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Kasowitz LLP and Mishcon de Reya LLP Publish an Updated Report Regarding the Political Persecution of Erion Veliaj, Mayor of Tirana

OCTOBER 28, 2025

Kasowitz LLP (New York) and Mishcon de Reya LLP (London) today announced the public release of an Updated Veliaj Report, titled "Report Regarding the Political Persecution of Erion Veliaj, Mayor of Tirana." The report updates the "Report Regarding SPAK's Unjust Detention of a Democratically Elected Mayor in the Capital of Albania: Erion Veliaj," which the firms previously published on June 24, 2025.

The Updated Veliaj Report examines the apparent and improper political motivations underlying SPAK's case against Tirana Mayor Erion Veliaj. According to the report, in the span of eight months, key events have created the undeniable appearance that SPAK's prosecution of Mayor Veliaj is no ordinary prosecution. Mayor Veliaj has been detained since February, despite the fact that he does not pose a risk of flight, a risk of obstructing SPAK's case, or a risk of re-committing the supposed offenses for which he has been charged. According to the report, the fact that Mayor Veliaj was denied bail – while 17 of the other defendants charged in the same case were released on minimal conditions – illustrates the stark disparity in the way that he has been treated by the Albanian authorities.

Moreover, the Updated Veliaj Report notes that recent political events have amplified the concern that Mayor Veliaj's case is a political persecution designed to strip him of his duly elected position as Mayor in violation of the Albanian Constitution. In September, the Municipal Council of Tirana – citing Mayor Veliaj's involuntary detention – removed him from office. As the report notes, this decision, followed by an announcement by the President of the Republic to hold new elections to replace Mayor Veliaj, created the appearance that Mayor Veliaj's unjustified detention was the pretext on which the Albanian authorities have tried to unconstitutionally strip him of his position and disenfranchise the citizens of Tirana of their right to self-government.

While the Constitutional Court has, for the time being, suspended any such actions until Mayor Veliaj's appeal challenging the Municipal Council's decision has been decided, the Updated Veliaj Report

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explores the implications of this constitutional crisis. One of the observations of the report is that Mayor Veliaj's case is a clear example in which Albania's commitment to due process has come into question. According to the report, recent political maneuvers intended to depose Mayor Veliaj have vitiated the presumption of innocence to which Mayor Veliaj is entitled, and deprived him of his liberty and his office – all before his trial has even begun.

A copy of the Updated Veliaj Report is available **here**.

The Kasowitz team includes partners Daniel J. Fetterman and Brian S. Choi in New York, and senior counsel Clarine Nardi Riddle and special counsel David Miller in Washington, D.C.

The Mishcon de Reya team includes partners James Libson and Ben Brandon, managing associate Celia Marr, and associates Grace Houghton and Elizabeth Fitton.

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Report Of Kasowitz LLP And Mishcon de Reya Regarding The Political Persecution Of Erion Veliaj, Mayor Of Tirana

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This Report updates the Final Report of Kasowitz LLP and Mishcon de Reya LLP Regarding SPAK's Unjust Detention Of A Democratically Elected Mayor In The Capital Of Albania: Erion Veliaj, which was published on June 24, 2025, and is attached hereto as Attachment A (the "Initial Report"). Familiarity with the background facts, principles, and legal framework of the Initial Report is presumed.

* * * * *

I. The Unlawful and Unjustified Detention of Erion Veliaj

Erion Veliaj is the 45-year old Mayor of Tirana, the capital and most populous city of Albania. First elected to office in 2015, Mayor Veliaj has played a pivotal role in Tirana's growth, overseeing dramatic improvements in infrastructure and investments in youth and education programs, among other initiatives. Under Mayor Veliaj's leadership, Tirana has emerged as a world-class city – named as the European Capital of Youth for 2022 by the European Youth Forum,[1] the European City of Sport by ACES Europe in 2023,[2] and the Mediterranean Capital of Culture and Dialogue by the Union for the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation in 2025.[3] Over the past ten years, Tirana has become the face of Albania's ascension on the global stage – putting the country one step closer to achieving its long-desired

[1] *Congratulations, Tirana! Winner of the European Youth Capital for 2022*, European Youth Forum (21 November 2019), https://www.youthforum.org/news/congratulations-tirana-winner-of-the-european-youth-capital-for-2022.
[2] *European Cities of Sport*, ACES, https://aceseurope.eu/european-cities-of-sport/.
[3] *Tirana takes centre stage as Mediterranean Capital of Culture and Dialogue*, Union for the Mediterranean (12 March 2025), https://ufmsecretariat.org/tirana-launch-capitals-2025/.

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goal of joining the European Union. Mayor Veliaj was elected to his third term in 2023 in overwhelming fashion.[4]

In July of 2023, however, the Special Structure Against Corruption and Organized Crime ("SPAK") – a government entity in Albania responsible for investigating public corruption – received an anonymous tip-off accusing Mayor Veliaj of engaging in corruption. Based on this tip, SPAK initiated a far-reaching investigation into Mayor Veliaj, examining virtually every facet of his life. SPAK raided the offices of Mayor Veliaj's family members, seizing their personal devices and items.[5] SPAK subjected Mayor Veliaj and his wife, among other family members and close friends, to multiple hours-long interrogations. Nothing was off limits – even events that had occurred nearly two decades ago in Mayor Veliaj's life were scrutinized. At every step of SPAK's two-and-a-half year investigation, Mayor Veliaj provided his full cooperation. On numerous occasions, Mayor Veliaj even returned to Albania during international trips that he had taken in his capacity as Mayor to meet with SPAK investigators.

Over two-and-a-half years, SPAK refused to disclose anything about its investigation. On 10 February 2025, SPAK escalated its investigation by arresting

[4] Local Elections, 14 May 2023, Preliminary Election Information, Central Election Commission, https://iemis.kqz.gov.al/results2023/results2023.htm; *see also Erion Veliaj reconfirmed Mayor of Tirana, winning the election by a landslide*, Euronews Albania (16 May 2023), https://euronews.al/en/erion-veliaj-reconfirmed-as-mayor-of-tirana-winning-the-election-by-a-landslide/.

[5] *Veliaj's family members complained about SPAK checks, the judge who will examine the case is appointed,* A2 CNN (19 December 2024), https://a2news.com/english/shqiperia/kronike/familjaret-e-veliajt-ankimuan-kontrollet-e-spak-caktohet-gjyqt-i1135877.

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and detaining Mayor Veliaj on unspecified, undisclosed, and uncharged allegations of "passive corruption." Even at this juncture, however, SPAK did not bring formal charges supporting its arrest and detention of Mayor Veliaj.[6] SPAK only formally announced its charges against Mayor Veliaj on 23 July 2025[7] – more than five months into his detention.

After his arrest, Mayor Veliaj promptly requested his release from pre-trial detention. In Albania – similar to Europe and the United States – a court must evaluate certain fundamental risks to determine whether a defendant should be released: (1) the risk of flight; (2) the risk of obstructing the authorities' investigation; and (3) the risk of re-committing the offenses for which he is charged.[8] In considering these risks, a court must assure itself that a defendant will appear for every hearing in his case and will not harm the public while released on bail.[9] All three of these risks were virtually non-existent at the time of Mayor Veliaj's arrest (and remain so today).

First, there was and remains virtually no risk that Mayor Veliaj would abscond to a foreign jurisdiction. His wife, seven-year-old son, and elderly mother reside in

[6] *Erion Veliaj, Mayor of Tirana, held without charge for past five months*, Colin Stevens, EU Reporter (30 June 2025), https://www.eureporter.co/world/albania/2025/06/30/erion-veliaj-mayor-of-tirana-held-without-charge-for-past-5-months/.
[7] *SPAK communicates the charges to Erion Veliaj*, Arbjona Cibuku, Citizens.al (23 July 2025), https://citizens.al/en/2025/07/23/erion-veliaj-zyrtarisht-i-pandehur/.
[8] *Analysis of the Criminal Justice System of Albania*, Mari-Ann Roos, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (2006) at 33, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/c/22211.pdf.
[9] *Id.*

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Tirana. His friends, community, and colleagues are based in Albania. Mayor Veliaj built his entire career and livelihood in Albania. All of his assets and property are in Albania. He had every incentive to remain in Albania to vindicate himself and restore the promising career that was derailed by SPAK's investigation. And, even if Mayor Veliaj were to flee Albania – a task made infinitely more difficult by his public profile and the public scrutiny surrounding his case – he lacked the assets abroad to support himself and his family in a foreign country.

Second, the risk that Mayor Veliaj would obstruct or otherwise interfere with SPAK's investigation was always low and is non-existent today because the investigation now has been concluded.[10] Since the inception of the investigation, Mayor Veliaj fully cooperated with SPAK and would have continued doing so if he had been released. With the intense media attention surrounding his case, any attempt by Mayor Veliaj to obstruct SPAK's investigation or tamper with witnesses and evidence would have generated relentless coverage, subjected him to public scorn, and been completely at odds with his own interests.

Third, there was and is virtually no risk that Mayor Veliaj would re-commit the alleged "passive corruption" offenses for which he was ultimately charged. The material disclosed by SPAK to date does not provide evidential support for the

[10] *SPAK communicates the charges to Erion Veliaj*, Arbjona Cibuku, Citizens.al (23 July 2025), https://citizens.al/en/2025/07/23/erion-veliaj-zyrtarisht-i-pandehur/.

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contention that Mayor Veliaj used his official powers to grant a favor (*i.e.*, approving a real estate permit or artistic and cultural event budgets) to another party specifically in exchange for or with the expectation of a personal benefit. In any event, the concern that Mayor Veliaj, if released, would somehow continue using his authority improperly can be mitigated, if not eliminated, through a formal delegation of such authority to an independent party. In other words, Mayor Veliaj can remove himself from the process of reviewing any future permit or project requests submitted before his office, and leave that task in the hands of an independent party.

In view of the foregoing, Mayor Veliaj easily satisfied the criteria for release. But the court in February summarily denied – and appeals courts subsequently denied – Mayor Veliaj's request.[11] Remarkably, out of the 18 defendants implicated in SPAK's "passive corruption" case, Mayor Veliaj is the sole defendant whose bail request was denied. 17 other defendants in this case have been released on minimal conditions. Thus, over the past eight months, Mayor Veliaj has remained in detention. During that time, he has been (i) subjected to highly-intrusive, unnecessary and humiliating bodily searches during routine medical examinations, (ii) deprived of full access to his legal counsel, which has impaired his ability to

[11] *Albania Appeal Court Orders Tirana Mayor to Stay in Custody*, Fjori Sinoruka, Balkan Insight (13 March 2025), https://balkaninsight.com/2025/03/13/albania-appeal-court-orders-tirana-mayor-to-stay-in-custody/; *Erion Veliaj, Mayor of Tirana, held without charge for past five months*, Colin Stevens, EU Reporter (30 June 2025), https://www.eureporter.co/world/albania/2025/06/30/erion-veliaj-mayor-of-tirana-held-without-charge-for-past-5-months/.

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adequately prepare his defense; and (iii) had highly personal communications with his friends, family, and lawyers wiretapped by the authorities – and then publicly disclosed to the media without his consent.

The fact that the sitting Mayor of Albania's capital city has been detained indefinitely without posing any risk of flight or danger to the community violates all established principles of due process, fundamental fairness, and the rule of law. According to the United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture, Albania has failed to stem its overuse of pre-trial detention[12] in cases where, as in Mayor Veliaj's case, such measures are wholly unnecessary. The glaring disparity between the treatment of Mayor Veliaj and his 17 co-accused, all of whom have been released, suggests an ulterior motive for his prolonged detention – to stifle his political platform and message, and interfere with the preparation of his defense in this case.

II. The Apparent Political Persecution of Mayor Veliaj

Recent political events lay bare that SPAK's case – and Mayor Veliaj's unjustified pre-trial detention over the past eight months – has served as a pretext to unconstitutionally strip him of his position as the duly elected Mayor of Tirana.

[12] *Albania: High number of pre-trial detainees, access to healthcare matters of concern, UN torture prevention body says*, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commission (23 April 2024), https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/albania-high-number-pre-trial-detainees-access-healthcare-matters-concern-un.

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Since his arrest in February 2025, the conduct of the Albanian authorities has made it increasingly apparent that the case against Mayor Veliaj is no ordinary prosecution. His prolonged and punitive detention – now stretching into its ninth month – has effectively deprived him of the ability to govern, campaign, and discharge his mayoral duties. It is notable that Mayor Veliaj was detained just two months before Albania's national elections, at a time when he was leading the Socialist Party's campaign efforts.

The events of September 2025 have further exposed the political motivations underlying these proceedings. On 23 September, the Municipal Council, without affording Mayor Veliaj the constitutionally required notice, opportunity to be heard, or administrative investigation, attempted to remove him from his elected position.[13] The Council invoked Article 62(c) of Law No. 139/2015,[14] which allows the removal of a mayor absent from duty for more than three months. In doing so, however, for the reasons set forth below, the Council revealed the true and only reason for Mayor Veliaj's extended detention: to manufacture an artificial "absence" from office as pretext for his removal.

Mayor Veliaj has appealed these actions to the Constitutional Court of Albania. According to Mayor Veliaj's appeal, a mayor may be removed pursuant to

[13] *Tirana Council Dismisses Mayor Erion Veliaj*, Tirana Times (23 September 2025), https://www.tiranatimes.com/tirana-council-dismisses-mayor-erion-veliaj/.

[14] *Erion Veliaj challenges the government in Constitutional Court,* Citizens.al (29 September 2025), https://citizens.al/en/2025/09/29/Erion-Veliaj-challenges-the-government-in-the-constitutional-court/.

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Article 62(c) of Law No. 139/2015 for absence exceeding three months only if that absence is voluntary.[15] Mayor Veliaj's absence was instead the direct result of an involuntary and arbitrary detention. His multiple applications and appeals challenging his detention demonstrate his continuous willingness to perform his official duties. According to the arguments in Mayor Veliaj's appeal, his removal from office based on his absence from office for three months was unconstitutional because the constitution requires that his absence had to be voluntary – which it was not – and the process by which he was removed violated his due process rights as well as the presumption of innocence.

This issue is not unprecedented. In the case of Rexh Byberi, the Mayor of Tropoja, the Municipal Council concluded that although he had been under house arrest for more than three months, the coercive nature of that measure rendered his absence involuntary. The Council therefore did not remove him. The same reasoning applies here with even greater force, as Mayor Veliaj's detention is far more restrictive than house arrest.

On 29 September 2025, Mayor Veliaj appealed the Council's decision to the Constitutional Court.[16] Mayor Veliaj argued that, pursuant to Article 115 of the Constitution, filing the appeal automatically suspended both his removal and any

[15] *Veliaj appeals dismissal to the Constitutional Court*, Tirana Post (29 September 2025), https://tiranapost.al/english/aktualitet/veliaj-ankimon-shkarkimin-ne-gjykaten-kushtetuese-i540301.
[16] *Veliaj appeals dismissal to the Constitutional Court*, Tirana Post (29 September 2025), https://tiranapost.al/english/aktualitet/veliaj-ankimon-shkarkimin-ne-gjykaten-kushtetuese-i540301.

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related electoral process pending a final decision.[17] Nevertheless, on 1 October 2025, the President of the Republic announced new elections for 9 November to replace him.[18] This development indicated two things: (1) the Albanian authorities are intent on removing Mayor Veliaj from office, and (2) they are prepared to do so in defiance of his constitutional and due-process rights.

On 9 October 2025, the Constitutional Court intervened, suspending the planned elections and holding that proceeding with them before hearing and addressing Mayor Veliaj's appeal would cause irreparable harm to his rights and disenfranchise the citizens of Tirana.[19] This consequential decision, for now, has halted efforts to depose Mayor Veliaj and preserved his lawful status as Mayor. Mayor Veliaj's substantive appeal on the constitutionality of his removal from office is scheduled to be heard by the Constitutional Court on 31 October 2025.[20]

SPAK's deeply flawed prosecution and the Municipal Council's hasty and unconstitutional efforts to strip Mayor Veliaj of his office strongly suggest that the country's executive and judicial institutions remain susceptible to political interference.

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[17] Article 115(2), Albanian Constitution, https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/Albania%20Constitution.pdf.
[18] *Early Elections in 6 Municipalities on November 9 – Presidency Clarifies Decree for Tirana*, Nen Si, Euronews Albania (1 October 2025), https://euronews.al/en/early-elections-in-6-municipalities-on-november-9-presidency-clarifies-decree-for-tirana/.
[19] *Constitutional Court Suspends Tirana Elections Pending Veliaj's Appeal*, Nen Si, Euronews Albania (9 October 2025), https://euronews.al/en/constitutional-court-suspends-tirana-elections-pending-veliajs-appeal/.
[20] *On October 31, the Constitutional Court will review Veliaj's appeal over his dismissal*, Nen Si, Euronews Albania (9 October 2025), https://euronews.al/en/on-october-31-the-constitutional-court-will-review-veliajs-appeal-over-his-dismissal/.

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