

## THE ALBANIAN TRANSITION AND THE CONTINUING CHALLENGE OF EU INTEGRATION

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### Abstract

During the transition years, the EU integration agenda has been characterised by a combination of achievements, limitations and failures. Given the EU's expressed interest in incorporating all Western Balkan countries into the Union, the case of Albania may illustrate some characteristic features that explain the slow pace of integration.

Albania's ambition to rejoin Europe arose immediately after the collapse of communism. The idea of change has been equated with the legitimate but premature desire of Albanians to become part of the Western European family, thus entering a path of complex transformations, which began with many difficulties in the first decade of transition, and then continued with an attractive and tiring challenge of integration that is still far from being crowned with membership.

EU integration is perceived more as an external socio-economic and political benefit with abundant welfare of all kinds: free movement, democratic rights, tolerance, etc., rather than an internal commitment to institutional responsibilities both political and legal, implementation of reforms, compliance with legal norms, free and fair competition, etc. It is therefore essential to reduce the gap between exaggerated expectations and tangible and deserved benefits, which makes the European Commission, as a supporter and promoter of reforms, irreplaceable in this regard, despite the two-year delay of the Albanian political class in accepting and aligning itself with institutional requests in this matter.

*Keywords:* EU, Albania, integration, transition, the rule of law, constitutional changes.

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### Introduction

The political transition and the multifaceted impacts of this process have inspired a lively theoretical discussion among scholars within and outside the region, regarding the simultaneous transition from communist totalitarianism to a more or less democratic order, as well as from a command economy to a free market. Particular attention is paid to the former communist countries, on which various authors and scholars have expressed favorable or contrary opinions on the issues of transition or transformation of these countries. Studies on political transition analyze the path followed by these countries, the problems they have had to face, as well as those that are considered achievements on the road to democratization.

Each country that embarks on the path towards processes of transformation and political change undoubtedly has a unique specificity and experience and at the same time each of them has the indisputable need to refer to the experiences of other countries. Thanks to this reference, it is easier to clarify the path of change and achieve the set objectives as quickly as possible. However, while much has been written about the post-communist transition, there have been few serious efforts either to systematize what has been learned to date or to assess the methods by which that knowledge has been accumulated.

The move towards democratic governance requires the establishment of new political institutions, legal frameworks, and the promotion of democratic values, which can be a complex and gradual process. These discussions underscore the importance of context-specific approaches, recognizing that each country's journey is influenced by its historical, cultural, and socio-economic background. The debates among scholars contribute to a deeper understanding

of the multifaceted nature of political transition and the diverse outcomes observed in different countries.

While we have gained significant insights into various aspects, such as the creation of new party systems, the adoption of new constitutions or democratic laws, privatization, and macroeconomic stability policies, we still lack a comprehensive explanation of the duration of these processes. Understanding the length of time for these transitions to occur and the factors influencing their speed remains a critical gap in our knowledge. This comprehensive analysis would provide a clearer understanding of the intricacies involved in the transition and help in formulating more effective strategies for future transformations.

In the definition of researchers Terry Lynn Karl and Philip Schmitter, the transition is nothing more than "...a period of great political uncertainty. It is subject to unforeseen uncertainties, endless processes and unimaginable outcomes." (Karl & Schmitter, 1991) In this context, it is easy to understand the difficulties that various researchers have encountered when analysing the transformation processes of the transition in the former communist countries, as well as when classifying *en bloc* the characteristics and changes that these countries have experienced. Each country has followed its path, with different characteristics, sometimes unique, compared to other countries. These differences that we find in the approaches to their democratization processes call into question many of the theoretical views on the transition to democracy. Moreover, with the development of the third wave of democratization (Huntington, 2011), many researchers have tried to build and argue comprehensive theses to explain the stages and content of the transition. Thus, by focusing on common and general elements, the treatment of local factors has often been neglected, which can find the explanation for the forms and deviations of theoretical approaches, which is more evident in the case of former communist countries. In their journey, there are differences along the way, both in the timing of the transition stages (as predicted by experts and researchers) and in the content and quality of these processes. The changes are mainly related to historical, economic, social, and structural factors etc. On the road to democracy, these factors are considered decisive, both at the time of the change in the political system (on the eve of the 1990s) and in the subsequent adaptations of societies and political classes. Many scholars argue that while the goals of the transition were common to most former communist countries, their success and timing were determined primarily by three main factors: political legacy, economic legacy, and social legacy.

The profound changes at the national level necessitate a thorough study, particularly due to the problems and delays experienced by some countries, including Albania. While issues of political transition are widely discussed in various literature and analyses, Albania's case is often overlooked. However, Albania's transition is unique. After the change of regime, the process of building democracy in Albania during the political transition cannot be defined as a rebirth or reconstruction. This unique characteristic stems from Albania's history; there was no previous democratic experience to revive or reconstruct.

Regime change is undoubtedly considered a difficult process. In the former communist countries of the East, it is difficult to find a political class that has transformed its political system into an instrument of change. In Albania, as in other countries, it is clear that politics, as the main instrument of change, has added "artificial obstacles" to the transition processes. In light of the political developments of recent years, the study of political transition and especially of the ruling political class (in transition) is considered an important topic. The interest increases when this is seen about the processes of democratisation and especially those of integration into the European Union.

Albania presents an interesting case study. The reason is that its path to democracy is full of contradictions and unforeseen developments. However, the entire journey has its origins in the transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic goal. Evaluating this stage helps to understand and recognize the process of the birth of democracy. In these over 30 years of

pluralism, Albanian politics has been accompanied by a deep contradiction (AIIS, 2012) between the aspirations and efforts of the Albanian people for democratization and European orientation and the realities developed by the political elite. In most cases, politics and policymakers have reflected an effect opposite to the aspirations for integration and democratisation expressed in their political speeches.

The prospect of EU integration serves as a powerful incentive for society to achieve progress and democratization in Albania. Studies indicate that over 90% of the Albanian population aspires to meet democratic standards and secure the country's membership in the EU. However, this aspiration is accompanied by a contradictory political reality. Across the political spectrum, events in the country have been almost continuously marked by significant conflicts between the government and the opposition. These conflicts have not only impacted the quality of governance but also hindered the implementation of EU standards. Persistent political instability has distanced political parties from the interests of citizens. The lack of genuine alternatives in the “political market” has significantly exacerbated the crisis of representation for many societal groups.

Like Bulgaria and Romania, Albania faces significant challenges in its integration efforts, despite the work, effort, and desire of its people, as well as the support from the European Union through democratic conditionality mechanisms. The standards and conditions set by the EU have not yielded the desired results for Albania, largely due to the legacy of the totalitarian system and the political decisions made during the early years of transition. The economic “shock therapy” implemented without considering long-term costs and benefits is a prime example.

The ties to the past are stronger than anticipated. As society evolves, elements of the old persist, not necessarily in a progressive manner. The culture in which people are immersed often predisposes them to revert to familiar patterns. (Vehbiu, 1999) Over the past 30 years of political pluralism, integration has remained a central theme for Albanian politicians. Despite extensive discussions and efforts, Albania still has significant “homework” to do to achieve full democratization and integration into the EU. The prolonged political crisis and the limited progress in implementing the reforms requested by the EC are among the main reasons mentioned in the European Commission (EC) progress reports. The reports highlight that progress has been hampered by political deadlock and parliamentary boycotts, though their analysis remains reserved and diplomatic. Public opinion, along with various analysts and researchers, continues to seek the root causes of this political conflict, which has hindered both the development and integration of the country.

The peaceful political transition in 2005 and the positive outcomes of the new government's first two years sparked hope that Albanian politics had moved beyond electoral issues, conflict-ridden rhetoric, and non-cooperation among political actors, as well as violence in the squares. There was a widespread belief in the maturity and qualitative advancement of the Albanian political class. However, political developments, particularly after the 2009 elections, have raised many questions about whether Albania, and especially its political class, are on the right path to bring the country closer to the European Union—questions that subsequent history has shown were not unfounded.

One of the most problematic elements highlighted by both the international community and Albanian society (AIIS, 2010) is the political class. The questions that arise about the transition are related to what is preventing Albania from moving forward on the path towards democracy and, consequently, towards the EU. What makes it difficult for Albanian politicians to find a compromise for holding free and fair elections, consolidating independent institutions, and establishing democratic norms in the country? Why does the orientation of the vast majority of society not coincide with the concrete realization of democratic values in the formation of the state, institutions, politics, and citizenship? Why does Albanian democracy remain weak today,

both in terms of the functioning of the political process and its institutionalization? Why have international efforts, especially those of the European Union, been ineffective? Why is Albanian democracy in a “grey zone” of political regimes? These are big, complex, current, and important questions.

Is it possible that Albania’s failure to achieve positive results in terms of reforms, development, democratization, and integration into the European family has been significantly influenced by the political class over these 34 years of transition? The political class is the most important actor in policy-making in Albania, where, unlike in other former communist countries, historical political leaders remain active and compete for high-level leadership positions. (Krasniqi, 2008) Over the past three decades, the Albanian political scene has been virtually dominated by the same political actors. Policy-making is considered a process of agreements, negotiations, and commitments between actors (Bogdani & Loughlin, 2004), and its recycling is necessary for the development of democracy and the country as a whole.

Researchers point out that “despite relatively favourable constellations, the transition to democracy can fail when there is a lack of will and political clumsiness” (Schmidt, 2012), both of which are very present in Albanian politics. This is also highlighted by the statement of the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Mr. Stefan Füle, who stressed that the “lack of a culture of compromise...” is a critical problem. (Shkëmbi, 2013)

It should be noted that political pluralism in Albania is a product of the old ruling elite. The democratization of the country after the overthrow of the communist regime brought significant changes to the political elite. However, despite these changes, today’s elites bear a striking resemblance to their communist predecessors. (Biberaj, 2011) Studying the activity of the political class is necessary not only due to the negative perceptions society holds about this class but also because of the strong criticism it has received from the international arena. The purpose of studying the elite in transition is to examine the power structure, state-building activities, and their impact on vital sectors of society. How much has it been renewed over the years? How and to what extent has the dominant political class influenced the implementation of transition processes? If there have been delays in this process, how much influence have the ruling elites had over them? If power is in the hands of a minority, was this a random or predictable outcome? Research and analysis reveal that the transition processes and Albania’s integration into the EU have developed simultaneously and are closely intertwined. One researcher on political parties, Robert Michels, helps us understand the situation. He explains that “in a society, there may be a minority of the population that makes important decisions... that affect the most general aspects of society, and that is why they are usually known as political decisions.” (Geraint, 2010) Michels does not limit himself to stating that in a society the minority makes decisions and the majority obeys; he also asserts that “the dominant minority cannot be controlled by the majority, whatever the democratic mechanisms used.” (Geraint, 2010) Furthermore, Michels states: “If laws are passed to control the dominion of the leaders, it is the laws which gradually weaken, and not the leaders.” (Michels, 1915) The power of ruling elites becomes problematic for the state and society, especially when democracy is in its fragile phase. Government power is a strong temptation for anyone, as American President Woodrow Wilson stated: “The history of liberty is a history of the limitation of governmental power, not the increase of it,” (Meidani, 2009) so accountability and high political morality are required for those who assume government functions.

The political transition towards a consolidated democracy is of great importance not only to build a functioning state and guarantee political benefits for all citizens of the country, but above all because it is precisely that path towards integration and membership of the European Union. To achieve an irreversible transition, we must be able to adequately address political developments that have a direct impact on security and development. This makes it possible to find suitable solutions that can be successfully implemented on the ground. Albania’s

development, democratic transition, integration and Europeanisation are closely linked to the prospect of joining the European Union.

At the same time, the integration process also aims at the Europeanisation of the candidate countries to the European Union. According to researcher Radaelli, Europeanization is a process of: “a) construction, b) diffusion, c) and institutionalization of formal or informal rules, procedures, policy models, styles, ways of doing things and shared norms or beliefs that have been established and consolidated at the policy level in the EU, and which are then included in the logic of local discourse, that of identity, political structures and public policies”.

## Conclusions

The political transition towards a consolidated democracy is crucial not only for building a functioning state and ensuring political benefits for all citizens but also because it is the path towards integration and membership in the European Union. To achieve an irreversible transition, we must adequately address political developments that directly impact security and development. This approach enables the identification of suitable solutions that can be successfully implemented on the ground. Albania’s development, democratic transition, integration, and Europeanization are closely linked to the prospect of joining the European Union.

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From this perspective, the values, norms, and rules of the European Union are objectives that Albanian society, and especially its political leaders, must strive to achieve. Moreover, the democratic transition has been seen as a two-way process, involving not only assistance and pressure from the European Union (through the mechanism of democratic conditionality) but also pressure from Albanian society, intellectuals, and politicians to be more than just a geographical entity of the continent.

The crossroads that the countries of Eastern and Central Europe had to navigate immediately after the collapse of the totalitarian regimes appeared as a labyrinth in which these countries were entangled, unable to find either the entrance or the exit, wandering in vain. This political time and space have been termed a transition, where almost no one can distinguish between left and right or other political groups. Someone may start moving in one political direction but soon finds themselves aligned with someone they had previously distanced themselves from ideologically. Perhaps the issue is more about finding a way out of a particularly complicated situation rather than being entangled in a web of liberal or other ideologies, which have not proven to be very adequate in terms of quality, even those offered by actors from the most developed countries in the West.

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