

Against Price Increases and Oligarchs - A New Protest Movement in Albania

Sunday 8 May 2022, by [ANDRIOTIS Minoas](#), [PEÇULAJ Enriko](#) / [PEÇULI Enriko](#) (Date first published: 4 May 2022).

The recent price increases hit large parts of the people in Albania hard - especially because the living conditions of most people have already been difficult. On the other side, few rich people in the country have accumulated enormous wealth. In the last month, a movement has evolved that criticises the price increase and challenges the existing political order. Minoas Andriotis spoke with Enriko Peçuli, militant of the left-wing organisation [Organizata Politike](#), about the social situation in Albania and the current protest movement.

Minoas Andriotis - How have the protests come up? What are they about?

Enriko Peçuli - A few days after the Russian offensive in Ukraine, the idea of a global crisis that would drastically affect the spending capacity of the most vulnerable categories of society began to spread in Albania and beyond. Shortly before the war in Ukraine, hydrocarbon speculators in Albania began to play with oil and gas prices in a somewhat moderate way - while of course blaming the invisible hand of the free market. Afterwards, they stated that they were powerless before the sensitive stock markets that had moved as soon as the first winds of the conflict started to blow.

The situation worsened in the first days of March, when oil prices rose every morning by 30 to 40 cents per litre. At the end of the first week of March, the price of oil had increased by 30% in relation to the price before the war, reaching 270 ALL (Albanian Lek) per litre (about €2,22). Such a move would certainly cause a chain reaction, affecting food prices and basic expenses as well.

On Wednesday, March 9th, following calls on social networks, people gathered in front of the Prime Minister's Office in Tirana to oppose the unreasonable rise in prices. Until then, there had been no official position from the government regarding the price increase, except for the words of Prime Minister Edi Rama, justifying it with the fact that we are all at war. The protest intensified on the first night when, after protesters blocked a segment on the Dëshmorët e Kombit boulevard, police officers - dressed in civilian clothing and without IDs - began to arrest some of the protesters who were standing on the sidewalk. About 30 people were arrested that night, and some of them stayed in detention in Tirana for three days. The next day there were protests again in Tirana and other cities in Albania - more people in the squares, and more arrests. Within a week, a total of 300 young people had been arrested in different cities in Albania.

The protest culminated in the following days, with more than 20,000 people on the streets. It has now become a tradition to organize a big march on a regular basis to continue the demand for crisis prevention measures.

What are the slogans of the protests?

One of the most striking slogans is “*Tax the oligarchs – not the people!*” which indicates that people have understood the social contradiction between the rich and the poor.

Another slogan is “*We will go to the street in hundreds, in thousands – if the prices don’t fall, the government will.*” This slogan is the last threat to the government, which must start thinking about its own people, or it will have a terrible end. A few days before the protest started, the most serious measure proposed by the government was the suggestion that people should not use cars when going to buy food. This was said by the Minister of Energy, Belinda Balluku, at a press conference of the government, where she talked about coping with the crisis.



[Photo: Organizata Politike.]

Which parts of the society participate in the protests? Are there political organizations involved?

There is massive participation of the working class, which is the most affected by the increase in prices. But there are also people from different social groups and classes, where the professional class (with higher educational degrees) stands out, and also the lower middle class. They are starting to articulate their demands.

The only organized group involved in the protest is the *Organizata Politike* (“Political Organization”), a left-wing group made up of students, professors, and workers. Other participants are individuals from civil society who have a history of social mobilization against such injustices.



[Photo: Organizata Politike.]

What is the social situation in Albania in general?

Days before the news of the war between Russia and Ukraine spread around the world, a World Bank report on Albania said that 900,000 Albanians live on less than \$5 a day. In a country of about 2.8 million people, we find that more than 40% of the population lives below the official poverty line (\$6/day). Albania is one of the only countries – in the region and beyond – which does not have a legally defined minimum basic income in case of unemployment, although it had been calculated by the Ombudsman (a state institution also called People’s Lawyer) in the amount of 18,000 ALL (ca. €148) per month for each adult. The minimum wage is 30,000 ALL (ca. €247) and the average is around 50,000 ALL (ca. €411), while recent calculations of basic expenses show that none of these

are enough to live a life with dignity. Of course, one of the main reasons for this situation is the fact that 3% of the richest people in the country hold bank deposits (4.1 billion Euros) larger than 97% of the remaining population (3.2 billion Euros).

In short: Most Albanians are a step away from a health, economic and social disaster.

Have there been similar movements in recent years?

In terms of the social composition of the protest, similar protests took place in 2013, when Prime Minister Rama sought to import and dispose of chemical weapons from Syria, which would turn Albania into a radioactive waste bin for the sake of quick benefits. At that time, mostly the middle class, but also people from the working class came out with tens of thousands in the streets to oppose the government decision, which was eventually reversed.

The last major protest, in terms of composition and importance, was the [movement of students in 2018](#). Students from all social categories occupied squares, streets, and faculties to oppose the high fees and commercialization of higher education. This protest was essential for reducing the cost of living for students and for the democratization of the university, but also for the establishment of a new culture of protest and reaction against the neoliberal policies of the Rama government.

Almost a year and a half ago, on December 8th 2020, Tirana police executed 25-year-old Klodian Rasha in the alley in front of his house, just because he had not obeyed the order to stop for a police check during a curfew at midnight. The next day police attempted to place a gun in the young man's possession, but cameras showed the opposite and the police's alibi was too weak. In Albania, isolated for two years due to the pandemic, the social anger of thousands of young people without perspective [was forcibly discharged into the streets](#), causing the official version of the story told by the police to change. The then Minister of Internal Affairs resigned and the police officer, who killed Klodian Rasha, was sentenced to 12 years in prison for murder. These are indications that Albanian society is creating a culture of reaction, which has learned to turn anger and spontaneity into political articulation and long-term resistance.

How well are progressive and left forces organized in Albania?

As I have already mentioned, *Organizata Politike* is the only political group that participates in the recent protests. In addition, *Organizata Politike* is the only left-wing group in the country. Its main focus is student organizing and the organizing of the most important productive sectors of the economy in Albania. An indication of this is the assistance we have provided to the establishment of several unions in the private sector, specifically in call centers, oil extraction and refining, [mining](#), and the textile sector. We strive to establish a strong base of working-class consciousness in the country by raising awareness of economic rights in the workplace and political and social rights in society.

The most important case in which the combination of trade union and political consciousness culminated was the independent candidacy of the miner Elton Debreshi in the parliamentary elections of April 25th, 2021. [Elton Debreshi's campaign](#) was a national sensation, and the first case in Albania where the working class proposes a candidate of its own for the Albanian parliament. He managed to rank as the third force in the district where he ran, and as the independent candidate with the highest percentage of votes at the national level. The election result also helped us understand the political context and the iron organisation of the ruling party, which is compromised to the core with the money of the oligarchs, but structurally the most organized party in the country.



[Photo: Organizata Politike.]

Which potential do you see in the current protests? And what perspective for social change do you see in the long term?

The latest protest is one more nail enforcing the wall of social resistance. We forced the government to become serious. We as *Organizata Politike* try to articulate as much as possible the incapacity of the government to intervene in the market and we contribute to the social mobilization to provide dignified living conditions for the population. We think that this government does not have the will or the ability to take money from the rich and start a process of wealth redistribution, which would ease the economic burden that the working-class population has to shoulder in the country today. We think that the partnership with the oligarchs, which this government has established, is an indication that we need a new socio-political alternative – not only to face the crisis, but to finally build a more democratic and social state, which is based on the rights and the voices of workers, students, and the most oppressed.

Enriko Peçuli and Minoas Andriotis

P.S.

- LeftEast. May 4, 2022:
<https://lefteast.org/against-price-increases-new-protest-movement-albania/>
- Enriko Peçuli is an activist of Organizata Politike for almost six years, having started his political journey at the beginning of his bachelor's studies. He studied philosophy at the University of Tirana and was a member there of Lëvizja Për Universitetin, a movement created by Organizata Politike, whose activity culminated during the 2018 mass student protests. Now he is an activist at Organizata Politike and a union organizer.

Minoas Andriotis is an activist of the German service union [Ver.di](#)