

On Sale for One Euro: Will Albania's Forests Go Private?

Article by Emma Belmonte

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Albania's modern history is characterised by dramatic political shake-ups, but one thing has remained constant through all the turbulence: the country's lustrous forests are overwhelmingly public. This might, however, soon no longer be the case, as the Albanian government plans to privatise forests in order to bolster tourism. How will such a change affect the lives of rural communities in the region, and what are the wider implications for European forests?

Driving along winding roads in Albania's northern mountains, solitary cars and occasional groups of bikers in search of adventure find themselves immersed in a vast, dark-green sea of pines, interspersed with chestnut trees, elms, and oaks. Situated in the county of Shkodër in Northern Albania, Fushë-Arrëze and Pukë count amongst the country's greenest municipalities, the vast majority of their territories being covered by public forests.

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In the past few decades, the resounding quietude of these lustrous mountains has been further amplified by the exodus which has swept Albania since it reopened after a half-century-long isolation under communist rule. Emigration has hollowed out rural areas, whose share of the country's population dropped from 65 per cent in 1992 to 36 per cent in 2022. Shkodër county, for example, has lost around 40 per cent of its population since 2001. Moreover, from the 1990s onwards, over a million Albanians have migrated abroad, and between 2011 and 2023, the country's resident population fell by about 420,000. Among those who choose to stay, many move to the capital Tirana – home to almost a third of the country's total population – in search of better opportunities and economic prospects

“Every person who chooses to stay here is sacrificing their life,” says Ardmir Doda, the head of the Forestry Department of the municipality of Fushë-Arrëz and one of the most active figures in the local community. “Seventy per cent of my family has gone abroad, and I might follow. If things continue to go the way they are now, in five years, there will be no one left here.”

In an effort to reverse this trend of depopulation, Albania's government has passed the “Mountain Package”, an initiative encouraging individuals – especially members of the Albanian diaspora – to return home and invest in rural areas. As prime minister Edi Rama emphatically put it, the goal of the package is to “address the dream and desire [of Albanians] to return to the land of [their] ancestors.”

However, while most residents agree on the need for economic opportunities in the region, some question whether privatising forests is the way to go.



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Ambitious yet ambiguous

The Albanian government adopted the Mountain Package on 13 March 2025. The nationwide initiative particularly targets the mountainous northern parts that have benefited the least from the boom of tourism in the country, which soared especially in the southern Albanian coast. For the symbolic price of one euro, the state will sell public forest areas to private investors, who will become their lawful owners provided they carry out projects aimed at developing touristic infrastructures in the region.

The initiative includes strong financial incentives for investors. The first 500 applicants will be granted a 10-year-long tax exemption, with no obligations to the state apart from social and health insurance for their employees. Investors will also benefit from 250 million euros in new financing from the Bank of Albania, with a 70 per cent collateral guarantee from the government.

Official texts on the package are ambiguous on the criteria that determine who can become landowners. They simultaneously state that the package concerns “factual possessors” who have “continuously used an area of public forest or pasture in the last 10 years” while also explicitly mentioning emigrants, and widely including “anyone (...) with the desire and vision to build on their ancestral land.” However, interviewed municipality staff in Fushë-Arrëz and Pukë confirmed that the package is not limited to de facto possessors who are already using the land, and that there is no requirement that investors be residents in or even originally from the area.



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A quest for luxury?

A couple of kilometres away from Pukë, a large pasture has been designated as the site for a luxury hotel. The vice-mayor of the municipality, Ferit Ringa, says local authorities have come to an agreement with investors whom he describes as “three brothers originally from Pukë, living in the UK where they own three high-end restaurants.” They are now awaiting the approval of the ministry of the Economy and hope to make it the first Mountain Package project in the region. Ringa is convinced that the project would bring positive developments to the local economy: “The hotel will buy products from Pukë’s farmers and hire locals,” he explains.

Elda Muco, a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Vilnius who holds a PhD in Rural Geography and Spatial Planning, sees things differently. “There is no legal guarantee that such luxury projects will involve locals, buy their products, and benefit them in the end,” argues Muco, whose doctoral thesis focused on northern Albanian rural areas. She underlines that touristic infrastructures in southern Albania, particularly luxury ones, often serve Italian food and import luxury products from abroad rather than buying from local farmers and businesses.

The Mountain Package was unveiled in Shkodër in March in the presence of prime minister Rama. During the meeting, an Albanian producer inquired whether the government would consider making it a requirement for recipients of public funds to buy, at least in part, Albanian products for their projects. Rama brushed over the question, saying “I am a socialist, but I am not one of those socialists who believe in government intervention in everything.”

The initiative aims to develop large tourist infrastructures and, as prime minister Rama has mentioned, transform agrotourism initiatives into “a luxury experience”. Ardmir Doda from the local forestry department believes this is the right approach: “We need to build resorts like in Turkey, but in our region, who has two or three million euros to invest? No-one! People here just want jobs, they don’t have projects.” Yet large-scale real estate and tourism development projects along Turkey’s Mediterranean coast, particularly near Marmaris, have recently drawn a growing local opposition due to the damage they have caused to the local environment and traditional lifestyle.



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Vullnet Kuci, the 32-year-old owner of a guest house in Pukë, believes in tourism of a different kind. “The people coming here are not after luxury; they are seeking authenticity, nature, tradition, good food, and simple local life,” he says. Kuci worries that the package will not guarantee any benefits for local farmers, and that luxury projects do not reflect the local lifestyle. “I am not interested in extending my guest house. I want to encourage other locals to build their own, so that as many of us as possible can participate in the development of the kind of tourism we want to see here,” he adds.

Muco concurs that the government should support such bottom-up, local-led tourism development projects and focus on multiplying smaller-scale agrotourism initiatives, which are more likely to respect the environment and benefit local residents. “They will buy products from farmers and hire locals because they actually know them. And they will prefer environmentally sustainable options because they know the value of their forests and the activities that are led there. But if you dispossess people from these lands through privatisation, they won’t care for it,” she adds.

Albania’s case is unique

The Mountain Package marks a turn in the country with the largest share of public forests in Europe. In the European Union – which Albania is aspiring to join – around 60 per cent of forest areas are privately owned. In Nordic countries, this share reaches 75 per cent. In contrast, only about 3 per cent of Albania’s forest area is officially registered as private property. Even in the Western Balkans – where the proportion of public forests is higher due to the region’s history of collectivisation – this low share of private owners makes Albania stand out.

But the forests in the region are threatened by more than a change in ownership. As in Albania, climate change is putting further pressure on the forests in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, which are already suffering from unsustainable practices such as illegal logging. In Serbia, damage caused by pests, disease, fire, and climatic hazards resulted in a 268 per cent increase in the loss of wood volume from 1966 to 2019. Bosnia and Herzegovina launched a large-scale project with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 2022 to bolster the resilience of forest ecosystems through afforestation, conservation, and land restoration. Earlier this year, Serbia followed with its own extensive collaboration with the FAO, targeting similar interventions to enhance the health and sustainability of its forest landscapes.



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According to Elda Muco, even before communists took charge in Albania in 1944, only 6 per cent of Albanian forests had private owners. Public forests made up a large majority of the land and were organised according to customary law. Under this arrangement, some areas belonged to certain family lineages while all citizens could freely access and use the rest. In the north, forests and pastures were largely collective properties.

Under communism, all forests became state property and officially remained so after the fall of the socialist regime in 1991. But soon after, some locals started to invoke their ancestors' customary right to collectively manage and use local public forests – an informal arrangement recognised to this day by local authorities. Still, only one per cent of the forests were initially returned to their former owners.

A social and economic lifeline

Whenever the children of Beslim and Bedrie – the 50-year-old owners of the local shop and cafe of Qerret – come back to the village to visit their parents, they plan family picnics in the nearby heights of the scenic Munella mountain. They also regularly pay their respects to their elders, buried in the local cemetery in the forest next to the village.

Forests are an essential part of family life and traditions, and they play a crucial role in the social cohesion of rural communities. In summer, one can easily spot shepherds leading their herds across forests towards cooler pastures higher up the mountains in search of relief from the hot weather.

These woods are also home to a wide variety of medicinal and aromatic plants, berries, and mushrooms, which represent a vital source of income. “One month of picking mushrooms pays for my coffee the whole year,” says 40-year-old Valdete, sipping her espresso at Beslim and Bedrie’s cafe. Valdete has been picking mushrooms every year since she was a little girl and accompanied her mother, as children often do in the region’s villages. She sells what she finds to Beslim, who acts as the village’s collector: he buys berries, mushrooms, and plants from the pickers and drives to the county’s capital Shkodër to sell them. Beslim estimates that these pickers collect 400 kilogrammes of blackberries per day, typically over a 20-day period in summer. This amounts to 8 tonnes every year, and most of the harvest is exported from Pukë directly to Kosovo and

Serbia.



Credit: ©Emma Belmonte

“Apart from remittances sent from their children who live abroad, the revenues generated from picking often constitute the entirety of the village households’ yearly income”, explains Muco. Moreover, she emphasises that picking “is a moment of socialising between women and children of the village” and contributes to the empowerment of rural women.

The geographer worries that privatisation would disrupt these traditional activities. “The pickers would not be allowed on private forest. And if tourists wander around beyond the limits of privatised property, it will make the women very uncomfortable,” says Muco. Responding to a request for comment, the EU Delegation in Tirana also expressed concern that the Mountain Package could allow “the development of large-scale infrastructure in public forests, pastures, and communal land, potentially creating conflicts with the local communities.”

Before a contract is signed, authorities from the municipality are supposed to consult local communities through their elected representatives. However, during my discussions with residents, I realised that many of them had never heard of the Mountain Package. Beslim, who is also Qerret’s village head, is one of them. He sighs in disbelief: “People would never allow such projects in the surrounding forests.”

The lack of awareness about this initiative profoundly concerns Marie Shkjau, the 62 year-old head and founder of a women’s group in of Qerret who cooperate to sell jams, juices, and various liquors made from the fruits they pick. Shkjau tries to raise awareness in the group, but laments that there is not enough information available. “Even when you explain it, it feels abstract to them – they don’t realise it could destroy the mountain and our traditional activities in the forest,” she says.



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Eroded trust

The doubts and opposition that the Mountain Package faces are further fuelled by a distrust in the central government which, although widespread in Albania, is particularly strongly felt in Northern regions. In 2023, a poll found that only a minority of Albanians trust public institutions, with four out of five participants believing that both petty and grand corruption are widespread. The recent corruption charges against former Albanian President Ilir Meta, and earlier this year Tirana's mayor Erion Veliaj, have only added to people's scepticism.

This distrust naturally extends to government initiatives like the Mountain Package. The law requires that every application be registered in the public electronic system "e-albania", so that citizens can follow every step of every project. But the government's critics, Muco explains, see this transparency as a façade: "The package might be a mere rebranding of the 'Law on Strategic Investment' through which the government granted favours to supporters to thank them for financing their election campaigns."



Credit: ©Emma Belmonte

Northern inhabitants, who in this year's general elections, much as usual, largely voted in support of the right-wing opposition, often say they feel "discriminated against" because of their political position. Previous infrastructural projects in the North, particularly hydropower dams and polluting mining sites, have strengthened the view among residents that their lands and natural resources are being exploited while receiving few benefits. The county of Shkodër (and Pukë particularly) is rich in water resources and streams, and is home to the country's three main hydroelectric dams. But while these dams help generate and distribute electrical power across the country, locals in Pukë's villages often complain of power cuts and issues with running water.

With privatisation on the horizon, these grievances are ever more acute. Locals and experts like Muco fear that the Mountain Package could disturb the collective use of their ancestral lands and, as other projects in their regions have shown, exploit northern Albania's rich resources at the expense of its population.



Emma Belmonte is a freelance journalist with a double specialisation covering Europe and Asia. After gaining expertise in Chinese-speaking regions at the University of Oxford, she won the GEO magazine Young Reporter Grant (2024) launching her work as a reporter for media outlets such *Asialyst*, *Chinafilm* and *Figaro Magazine*. In parallel, Emma has contributed to European podcasting for *Europod*, and developed a strong interest for covering issues of social-injustice. She is the co-creator and co-host of the podcast *Parlons du Congo*.

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