

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Effectiveness of the Forest Moratorium in Albania: A Critical Assessment and Regional Comparison

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Abstract

The forest moratorium in Albania was introduced as an emergency policy measure to curb illegal logging, forest degradation, and increasing pressure on forest ecosystems. This article critically examines the effectiveness of the moratorium by analyzing the relationship between the legal framework, institutional implementation, and actual outcomes on the ground. The study is based on a qualitative review of legal documents, institutional reports, and relevant international literature, complemented by descriptive numerical data on timber imports, forest fund area, and forest offenses over the period 2015–2024. The findings suggest that, although the moratorium produced an immediate restraining effect and sent a strong political signal, its long-term impact has remained limited due to weak monitoring capacity, insufficient enforcement, lack of alternatives for local communities, and weak linkage with reforestation policies. The numerical evidence indicates that timber imports increased from 214,209.7 m³ in 2015 to 322,484.7 m³ in 2024, while administrative offenses in the forest fund declined sharply from 443 to 2 over the same period. A regional comparison with Western Balkan countries shows that more sustainable outcomes are achieved where bans are combined with administrative reform, monitoring systems, and landscape restoration policies. The article concludes that the moratorium should be understood as a necessary but insufficient step toward sustainable forest governance in Albania.

Keywords: forest moratorium; Albania; forest governance; illegal logging; sustainable forest management; Western Balkans

1. Introduction

Forests represent one of Albania's most important natural assets, both in ecological terms and in relation to the social and economic life of rural communities. According to INSTAT, in 2024 the forest and pasture fund covered 1,731,891 hectares, representing 60.2% of the country's total territory. This scale demonstrates the strategic importance of forest governance in Albania and highlights the relevance of policy measures aimed at preventing degradation and promoting sustainable management. In recent decades, the forest sector has been exposed to significant pressure due to illegal logging, uncontrolled use of firewood, forest fires, and weak institutional control.

In international literature, such measures are considered effective only when accompanied by continuous monitoring, credible enforcement, and alternative policies for communities dependent on forest resources (FAO, 2020; OECD, 2019). In Albania, the moratorium was particularly important because it was adopted at a time when institutional control over forests was weak and environmental degradation had become increasingly visible.

However, the key question is not whether the moratorium was necessary, but whether it produced a lasting effect on forest protection and environmental recovery.

This article aims to assess the effectiveness of the forest moratorium in Albania through a critical analysis of the

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legal framework, practical implementation, institutional gaps, and regional comparison.

2. Material and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative analytical and comparative approach. The analysis is based on the review of legal acts, institutional reports, and relevant academic and policy literature concerning forest governance in Albania and the Western Balkans. The main sources include national environmental reports, international assessments, and policy documents related to sustainable forest management.

The methodological approach is descriptive-analytical, with emphasis on the relationship between legal norms and practical outcomes. The study does not rely on primary field data, but rather on secondary sources that allow for a critical evaluation of the moratorium's effectiveness over time.

2.1. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework is grounded in the concept of sustainable forest management, according to which economic use of forest resources must be balanced with ecological conservation and long-term regeneration (FAO, 2020). Within this framework, legal bans such as moratoria can be effective only if they are supported by strong enforcement mechanisms, institutional capacity, and complementary policies for affected populations.

3. Results and Discussion

The forest moratorium in Albania appears to have had a partial but not transformative impact on forest governance and forest protection. The available data suggest that its most visible effect was on formal enforcement, particularly in the sharp decline of administrative offenses in the forest fund from 443 in 2015 to only 2 in 2024, which indicates a substantial strengthening of regulatory control. Criminal offenses also declined overall, although the trend was uneven and marked by significant fluctuations, especially in 2022 and 2023, which suggests that enforcement gains were not fully stable. At the same time, timber imports increased from 214,209.7 m³ in 2015 to 322,484.7 m³ in 2024, implying that domestic demand for wood products remained high and that pressure on the sector was not eliminated but may have been partially displaced toward imports. The total forest fund area

remained broadly stable, with only a slight decline over the period, which does not provide strong evidence of ecological recovery. Overall, the moratorium functioned primarily as a short-term restrictive and symbolic policy instrument rather than as a comprehensive long-term solution. Its effectiveness was therefore limited by the persistence of structural demand, the absence of strong alternative energy and livelihood options, and the need for more consistent monitoring, enforcement, and reforestation policies (FAO, 2020; OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2021).

3.1. Timber imports and demand pressure

The total imported timber material increased from 214,209.7 m³ in 2015 to 322,484.7 m³ in 2024, corresponding to an increase of approximately 50.5%. This upward trend suggests that domestic demand for timber products remained strong throughout the moratorium period. Rather than reducing consumption, the policy appears to have coincided with a continued reliance on imported timber, which may reflect persistent demand in construction, household energy use, and wood-based production. Similar patterns have been observed in broader forest governance discussions, where restrictions on domestic extraction do not automatically reduce demand unless they are accompanied by energy transition measures and alternative material supply chains (FAO, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

3.2. Forest fund area and ecological stability

The total forest fund area remained broadly stable over the decade, declining slightly from 1,740,897 hectares in 2015 to 1,731,891 hectares in 2024. This represents a net decrease of 9,006 hectares, or roughly 0.5%. Although this decline is relatively modest, it does not provide evidence of a strong recovery in forest coverage during the moratorium period.

The data also show a notable fluctuation in 2021, when the forest fund area dropped to 1,716,824 hectares, before rising again in subsequent years. This may reflect changes in classification, reporting methodology, or actual land-use dynamics. In either case, the figures do not support the conclusion that the moratorium generated a clear expansion or restoration of forest resources. Instead, they suggest that forest area remained under pressure and that the policy's

ecological effects were limited (FAO, 2020; INSTAT, 2025).

3.3. Criminal and administrative offenses

The number of criminal offenses in the forest fund declined from 33 in 2015 to 6 in 2024, but the trend was not linear. Criminal offenses fell to 0 in 2019, 2020, and 2021, then increased again to 36 in 2022 and 32 in 2023, before declining in 2024. This pattern points to inconsistency in enforcement, reporting, or both. The fluctuations make it difficult to interpret the data as evidence of a stable and sustained improvement in compliance.

By contrast, administrative offenses show a much clearer downward trend. These declined from 443 in 2015 to 2 in 2024, which represents a reduction of more than 99%. This is the strongest numerical indication that formal administrative control over the forest sector has improved significantly. However, such a sharp decline should be interpreted cautiously. It may reflect better compliance, but it may also be influenced by changes in inspection intensity, reporting practices, or institutional capacity. OECD (2019) emphasizes that in contexts with limited administrative capacity, improvements in recorded violations may reflect institutional reporting changes as much as actual behavioral change.

3.4. Overall interpretation

Overall, the data suggest that the moratorium has been more effective as a short-term regulatory and symbolic measure than as a long-term structural solution. The sharp reduction in administrative offenses indicates stronger formal enforcement, yet the persistence of high timber imports and the limited change in forest fund area show that the underlying pressures on forests remain substantial.

This means that the moratorium should be understood as a necessary but insufficient intervention. It has likely helped reduce visible violations and strengthen the state's regulatory presence, but it has not by itself produced a durable transformation in forest governance. For this reason, the evidence supports the need for a broader policy framework that includes reforestation, rural energy alternatives, improved monitoring systems, and more consistent enforcement (FAO, 2020; OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2021).

3.5. Regional comparison

In regional terms, Albania shares many of the same challenges as other Western Balkan countries: illegal logging, limited institutional capacity, and economic pressure on forests. However, some countries in the region have combined bans with administrative reform, reforestation plans, and clearer control instruments, resulting in more sustainable outcomes (OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2021).

Table 1. Comparative overview of forest moratorium and forest governance approaches in Albania and selected Western Balkan countries

Country	Main approach	Main strength	Main weakness	Overall assessment
Albania	Prohibitive moratorium + legal reform	Strong political signal and short-term restraint	Partial implementation, limited monitoring, lack of alternatives	Limited effectiveness
North Macedonia	More structured institutional management	Administrative reform and clearer local control	Economic pressure on forests and limited capacity	More balanced than Albania
Montenegro	Territorial planning and use control	Stronger link with spatial management	Tourism impact and seasonal pressure	Relatively more sustainable
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Fragmented governance	Some good local practices	Institutional fragmentation and uneven implementation	Low effectiveness
Serbia	More developed monitoring and administration	Greater capacity for control and reporting	Persistent pressure on forests	More advanced in monitoring

This comparison indicates that the effectiveness of a moratorium depends not only on legal prohibition, but also on how it is integrated into a broader governance system. Countries that combined bans with monitoring, reforestation, and institutional reform achieved more

sustainable results. Albania could benefit from these experiences by linking forest protection with rural development, clean energy, and stronger local administration.

Table 2. Total imported timber material in Albania, 2015–2024

Year	Total imported timber material (m ³)
2015	214,209.7
2016	309,653.7
2017	311,243.4
2018	309,452.1
2019	295,729.9
2020	289,807.6
2021	289,278.4
2022	277,411.9
2023	290,789.0
2024	322,484.7

Table 3. Total forest fund area in Albania, 2015–2024

Year	Total forest fund area
2015	1,740,897
2016	1,740,880
2017	1,740,339
2018	1,740,324
2019	1,740,307
2020	1,740,304
2021	1,716,824
2022	1,731,901
2023	1,732,869
2024	1,731,891

Table 4. Number of criminal offenses in the forest fund, 2015–2024

Year	Number of criminal offenses
2015	33
2016	32
2017	21
2018	41
2019	0
2020	0
2021	0
2022	36

2023	32
2024	6

Table 5. Number of administrative offenses in the forest fund, 2015–2024

Year	Number of administrative offenses
2015	443
2016	368
2017	278
2018	348
2019	240
2020	170
2021	191
2022	51
2023	23
2024	2

4. Conclusions

The forest moratorium in Albania has been an important and necessary measure to slow immediate forest degradation, but its effectiveness has been partial and limited. It has worked as a prohibitive instrument and political signal, but not as a structural solution to the problem.

Weak implementation, lack of comprehensive monitoring, limited institutional capacity, and the absence of alternatives for local communities have prevented the moratorium from producing a lasting impact. From a critical perspective, it should be seen as an important but insufficient step.

To achieve real forest protection, Albania needs an integrated policy that combines prohibition with sustainable management, reforestation, advanced monitoring, and economic alternatives for rural areas. Only such an approach can transform the moratorium from a temporary measure into a genuine instrument of ecological recovery.

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