Transport Services announced the payment of 100% of the annual tax for 2020 for 7 204 transportation vehicles such as buses, amounting to ALL 170 million.
- Balance sheet submissions are postponed until 1 June 2020 for businesses submitting balance sheets to NBCs online or directly.

### ***Support to the population:***

- *Unemployment measures:* Included in the first economic package, unemployment benefits were doubled during the pandemic. As of 20 April, from the expanded economic package, 176 000 families will receive ALL 40 000 during the COVID-19 pandemic. That includes 100 000 employees from small businesses affected by the situation, 66 000 employees from large businesses and 10 000 employees from the tourism sector. Businesses that do not apply for their employees will be fined. The unemployed jobseekers who were receiving unemployment benefits before 10 March will be able to process their requests online, and citizens that were unemployed after 10 March will be able to exceptionally apply online (by email) and receive unemployment benefits.
- *Support for vulnerable groups:* Persons receiving social assistance will receive double the amount during the pandemic. The payment of rent will be postponed for the months of April and May for small businesses, families that have stopped working due to the COVID-19 situation, and students that moved back home during the pandemic.
- *Support for education:* Albania has developed a range of televised courses for primary and secondary students that air on national TV channels. Distance learning is also available via online platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom and Edmodo, and is organised at the school level. Online lectures will continue until the end of May.

### ***Additional measures***

- As of 20 April, citizens and businesses are able to get an authorisation online allowing them to go out or go to work.
- On 16 April, the parliament approved the government’s proposal to introduce harsh prison sentences for those who violate COVID-19 measures, thus changing the Criminal Code.
- Any business that raises their prices abusively will be penalised.
- All passports and IDs that expire during the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to be valid until they are able to obtain new forms of identification. The renewal process has become operational again and citizens may now make their appointments online.
- On 1 April, the Prime Minister announced that the doctors, nurses and health workers on the front line will receive an additional EUR 1 000 payment. The supporting personnel (including ambulance drivers) will benefit from an additional payment of EUR 500 during the COVID-19 crisis.
- The Council of Ministers decided that the salary of the Prime Minister, the government cabinet and the deputies will be halved for a period of three months, while the Presidency offered to voluntarily give up 50% of their salary. Additionally, the assembly called for 30 other constitutional institutions to voluntarily join the initiative and give a part of their salaries.
- USD 20 million was made available to the Ministry of Defence for Humanitarian Operation.

## International support

- The EU is mobilising a package of over EUR 410 million in reallocated bilateral financial assistance to support the Western Balkans during the coronavirus emergency. Out of this package, Albania will receive EUR 4 million of immediate support for the health sector and EUR 46.7 million of support for the social and economic recovery.
- The Commission has adopted a proposal for a EUR 3 billion macro-financial assistance (MFA) package to ten enlargement and neighbourhood partners to help them limit the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic. Albania will receive USD 180 million out of this package.
- On 10 April, the IMF approved USD 190.5 million in financial assistance to Albania.
- Albania is receiving USD 700 000 in health assistance from the USA to help prepare the response of the health sector to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Albania is also receiving aid for its health care system from Turkey, China, Switzerland, Norway, Hungary and the UNDP.

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## Outlook

- *Situation prior to COVID-19:* In November 2019, Albania was hit by a high magnitude earthquake, which took a toll on physical infrastructure and economic activity, leaving a burden on the budget prior to COVID-19. Although in recent years the economy experienced a constant increase in real GDP growth, due to the earthquake and a decrease in energy production caused by a drought, it went from 4.1% to an estimated 2.2% in 2019. On the other hand, unemployment rates have been constantly declining, reaching 12.3% in 2018. The situation for youth has been improving (28% in 2019), as well as long-term unemployment (67.4% of all unemployment), although their high levels remain a concern. On the other hand, the share of informal workers kept increasing, reaching 37% in 2018. This situation has led to an outflow of the young and highly skilled from the country, with more than 30% of the population residing outside of the country. Net FDI had been decreasing at an estimated 7.6%, after peaking in 2016 due to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline and the Devoll Hydropower projects. General government debt stood at 66.7% of GDP.
- Given the small size of the Albanian economy, the policy action is considerable and covers many groups affected by the containment measures. In Fall 2019, the projected GDP growth for 2020 in Albania was 3.4%,<sup>5</sup> while in April 2020 the GDP growth is projected to be -5%.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the coronavirus pandemic is expected to produce a notable recession of the economy, which heavily relies on trade with and investments from the EU, particularly Italy. Within the domestic market, SMEs, manufacturing and tourism sectors will be among the most affected. Unemployment may rise again and labour market conditions may further deteriorate given that a notable share of the workforce live abroad (around 30% of the population). Amidst the crisis, the European Commission decided to open accession negotiations with Albania.

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<sup>5</sup> World Bank (2019), *Western Balkans Regular Economic Report: Fall 2019*, Washington D.C., <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/western-balkans-regular-economic-report>

<sup>6</sup> International Monetary Fund (2020), *World Economic Outlook (April 2020)*, Washington D.C., [https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP\\_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020](https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020)

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## THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN ALBANIA

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30 July 2020

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### COVID-19 update

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- *Current COVID-19 situation:* The Ministry of Health of Albania monitors and holds daily press conferences on the COVID-19 outbreak. The detailed and updated number of cases – including statistics on patients in remission, number of new cases, deaths and the total of positive tests for COVID-19 – is published daily on the Ministry's [website](#).
- As of 30 July, Albania ranks 74<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of the number of confirmed cases with 169 cases per 100 000 inhabitants and 54<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of the number of active cases with 70.4 cases per 100 000 inhabitants.
- As of May 2020, the government put a de-confinement process in place to open the economy step by step, including the reopening of touristic activities under health and safety protocols and completely removing its curfew. On 1 June, Albania opened land borders with all neighbouring countries. As of 9 June, the number of new cases started rising, putting the deconfinement process into question. As the situation continued, on 19 June, the government announced an increased monitoring of the measures (keeping distance, wearing masks etc.) and a zero-tolerance policy towards those who fail to comply. On 23 June, the state of natural disaster ended, enabling public transportation to resume the next day. However the government reiterated their statement that there shall be a strict monitoring of the implementation of the measures. On 13 July, Albania reached another high record of new COVID-19 cases in a day. In response to this, on 15 July, the government made the wearing of masks obligatory in closed environments. The COVID-19 task force of inspection of measure implementation has doubled in numbers to increase the monitoring. On 20 July, the government announced the closing of nightclubs, discos and lounge bars and a ban on music after 20:00 in all public facilities. On 21 July, Albania reached the highest number of new infections in one day since the start of the pandemic.
- *Assessment of the health system:* Two main hospitals were put into service for coronavirus patients in Tirana as “COVID 1” and “COVID 2”. According to the Albanian Ministry of Health, they have around 500 hospital beds for the hospitalisation of patients with coronavirus at their disposal. More hospitals have since been adapted to function as quarantine hospitals during the pandemic. With a current capacity of 90 000 tests, more than 30 000 persons are tested to date in Albania. On 18 May, due to the decrease in the number of new cases, hospitals were allowed to start performing planned interventions and the “COVID 2” hospital returned to its usual activities. At the beginning of June, another hospital, named “COVID 3”, was adapted to prepare for a possible new wave of infections. The government has been continuously investing in improving hospitals and the health system in general, strengthening the capacity of life-saving equipment for intensive care units in hospitals with 265 new monitors and opening 28 summer health centers near beaches around the country. Since deconfinement started, an increase in the number of infected cases quickly followed, showing a worrisome trend in the number of hospitalised persons and deaths due to COVID-19. However, the government stated that there has been an increase in the number of persons tested for COVID-19, showing that the share of positive cases to the number of cases tested has been constant during the last week. On 13 July, the “COVID 2” hospital stopped performing its usual functions, and is once again functioning for patients infected with COVID-19 only. On 17 July, a

second laboratory was opened to perform COVID-19 tests. On 23 July, the Technical Committee of Experts approved the decision to allow COVID-19 testing in non-public laboratories for administrative reasons.

### **Short-term indicators of the economic impact**

- Real GDP growth is expected to decline by 5% in 2020 from the estimated 2.2% growth in 2019.<sup>1</sup> According to the Ministry of Finance and Economy, the first phase of lockdown will cost the economy EUR 16 million in tax revenues. The Prime Minister announced that losses to the revenues will amount to more than half a billion euros. The most affected sectors will be tourism, transport and trade. 50 000 jobs have already been lost due to the crisis.
- It is expected that the COVID-19 outbreak will instigate a recession of the economy, which heavily relies on trade with and investments from the EU (e.g. almost 50% of exports are directed to Italy)<sup>2</sup>. Within the domestic market's SMEs, manufacturing (6% of 2017 GDP) and tourism sectors (8.5% of 2018 GDP) will be among the most affected.<sup>3</sup> Unemployment rates (12.3% in 2018) may rise again and labour market conditions might be exacerbated, given that a notable share of the workforce lives abroad (around 30% of the population).<sup>4</sup>

### **Financial Market**

- The government bond spread has increased by around 25% between 1 January and 31 March, signalling a deterioration of investor confidence and higher perceived risk of Albanian sovereign debt.
- The Albanian currency, ALL, has depreciated by almost 7% since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. This depreciation can affect enterprises' ability to make payments denominated in foreign currency, which is a problem due to the high percentage of foreign exchange denominated loans. The depreciation of ALL against EUR and the strong increase in food prices caused the CPI inflation in Albania to pick up from 1.4% in 2019 to 2.1% in March 2020, although still below the 3% target.

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## **Policy reactions**

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- On 24 March, Prime Minister Edi Rama declared a 'state of natural disaster' across the country for a period of 30 days, which was later extended by two more months and ended on 23 June.

### **Extent of containment measures**

- *Containment:* On 15 July, the government made the wearing of masks obligatory in closed environments. On 20 July, the government announced that it will prohibit the opening of nightclubs, discos, lounge bars and any kind of area of service of this nature indoors or outdoors, except restaurants. Failure to comply with this obligation by the entities is punishable by a fine of ALL

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3 million and suspension of activity for a period of one year. In addition, it prohibited music after 20:00 in all facilities of any kind. Non-compliance with this obligation is punishable by a fine of ALL 1 million, and in case of repetition, the suspension of activity for a period of six months.

- *Curfew:* As of 1 June, there was no longer a curfew in Albania. Cars were allowed to move freely in all of the country, as the separation between Green Zones (low risk) and Red Zones (high risk) was lifted.
- *Opening of the economy:* As of 20 April, the government allowed economic activity to resume for 600 sectors such as agriculture and animal husbandry, food production, mining and textile industry as well as the fishing sector. On 27 April, a new wave of businesses was able to resume their activities, enabling 27 589 employees to return to work. These include different types of businesses such as clothing stores, shoe and leather goods shops, furniture and household items stores, florist shops, lighting, electronic and telecommunications equipment stores. Taxi services were allowed for a maximum of two passengers from the same family per car. On 11 May, driving schools, hairdressers, barbershops, dental clinics and stores in shopping malls were allowed to resume activity. On 18 May, bars and restaurants resumed activities, but only on the exterior of their facilities. Museums, art galleries and archaeological sites also opened on 18 May, and individual sports training resumed in open areas. On 24 May, places of worship opened for all religions under the necessary restrictions. The government planned to announce at the end of May the strategy on opening public transports gradually. On 1 June, kindergartens and day-care facilities reopened. In addition, sports championships were allowed - only without an audience. All parks, educational and cultural training centres, internet centres and gyms are open under strict security rules. Schools resumed only for high school graduates taking university admission exams and for universities during the summer with fewer students per class. On 24 June, public transportation was allowed to operate again throughout the country, with masks being obligatory for everyone using it.
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### **Border measures**

- On 1 June, Albania opened land borders with all neighbouring countries.
- On 22 June, Tirana International Airport was allowed to start broad operations of regular international flights. Maritime transport was allowed to resume for all international passenger transport lines.
- The EU continues to have closed borders with Albania, and some countries are closing further with Austria suspending flights with Albania until the end of July and Hungary adding Albania to its red list of countries with a possibility of barring citizens completely from entering the country.
- The Albanian government will reimburse citizens who received fines for exceeding their stays in a foreign country due to the closure of borders.

### **Measures to cope with the health emergency**

- On 3 April, Albania received 8 tons of personal protective equipment for medical staff, reaching a total of 23 tons of new equipment including masks, special clothing, goggles, protective helmets and other elements enabling the increase of the safety of doctors and nurses in dealing with COVID-19.

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- The EU is mobilising a package of over EUR 410 million in reallocated bilateral financial assistance to support the Western Balkans during the coronavirus emergency. Out of this package, Albania will receive EUR 4 million of immediate support for the health sector and EUR 46.7 million of support for the social and economic recovery.
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## **Outlook**

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- *Situation prior to COVID-19:* In November 2019, Albania was hit by a high magnitude earthquake, which took a toll on physical infrastructure and economic activity, leaving a burden on the budget prior to COVID-19. Although in recent years the economy experienced a constant increase in real GDP growth, due to the earthquake and a decrease in energy production caused by a drought, it went from 4.1% to an estimated 2.2% in 2019. On the other hand, unemployment rates have been constantly declining, reaching 12.3% in 2018. The situation for youth has been improving (28% in 2019), as well as long-term unemployment (67.4% of all unemployment), although their high levels remain a concern. On the other hand, the share of informal workers kept increasing, reaching 37% in 2018. This situation has led to an outflow of the young and highly skilled from the country, with more than 30% of the population residing outside of the country. Net FDI had been decreasing at an estimated 7.6%, after peaking in 2016 due to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline and the Devoll Hydropower projects. General government debt stood at 66.7% of GDP.
- Given the small size of the Albanian economy, the policy action is considerable and covers many groups affected by the containment measures. In Fall 2019, the projected GDP growth for 2020 in

Albania was 3.4%,<sup>5</sup> while in April 2020 the GDP growth is projected to be -5%.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the coronavirus pandemic is expected to produce a notable recession of the economy, which heavily relies on trade with and investments from the EU, particularly Italy. Within the domestic market, SMEs, manufacturing and tourism sectors will be among the most affected. Unemployment may rise again and labour market conditions may further deteriorate given that a notable share of the workforce live abroad (around 30% of the population). Amidst the crisis, the European Commission decided to open accession negotiations with Albania.

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<sup>5</sup> World Bank (2019), *Western Balkans Regular Economic Report: Fall 2019*, Washington D.C., <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/western-balkans-regular-economic-report>

<sup>6</sup> International Monetary Fund (2020), *World Economic Outlook (April 2020)*, Washington D.C., [https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP\\_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020](https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020)



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## THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN ALBANIA

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31 August 2020

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### COVID-19 update

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- *Current COVID-19 situation:* The Ministry of Health of Albania monitors and holds daily press conferences on the COVID-19 outbreak. The detailed and updated number of cases – including statistics on patients in remission, number of new cases, deaths and the total of positive tests for COVID-19 – is published daily on the Ministry's [website](#).
- As of 31 August, Albania ranks 72<sup>nd</sup> in the world in terms of the number of confirmed cases with 310.6 cases per 100 000 inhabitants and 39<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of the number of active cases with 131.1 cases per 100 000 inhabitants.
- As of May 2020, the government put a de-confinement process in place to open the economy step by step, including the reopening of touristic activities under health and safety protocols and completely removing its curfew. On 1 June, Albania opened land borders with all neighbouring countries. As of 9 June, the number of new cases started rising, putting the deconfinement process into question. As the situation continued, on 19 June, the government announced an increased monitoring of the measures (keeping distance, wearing masks etc.) and a zero-tolerance policy towards those who fail to comply. On 23 June, the state of natural disaster ended, enabling public transportation to resume the next day. However the government reiterated their statement that there shall be a strict monitoring of the implementation of the measures. On 13 July, Albania reached another high record of new COVID-19 cases in a day. In response to this, on 15 July, the government made the wearing of masks obligatory in closed environments. The COVID-19 task force of inspection of measure implementation has doubled in numbers to increase the monitoring. On 20 July, the government announced the closing of nightclubs, discos and lounge bars and a ban on music after 20:00 in all public facilities. On 21 July, Albania reached the highest number of new infections in one day since the start of the pandemic. On 17 August, the Ministry of Health announced its autumn-winter strategy for handling the crisis. On 25 August, the Prime Minister announced a planned increase in the wages of doctors and nurses. The school year is set to start on 14 September and will follow the guidelines approved by the Technical Committee of Experts.
- *Assessment of the health system:* Two main hospitals were put into service for coronavirus patients in Tirana as “COVID 1” and “COVID 2”. According to the Albanian Ministry of Health, they have around 500 hospital beds for the hospitalisation of patients with coronavirus at their disposal. More hospitals have since been adapted to function as quarantine hospitals during the pandemic. With a current capacity of 90 000 tests, more than 30 000 persons are tested to date in Albania. On 18 May, due to the decrease in the number of new cases, hospitals were allowed to start performing planned interventions and the “COVID 2” hospital returned to its usual activities. At the beginning of June, another hospital, named “COVID 3”, was adapted to prepare for a possible new wave of infections. The government has been continuously investing in improving hospitals and the health system in general, strengthening the capacity of life-saving equipment for intensive care units in hospitals with 265 new monitors and opening 28 summer health centers near beaches around the country. Since deconfinement started, an increase in the number of infected cases quickly followed, showing a worrisome trend in the number of hospitalised persons and deaths due to COVID-19. However, the government stated that there has been an increase in the number of persons tested

for COVID-19, showing that the share of positive cases to the number of cases tested has been constant during the last week. On 13 July, the “COVID 2” hospital stopped performing its usual functions, and is once again functioning for patients infected with COVID-19 only. On 17 July, a second laboratory was opened to perform COVID-19 tests. On 23 July, the Technical Committee of Experts approved the decision to allow COVID-19 testing in non-public laboratories for administrative reasons. On 17 August, the Ministry of Health announced an autumn-winter strategy which includes: doubling the testing capacity, hiring and training medical staff and providing free flu vaccines for the groups most in need. On 19 August, hospitals started procedures for the treatment of patients using the convalescent plasma therapy.

### **Short-term indicators of the economic impact**

- Real GDP growth is expected to decline by 5% in 2020 from the estimated 2.2% growth in 2019.<sup>1</sup> According to the Ministry of Finance and Economy, the first phase of lockdown will cost the economy EUR 16 million in tax revenues. The Prime Minister announced that losses to the revenues will amount to more than half a billion euros. The most affected sectors will be tourism, transport and trade. 50 000 jobs have already been lost due to the crisis.
- It is expected that the COVID-19 outbreak will instigate a recession of the economy, which heavily relies on trade with and investments from the EU (e.g. almost 50% of exports are directed to Italy)<sup>2</sup>. Within the domestic market’s SMEs, manufacturing (6% of 2017 GDP) and tourism sectors (8.5% of 2018 GDP) will be among the most affected.<sup>3</sup> Unemployment rates (12.3% in 2018) may rise again and labour market conditions might be exacerbated, given that a notable share of the workforce lives abroad (around 30% of the population).<sup>4</sup>

### **Financial Market**

- The government bond spread has increased by around 25% between 1 January and 31 March, signalling a deterioration of investor confidence and higher perceived risk of Albanian sovereign debt.
- The Albanian currency, ALL, has depreciated by almost 7% since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. This depreciation can affect enterprises’ ability to make payments denominated in foreign currency, which is a problem due to the high percentage of foreign exchange denominated loans. The depreciation of ALL against EUR and the strong increase in food prices caused the CPI inflation in Albania to pick up from 1.4% in 2019 to 2.1% in March 2020, although still below the 3% target.

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## **Policy reactions**

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- On 24 March, Prime Minister Edi Rama declared a 'state of natural disaster' across the country for a period of 30 days, which was later extended by two more months and ended on 23 June.

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<sup>1</sup> International Monetary Fund (2020), *World Economic Outlook (April 2020)*, Washington, D.C., [https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP\\_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020](https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2020)

<sup>2</sup> WITS (2018), *Trade summary for Albania*, <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/ALB/textview>

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2020), *Covid-19 crisis response in South East European economies*, [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129\\_129649-tclugxbw4j&title=COVID-19-Crisis-Response-in-South-East-European-Economies](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129_129649-tclugxbw4j&title=COVID-19-Crisis-Response-in-South-East-European-Economies)

<sup>4</sup> World Bank Group (2018), *Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2018*, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/565231521435487923/Western-Balkans-Labor-Market-Trends-2018>.

### **Extent of containment measures**

- *Containment:* On 15 July, the government made the wearing of masks obligatory in closed environments. On 20 July, the government announced that it will prohibit the opening of nightclubs, discos, lounge bars and any kind of area of service of this nature indoors or outdoors, except restaurants. Failure to comply with this obligation by the entities is punishable by a fine of ALL 3 million and suspension of activity for a period of one year. In addition, it prohibited music after 20:00 in all facilities of any kind. Non-compliance with this obligation is punishable by a fine of ALL 1 million, and in case of repetition, the suspension of activity for a period of six months.
- *Curfew:* As of 1 June, there was no longer a curfew in Albania. Cars were allowed to move freely in all of the country, as the separation between Green Zones (low risk) and Red Zones (high risk) was lifted.
- *Opening of the economy:* As of 20 April, the government allowed economic activity to resume for 600 sectors such as agriculture and animal husbandry, food production, mining and textile industry as well as the fishing sector. On 27 April, a new wave of businesses was able to resume their activities, enabling 27 589 employees to return to work. These include different types of businesses such as clothing stores, shoe and leather goods shops, furniture and household items stores, florist shops, lighting, electronic and telecommunications equipment stores. Taxi services were allowed for a maximum of two passengers from the same family per car. On 11 May, driving schools, hairdressers, barbershops, dental clinics and stores in shopping malls were allowed to resume activity. On 18 May, bars and restaurants resumed activities, but only on the exterior of their facilities. Museums, art galleries and archaeological sites also opened on 18 May, and individual sports training resumed in open areas. On 24 May, places of worship opened for all religions under the necessary restrictions. The government planned to announce at the end of May the strategy on opening public transports gradually. On 1 June, kindergartens and day-care facilities reopened. In addition, sports championships were allowed - only without an audience. All parks, educational and cultural training centres, internet centres and gyms are open under strict security rules. Schools resumed only for high school graduates taking university admission exams and for universities during the summer with fewer students per class. On 24 June, public transportation was allowed to operate again throughout the country, with masks being obligatory for everyone using it.
- *Tourism:* Albania drafted a protocol for the summer season including measures such as thorough temperature checks for all beach goers, an anti COVID-19 coordinator overseeing the hygiene measures for staff, obligatory masks and gloves for staff, which must also be available for all tourists and more. From 1 June, beaches opened for hotels only, and from 10 June, they would open for all tourists. A licensing authority will check to make sure all beach areas fulfil the required conditions. It is possible to apply online for the necessary certificate to use the beaches.
- *Education:* As it was announced that the school year will start on 14 September 2020, the government shared three scenarios for going back to school and will be deciding soon. Pupils will either go back to school physically for all classes, will alternate between one week of physical classes and one week of online classes or finally if the situation worsens, they will have only online classes. Pupils who could not follow online classes at the end of the school year during the pandemic, are having two weeks of classes to catch up. Additionally, the Ministry of Health shared instructions approved by the Technical Committee of Experts, to be followed during the school year, such as the obligation to wear masks for pupils in middle school or high school and other safety measures .

### **Border measures**

- On 1 June, Albania opened land borders with all neighbouring countries.

- On 22 June, Tirana International Airport was allowed to start broad operations of regular international flights. Maritime transport was allowed to resume for all international passenger transport lines.
- The EU continues to have closed borders with Albania, and some countries are closing further with Austria suspending flights with Albania until the end of July and Hungary adding Albania to its red list of countries with a possibility of barring citizens completely from entering the country.
- The Albanian government will reimburse citizens who received fines for exceeding their stays in a foreign country due to the closure of borders.

### ***Measures to cope with the health emergency***

- On 3 April, Albania received 8 tons of personal protective equipment for medical staff, reaching a total of 23 tons of new equipment including masks, special clothing, goggles, protective helmets and other elements enabling the increase of the safety of doctors and nurses in dealing with COVID-19.
- An export ban has been placed on drugs and medical devices except if a special authorisation is provided by the Minister of Health.
- The elderly receive their reimbursable drugs at home.
- Family physicians across the country are performing online counselling and treatment of patients with chronic diseases, and monitoring all patients confirmed with COVID-19 who are at home with mild or moderate symptoms.

### ***Monetary policy***

- As of 25 March, the Bank of Albania decided to reduce its policy rate from 1.0% to 0.5%. It reduced the interest rate for the overnight lending facility from 1.9% to 0.9% and maintained the interest rate for the overnight deposit facility unchanged, at 0.1%.
- The Bank of Albania has increased the operational capacities to guarantee the supply of the economy with currency and banknotes as well as to ensure the smooth functioning of the electronic payment system.
- The Bank of Albania has adopted the operational strategy of unlimited liquidity into the banking system. Through this strategy, the banking sector, businesses, households and the public sector will have the possibility to withdraw at the Bank of Albania all the necessary liquidity required by them.
- The Supervisory Council decided to ease the postponement procedures by three months of loan instalments to businesses and households affected by the crisis, by providing the banking sector with the necessary regulatory space to do so.
- Until the end of June 2020, the distribution of dividends from 2019 and 2020 to banks is suspended. In addition, the supervisory board and top management of the Bank of Albania had their salaries halved for the duration of the pandemic.
- On 28 May, the Bank of Albania announced the temporary suspension of the payment of loan instalments for all categories of customers, for an additional period, from 1 June to 31 August 2020. It also suspended temporarily the creation of reserve funds for real estates obtained instead of the payment of loans until December 2020.
- As of 28 May, banks can restructure current loan agreements in order to find adequate solutions depending on borrowers' solvency until 31 December 2020 without additional provisioning costs and without deteriorating the status of the borrowers. The current regulation and requirements related to the restructuring of loans will be in place for one more year until January 2022.

### **Fiscal policy**

- The government has allocated a total of ALL 45 billion (2.8% of GDP) through two support packages for the population and the private sector affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes budget spending, sovereign guarantees and tax deferrals.
- On 19 March, the government amended the 2020 budget through a normative act announcing a package of support measures of ALL 23 billion (1.3% of GDP). The package is a combination of spending reallocations, spending increases and sovereign guarantees to support affected businesses.
- A total of USD 65 million was made available for the immediate needs of the most disadvantaged part of the population, small businesses and for the potential unemployment due to the virus.
- USD 10 million was made available as a reserve fund to the Council of Ministers for any unforeseen emergencies.

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