



Research Article

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Prospects for integration and Obstacles to democracy - EU's role in the Albanian political crisis

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Abstract

More than three decades after the totalitarian regime collapse, Albania is still categorized as a hybrid democracy despite having made consistent strides toward becoming a liberal democracy. Most local political leaders have remained antagonistic towards liberal democratic principles. In 2019, relations between the European Union (EU) and Albania were at a special stage of development. After a difficult period and tensions in the EU, the European Council decided to postpone the decision to start membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia. Apart from this issue, Albania had other challenges in 2019, including institutional and political conflict, justice reform, the fight against corruption, and the consolidation of democratic structures. This article examines the intricate connections that Albanian political representatives and institutions maintain with foreign organizations and entities. It specifically highlights the role that the EU Delegation played in mediating the political and institutional crises of 2019. Although the external incentives models provide a useful foundation for understanding Albania's Europeanization process, other factors that may be relevant and encourage the ongoing democratization and rule adoption are indicated by the country's low membership credibility.

Keywords: democratic transition, crises, integration, EU conditionality.

1. Introduction

In 2019, Albania went through various political developments and challenges that affected the political and social situation of the country: The political opposition in Albania, led by the Democratic Party (PD) and its allies, organized numerous protests against the government of Prime Minister Edi Rama. These protests were related to the opposition's accusations of corruption and lack of transparency in the governance of the country. In July 2019, local elections were held in Albania. Concerns and accusations of the opposition for possible violations of election rules accompanied

these elections.

During 2019, Albania continued the judicial reform process, an initiative aimed at improving the independence of the judicial system and the fight against corruption. This process was one of the conditions set by the European Union for the opening of membership negotiations. Relations between the European Union (EU) and Albania were at a special stage of development. Albania has expressed its desire to join the EU and has sought to fulfill the membership criteria.

In 2018, the European Commission had recommended the start of membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia. However, some EU member states, including France and the Netherlands, are against starting negotiations with these two countries, stressing the need for further reforms and the fulfillment of membership criteria (EUCO 9/18).

2. Literature review and methodology

Prospective EU membership has been viewed in studies on Eastern European transition countries as “the EU’s most powerful instrument to encourage them to undertake major economic and political reforms” (Smith, 1997). The importance of EU incentives for the advancement of democracy and the market economy is emphasized in the literature on the international dimension of transition and studies on the Europeanization of Central and East European countries. (Pridham, 2006). Within this context, conditionality has been used as an analytical tool to explain the effects of external actors on democratization (Grabbe, 2002). That is the case in Albania, where EU institutions and representatives have attempted to effectively influence the reform processes in various fields by using a variety of instruments to impact institutional and policy transformation, as well as incentives and deterrents (Duraku and Agolli Nasufi, 2024). Kubicek notes that an external actor like the EU may not always have the desired effect on changes, even when conditionality is used. His question then becomes, “whether and under what conditions can conditionality actually work?” (Kubicek, 2003). Regarding this query, Kubicek formulates a number of theories. He contends that for domestic elites to begin and continue a process of democratization, the incentives pushed by outside actors need to be greater than the practical and political costs involved. The causality between EU conditionality and the effectiveness of rule adoption in potential candidate countries has been analyzed (Pickering, 2011; Böhmelt and Fryburg, 2012), but the degree to which EU conditionality is effective in a candidate or prospective candidate country is also influenced by internal factors and EU strategies. The degree of political system competition and the general level of support for EU membership among the population are examples of domestic factors (Schimmelfennig et al. 2003; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2017).

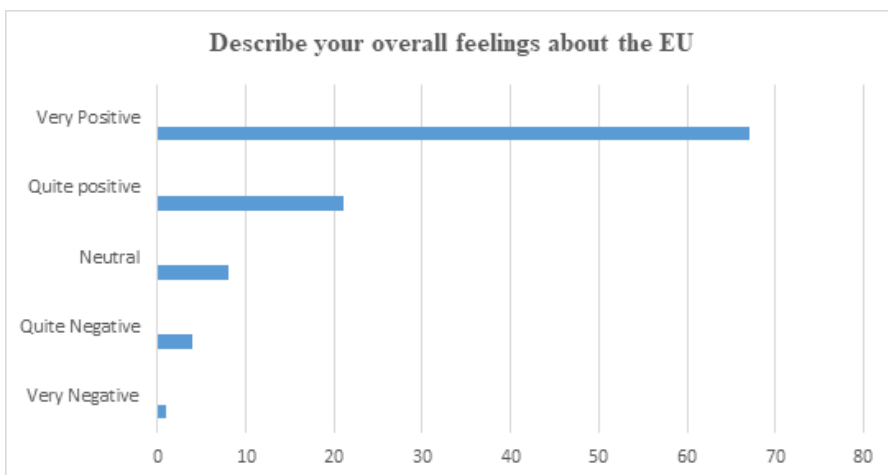
In order to become members of the EU, prospective Western Balkan countries must settle unresolved conflicts and institutional deficiencies (Huszka, 2020; Lemstra, 2020; Kemp, 2021). The Western Balkan countries have seen a decline in democracy during the past decade. The region’s nondemocratic traits are part of a global trend

(Stratulat, 2017; Bandović and Dimitrov, 2017; Bieber, 2018; Levitsky and Way, 2021) The Balkan countries have experienced hybrid political regimes, which combine elements of democratic and autocratic institutions (Kiri, 2023; Freedom House 2022, 2023; International IDEA, 2023). Furthermore, the emergence of additional external players like China and Russia has highlighted the potential for nationalist leaders to escalate tensions with neighboring nations in the event that the EU's influence was to decline. In order to improve their prospects and increase regional security, the EU should encourage the Western Balkan nations to settle their unresolved conflicts. This would show the region's commitment to the region (Bonomi, 2019; Parandii, 2023). Formal theories, critical political comparisons, and public opinion data regarding EU integration are all taken into account. To identify factors that might be important in Albania's path towards integration, a comparative analysis is done between the public statements and interventions made by EU representatives and the editorials and opinions published in media outlets affiliated with the opposition and ruling parties.

3. Democratic endorsement of the integration process

All polls conducted over the past few decades have shown that Albanians are very supportive of integration (WBSB 2021, Kalemaj, 2022). Generally dissatisfied with the social and economic accomplishments of their elected representatives, they view the external pressure from EU institutions as a good thing that might force Albanian institutions and politicians to take greater accountability and focus on outcomes (Stasa and Dedej, 2023). In 2019, the process of European integration held great significance for the Albanian people, as evidenced by the 85% of respondents who expressed very or quite positive feelings towards it, compared to just 6.7% who described their feelings as neutral and 7.7% who expressed negative feelings (Ipsos, 2019).

Table 1. Albanian public perception about EU (Source: Ipsos Public Affairs, 2019)



Though it has somewhat decreased recently, Albanians' level of support and expectation is still very high, and it is in direct proportion to their dissatisfaction with Albanian institutions in general. To the dismay of the Albanian political elite, the integration process is seen as a greater degree of control over a favorable external factor.

Albania is categorized as a Transitional or Hybrid regime in the annual report Nations in Transit by Freedom House, which focuses on democracy in the region extending from Central Europe to Central Asia. (Freedom House, 2020).

Table 2. Albanian democracy score history (Source: FH Nations in Transit, 2020)

2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2019	2020
3.96	3.86	3.75	3.82	3.86	3.86	3.86	3.89	3.82

The year 2012 saw the first mention of Sali Berisha's rule in Albania as a stabilitocracy. Even though Edi Rama's socialist government introduced new reforms, many structural remnants of party patronage and the value of a strong man persisted (Bieber, 2018) The democratic score has been slightly dropping, with the corruption and national democratic governance receiving the lowest scores (FH, 2020).

Table 3. Democracy score by category (Freedom House, 2020)

National Democratic Governance	3.25
Electoral Process	4.25
Civil Society	4.75
Independent Media	3.50
Local Democratic Governance	4.50
Judicial Framework and Independence	3.25
Corruption	2.75
Democracy Score	3.75
Democracy Percentage	46%

The political crises of 2019

The political and social climate of Albania was impacted by a number of political events and difficulties that occurred in 2019. Numerous demonstrations against Prime Minister Edi Rama's administration were organized by Albania's political opposition, which was headed by the Democratic Party (PD) and its allies. These demonstrations were sparked by the opposition's charges of corruption and a lack of openness in the national government. Albania persisted in the judicial reform initiative, which sought to strengthen the judiciary's independence and combat

corruption. One of the requirements imposed by the European Union for the commencement of membership negotiations was this procedure. Local elections took place in Albania in July 2019. Despite the opposition's radical boycott of institutions, Albania's ruling party proceeded with local elections, giving voters no meaningful option (FH, 2021).

Welzel argues that extreme social polarization is bad for democracy because it can quickly turn into violent conflicts between groups trying to control the state. As a result, this division is highly harmful to Albania's democratic process and causes the crucial reforms required for the establishment of institutions, the consolidation of democracy, and the upholding of the rule of law to come to a standstill. As a result, the following reforms about public administration, the independence and structure of the judiciary, and electoral matters—remain stalled (Welzel, 2008).

In 2019, relations between the European Union (EU) and Albania were at a special stage of development. Albania has expressed its desire to join the EU and has sought to fulfill the membership criteria. In June 2018, the European Council agreed to the start of membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia (Council of the EU 10555/18). Negotiations with these two nations, however, were opposed by some EU members, notably France and the Netherlands, who emphasized the need for additional reforms and the fulfillment of membership requirements (Balkan Insight, 2019).

4. Albanian political elites and EU integration

One generally positive aspect of Albania's political landscape is the acceptance of EU membership as a priority by all political parties, from the left to the right. It is intriguing to consider whether or not each priority statement represents a true commitment, or if it is merely rhetorical and serves a political purpose (Soros Foundation, 2019). Any other topic, whether domestic or international, is subordinated to the European Union and its related aspects in the public speeches of Albania's main leading political figures (Edi Rama, the leader of the Socialist Party and Prime Minister of Albania since 2013 and Lulzim Basha, leader of the Democratic Party since 2013). Naturally, these subjects are used more frequently as the crucial negotiating phases draw near, but they are also discussed in weekly political speeches.

Considering a large number of press releases, the discourse of the leader holding the prime minister position at any given time (Rama from 2013 to the present) quantitatively more frequently mentions EU integration; the reforms carried out by the ruling majority are consistently legitimized and described as necessary for the negotiation process to move forward. Whether they are outlining specific economic reforms or more general universal values, both leaders portray their party platforms as the pinnacle of European values (Lernstra, 2020). Depending on the speaker, every advancement made in the Albanian integration process is credited solely to the current or previous administration, while every setback is attributed to its opposite. Following the EU summit in October 2019, where was decided that North Macedonia

and Albania could not start the process of applying for membership in the EU, the opposition leader, Lulzim Basha, said: "Conditions were added for the opening of negotiations. It demonstrates the regression of the government. Large-scale exodus of Albanians from the nation has been caused by state capture and legal inequality. These are issues with our government, not the EU" (Lapsi, 2019). In contrast, the Prime Minister expressed disappointment in his response, highlighting the divisions and internal issues within the EU while discounting any potential shortcomings of the Albanian institutions: *"We will continue to reform our institutions. To improve Albania, we will begin implementing justice reform. We've implemented a reform that wasn't requested. This is an extremely powerful game. It's a game of bigger interests than ourselves. However, as I've previously stated, integration is a process of internal change rather than winning over people"* (Tv1. 2019).

The use of historical allusions and stereotypes in political discourse and public communication is a persistent trend in Albania. It is commonplace to come across positive or negative portrayals of nations in the media and public discourse, as well as connections between the political choices made by those nations' leaders and events that occurred decades or even centuries ago. For instance, Albanian politicians and society channeled these feelings when France, the Netherlands, and Denmark decided to postpone their accession negotiations in 2019. Certain politicians and mainstream commentators vented their annoyance by concentrating on the domestic issues facing European nations, occasionally employing clumsy or even disparaging justifications. A National Assembly member was among those who condemned France's position and blamed internal immigration issues. *"Paris has become black and white like the Juventus jersey,"* he said on national television (TV Klan, 2019).

5. EU representatives intervention

In support of his decision to oppose the accession talks, President Macron offered two arguments: first, the EU must improve its current institutions and policies before accepting new members; and second, the EU enlargement process is inherently flawed, leaving member states without sufficient means to deal with any subsequent violations of EU democratic norms. These are fair arguments, especially in light of the fact that certain member states have regressed from liberal democratic norms, and reforming the EU is necessary to strengthen the Eurozone and its decision-making mechanism so that it can react to crises more quickly (Global Policy, 2020).

Charles Michel, the prime minister of Belgium, stated that there was "a lot of intensity in the debates" but no agreement on the matter. While Donald Tusk pleaded with both nations to persevere, EU chief Jean-Claude Juncker referred to it as a "grave, historic error" (Euronews, 2019).

EU representatives have shown restraint intervening in the Albanian political dispute. Their primary argument here remains unchanged: we do not want to become involved as long as Albanian political leaders can use international mediation as a justification and a tool to create a new, customized agreement in which foreigners

are not involved or given a voice (Bonomi, 2019). An EU delegation of seven MEPs visited Tirana in February 2019. In the meetings with representatives of all factions, they stressed that national unity should be the aim of all parties and called on the opposition to return to parliament (Tirana Post, 2019).

In an interview with Deutsche Welle, EU Ambassador to Albania Luigi Soreca discussed the political crisis, and the possibility of starting EU-Albania membership negotiations: *"We have certainly played a role in this country, and we continue to play an important role. We have a strong mandate from Albanian citizens, 93% of whom want to enter the European Union, but also a strong responsibility. And now it's time for us to deliver, but it's also time for the political parties of this country to find a compromise. The culture of compromise is not necessarily typical of this country; it should become a moment where interests meet. Everyone must step forward. There is a bridge somewhere and I am sure there is a way to cross that bridge and ensure that dialogue is found. This is in the interest of Albanian citizens who want this country to move forward"* (Deutsche Welle, 2019).

However, the Albanian opposition's unprecedented initiative to turn over parliamentary mandates forced the European representatives to take a stance in favor of institutions and public peace. In a joint statement, High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn took a stance: *"The decision by the opposition to relinquish their mandates seriously hinders the functioning of democracy in Albania. Parliament is where reforms and relevant developments should be discussed and taken forward, not boycotted. These decisions and acts are counterproductive, go against the democratic choice of Albanian citizens, and undermine the progress the country has made on the European Union path"* (EEAS, 2019).

6. Conclusion

Albanians remain among the most enthusiastic about the process and its expected outcomes, even in these turbulent times for the Community, despite a few stops and setbacks along the way to European integration. However, no political party in Albania's political spectrum has ever expressed even the slightest criticism of the dynamics of the integration process. This extraordinary zeal stems from historical and geopolitical factors, as well as the dysfunctional political and social structures of Albania, which are examined in this analysis.

Whether in power or in opposition, political leaders have alternately used the language of Albania's EU membership. Government representatives frequently take credit for any advancements made in the process and blame any pauses or setbacks on the opposition's lack of cooperation. Opposition leaders accuse the government of moving in the wrong direction and define their position as the "real European position" at the same time. Apart from refusing to work together when EU diplomats disagree with their political positions, both major parties advocate for EU intervention during political crises. Regardless, Albanian leaders typically find or create internal and external factors that undermine them and refuse to accept responsibility for their mistakes. Albanian citizens consistently score highly in favor of integration in

every survey over the past few decades. Generally dissatisfied with the social and economic accomplishments of their elected representatives, they view the external pressure from EU institutions as a good thing that might force Albanian institutions and politicians to take greater accountability and focus on outcomes. Particularly the younger generations and those who have had firsthand contact with European societies, Albanians characterize themselves as closely aligned with European values and culture.

Recent years have seen a rise of governments that pose as proponents of EU integration, assert stability, and subvert democracy and the rule of law through media manipulation, informal structures, and the continual instigation of crises. The opposition forces' destructive and uncooperative counter-reaction in the Albanian case has put the European Union's representatives in a precarious position.

Is it right to support an Albanian nation in its integration process? The European Parliament expressed dissatisfaction with the failure to begin accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in the resolution approved in October 2019. The European Parliament viewed the EU leaders' "non-decision" as a strategic error that could harm the EU's reputation and convey a bad message to other potential candidate nations. Additionally, it might make it possible for other foreign players to interact more closely with North Macedonia and Albania, even if their actions conflict with EU values and interests.

The green light for accession negotiations was given to both countries in March 2020; however, most of the societal and governmental obstacles to integration still exist.

The European Union must be able to uphold its commitment to the accession of Albania and the other Western Balkan countries. While the inclusion of factors (like domestic resonance) described in constructivist approaches can offer complementary explanations of the domestic processes leading to the adoption of EU rules and the specific choices of rules within the scope of the EU's conditionality, this is insufficient. The European commitment, while repeatedly reaffirmed solemnly, does not always seem credible. Albanians are mentally in the position of "permanent candidates," but neither political elites nor the population contemplates rejecting the integration aspirations. Thus, the EU should maintain the current level of political conditionality while simultaneously making its membership pledge more believable and tangible.

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