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# BETWEEN THE MAP AND THE MISSION: JUSTICE ON NEW COORDINATES. AN EVALUATION OF THE 2022 JUDICIAL MAP REFORM IN ALBANIA AND ITS IMPACT ON EFFICIENCY AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE

by Julinda Beqiraj\* and Edlira Osmani\*\*

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. The 2022 Judicial Map Reform: Policy and Implementation. – 2.1. The Rationale for Reform: Legal and Institutional Background. – 2.2. The Methodology and Comparative Models. – 3. Mapping the Impact: Early Outcomes of the 2022 Judicial Map Reform. – 3.1. The Stock of Pending Cases. – 3.2. Incoming Cases. – 3.3. Human Resources – Judge and Non-Judge Staff. – 3.4. Court Efficiency Indicators – CR and DT. – 3.5. Average Statistics per Judge. – 3.6. The National Strategy for Reducing Court Backlog and the Related Roadmap on Efficiency. – 4. Access to Justice and Institutional Challenges After the Reform. – 4.1. Access to Justice Between Efficiency and Territorial Centralisation. – 4.2. Implementation Dynamics and Stakeholder Perspectives. – 5. Conclusions.

## 1. Introduction

Albania's 2016 justice reform is widely regarded as a European Union (EU)-driven transformation of the judicial system, closely tied to the country's accession process and its wider effort to strengthen the rule of law and fight corruption<sup>1</sup>. Within this broad restructuring, the territorial reorganisation of the courts adopted in 2022 stands out as one of the reform's most significant institutional measures. By redrawing the judicial map and restructuring court jurisdictions, the reform sought to align the judiciary's organisation with judicial independence, procedural efficiency, and effective access to justice<sup>2</sup>.

The 2016 justice reform revised a large share of the Constitution and built a new governance architecture – the High Judicial Council (*Këshilli i Lartë Gjyqësor*, KLGJ), the High Prosecutorial Council, the High Inspector of Justice, and the Special Structure Against Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK), with its Special Courts<sup>3</sup>. The reform architecture paired this with an extraordinary vetting process<sup>4</sup> that removed more than half of sitting magistrates from office. Vetting has strengthened integrity and public trust, but it has also created serious short-term capacity constraints, backlogs, and delays that affect the right to a trial within a reasonable time<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> E. GARUNJA, *The Effects of Constitutional Changes on the Judiciary System in Albania: The Process of Vetting*, in *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2022, p. 104.

<sup>2</sup> B. MAHO, *Approval of the New Judicial Map: A Priority of the Albanian Justice Reform*, in *Jus & Justicia*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2022, pp. 7-21.

<sup>3</sup> Law no. 76/2016, *Për disa shtesa dhe ndryshime në Ligjin nr. 8417, datë 21 tetor 1998, Kushtetuta e Republikës së Shqipërisë*, of 22 July 2016.

<sup>4</sup> The Albanian vetting process is a temporary re-evaluation of all judges, prosecutors, and key judicial officials. It assesses their assets, background, and professional competence in order to confirm, suspend, or dismiss them from office, as part of the broader 2016 justice reform aimed at restoring public trust and strengthening judicial integrity. Law no. 84/2016, *Për rivlerësimin kalimtar të gjyqtarëve dhe prokurorëve në Republikën e Shqipërisë* (Vetting Law), of 30 August 2016.

<sup>5</sup> P. AGALLIU, *Analysis of Legal and Practical Aspects of the Vetting Process*, in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Political Sciences*, ProudPen, London, 2024.

The EU placed justice reform, including a more efficient and independent judiciary, among the core political criteria for Albania's accession, repeatedly stressing in its progress reports the need to strengthen the rule of law<sup>6</sup>. Constitutional changes, new institutions, and the vetting of judges and prosecutors were explicitly framed as measures to meet EU standards and address systemic corruption and dysfunction in the justice system<sup>7</sup>. The reorganisation and functioning of the courts, including their territorial structure, was therefore not optional but a central expectation within the EU conditionality framework for opening and advancing accession negotiations<sup>8</sup>.

Within this broader EU-driven agenda, the adoption of Law no. 98/2016, "On the Organisation of the Judiciary", made the approval of a new judicial map a priority component of justice reform, intended to increase efficiency, improve access, and bring Albania closer to European best practices in court organisation<sup>9</sup>. Under strong EU conditionality to deliver visible rule-of-law improvements, the justice reform and especially the vetting process generated severe capacity constraints, growing backlogs and delays, which in turn were used to justify rationalising the court network through consolidation and centralisation, particularly at the appeal level as a way to optimise limited human resources, promote more consistent jurisprudence, and signal progress toward the rule-of-law benchmarks required for EU integration<sup>10</sup>.

The paper explores three questions. The first concerns outcomes: has the judicial map reform begun to deliver on its stated goals of improving access to justice, raising efficiency, and lifting the quality of judicial services? To answer this, we use 2022 as a baseline year and examine court performance data from 2023, 2024, and 2025.

A second question focuses on trends: what early signs can be observed in workload distribution, case backlogs, and the timeliness of proceedings that might indicate the likely long-term trajectory of the reform? By comparing statistical data across the four years, the paper seeks to identify patterns that go beyond short-term fluctuations.

The third question relates to perceptions and lived experience: how is the reform being received by those directly involved in the justice system, judges, prosecutors, and legal professionals, and what do their insights reveal about both opportunities and challenges in the early stages of implementation?

Taken together, these three dimensions provide an initial assessment of whether the judicial map reform is advancing its intended objectives, while also highlighting the challenges likely to shape its long-term impact on the administration of justice in Albania.

## 2. The 2022 Judicial Map Reform: Policy and Implementation

### 2.1. The Rationale for Reform: Legal and Institutional Background

Prior to the 2022 judicial map reform, the Albanian judiciary operated through a highly fragmented territorial structure, with 29 courts of first instance, including 22 general

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<sup>6</sup> M. KOLOTYLO, *Judicial System Reform in Albania in the Context of the Accession Process to the European Union*, in *Scientific Notes of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Legal Sciences*, no. 13, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> E. GARUNJA, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> On the broader impact of EU pre-accession technical assistance on the Albanian judicial system, see J. BEQIRAJ, *Impacts of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance on the Rule of Law in Albania*, in M. NOVAKOVIĆ, M. MATIĆ BOŠKOVIĆ (eds.), *EU Accession and the Rule of Law: Pre-accession Assistance and the Western Balkans*, Abingdon-New York, 2026.

<sup>9</sup> B. MAHO, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> J. BARA, B. BARA, *Trial Within a Reasonable Time and the Impact of Justice Reform in Albania*, in *ICL Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2020, pp. 211-230.

jurisdiction courts, six administrative courts, and one special court; eight courts of appeal, comprising six general jurisdiction appeal courts, one administrative appeal court, and one special appeal court; and the High Court<sup>11</sup>. While formally justified by the need for territorial proximity, this architecture increasingly produced systemic inefficiencies: uneven caseloads, delays, duplication of administrative units, and an erosion of public trust in the effectiveness and integrity of justice institutions<sup>12</sup>.

These weaknesses became more acute in the post-2016 context. The justice reform package, including Law no. 98/2016, “On the Organisation of the Judiciary in the Republic of Albania”, introduced a new model of judicial organisation, tying the court network to functional criteria such as workload, resource rationalisation and access to justice, rather than mere geographic distribution<sup>13</sup>. Subsequent assessments highlighted persistent imbalances: some courts faced excessive inflows and backlogs while others were under-utilised; many operated with serious judicial vacancies due to vetting, contributing to paralysis, long delays and rising stocks of pending cases, especially at the appeal level<sup>14</sup>. The duplication of administrative structures across numerous small courts led to suboptimal use of scarce financial and human resources, while geographical disparities and increased travel burdens raised concerns about effective access to justice and compliance with the right to a trial within a reasonable time<sup>15</sup>.

Against this backdrop, the structural reconfiguration of the judicial map emerged as a systemic necessity and a core benchmark within the EU accession process, where consolidation, efficiency and rule-of-law performance stand as central conditionality elements<sup>16</sup>. Anchored in the mandate of the High Judicial Council, an Inter-Institutional Working Group established in 2019 conducted a comprehensive assessment of caseloads, staffing and territorial coverage, culminating in a proposal for a new judicial map approved by the KLGJ after broad consultations<sup>17</sup>. On this basis, the Council of Ministers adopted Decision no. 495, dated 21 July 2022, “On the Reorganisation of Judicial Districts and Jurisdictional Competences of Courts”, formally implementing the reform<sup>18</sup>.

Substantively, the reform consolidated the court network: first-instance courts of general jurisdiction were reduced from 22 to 13, the six courts of appeal were merged into a single Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction, and administrative courts of first instance were reduced from six to two – a total of 18 courts were dissolved<sup>19</sup>. The prosecution offices attached to these courts were correspondingly reorganised and territorially restructured<sup>20</sup>. This restructuring reflects a policy orientation towards rationalisation, centralisation and specialisation aimed at addressing resource shortages and improving consistency and efficiency – although it has also triggered concerns about reduced territorial access and increased costs for court users<sup>21</sup>.

The analytical basis of the reform relied primarily on judicial workload indicators such as court caseloads, case-to-judge ratios and territorial distribution of courts, while

<sup>11</sup> KLGJ, *Relacion mbi propozimin për hartën e re gjyqësore* (Report on the Judicial Map Reform Proposal), June 2022.

<sup>12</sup> J. LAMÇE, *Improving Judicial Performance in Albania*, in *Jus & Justicia*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2024, pp. 7-24.

<sup>13</sup> Y. RUPA, *The Albanian Reform in the Institutions of Justice and Its Impact on the Integration of Albania in the European Union*, in *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 8, 2017, pp. 196-201.

<sup>14</sup> E. GARUNJA, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> J. BARA, B. BARA, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> A. BALLIU, *The Reform of Justice in Albania*, in *Beijing Law Review*, vol. 11, 2020, pp. 709-728.

<sup>17</sup> KLGJ, *Harta e Re Gjyqësore*, available at <https://klgj.al/harta-e-re-gjyqesore>.

<sup>18</sup> Council of Ministers Decision no. 495, *On the Reorganisation of Judicial Districts and the Territorial Jurisdiction of Courts*, of 21 July 2022.

<sup>19</sup> KLGJ, *Harta e Re Gjyqësore*, *cit.*

<sup>20</sup> KLGJ, *Një Hartë e Re Gjyqësore për Shqipërinë: Raport Vlerësimi*, May 2022.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

the integration of prosecutorial data and broader justice-chain analysis appears more limited, despite acknowledged vetting-related vacancies in the prosecution system and the impact on the case-flow<sup>22</sup>. This suggests that the reform's evidence base and institutional design remained fragmented, despite the judiciary and prosecution facing pressures that are closely interconnected.

In this sense, the rationale for the 2022 judicial map is best understood as the product of a convergence between the EU-driven legal and institutional redesign following the 2016 justice reform and accumulated structural pressures, including fragmentation, backlogs, vacancies and territorial inequalities, which together made a comprehensive reconfiguration of the territorial organisation of the judiciary both legally possible and practically unavoidable.

## 2.2. *The Methodology and Comparative Models*

The design of the 2022 judicial map was informed not only by domestic structural challenges but also by comparative European experiences concerning the rationalisation of judicial systems. In developing the reform proposal, the Inter-Institutional Working Group<sup>23</sup> relied extensively on international standards and comparative models, particularly studies and recommendations produced by the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ)<sup>24</sup>. Reference was made to broader European trends over the past two decades, during which several European jurisdictions, including Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Sweden, undertook territorial consolidation of courts through the merger of smaller judicial units into larger and more specialised structures<sup>25</sup>. These reforms were generally aimed at improving efficiency, strengthening judicial specialisation, optimising resource allocation, and enhancing consistency in judicial decision-making.

Within this comparative framework, the Albanian judicial map reform sought to adapt European models to the country's institutional, demographic, and geographic realities. The methodology adopted by the Inter-Institutional Working Group was primarily grounded in quantitative indicators and operational criteria intended to assess the functionality and sustainability of the court network<sup>26</sup>. A central indicator in this assessment was judicial workload, particularly the ratio between caseloads and the number of judges assigned to each court. The objective was to ensure a more balanced distribution of cases and to avoid situations in which courts remained either structurally overburdened or underutilised<sup>27</sup>.

In addition to workload indicators, the reform methodology incorporated factors relating to population distribution, territorial jurisdiction, and the complexity of cases

<sup>22</sup> E. GARUNJA, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> The Working Group on the judicial map was established under the High Judicial Council and brought together representatives of the Council, the judiciary and courts, the Ministry of Justice, and supporting administrative and international partner institutions. The High Judicial Council, together with the Ministry of Justice, also ran public consultations in early 2022 on the new judicial map, holding eight meetings with stakeholders, including representatives of the General Prosecutor's Office, judges, legal professionals, civil society, and the business community. Their feedback was jointly assessed and used to refine and finalise the reform proposal. KLGJ, *Një Hartë e Re Gjyqësore*, cit.

<sup>24</sup> J. LAMÇE, A. KURTI, *The Effects of the New Judicial Map on Family Dispute Resolution*, in *Jus & Justicia*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2022, pp. 28-39.

<sup>25</sup> E. MAK, *Balancing Territoriality and Functionality: Specialisation as a Tool for Reforming Jurisdiction in the Netherlands, France and Germany*, in *International Journal for Court Administration*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> KLGJ, *Relacion mbi propozimin*, cit.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

handled by different courts. Structural and infrastructural considerations were also taken into account, including the number of judges, courtrooms, and administrative capacities available within each judicial district. At the same time, geographic accessibility constituted an important component of the assessment, measured primarily through travel distance and travel time for court users. The underlying objective was to design a judicial structure capable of balancing efficiency and institutional sustainability with the constitutional requirement of effective access to justice<sup>28</sup>.

On the basis of this methodology, the judicial map reform introduced substantial territorial and organisational restructuring across all levels of the judiciary. At the level of first-instance courts of general jurisdiction, the number of courts was reduced through the consolidation of smaller courts into larger judicial units. The reform envisaged that each court would operate with a minimum number of judges sufficient to ensure functional stability and balanced workload distribution<sup>29</sup>.

A similar consolidation logic was applied within the administrative judiciary. The six Administrative Courts of First Instance were reduced to two regional courts, located in Tirana and Lushnja, with the intention of concentrating judicial expertise, strengthening administrative adjudication capacity, and addressing the growing volume of pending administrative cases<sup>30</sup>. The most significant restructuring occurred at the appellate level, where the existing six courts of appeal were merged into a single national Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction located in Tirana. The rationale underlying this centralisation was to promote greater uniformity of jurisprudence, improve workload management, and reduce procedural delays through a more coordinated appellate structure<sup>31</sup>.

At the same time, the reform attempted to mitigate concerns regarding reduced territorial accessibility resulting from court closures. For this purpose, Judicial Service Offices were envisaged in the premises of former courts<sup>32</sup>. These offices were designed to provide citizens with basic administrative and procedural services, including the submission of claims, access to court documentation, and issuance of certifications, even though hearings and adjudicatory functions would no longer take place locally<sup>33</sup>. In this way, the reform sought to preserve a limited local institutional presence while advancing broader objectives of consolidation and rationalisation.

Taken together, the methodology and comparative foundations of the reform reflect an effort to balance two potentially competing objectives: on the one hand, the drive to streamline and modernise the judicial system through consolidation and efficiency-oriented restructuring; and on the other, the imperative of safeguarding effective access to justice and sustaining public trust in judicial institutions.

### 3. Mapping the Impact: Early Outcomes of the 2022 Judicial Map Reform

To assess quantitative trends, we used 2022 as a baseline year and examined performance data from all courts in 2023, 2024, and 2025.

The early evidence suggests that despite the creation of a more concentrated court structure with potential efficiency gains, such gains have remained uneven and are strongly conditioned by judicial staffing levels, infrastructure capacity, and effective

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<sup>28</sup> B. MAHO, *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> KLGJ, *Harta e Re Gjyqësore*, cit.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> J. LAMÇE, A. KURTI, *op. cit.*

access-to-justice challenges. The reform aimed to rationalise the court network, rebalance workloads, and improve the quality and efficiency of court services. However, the data for 2022-2025 show that institutional consolidation alone does not automatically produce uniform improvements across all court levels. Rather, the impact of the reform varies significantly depending on the type of court, the level of existing stock of pending cases, the availability of judges, and the capacity of merged courts to absorb additional pressure.

### 3.1. The Stock of Pending Cases

A first important trend concerns judicial backlog. The data showed a mixed picture. The High Court managed to significantly reduce the stock of pending cases between 2022 and 2025: from 31,826 pending cases in 2022 to 16,445 in 2025.

| Court backlog (end of the year) and age of pending cases |        |        |        |        |       |
|----------------------------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
|                                                          | 2022   | 2023   | 2024   | 2025   | Trend |
| <b>HC</b>                                                | 31,826 | 26,058 | 20,888 | 16,445 |       |
| <b>SPAK Court</b>                                        | 152    | 126    | 169    | 199    |       |
| <b>SPAK Appeal Court</b>                                 | 34     | 25     | 14     | 24     |       |
| <b>Appeal court/s gen jurisdic</b>                       | 31,370 | 37,662 | 41,700 | 45,876 |       |
| Age Civ +2                                               | 10,572 | 17,468 | 19,049 | 19,459 |       |
| Age Crim +2                                              | 2,993  | 5,750  | 7,415  | 8,296  |       |
| <b>Admin. Appeal court/s</b>                             | 21,166 | 23,056 | 23,862 | 24,530 |       |
| Age Admin+2                                              | 13,732 | 17,060 | 17,406 | 17,527 |       |
| <b>First instance general courts</b>                     | 40,866 | 43,853 | 42,070 | 39,767 |       |
| <b>First instance admin courts</b>                       | 7,354  | 8,788  | 8,396  | 8,796  |       |
| Age Admin+2                                              | 907    | 1,759  | 1,518  | 1,360  |       |

This suggests a positive reduction in accumulated caseload at the highest level of the judiciary. The assessment of the reform, however, should focus less on developments at the High Court – which was not part of the judicial map’s consolidation effort – and more on the newly reorganised appellate structure.

Data shows that the appeal level has become the most visible stress point of the reformed judicial map. The stock of pending cases before the Court of Appeal of general jurisdiction increased, from 31,370 cases in 2022 to 41,700 in 2024, to 45,876 in 2025. The age profile of pending cases is also a concern: by the end of 2025, more than 60% of cases had been pending for over two years (19,459 civil and 8,296 criminal), including 6,211 cases older than five years.

This upward trend is particularly important because it suggests that the merger of appeal courts into a single court has not yet translated into a reduction of accumulated caseload. On the contrary, the appeal level appears to have absorbed significant pressure during the transition period, with a larger territorial jurisdiction and a high stock of pending cases. Administrative Appeal Courts also continued to carry a very high stock of pending cases – from 21,166 cases in 2022 to 24,530 cases in 2025, with 30.5% of such

cases being older than 5 years. We therefore explore below possible reasons for such increased pressure, such as the volume of incoming cases, human resources (judge and non-judge staff), average judge efficiency rate, *etc.*

At the first instance, the stock of pending cases at the Administrative Court of First Instance slightly increased, while Courts of General Jurisdiction recorded a modest reduction in 2025. The SPAK Court, being newly established, recorded a comparatively low number of pending cases overall.

### 3.2. Incoming Cases

The incoming cases data provide additional context, as this indicator can reveal important shifts in demand across the system, ultimately potentially affecting the growing stocks of pending cases noted above.

| Court incoming cases                 | 2022   | 2023   | 2024   | 2025   | Trend |
|--------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| <b>HC</b>                            | 2,096  | 2,145  | 2,469  | 2,433  |       |
| <b>SPAK Court</b>                    | 2,059  | 2,775  | 3,459  | 3,067  |       |
| <b>SPAK Appeal Court</b>             | 314    | 288    | 393    | 445    |       |
| <b>Appeal court/s gen jurisd</b>     | 14,176 | 14,507 | 13,888 | 15,290 |       |
| Civil                                | 6,362  | 8,030  | 5,960  | 6,168  |       |
| Criminal                             | 7,814  | 6,477  | 7,928  | 9,122  |       |
| <b>Admin. Appeal court/s</b>         | 3,641  | 3,470  | 3,465  | 4,067  |       |
| <b>First instance general courts</b> | 96,596 | 84,112 | 84,720 | 81,842 |       |
| Civil                                | 52,287 | 41,478 | 38,448 | 32,408 |       |
| Criminal                             | 44,309 | 42,634 | 46,272 | 49,434 |       |
| <b>First instance admin courts</b>   | 16,095 | 15,435 | 14,370 | 13,225 |       |

Regarding First Instance Courts of General Jurisdiction, data shows that while they continue to receive by far the highest number of incoming cases, the volume has overall declined between 2022 and 2025. First Instance Administrative Courts also recorded a gradual reduction of incoming cases.

In contrast, the SPAK Court recorded a significant rise in incoming cases, growing from 2,059 in 2022 to a peak of 3,459 in 2024, before declining slightly to 3,067 in 2025. This points to the growing institutional weight of the specialised anti-corruption and organised crime jurisdiction and suggests that future monitoring should pay close attention to its staffing, workload, and case-processing capacity.

At the appeal level of general jurisdiction, the volume of incoming cases remained broadly stable between 2022 and 2024, fluctuating narrowly between 13,888 and 14,507, before edging upward to 15,290 cases in 2025. The Administrative Court of Appeal followed a similar pattern, with a modest increase to 4,067 cases in 2025 after three years of near-constant volume.

This means that the rise in backlog can only partly be explained by a dramatic increase in new incoming cases. Rather, it appears to be linked to the court's limited capacity to process both new and pending cases. The problem is therefore less one of

sudden demand growth and more one of insufficient adjudicative capacity within the new appeal structure.

The Appeal Court of General Jurisdiction and the Administrative Court of Appeal represent the most critical test cases for the judicial map reform. Regarding the Appeal Court of General Jurisdiction, in particular, consolidation into a single court holds genuine medium- and long-term promise – greater consistency of the case law, more effective deployment of specialised expertise, and more rational use of resources. Yet, the 2022–2025 data shows that these potential benefits have not yet fully materialised. Instead, the immediate effect has been a concentration of pressure in a court that remains severely understaffed and burdened by a growing stock of pending cases, and where about 60% of the cases have been waiting for more than two years.

### 3.3. Human Resources – Judge and Non-Judge Staff

The percentage of judges in office provides an essential explanation for many of these trends. The data points to significant variation in judge staffing levels across courts, with the most acute pressures concentrated at the appeal level and in some specialised jurisdictions.

| Judges in courts                     | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | Trend |
|--------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| HC Law                               | 19   | 19   | 19   | 17   |       |
| HC Actual                            | 13   | 16   | 18   | 15   |       |
| <b>HC</b>                            | 70%  | 86%  | 94%  | 88%  |       |
| SPAK Court Law                       | 16   | 16   | 16   | 16   |       |
| SPAK Court Actual                    | 8    | 9    | 10   | 11   |       |
| <b>SPAK Court</b>                    | 47%  | 56%  | 64%  | 69%  |       |
| SPAK Appeal Court Law                | 11   | 11   | 11   | 11   |       |
| SPAK Appeal Court Actual             | 8    | 10   | 9    | 10   |       |
| <b>SPAK Appeal Court</b>             | 72%  | 91%  | 85%  | 91%  |       |
| Appeal court/s Law                   | 78   | 78   | 78   | 78   |       |
| Appeal court/s Actual                | 35   | 24   | 27   | 28   |       |
| <b>Appeal court/s</b>                | 44%  | 31%  | 34%  | 36%  |       |
| Admin. Appeal court/s Law            | 13   | 13   | 13   | 13   |       |
| Admin. Appeal court/s Actual         | 6    | 8    | 12   | 13   |       |
| <b>Admin. Appeal court/s</b>         | 43%  | 64%  | 88%  | 100% |       |
| First instance general courts Law    | 235  | 235  | 235  | 235  |       |
| First instance general courts Actual | 133  | 131  | 173  | 173  |       |
| <b>First instance general courts</b> | 56%  | 56%  | 74%  | 74%  |       |
| First instance admin courts Law      | 36   | 36   | 36   | 36   |       |
| First instance admin courts Actual   | 26   | 24   | 19   | 20   |       |
| <b>First instance admin courts</b>   | 73%  | 65%  | 53%  | 56%  |       |

The SPAK Appeal Court and the Administrative Appeal Court have a good percentage of judges in office compared to the organigram foreseen by law. At the SPAK Appeal Court, the share of judges in office fluctuated from 72% in 2022 to 91% in 2023 and 85% in 2024. The Administrative Court of Appeal was brought up to its full establishment of 13 judges in 2025.

By contrast, the Appeal Court of General Jurisdiction continues to operate well below the required staffing levels, recording the lowest proportion of judges in office among all courts. The number of actual judges in appeal courts fell sharply from about 35 in 2022

to 24 in 2023, before only partially recovering to around 27 in 2024 and 2025 (or about 35% of the number foreseen by law)<sup>34</sup>. This indicates that, despite some recent stabilisation, the appeal level remains significantly under-resourced – even though it faces one of the heaviest accumulated backlogs in the system.

The staffing gap is particularly important because it can be understood as the main driver of the increasing backlog. The reduced number of judges limits the courts' ability to absorb the caseload, lengthens disposition times, and weakens the overall impact of efficiency-oriented reforms. The partial recovery in staffing in 2024 and throughout 2025 is a positive development, but it may not yet be sufficient to reverse the backlog trend unless staffing levels continue to improve and are matched by measures to increase case-processing capacity. In this regard, at the end of 2025, the KLGJ appointed (permanently and/or temporarily) 14 more judges to the Appeal Court.

Additional measures aimed at increasing efficiency via organisational tools and changes to procedural laws are underway as part of the KLGJ's Roadmap<sup>35</sup> to improve court efficiency (see also Section 3.6).

The First Instance Courts of General Jurisdiction recorded an increase in judge staff capacity, rising from around 56% in 2022–2023 to about 74% in 2024–2025. Instead, the First Instance Administrative Courts show a declining staffing rate, from 73% in 2022 to 65% in 2023 and 56% in 2025, which may create additional pressure on administrative justice, particularly if inflows remain stable or increase.

Overall, the data shows that the staffing gap remains a structural challenge across most courts. The Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction and First Instance Administrative Courts continue to require close monitoring, as persistent vacancies may undermine the expected efficiency gains of the judicial map reform and slow progress in reducing backlogs. The data also confirm that the effects of the judicial map reform cannot be assessed separately from the consequences of the vetting process and the continuing shortage of magistrates, especially of senior judges, filling in appeal positions.

To assess human resources' capacity at courts more comprehensively, we also examine the availability of non-judge staff<sup>36</sup>. Data shows a generally higher level of staffing than for judges, although with important differences across courts.

First Instance Courts of General Jurisdiction appear comparatively well staffed, reaching 95% of the legally foreseen non-judge staff positions in 2024. The SPAK Court of First Instance also records a high staffing level, increasing from 93% in 2022–2023 to 96% in 2024. The High Court also shows steady improvement, from 74% in 2022 to 86% in 2024.

<sup>34</sup> Judicial composition at the Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction fluctuated throughout the year owing to dismissals and transfers, with a significant number of judges assigned to the court only in December 2025, bringing the total to 40 judges in post by year end. The Court's annual report accordingly reflects statistics based on 27 judges.

<sup>35</sup> KLGJ, *Udhërrëfyti për Efikasitetin e Pushtetit Gjyqësor në Shqipëri 2025-2027* (Roadmap for the Efficiency of the Judicial System).

<sup>36</sup> The KLGJ's annual reports 2022–2025 are available at <https://klgj.al/raportevjetoreklgj>; Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction (Albania), *Annual Report 2025*, Tirana, 2025. At the time of writing, the court datasets on judge supporting staff were not available for all courts.

At the appeal level, the picture is mixed. The Administrative Appeal Court shows a strong recovery, reaching 91% in 2024, while the SPAK Appeal Court records a deterioration, falling from 74% in 2022 to 65% in 2024.

| Court          | Staff          | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | Trend |
|----------------|----------------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| HC             | Law            | 126  | 126  | 129  | 132  |       |
| HC             | Actual         | 94   | 102  | 111  | 115  |       |
| HC             | %              | 74%  | 81%  | 86%  | 86%  |       |
| HC             | Per judge actu | 7.1  | 6.3  | 6.2  | 7.7  |       |
| SPAK Court     | Law            | 49   | 49   | 49   |      |       |
| SPAK Court     | Actual         | 46   | 46   | 47   |      |       |
| SPAK Court     | %              | 93%  | 93%  | 96%  |      |       |
| SPAK Court     | Per judge actu | 6.1  | 5.1  | 4.6  |      |       |
| SPAK Appeal    | Law            | 31   | 31   | 31   |      |       |
| SPAK Appeal    | Actual         | 23   | 23   | 20   |      |       |
| SPAK Appeal    | %              | 74%  | 73%  | 65%  |      |       |
| SPAK Appeal    | Per judge actu | 2.9  | 2.3  | 2.2  |      |       |
| Appeal court/  | Law            | 196  | 167  | 167  | 167  |       |
| Appeal court/  | Actual         | 158  | 115  | 123  | 130  |       |
| Appeal court/  | %              | 81%  | 69%  | 74%  | 78%  |       |
| Appeal court/  | Per judge actu | 4.6  | 4.8  | 4.6  | 4.8  |       |
| Admin. Appea   | Law            | 57   | 67   | 67   |      |       |
| Admin. Appea   | Actual         | 46   | 50   | 61   |      |       |
| Admin. Appea   | %              | 80%  | 74%  | 91%  |      |       |
| Admin. Appea   | Per judge actu | 8.2  | 6.0  | 5.3  |      |       |
| First instance | Law            | 622  | 661  | 658  |      |       |
| First instance | Actual         | 585  | 589  | 628  |      |       |
| First instance | %              | 94%  | 89%  | 95%  |      |       |
| First instance | Per judge actu | 4.4  | 4.5  | 3.6  |      |       |
| Admin First In | Law            | 106  | 106  | 106  |      |       |
| Admin First In | Actual         | 97   | 93   | 94   |      |       |
| Admin First In | %              | 91%  | 88%  | 89%  |      |       |
| Admin First In | Per judge actu | 3.7  | 4.0  | 4.9  |      |       |

The Appeal Court of General Jurisdiction remains below full non-judge staffing capacity, although it improved from 69% in 2023, to 74% in 2024, and 78% in 2025. In absolute figures, actual non-judge staff decreased sharply from 158.3 in 2022 to 115.1 in 2023, before increasing to 130 in 2025, against 167 legally foreseen posts from 2023 onwards (i.e. after the merger of the six appeal courts into one).

Importantly, the figures on supporting staff per judge should be interpreted with caution. The Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction is a clear example. Under the legal framework, the court should have approximately 2.1 non-judge staff per judge in 2024-2025, based on 167 non-judge staff posts and 78 judge posts. However, because the court is operating with far fewer judges than legally foreseen, the actual ratio is much higher: around 4.6 non-judge staff per judge in 2024 and 4.8 in 2025.

This higher ratio should therefore not be read as evidence of excess support staff. Rather, it reflects the depth of the judicial vacancy gap. When considered alongside the increasing stock of pending cases, the data suggests that the main challenge is not only the overall availability of non-judge staff, but how effectively this capacity is used. In particular, there is a need to strengthen the skills of non-judge staff and to delegate tasks to them to the fullest extent permitted by law, so that judges can focus more effectively on their core adjudicative functions. Measures to this end are set out in the KLGJ's Efficiency Roadmap (see below Section 3.6)<sup>37</sup>.

### 3.4. Court Efficiency Indicators – CR and DT

Clearance Rate (CR) and Disposition Time (DT) are two core indicators, typically used to assess court efficiency. The Clearance Rate measures the relationship between resolved and incoming cases in a given period.

| Clearance Rate (CR) Indicator |           |       |        |        |        |       |  |
|-------------------------------|-----------|-------|--------|--------|--------|-------|--|
| Court                         | Case type | 2022  | 2023   | 2024   | 2025   | Trend |  |
| HC                            | Total     | 363%  | 387.8% | 309.6% | 291.7% |       |  |
|                               | Civil     | 283%  | 362.5% | 357.6% | 373%   |       |  |
|                               | Crim.     | 193%  | 265.2% | 275.8% | 254%   |       |  |
|                               | Admin.    | 613%  | 535.6% | 295.4% | 248%   |       |  |
| SPAK Court                    |           | 77.3% | 100.9% | 98.8%  | 99%    |       |  |
| SPAK Appeal Court             |           | 98%   | 103.3% | 102.3% | 98%    |       |  |
| Appeal Court/s                | Total     | 85.5% | 58.4%  | 70.1%  | 73%    |       |  |
|                               | Civil     | 85%   | 42.3%  | 64.2%  | 75.6%  |       |  |
|                               | Crim.     | 86%   | 74.4%  | 76%    | 71%    |       |  |
| Admin. Appeal Court/s         |           | 24%   | 43.4%  | 76.7%  | 84%    |       |  |
| First Instance General Courts |           | 95%   | 90%    | 103%   | 106.5% |       |  |
| Admin First Instance Court    |           | 75%   | 89.6%  | 102%   | 101.5% |       |  |

<sup>37</sup> KLGJ, *Udhërrëfytyesi*, cit.

A CR above 100% indicates that the court is reducing its stock of pending cases, while a CR below 100% suggests that pending cases are likely to increase. Disposition Time estimates the number of days needed to resolve the pending caseload, based on the court's current pace of case resolution. Higher DT values indicate longer expected processing times and greater pressure from accumulated pending cases. The DT indicator is thus heavily influenced by the existing stock of pending cases.

The data shows very different performances across courts.

The High Court has recorded exceptionally high Clearance Rates: 363% in 2022, 387.8% in 2023, 309.6% in 2024 and 291.7% in 2025. The court resolved roughly three times as many cases as it received, contributing to a reduction in its pending stock. This is also reflected in the Disposition Time, which decreased from 1,834 days in 2022 to 873 days in 2025. The DT, however, remains high (over two years on average), showing that the High Court still carries a significant legacy backlog.

The main area of concern remains again the Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction. Its total Clearance Rate dropped sharply from 86% in 2022 to 58% in 2023, before partially recovering to 70% in 2024 and 73% in 2025. Although the trend is improving, the CR remains well below 100%, meaning that the court continues to resolve fewer cases than it receives. This directly contributes to the growth or persistence of a large stock of pending cases. The corresponding DT figures confirm the pressure: total DT increased from 1,006 days in 2022 to 1,838 days in 2023, and remained very high at 1,753 days in 2024 and 1,507 days in 2025. Civil cases are particularly affected, with DT remaining above 2,300 days in 2025, despite some recent improvement.

| Disposition Time (DT) Indicator |           |       |       |       |       |       |  |  |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--|--|
| Court                           | Case type | 2022  | 2023  | 2024  | 2025  | Trend |  |  |
| HC                              |           | 1,834 | 1,167 | 934   | 873   |       |  |  |
| SPAK Court                      |           | 27    | 16    | 18    | 24    |       |  |  |
| SPAK Appeal Court               |           | 41    | 31    | 15    | 20    |       |  |  |
| Appeal Court/s                  | Total     | 1,006 | 1,838 | 1,753 | 1507  |       |  |  |
|                                 | Civil     | 1,605 | 2,790 | 2,683 | 2318  |       |  |  |
|                                 | Crim.     | 407   | 885   | 823   | 920   |       |  |  |
| Admin. Appeal Court/s           |           | 8,680 | 5,326 | 3,276 | 2634  |       |  |  |
| First Instance General Courts   | Total     | 133   | 193   | 177   | 181   |       |  |  |
|                                 | Civil     | 168   | 272   | 256   | 270   |       |  |  |
|                                 | Crim.     | 98    | 114   | 97    | 92    |       |  |  |
| Admin. First Instance Court     |           | 261   | 255   | 223   | 256.5 |       |  |  |

At the Administrative Appeal Court, the CR increased substantially and steadily from 24% in 2022 to 84% in 2025, while DT decreased from 8,680 days in 2022 to 2,634 days in 2025. This points to a clear improvement in case-processing capacity, though the data also reveals a heavy accumulated backlog and lengthy expected resolution times, averaging over seven years.

At first instance, performance is stronger. Courts of General Jurisdiction at first instance achieved a clearance rate of 106.5% in 2025, meaning they resolved slightly

more cases than they received, while disposition time remained comparatively low at 181 days. Administrative Courts of First Instance also improved, sustaining a clearance rate of around 102% in both 2024 and 2025, with disposition time edging down from 261 days in 2022 to 256.5 days in 2025.

The SPAK Court and SPAK Appeal Court, as new courts, show more stable efficiency performance with low DT levels.

Overall, the court efficiency indicators – CR and DT – confirm that backlog pressure is concentrated mainly at the appeal level, especially in the Appeal Court of General Jurisdiction and the Administrative Appeal Court. The persistently low CR of the Appeal Court of General Jurisdiction, combined with the high stock of pending cases result in a very high DT, suggesting that the court's current capacity remains insufficient to process cases efficiently. This finding should be read alongside the staffing data: the low number of judges in office at the appeal level is one of the key factors constraining case-processing capacity and driving the persistence or growth of backlog.

### 3.5. Average Statistics per Judge

To further assess the factors affecting the stock of pending cases, the analysis also considered judge workload and judge productivity. The Workload Rate (WR) is calculated as the sum of pending cases at the beginning of the year and incoming cases during the year, divided by the number of judges. It therefore provides an estimate of the average number of cases requiring judicial action per year, per judge, at a certain court. Instead, the Efficiency Rate (ER) measures the average number of resolved cases per judge and is used as a proxy for judicial productivity.

| Efficiency Rate (ER) Indicator (per judge) |      |      |      |      |       |  |
|--------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|-------|--|
| Court                                      | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | Trend |  |
| HC                                         | 478  | 486  | 429  | 414  |       |  |
| SPAK Court                                 | 278  | 311  | 332  | 290  |       |  |
| SPAK Appeal Court                          | 38   | 30   | 43   | 44   |       |  |
| Appeal court/s                             | 312  | 341  | 372  | 412  |       |  |
| Admin. Appeal court/s                      | 167  | 190  | 231  | 258  |       |  |
| First instance general courts              | 563  | 547  | 516  | 420  |       |  |
| First instance admin courts                | 659  | 523  | 677  | 484  |       |  |

The data illustrates the uneven distribution of pressure both between courts and over time. In the High Court, the workload per judge fell from 2,880 cases in 2022 to 1405 in 2025. A similar downward trend is visible in the Administrative Court of Appeal, where workload decreased from 3,953 cases per judge in 2022 to 2,116 in 2024. Improvements in staffing (43% in 2022, to 100% in 2025) have helped reduce pressure on individual judges, although workload remains high in absolute terms. In contrast, at the Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction workload per judge more than doubled, from 981 in 2022 to 2,265 in 2025. This is one of the clearest signs that the new appeal structure is under considerable pressure and that consolidation has not yet translated into a manageable workload at this level.

Productivity trends are generally stable and show positive trends across courts, suggesting that the increase in pending cases and Disposition Time cannot be attributed to low judicial efficiency. Quite the contrary; in several courts, judges are resolving more cases per judge each year. Even at the Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction, the ER indicator per judge has steadily improved, from 312 in 2022 to 412 resolved cases per judge in 2025. However, these productivity gains are not sufficient to offset the effects of high workload, accumulated backlog, and persistent judicial vacancies. The problem, therefore, appears to lie less in individual judge performance and more in the limited overall case-processing capacity of courts operating with too few judges.

At the same time, sustained productivity under conditions of high workload should not be interpreted as a stable or risk-free situation. Persistently high caseloads may lead to judge and staff exhaustion, reducing the system's ability to maintain performance over time. Without adequate staffing and support, continued pressure on judges and court personnel may affect the quality, timeliness, and sustainability of case processing.

### *3.6. The National Strategy for Reducing Court Backlog and the Related Roadmap on Efficiency*

Albania's Strategy for the Reduction of Court Backlog (2024-2027)<sup>38</sup> forms part of the broader justice reform agenda. Adopted in response to well-documented structural weaknesses in the judiciary's capacity to deliver timely justice, it aims to raise the efficiency, timeliness, and quality of judicial proceedings through organisational, procedural, staffing, and digital reforms. The accompanying Roadmap for Judicial Efficiency<sup>39</sup>, adopted by the KLGJ, provides the operational framework: it sets benchmarks and targets for reducing pending caseloads and disposition times through better case-flow management, harmonised judicial statistics, targeted backlog-reduction measures, and stronger use of support staff and technology.

Both instruments rest on a shared diagnosis: the backlog built up gradually because the growing volume of cases never matched proportional growth in institutional capacity, human resources, or case-management tools. Their stated ambition is to move the justice system away from reactive backlog clearance and toward a sustainable performance-management model grounded in data, strategic planning, and continuous monitoring of court efficiency indicators. It is worth noting, though, that this structured response arrived three years after the judicial map reform – suggesting the reform was partial and that its efficiency dimension came late.

According to official reporting<sup>40</sup>, 2025 should mark a shift from diagnosis to active implementation. A full inventory of backlog cases has reportedly been completed for the first time, providing a verified and measurable baseline for targeted interventions. Practical steps taken include grouping cases by type and complexity, establishing processing priorities, creating structured case lists, fast-tracking certain categories, standardising procedural templates, expanding the role of legal assistants, training support staff, and advancing electronic documentation.

That said, as the analysis above makes clear, the transformation faces significant structural obstacles. Staff shortages remain the most acute constraint — but the challenge is not only one of numbers. Even where staff are available, the effective implementation of these reforms depends on their capacity to apply procedures, tools, and case

<sup>38</sup> KLGJ, *Strategjia kombëtare e uljes së numrit të çështjeve të prapambetura në gjykata (2024-2027)*, May 2024, available at <https://klgj.al/strategjia-e-uljes-se-numrit-te-ceshtjeve-te-prapambetura-2024-2027/>.

<sup>39</sup> KLGJ, *Udhërrëfyesi*, cit.

<sup>40</sup> KLGJ, *Annual Report 2025*, cit.

management approaches consistently. Without adequate human resources, sustained investment in their training and professional development, and the financial backing to maintain both over time, the practical impact of these reforms is likely to remain limited.

#### 4. Access to Justice and Institutional Challenges After the Reform

This Section examines the key challenges that have emerged from implementing the 2022 judicial map, particularly its implications for access to justice and the court system's functioning. While the new map aimed to pursue efficiency by consolidating courts into larger judicial centres, its early application has raised practical and institutional concerns affecting both court users and justice-sector professionals. The initial implementation phase thus reveals not only that the anticipated gains in rationalisation and specialisation have yet to fully materialise (see Section 3), but also that the reform has generated a range of operational and socio-legal challenges affecting both the justice system's functioning and effective access to justice<sup>41</sup>. From the perspective of public perception, however, a more nuanced picture emerges: recent findings from the World Bank Group's 2025 Justice Survey – comparing results with the 2020 survey – show a notable rise in trust in courts (53% in 2025 against 26% in 2020) and in perceptions of judicial independence (51% against 21% in 2020)<sup>42</sup>.

##### 4.1. Access to Justice Between Efficiency and Territorial Centralisation

Access to justice stands as one of the rule of law's foundational principles and a central benchmark for evaluating judicial reforms in contemporary European legal systems<sup>43</sup>. It is increasingly understood not merely as courts' formal existence, but as individuals' effective ability to seek remedies and have their grievances heard and decided by an independent and impartial tribunal – an integral element of the right to a fair trial and the protection of fundamental rights<sup>44</sup>. This broader, effectiveness-oriented understanding covers several practical dimensions: the availability and accessibility of courts in practice, the absence of unjustified legal or practical barriers, and equal access regardless of socio-economic status. It also covers affordability, supported where necessary by legal aid or other assistance, procedural guarantees and efficiency – notably reasonable duration of proceedings – as well as procedural arrangements that let litigants meaningfully take part in judicial processes through fair hearings, proper information, representation, and effective remedies<sup>45</sup>.

Within this framework, the Albanian judicial map sought to balance efficiency gains against the need to preserve access to justice, mainly through consolidating and reorganising courts territorially<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> B. MAHO, *op. cit.*

<sup>42</sup> World Bank Group, 2025 Justice Survey Findings, presented at the dissemination event attended by the authors; the full report is not yet publicly available online at the time of writing. Further information available at <https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/anketa-besimi-i-shqiptareve-tek-gjykatat-u-dyfishua-ne-pese-vjet-gogu-banka-boterore-konfirmon-permiresim-te-ndjeshem-te-drejtewise-shqiptare>.

<sup>43</sup> O. BALATSKA, T. LOTYSH, *The Right to Effective Access to Justice in the European Union*, in *Visegrad Journal on Human Rights*, no. 4, 2024, pp. 12-19.

<sup>44</sup> J. BEQIRAJ, L. MCNAMARA, *International Access to Justice: Barriers and Solutions*, Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law Report 02/2014, International Bar Association, October 2014, p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> J. BEQIRAJ, L. MCNAMARA, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> B. MAHO, *op. cit.*

Cutting the number of courts significantly changed the territorial relationship between citizens and the judiciary. The territorial concentration of courts thus reduced their proximity to citizens, reinforcing concerns that “*there can be no justice for the citizens away from the citizens*”<sup>47</sup>. Civil-society and professional actors warned that longer distances, travel costs, and logistical burdens particularly affect people in peripheral and rural areas, potentially discouraging them from bringing proceedings and undermining effective access to justice<sup>48</sup>. Analyses reinforce these concerns, showing that the 2022 reduction in the number of courts “*significantly reduced the access*” for citizens, increased the stock of court files, and contributed to failures to decide cases within legal deadlines<sup>49</sup>.

Studies show that geographic remoteness, transport costs, and court consolidation particularly hinder access to justice for rural and economically deprived populations<sup>50</sup>. Civil society organisations have also argued that centralising courts, without enough attention to transport access and local conditions, creates added practical and financial barriers to justice – especially for people in rural areas, vulnerable groups, and those with limited financial means<sup>51</sup>. Lawyers, witnesses, and other participants in judicial proceedings increasingly face longer travel distances and higher financial costs to reach court services. Recent findings from the World Bank Group’s 2025 Justice Survey show that 72% of citizens do not consider the justice system financially accessible<sup>52</sup>. These burdens bite hardest in areas with limited infrastructure and scarce public services, where poor roads, unreliable or infrequent public transport, and long travel times make court attendance difficult and costly, and may force repeated trips owing to adjournments<sup>53</sup>. Concerns also arise that the new judicial map – including a single Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction in Tirana – does not adequately weigh Albanians’ economic situation and the existence of remote villages where people find it “*economically impossible to travel*”, threatening both access to justice and the economic viability of local legal practice<sup>54</sup>.

To soften these effects, the reform planned Judicial Service Offices in the premises of former courts<sup>55</sup>. These offices were meant to preserve a degree of local institutional presence, letting citizens submit filings, obtain official documentation, and access archived decisions without travelling to the newly centralised courts. Still, the absence of adjudicatory functions at the local level limits how far such mechanisms can fully offset court closures, particularly where hearings require repeated physical attendance<sup>56</sup>. There is also a risk that, if these offices sit underused, they may draw on non-judge staff resources urgently needed elsewhere in a justice system already facing significant human-resource shortages, as noted above.

Beyond geographic proximity to courts, other factors shape access to justice too – court capacity, workload distribution, resource allocation, and the quality and timeliness

<sup>47</sup> *Id.*

<sup>48</sup> J. LAMÇE, A. KURTI, *op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> A. KASAJ, *Access to Justice in Albania and EU Policies*, in *European Journal of Economics, Law and Social Sciences*, vol. 8, 2024, pp. 67-74.

<sup>50</sup> A. KASAJ, *op. cit.*

<sup>51</sup> Institute for Public and Legal Studies (IPLS), *Konsolidimi i Gjykatës Rajonale të Apelit – një rishikim i ndikimit të saj në efikasitetin dhe cilësinë e gjyqësorit*, KGRA/IPLS platform, available at <https://kgra.ipls.org/>.

<sup>52</sup> World Bank Group, *2025 Justice Survey Findings*, cit.

<sup>53</sup> B. MAHO, *op. cit.*

<sup>54</sup> A. RUSHITI, *The Impact of the Court Map in the Field of Advocacy*, in *Indonesian Journal of Advocacy and Legal Services*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2022, pp. 243-258.

<sup>55</sup> B. MAHO, *op. cit.*

<sup>56</sup> J. LAMÇE, A. KURTI, *op. cit.*

of judicial proceedings<sup>57</sup>. In this sense, the Albanian reform echoes a broader European tendency, reflected in CEPEJ and ENCJ<sup>58</sup> work, to see access to justice not solely in terms of territorial closeness, but also as the judiciary's capacity to deliver timely, professional, and predictable decisions through adequately sized, specialised, and efficiently managed courts<sup>59</sup>.

The Albanian case therefore illustrates a wider structural dilemma in contemporary judicial map reforms: balancing territorial accessibility against institutional sustainability and efficiency, as also debated in Italian and Portuguese reorganisation efforts that pursue efficiency gains through concentration while struggling with physical access and social cohesion<sup>60</sup>. Consolidation may strengthen the judiciary's long-term operational capacity by optimising resources and raising specialisation, but early evidence from Albania and other European experiences points to uneven territorial impacts and persistent concerns about practical accessibility – especially for vulnerable users and communities far from newly consolidated judicial centres<sup>61</sup>.

#### 4.2. Implementation Dynamics and Stakeholder Perspectives

Despite accessibility concerns, the judicial map reform was justified primarily by the goal of raising judicial efficiency and addressing structural imbalances in workload distribution. This rationale reflects broader European trends, where court reorganisation and territorial concentration serve as tools to tackle backlogs and unequal caseloads across territories<sup>62</sup>. In Albania, these challenges grew particularly acute after the vetting process, which removed or prompted the resignation and/or dismissal of more than half of all magistrates<sup>63</sup>. Consolidating courts through the judicial map was thus presented as a way to rationalise human and infrastructural resources, aiming to raise the quality and efficiency of judicial activity through concentrated management and specialisation<sup>64</sup>.

Early implementation and stakeholder analyses, however, point to significant transitional pressures tied to institutional restructuring rather than to the judicial map reform's stated goals as such<sup>65</sup>. These include administrative burdens from case transfers, adjustments to territorial jurisdiction, and reorganising court management systems – all of which have demanded adaptation from both judicial staff and court users<sup>66</sup>. In this phase, delays appear driven less by workload concentration alone and more by implementation-related disruption and uneven administrative capacity across newly consolidated courts<sup>67</sup>.

Judges, prosecutors, and lawyers therefore face a dual burden: adjusting to structural reorganisation while managing heavier workloads within an understaffed system.

<sup>57</sup> M.F. CASTRO, C. GUCCIO, *Measuring Potential Efficiency Gains from Mergers of Italian First Instance Courts through a Nonparametric Model*, in *Public Finance Review*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2018, pp. 83-116.

<sup>58</sup> European Network of Councils for the Judiciary (ENCJ).

<sup>59</sup> J.P. DIAS, C. GOMES, *Judicial Reforms 'Under Pressure': The New Map/Organisation of the Portuguese Judicial System*, in *Utrecht Law Review*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2018, pp. 174-186.

<sup>60</sup> M.F. CASTRO, C. GUCCIO, *op. cit.*; J.P. DIAS, C. GOMES, *op. cit.*

<sup>61</sup> A. RUSHITI, *op. cit.*

<sup>62</sup> European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ), *Compendium of "Best Practices" on Time Management of Judicial Proceedings*, Council of Europe, 2021, available at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cepej/database-of-backlog-reduction-practices>.

<sup>63</sup> E. PULAJ, *Justice System Reform in Albania: Achievements, Challenges, and the Path Forward*, in *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*, vol. 12, no. 1 S1, 2025, pp. 124-128.

<sup>64</sup> A. RUSHITI, *op. cit.*

<sup>65</sup> *Id.*

<sup>66</sup> B. MAHO, *op. cit.*

<sup>67</sup> P. AGALLIU, *op. cit.*

Lawyers outside Tirana have particularly voiced concerns about increased travel demands, higher operational costs, and the potential erosion of local practice's viability following appellate centralisation<sup>68</sup>. Yet institutional actors also point to potential medium-term benefits: larger courts and a single appellate court offer opportunities for greater specialisation, more consistent case allocation, improved internal coordination, and, ultimately, more coherent and predictable case law<sup>69</sup>.

In this context, stakeholders at a civil society roundtable presenting findings on the judicial map reform's effects have cautioned that not all operational challenges seen in the early implementation phase trace back to the judicial map reform itself<sup>70</sup>. Instead, they have pointed to the continued impact of pre-existing structural constraints, particularly infrastructural deficiencies in court and prosecution office facilities and broader capacity limits across the system. They argue that a comprehensive assessment of the judicial map reform's effects should also account for ongoing staffing gaps, and should wait until judicial vacancies have been fully addressed and workforce levels stabilised. Future assessments of the judicial map reform should therefore adopt a structured, data-driven monitoring approach that combines court-level performance indicators with user-experience evidence, to distinguish more clearly between transitional implementation challenges and the reform's long-term structural effects on access to justice and judicial efficiency.

Overall, the Albanian judicial map reform reflects a familiar trade-off in comparative court map reforms: efficiency gains and specialisation through consolidation on one hand, and transitional strain, congestion risks, and uneven territorial impacts on the other. Its ultimate effect on the quality and efficiency of justice will depend on closing persistent staffing gaps, investing in infrastructure and digitalisation, and ensuring that the pursuit of efficiency does not undermine access to justice or public trust in the courts<sup>71</sup>. Notably, Albanian legislation requires the judicial map to be reviewed every five years, allowing periodic reassessment of the reform's impact and adaptation of the court structure to evolving institutional and societal needs<sup>72</sup>.

## 5. Conclusions

This review of the 2022 judicial map reform shows that Albania's justice system remains in a complex transitional phase, shaped at once by institutional consolidation, post-vetting capacity shortages, and rising demands for efficiency and accessibility. The reform responded to genuine structural problems that had long affected the judiciary, including fragmented court organisation, uneven workload distribution, limited specialisation, and inefficient use of resources. In this sense, the reform broadly aligned with wider European trends promoting court consolidation and rationalisation as tools for improving judicial performance.

At the same time, our assessment's findings show that structural redesign alone cannot generate immediate efficiency gains. The reform's effectiveness depends fundamentally on the institutional capacity available to support its implementation. Data

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<sup>68</sup> A. RUSHITI, *op. cit.*

<sup>69</sup> B. MAHO, *op. cit.*

<sup>70</sup> Tryeza "Efektet e Hartës Gjyqësore në Sistemin e Prokurorisë" (Roundtable on the Effects of the Judicial Map in the Prosecution System), Tirana, 12 May 2026, available at <https://klgj.al/aktivitete/deklarate-per-shyp-12-maj-2026/>.

<sup>71</sup> J. LAMÇE, *Improving Judicial Performance in Albania*, in *Jus & Justicia*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2024, pp. 7-24.

<sup>72</sup> Law no. 98/2016, *Për organizimin e pushtetit gjyqësor në Republikën e Shqipërisë*.

for 2022-2025 reveal that the consolidation's expected benefits have materialised unevenly across the judicial system and remain heavily shaped by staffing levels, organisational capacity, infrastructure, and backlog-management mechanisms.

The Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction offers the clearest illustration of these tensions. Creating a single appellate court may open long-term opportunities for greater consistency of jurisprudence, specialisation, and coordinated case management, but the court currently operates under severe structural pressure. Persistent judicial vacancies, growing backlog, low Clearance Rates, and exceptionally high Disposition Times show that the court's adjudicative capacity remains insufficient against the workload it absorbed through territorial concentration. The reform has therefore concentrated institutional pressure at the appellate level without yet providing the human and organisational resources needed to fully manage that concentration.

Importantly, the findings do not suggest that low judicial productivity drives the growing backlog. On the contrary, workload and efficiency indicators show that judges in several courts, including the Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction, keep comparatively high productivity under difficult conditions. The central problem instead lies in the structural gap between workload demands and available adjudicative and support capacity. Relying on sustained high productivity in an under-resourced environment risks exhausting judges and court staff over the long term, and may ultimately affect the quality, consistency, and sustainability of judicial performance.

The analysis further highlights how much non-judge staff and internal court organisation matter for judicial efficiency. Strengthening legal assistants' and administrative staff's professional capacity, expanding task delegation where the law permits, improving case-management practices, and investing in digitalisation may significantly boost court performance without compromising judicial independence or the quality of adjudication. In this respect, recent High Judicial Council initiatives – including the National Strategy for the Reduction of Court Backlog and the Roadmap for Judicial Efficiency – represent important attempts to close the implementation gaps and build a more sustainable performance-management model.

Beyond efficiency, the reform also raises important access-to-justice concerns. Territorial concentration has reduced the physical proximity of courts for many citizens, particularly affecting rural and economically vulnerable populations through longer travel distances, higher costs, and heavier logistical burdens. Judicial Service Offices were introduced to preserve a degree of local institutional presence, but their ability to offset the loss of local adjudicatory functions remains limited. Albania's experience thus illustrates the broader structural dilemma common to many contemporary European judicial map reforms: balancing efficiency, specialisation, and institutional sustainability against the need to preserve effective and equitable access to justice.

Overall, the judicial map reform should be understood as a necessary but incomplete stage within Albania's broader justice reform process. It has built a more coherent institutional framework and laid the basis for potential long-term efficiency gains, but its success will ultimately depend on whether consolidation is matched by sustained investment in judicial staffing, infrastructure, digital transformation, training, and evidence-based court management. Recent findings from the World Bank Group's 2025 Justice Survey point to an overall improvement in public perceptions of the justice system (albeit measured against 2020), particularly in trust in courts and perceptions of judicial independence – suggesting strengthened institutional legitimacy alongside ongoing implementation challenges.

Future assessment of the reform should adopt a multidimensional approach, combining quantitative indicators – Clearance Rate, Disposition Time, workload, and

staffing levels – with broader access-to-justice indicators, including travel time, use of judicial service offices, user satisfaction, availability of legal aid, digital access, and the experiences of vulnerable groups. Quantitative data should also be paired with qualitative evidence from judges, prosecutors, lawyers, court staff, and court users.

The reform has placed Albania's justice system on new institutional coordinates, but the mission of delivering accessible, efficient, and high-quality justice remains unfinished. The next phase should focus on turning structural consolidation into practical improvements for citizens, lawyers, judges, and court users.