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# The EU Integration Process and its Role in the Albanian Sociopolitical Transformation

## Abstract

*Nearly thirty years after the fall of communism in Albania, European integration has been the main driving force for change and the real catalyst for reform. Today, a vast majority of Albanians continue to be convinced that the only way to develop, modernize and guarantee security is a full integration into the European family. The problem is not simply the duration of such an intermediate phase between obtaining candidate status and a full membership of the European Union. In fact, Albanians themselves are increasingly aware that the road to full membership of the European Union will be long, and that it will require a series of major and profound changes in the country, especially in the areas of the rule of law and functioning of institutions, along with implementing various standards that a society must meet in order to achieve this goal. The aim of this paper is to analyze Albanian use and abuse of the EU integration process in internal political discourse, reforms and transformation. A number of documents, publications and public speeches are examined in order to evaluate the impact of integration in this small, developing, post-communist country.*

**Key words:** european integration, political communication, cultural identity, external factors.

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## Introduction

Right after the fall of the communist regime and establishment of a democratic government in May 1992 Albania became the first state of the Balkan Peninsula to sign the agreement on economic cooperation and trade with the European Community. The incredible enthusiasm and expectations of people that chanted “We want Albania like the rest of Europe!” had to go through some dramatic setbacks due to the unsuccessful democratization process and internal turmoil during the ‘90ies. The following years were dedicated to normalization and building democratic institutions. The first time that the perspective of European membership became more tangible was at the Thessaloniki summit of EU leaders in 2003 and continued later through the stabilization and association process. Formally Albania submitted its application for EU membership in April 24<sup>th</sup> 2009 and a new wave of optimism began, despite the fact that the European Commission assessed that Albania should still reach a necessary level of compliance with the accession criteria before the formal start of negotiations (Füle 2010, 5). Albania was given a candidate country status in October 2014, after the general elections had brought the Socialist Party to power, opening a period of initiated and partially realized reforms to meet the accession criteria. The European Council of 17 and 18 October 2019 decided to return to the issue of enlargement before the EU-Western Balkans summit of Zagreb in May 2020 (EUCO XT 20018/19). On March 25<sup>th</sup> 2020, The European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Albania, after the General Affairs Council gave its political approval amid the Covid-19 global crisis (EC Press Release, 25/3/2020).

All of the conducted surveys have concluded that Albanians have been and still are one of the most enthusiastic people about the perspective of European integration. The percentage of those who are in favor of integration is consistently around 90 percent. Furthermore, the main Albanian political parties have historically included European integration in their political programs, considering it as the country’s major strategic objective (Misha 2015, 58). The promise of a membership in the European Union has been and still continues to be the true driving force behind positive change; while the European Union itself has been an authoritative watchdog stopping deviations and distortions of democratization and Europeanization, and often a decisive mediator in resolving Albanian internal tensions or political crises. The aim of this paper is to analyze the Albanian use of EU integration process in its internal political discourse, especially during the most important reforms. A number of documents, publications and public speeches are examined in order to evaluate the impact of integration in the Republic of Albania.

## EU Integration in the internal political discourse

Studies on Eastern Europe countries transitioning to democracy have consistently seen the prospect of EU membership as the “EU’s most powerful instrument to encourage them to undertake major economic and political reforms” (Smith 1997, 7). The literature on the international dimension of transition and recent studies on Europeanization of Central and East European Countries emphasize the important role of EU incentives for promotion of democracy and market economy. Within this context, conditionality has been used as an analytical tool to explain the effects of external actors on democratization (Grabbe 2002, 6). That is true in the Albanian case, where by means of incentives and deterrents, as well as relying on a range of instruments to impact the transformation of institutions and policies, the EU institutions and representatives have tried to effectively influence the reform processes in various fields. In this regard, Kubicek remarks that the use of conditionality does not guarantee that all changes develop in the direction intended by an external actor such as the EU. He therefore poses the question “whether and under what conditions can conditionality actually work?” (Kubicek 2003, 17). Kubicek constructs several hypotheses related to this question. According to him, the incentives pushed by external actors have to be bigger than the political and practical costs domestic elites face when they start to engage in and continue a democratization process. The causality between EU conditionality and the effectiveness of rule adoption in potential candidate countries had been analyzed (Böhmelt and Fryburg 2012, 250–272), but also internal factors as well as EU strategies affect the level of effectiveness of EU conditionality in candidate or aspiring candidate countries. Domestic factors include the level of competitiveness of the political system, the broad support for EU membership among the country’s population (Schimmelfennig et al. 2003, 495–518), the sensitivity of the required policy change and the domestic adoption costs (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2017).

The fact that in Albania EU membership is accepted as a priority by all political parties, from left to right of the political spectrum, is generally considered as a positive feature. It is interesting to question if all the statements of priority are an expression of sincere commitments, or just rhetorical and instrumental tools in political struggle. Examining the data regarding the European Union integration process in discourse of main Albanian political figures during the 2000s (Fondacioni Soros 2012), we can distinguish some recurring features:

- a) The European Union and EU related aspects in public speeches of the two main Albanian political leaders (Sali Berisha, leader of the Democratic Party and Prime

Minister of Albania from 2005 to 2013 and Edi Rama, leader of the Socialist Party and Prime Minister of Albania since 2013) dominate any other topic, either domestic or international. Understandably, the use of these topics intensifies when the key moments of the negotiation process are approached, but it is also present in weekly political speeches.

- b) EU integration is quantitatively more present in discourse of the leader holding the Prime Minister position at any time (Berisha from 2005 to 2013, Rama from 2013 to date), the reforms undertaken by the ruling majority are always described and legitimized as a precondition for progress in the negotiation process.
- c) Both leaders present their party programs as the epitome of European values, whether they are presenting precise economic reforms or broader universal values. As an example, when illustrating the flat tax reform, PM Berisha expressed himself: “As we set the flat tax reform, in the next four years we will give Albania freedoms as in all European countries...” (Gazeta 55, 2009, 2), while Rama as a leader of the opposition presented their electoral project in the following, more realistic frame: “The European collective dream is linked to the missing social dimension of the Albanian state, which must be modeled on the European institutional and civilization model” (Zeri i Popullit 2009, 1).
- d) Every progress on the Albanian integration path is presented as an exclusive achievement of either the present or the past government, depending on the speaker, while every setback is to be blamed on the counterpart. This was evident in October 2014 when Albania was given candidate country status, and even more so after the EU summit of October 2019, when Albania and North Macedonia were blocked from starting membership negotiations. Lulzim Basha, the head of the opposition, declared: “Conditions were added for the opening of negotiations. It shows that the government has taken steps backwards. State capture and inequality before the law has led Albanians to leave the country en masse. These are not problems of the EU, but of our government” (Lapsi 2019). On the other hand, the Prime Minister’s reaction was one of disappointment, underscoring internal problems and divides within the EU and dismissing any possible shortcomings of the Albanian institutions: “We will continue to reform our institutions. We will start implementing justice reform to make Albania better. We have undertaken a reform that no one has asked for. This is a game of great powers. It is a game of interests greater than us. But I have said that the process of integration is a process of internal transformation, not a process of pleasing others” (Tv1 2019). A recurrent tendency in Albania regards the use of historic references and stereotypes in the political discourse and public communication.

In press and public communication it is quite typical to find flattering or pejorative considerations regarding certain countries and linking their leaders' political decisions with historical events going back decades or even centuries. For example, on the occasion of postponement of accession negotiations by France, The Netherlands and Denmark in 2019, Albanian politicians and society simply repeated themselves. Some political representatives and main stream opinion makers expressed their frustration by focusing on the internal problems within European countries, sometimes using simplistic or even derogatory explanations. Among others, a member of the National Assembly criticized the France's stance and attributed it to internal problems with immigration. He expressed himself on national television "Paris has become black and white like the Juventus jersey" (TV Klan, 22/10/2019).

On March 25<sup>th</sup> 2020, at the height of the global Covid-19 crisis, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with the Republic of Albania (EC 7002/20). Regarding internal political dynamics in Albania, the Council's decision came during a prolonged and grave crisis and coincided with the opposition parties' decision to boycott all democratic institutions and any political communication with the governing party. Any of the above-mentioned tendency to use and abuse the integration process was even harsher this time, due to the internal political developments.

In a vast majority of public statements there is a discrepancy between the general agreement on Albania's European integration goal and the reaction to concrete steps towards integration. While there are no political parties or organizations in Albania that describe themselves as Eurosceptic, no shared opinion exists on the reasons and responsibilities regarding the negotiation process stalemate.

## **Between European identity and European hope**

Questioning and defining components of the European identity is a complex issue, and it is even harder to evaluate them within the Albanian society. Ever since the second half of the 2000s a line of public discourse persists, first promoted by the best-known Albanian writer – Ismail Kadare. In the "European Identity of the Albanians" (Kadare 2006) he writes about the antiquity of the Albanian people, the Catholic lords of the Middle Ages, the links with the West and the intrusion of the Ottomans as an incompatible, foreign culture which failed to leave any traces in Albanian culture. This is a stagnant vision, but still has a very strong following within the Albanian public; it is

often stated as the main idea on which the myth of European identity of the Albanian people is based. Collective identity tends to be pervasive and persistent, but individuals often have multiple identities that coexist and overlap. (Smith 1997, 322). We cannot speak of an identity referring to a static concept, since it is rather to be understood in terms of a fluid dynamic process, sensitive to the factors to which it is subjected, be they internal or external. The Albanian society has been quite traditional up to thirty years ago, but in the following years a number of factors have caused a sharp acceleration of cultural changes and consequent dilemmas/insecurities. In the last thirty years some of the impacting factors have been: a) the process of urbanization and economic transformation, which has seen Tirana in absolute foreground as a residence of almost half of the Albanian population; b) the proliferation of media outlets and the communication sector in general; c) the contribution of the emigrating population, due to the Albanians who emigrated to other (mostly EU) countries and, despite having the same cultural backgrounds as their countrymen, have intertwined their culture with that of the receiving nations.

The Maastricht Treaty has shaped a new legal category – the European Citizenship (TEUC 325/5 2002, 9), with the aim to give European citizens a sense of belonging to a common community with a shared history, values and purposes. The Maastricht Treaty also brought several new policy areas within the jurisdiction of the EU, including education, youth, culture, consumer protection and public health. With this enlarged sphere of governance, the EU obtained new legal powers to intervene in people's everyday life.

Beyond the vast rhetoric of European integration – are Albanian citizens fully aware of what the European Identity consists of and what does European integration mean in economic, social, political and cultural terms?

European integration is an overall important process to the Albanian people, with 86.2% combined percentage of those who think it is either very important or important but not a priority, opposed to only 7.7% who think it is irrelevant (AIIS 2014, 27). This level of support and expectation, despite a slight decline in recent years, coincides with an extremely high level of frustration that Albanian citizens express for the Albanian institutions at large. The integration process is perceived as adding a higher level of control, performed by a positive external factor, over the disappointing Albanian political class. To 72% of Albanians the EU means freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU, to 60% it means democracy and democratic values, to 60% it means economic prosperity and to 59% it means peace (OSFA 2014, 44). Albanian citizens, frustrated by the scarcity and insecurity of work and difficult living conditions in their country, are increasingly aiming at building

their future outside Albania, often in one of the EU countries to which they feel culturally closer. This cultural proximity comes out clearly in the polls showing that 66% of the participants under 50 see themselves in the near future as being both Albanians & Europeans. The sectors Albanian people expect to improve more as a consequence of the expected EU accession of Albania are: the education system, the economy and the environment protection in the country, the very sectors that are being considered the most problematic by Albanian public opinion.

When speaking of European institutions and values there's a lack of adequate information and awareness. 57% of Albanians think they are very or fairly well informed about the EU and its institutions, but most of them, when asked, can mention none. Even more serious is the lack of knowledge about the individual and collective rights deriving from a country's accession in the European Union. Most of Albanians pride themselves as "true Europeans" when asked directly, but they are not as coherent when asked about specific laws and customs. In 2015, the Minister of the Interior felt obliged to give a public answer (Sot, 7/7/2015) to the hundreds of people soliciting him to push for the introduction of death penalty after two Czech tourists were killed in northern Albania. Also, the reports on women and minorities rights show some disturbing figures related to discrimination and domestic violence (UNAL 2018, 27), although relative improvements have been made in those areas.

Analyses of the EU's ability to promote democracy, human rights and minority rights in candidate countries have found that the EU's impact has crucially depended on the regime type and political systems as well as democratic traditions of the candidate countries (Schimmelfennig et al. 2003). In states with liberal democratic governments (such as Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic), the EU did not need to use democratic conditionality heavily, while external conditionality is actively used in the Albanian case, especially in drafting crucial reforms and supervising their implementation.

## Conclusions

After a number of holdups and setbacks on the road to European integration, Albanians are still one of the most enthusiastic people when it comes to both the process itself and its expected outcomes, sometimes to the point their enthusiasm sounds incredible sounding in these tumultuous times. At the same time, there exists no political party in the Albanian political spectrum that expresses even a slightly critical position about the integration process or its dynamics. This unusual

enthusiasm is due to historical and geopolitical reasons, but also due to the Albanian dysfunctional political system and society, which have been analyzed here. The rhetoric of Albanian accession to the EU has been interchangeably used by political leaders, whether in power or opposition. The government officials tend to attribute any progress in the process to themselves and accuse the opposition of a lack of collaboration for any stops or failures. At the same time, opposition representatives describe their role as the “real European position”, accusing the government of going in the wrong direction. Both major parties call for the EU intermediation during political crises, and yet they refuse to collaborate when the EU diplomats do not support their political positions. In any case, Albanian leaders never take any responsibility for their failures and usually find or create external and internal factors that are supposedly undermining them.

On the other hand, Albanian people are consistently very favorable towards integration in all polls conducted in previous decades. Being generally disappointed with the economic and social achievements of their elected officials, they perceive the external pressure of EU institutions as a positive factor that could oblige Albanian politicians and institutions to be more responsible and result oriented. Albanian citizens describe themselves as close to the European values and culture, especially younger generations and people that have been in direct contact with European societies. Historically, the European identity has been embraced by nationalistic Albanians in order to differentiate themselves from the Ottoman cultural heritage and their Balkan neighbors. Polls show that this European identity doesn't rely on adequate knowledge of EU institutions and integration practical consequences, and neither does it express a real commitment to European values and norms. Therefore much has to be done to educate Albanians on the impact of integration, both its benefits and costs.

Is it appropriate to encourage a country like Albania in the integration process? In the resolution adopted in October 2019 the European Parliament expressed disappointment about the failure to open accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. The EP considered the “non-decision” by EU leaders as a strategic mistake, which could damage the EU's credibility and send a negative message to other possible candidate countries. It could also allow other foreign actors – whose activity might not be in line with EU values and interests – to engage more closely with both Albania and North Macedonia. Both countries have seen the green light on accession negotiation talks in March 2020, but most of the factors challenging the integration process persist both at the governmental and societal level.

The inclusion of factors described in constructivist approaches (such as domestic resonance) can provide complementary explanations for the domestic processes



leading to the adoption of EU rules and particular choices of rules within the scope of the EU's conditionality, but it is not enough: the European Union must be able to maintain faith in its commitment to the accession of the Western Balkan countries in general, and Albania in particular. After the last refusal to open the negotiating process, Albanians have found themselves in the psychological limbo of "permanent potential candidates". Although reaffirmed solemnly on more than one occasion, European commitment does not always appear credible. The EU should therefore make its promise of membership more credible and concrete, while at the same time keeping the bar of political conditionality steady.

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