



Between Transition and Consolidation: The EU'S Impact in Shaping Albania's Democracy

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Abstract

This paper examines Albania's post-communist transition, focusing on the role of the European Union accession perspective in promoting democratization and democratic consolidation. Structured into five sections, the study first presents the research methodology, outlining the main research question, the variables, the research method, and the study's contribution to the existing literature. The subsequent sections provide a conceptual overview of democratisation and the principal theories of transition, highlighting the diverse trajectories from authoritarianism to hybrid or consolidated democratic regimes. The authors introduce a novel analytical model - the multi-dimensional comprehensive approach for the 4th wave of democratisation (referring to the former communist countries of Eastern Europe) - which incorporates contextual conditions, domestic actors, and external influences, to provide a holistic understanding of the democratisation process within this regional context. The study further explores the concept of democratic consolidation through three sets of indicators: institutional performance, the development of a democratic political culture, and progress toward EU accession. Applying this framework to Albania, the paper analyses the complexity and challenges of the country's transition process. It further examines Albania's tumultuous journey towards the EU, conceptualising democratisation and Europeanisation as complementary processes. While the EU accession perspective has served as a significant driver of democratisation, the analysis finds that several key democratic indicators remain unfulfilled, particularly in the areas of rule of law, electoral integrity, public administration, corruption and organised crime. The paper concludes that Albania has not yet completed its transition and remains far from being a consolidated democracy.

Keywords: Albania, post-communist transition, democratic consolidation, democratization, Europeanization, EU accession

1. Research Methodology

This paper addresses an important topic concerning the relationship between democratization, transition, democratic consolidation, and EU conditionality in post-communist Albania. It asks whether, after 35 years since the collapse of communism, the transition in Albania can be considered complete and whether the country has entered the final phase of democratic consolidation. This constitutes the main research question of the study.

In this framework, democratic consolidation in Albania represents the dependent variable. We have identified three independent variables:

1. Institutional indicators
2. Creation of a civic and democratic political culture
3. Accession to the European Union (EU)

The first two variables are operationalised through their respective sets of indicators. The first variable includes eight indicators, while the second comprises six.

Accordingly, the study aims to analyse the causal relationships between these variables and democratic consolidation.

To address the research questions, the study employs a qualitative research design, based on secondary data. It seeks to examine the relationship between democratic consolidation in Albania and the explanatory factors influencing it. The qualitative approach relies on content analysis of existing literature, including a systematic review of relevant international and national scholarly works. These sources comprise books and peer-reviewed journal articles by scholars working on transition, democratization and consolidation, EU accession, and the Europeanisation of post-communist countries, with a particular focus on Albania. In addition, the analysis draws on documents, assessments, and reports produced by international organisations, such as European Commission, Freedom House, Transparency International etc. It also incorporates studies and reports issued by think tanks and research institutes, as well as relevant articles from national and international newspapers.

The review of existing literature on post-communist transition, and specifically on Albania as the case study of this research, reveals a substantial body of work. Most of these studies focus on the processes of transition, democratization, and Europeanisation. However, there remains a gap in the literature concerning systematic analysis of the indicators of democratic consolidation and the extent to which Albania has completed its transition and entered a phase of consolidation. This study seeks to address this gap, which constitutes its first added value. Secondly, the paper does not treat democratisation as a linear process. Instead, it acknowledges both the domestic legacies and crisis that complicate transition, as well as the role of external actors. That balance between endogenous and exogenous factors is particularly valuable in studies of Western Balkans. Thirdly, most transition theories are essentially one-dimensional models, each focusing on a single explanatory variable while neglecting the influence of other relevant factors. As a result, they are limited in explaining the complexity of transition trajectories and their outcomes. To address this limitation, this study introduces a multi-dimensional model that accounts for the characteristics of the fourth wave of democratization, with particular reference to post-communist countries in Eastern Europe. This model offers a more comprehensive explanation of Albania's transition process by identifying three categories of determinants: contextual factors, actors, and exogenous factors. This represents a novelty in the existing literature and constitutes another major contribution of the study. In addition, it gives the paper a clearer theoretical contribution and helps distinguish it from many descriptive studies of Albania's post-communist transition.

The study combines theoretical engagement with empirically grounded analysis, thereby contributing to ongoing scholarly debates on the effectiveness of international actors in shaping domestic political outcomes.

The analysis begins with an overview of democratization.

2. Introduction: Conceptual Overview of Democratization

Huntington (1991) identified three major waves of democratization in the modern era. The first, described as a 'slow' wave, unfolded throughout the nineteenth century, when suffrage was gradually extended to the majority of white males in the United States, followed by similar developments in France, Britain, Canada and other countries. This wave continued into the early twentieth century with the disintegration of the Tsarist, Habsburg and Ottoman empires, which gave rise to twenty-nine new democracies. The second wave occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War, during the period of decolonization, when thirty-six newly independent states adopted democratic forms of governance. The third wave began in Southern Europe, with the democratic transitions of Greece, Portugal and Spain, and subsequently spread to Latin America, spanning the years 1974 to 1991. This period culminated in a momentous historical event: the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, which inaugurated a profound process of transformation and democratization among the former communist states. McFaul (2002) argues that the process of decommunization initiated a 'fourth wave' of regime change. The twenty-eight countries that had belonged to the communist bloc for nearly five decades embarked on a complex and challenging transition from communist rule to democratic governance.

The period, extending from the collapse of a dictatorial or autocratic system to the establishment of a consolidated democracy characteristic of the Western liberal-democratic model, has three principal stages:

- a. Transition
- b. Consolidation
- c. Sustainability

The first two stages, transition and consolidation, together constitute the process of democratization. According to Pridham (2000), democratization represents the process of regime transformation from an authoritarian system to the establishment of a liberal democratic order. The final stage, sustainability, refers to the continued maintenance of democratic governance. As Schedler (1998) observes, 'Sustaining democracy is often a task as difficult as establishing it.'

3. Democratic Transition

According to Schmitter (2004), transition is defined as 'the interim period between two different political systems: the dissolution of an old regime and the installation of a new one.' The democratic transition, in particular, refers to the interim phase between a totalitarian regime (or, in the case of the fourth wave, a communist regime) and the establishment of democracy.

A central question concerns the duration of the transition period. The starting point, the onset of transition, is relatively straightforward to identify. It coincides with the creation of democratic rules and institutions, encompassing the establishment of the democratic infrastructure, political pluralism, a multi-party system, legislative institutions, a market economy, civil society, free elections and a functioning public administration. During the initial stages, these elements tend to be highly unstable and fragile. While the beginning of the transition can be clearly defined, its end point is far more difficult to determine. Thus arises the question: when does the transition end?

Some scholars argue that transition is a short-term process lasting only a few years. For instance, Bunce (2003) maintains that 'transition to democracy ends with the first democratically elected government.' Similarly, Di Palma (1990) asserts that 'transition to democracy is considered complete when an agreement on democratic rules has been successfully achieved, including the adoption of a new constitution and the conduct of the first free elections.' This perspective, however, is limited by its emphasis on 'procedural' democracy – the institutions of democracy. More important is the question of whether there is 'substantive' democracy, that is, what exists behind the procedures of voting, etc, a culture based on democratic values. Other scholars, however, including the authors of this paper, view transition as a prolonged and multifaceted process. Rustow (1970), for example, argues that 'Transition to democracy is a complex process extending over many decades. Since the emergence of

new social groups and the formation of new habits are involved, one generation is probably the minimum period of transition.'

Transition can also be conceptualised through a two-dimensional framework. The first is the 'temporal dimension', which concerns the duration and stages of the process. Here, three principal periods can be distinguished: the system's change, the initial phase of transition, and its final phase. The second is the 'outcome dimension', which focuses on the trajectories and forms of regimes established after the collapse of communism. In the context of the democratic transitions in post-communist Eastern Europe, four main regime types can be identified:

- a. Autocratic rule
- b. Semi-democracy, also referred to as partial democracy, proto-democracy, hybrid regime, democratura, or façade democracy (O'Donnell, 1996)
- c. Democracy
- d. Consolidated democracy, culminating in a stable liberal democracy of the Western type.

Research has shown that the countries emerging from communism at roughly the same time (1989–1991) followed different trajectories, establishing distinct regime types. The key analytical question is: how can we explain this? Several theories have sought to explain this divergence and factors influencing these various paths.

The 'Modernisation Theory' of Lipset (1959), and more recently the 'Functionalist or Preconditions Approach' of Harrison & Huntington (2001), emphasise the impact of legacies on democratic transition and consolidation. They argue that democratic transition is shaped by the state's existing socio-economic conditions such as the level of economic development and degree of modernisation. As Barrington Moore (1966) had famously stated, 'no bourgeoisie, no democracy.' Huntington contends that a high level of economic development is generally vital for democratic progress, while Lipset acknowledges the economic and social background conditions and cultural heritage.

A different approach is the 'Genetic or Political Crafting Approach', developed by Rustow (1970) and Di Palma (1990). This stresses the significance of elite pacts and institutional choices as decisive factors in democratic transition. Economic development is not viewed as a prerequisite for a successful transition; instead, emphasis is placed on the role of political actors, particularly elites, and institutional choices in shaping regime transformation, thereby focusing on endogenous factors.

Further influential theories include the 'Institutional Approach' (Linz, 1996), which links the nature of the preceding regime to the prospects of democratic transition; the 'Political Culture' approach (Almond & Verba, 1963); and Putnam's 'Civic Tradition' thesis (1993).

However, these are essentially one-dimensional models, each focusing on a single explanatory variable, such as socio-economic conditions, elites, institutions, or political culture, while neglecting the influence of exogenous factors. Consequently, they fall short in explaining the full complexity of transition trajectories and their outcomes.

For this reason, we introduce a multi-dimensional model that offers a more comprehensive explanation of the transition processes characteristic of the fourth wave of democratization, referring specifically to the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe. This model integrates three categories of determinants:

1. Contextual factors, referring to inherited legacies: political, economic, historical, social and cultural. As Pridham (2000) rightly notes, 'Democracy is not born of an immaculate conception, but inherits a variety of past legacies that may complicate regime change.' These legacies can be classified as long-term and short-term.
2. Actors, encompassing the political opposition, elites, mass publics, youth groups, civil society and the media, all of whom influenced both the breakdown of the previous regime and the trajectory of transformation thereafter.
3. Exogenous factors, most notably the prospect of EU membership, as well as the influence of the United States and international organisations.

4. Democratic Consolidation and its Indicators

There is a conceptual ambiguity surrounding the notion of democratic consolidation. The emerging subfield often referred to as 'consolidology' remains anchored in an imprecise, inconsistent and unbounded concept. Just as it is difficult to determine when a democratic transition is complete, it is equally challenging to establish when a country has achieved democratic consolidation. The term itself encompasses a multiplicity of meanings, including democratic survival, continuity, permanence, endurance, persistence, resilience, sustainability and irreversibility.

Scholars have proposed diverse definitions of democratic consolidation. For instance, Rustow (1970) in his 'Habituating Approach', says that consolidation is achieved when 'both politicians and the electorate are habituated to democratic rules and norms.' Kopecký (2000), Schmitter (2004), and Easter (1997) further argue that all domestic actors must not only respect and internalize democratic rules and institutions but also accept the democratic system as 'the only game in town'. Przeworski (1995) similarly maintains that 'democracy is consolidated when no one can imagine acting outside the democratic institutions, and when the losers should try again within the same institutions under which they have just lost.' According to Bunce (2003), 'democratic rules and institutions which are in place should be able to produce effective, inclusive and accountable governance.'

The most comprehensive definition, however, is provided by Linz and Stepan (1996), who describe consolidation as 'a political regime in which democracy, as a complex system of institutions, rules, and patterned incentives and disincentives, has become "THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN". In other words, democracy becomes consolidated when it is routinized and internalized within the social, institutional and psychological spheres of life, such that no one, including political leaders, can imagine acting outside democratic norms and institutions. Conversely, when political elites remain corrupt, irresponsible, self-serving and driven by personal interests, democracy continues to be unconsolidated.

Yet, how can we determine whether a democracy has truly reached consolidation? How can it be measured? Are there identifiable characteristics or indicators? We have identified a number of indicators that show whether a country has attained the stage of a consolidated democracy. In the context of the fourth wave of democratization, these indicators can be grouped into three main categories:

1. Institutional indicators
2. Creation of a civic and democratic political culture
3. Accession to the European Union (EU)

As noted above, despite having shared nearly half a century under similar authoritarian regimes, the former communist states of Eastern Europe embarked upon diverse transitional paths, resulting in a range of political outcomes, from autocratic and semi-democratic systems to democratic and liberal-democratic regimes.

According to McFaul (2002), the post-communist regimes across twenty-eight Eastern European countries can be categorized as follows:

- a. Autocracies: Belarus, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.
- b. Semi-democracies: Russia, Serbia, Macedonia, Albania, Armenia, B-H, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Azerbaijan.
- c. Democracies: Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, the three Baltic States, Slovenia, Slovakia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania.

Has any post-communist country truly reached democratic consolidation? The initial domestic conditions (the legacies) largely determined the diverse trajectories that these states followed after communism. Some of these countries had better starting points in the 1990s with higher levels of democracy and capitalism (the first two groups of indicators). These factors explain the substantial variation in regime transformations and outcomes among the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries and the Baltic States on the one hand, and the Balkans and post-Soviet republics on the other, many of which remain characterized by various degrees of authoritarianism or unconsolidated transitional regimes.

Even the prospect of EU membership (the third group of indicators) was not extended to all countries simultaneously. The first to receive this prospect were the so-called Visegrad countries of Central Europe (Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic) in 1992. Several years later, others followed, including the Baltic states, Slovakia and Slovenia. These countries managed to join the European Union in 2004, as part of the Fifth Enlargement. Romania and Bulgaria acceded three years later. By contrast, for the remaining post-communist states, the Western Balkans, the EU membership perspective was only offered a decade later, in the 2000s. The EU prospect has acted as a significant external incentive for democratic consolidation, operating through a 'carrot and stick' mechanism. Therefore, many scholars, such as Easter (1997) argue that former Eastern European states that have joined the EU can be considered to have achieved democratic consolidation. Others, such as Kopecký (2000), contend that no post-communist country can yet be regarded as fully consolidated. This view underscores the comparative distinction between the Central and Eastern European countries and Baltics, now EU members, and the Balkan countries that are still in the accession process, as well as the Central Asian republics with no foreseeable integration prospects. EU accession, therefore, has gradually transformed the diverse transitional trajectories that characterized the 1990s into a more convergent pattern of political development in the 2000s.

5. The Albanian Transition and the first two Groups of Indicators

In Albania, the communist regime collapsed in 1990, creating favourable conditions for the process of democratization and transformation. Due to the country's severe isolation, the absence of information about developments in the rest of Europe, and the determination of Albania's entrenched communist elite to resist democratic reforms and openness, the winds of change reached Albania relatively late. The development which really shattered the communist regime, as Rama (2020) points out, was the students' movement with non-violent protests and street demonstrations. Change, therefore, occurred through a 'velvet revolution', similar to most other countries of the Eastern communist bloc. Ultimately, the last bastion of Stalinism fell in June 1991 with the resignation of the final communist government, marking the end of forty-seven years of communist rule. Albania thus embarked on an evolutionary path from an isolated authoritarian system towards a liberal democracy, initiating comprehensive socio-economic and political reforms.

As Bogdani and Loughlin (2004) point out, Albania lacked a strong tradition of capitalism and democracy, unlike several Central and Eastern European states that entered the 'era of change' with varying degrees of such traditions. Albania was experiencing democracy for the first time in its history and was arguably the country facing the longest and most arduous journey from rigid Stalinism to democracy (Biberaj, 1998). Overcoming this legacy and 'catching up' with the West represented a formidable challenge, even in comparison with other post-communist states.

Consequently, the democratic transition in Albania has been lengthy, complex and tumultuous. This was primarily due to enduring historical, political, cultural and socio-economic legacies. As Bogdani (2020) argues, 'these inherited constraints, combined with incompetent and irresponsible political leadership, significantly hindered Albania's smooth and successful transition to a modern liberal democracy, particularly during the first decade.' That decade was marked by several severe political crises, most notably the unrest of 1997, triggered by the collapse of pyramid schemes that brought the country to the brink of civil war, and the Kosovo crisis in 1999, which led to a massive influx of refugees into Albania.

The second decade of transition, however, began with an important development: Albania became part of a new regional geopolitical framework, known as the Western Balkans, and was granted a European Union membership perspective. As a result, the processes of democratization during the second and third decades were greatly facilitated by this powerful and transformative prospect, as well as by the broader dynamics of Europeanization.

Yet, the question remains: Is the transition over? Has Albania entered the next phase, democratic consolidation? To answer these questions, it is necessary to analyse the three groups of indicators outlined above.

The first group of indicators are the 'Institutional Indicators', comprising approximately eight components.

Good governance is the first of these. It encompasses governmental performance, accountability and efficiency. As noted, Albanian governments have 'simply survived without in fact governing' (Bogdani & Loughlin, 2007). Over the past 35 years, Albania has lacked effective governance. The parliament, according to International Crisis Group (ICG, 2003) has been characterised as a 'foot-dragging parliament', demonstrating low levels of accountability to the electorate. The existence of criminal elements in parliament has been another persistent concern, with 'law-breakers turned into law-makers'. Clearly, Parliament has weakened, lost its value, argue Pacukaj & Tokrri (2021), leading to a strengthening of the executive power, more precisely a strengthening of the figure of the head of government. Without a doubt, they continue, the crisis of Parliament translates into an inability of the people's representatives to solve the problems that are present in civil society. Similarly, the Transparency International in its 2023 Report notes 'The executive dominates the Assembly through its political majority and weak opposition, leaving the legislative body unable to effectively exert its constitutional obligation of control and oversight over the executive'. Another problematic phenomenon that has remained a constant feature of Albanian governance throughout the transition period, is state capture, where state structures and institutions have been infiltrated by a wide range of political and economic interests.

Electoral alternation and uncontested elections constitute another key indicator. In Albania, elections have often been assessed as neither free, fair, nor competitive, as noted by international organisations such as the OSCE/ODIHR. Electoral irregularities, bribery, volatility and vote buying have been pervasive features of Albanian electoral processes. A study conducted by Kume et al (2025) on the three last elections (including the 2025 parliamentary elections) shows that 'Albania continues to be classified in the group of countries where the challenge of organizing and conducting democratic elections that must meet international standards and OSCE commitments is present'. Furthermore, the value of electoral index positions Albania in the group of countries with a 'Low' level in election integrity.

A crucial indicator of democratic consolidation is the judicial system, which, in a consolidated democracy, should be impartial, depoliticised and uncorrupted. Numerous reports by international organisations, including the European Commission, Transparency International, the Council of Europe, Freedom House, the British Foreign Office, the US State Department and Amnesty International, have repeatedly underscored that the Albanian judiciary remains weak and continues to be plagued by three persistent problems: corruption, unprofessionalism, and lack of independence (from both political and criminal influence). Beyond inefficiency, political interference in the criminal justice system and widespread judicial corruption continued to remain major sources of concern. Therefore, in 2015, with the initiative and strong support of the US government, a comprehensive reform of the judicial system was launched. This reform aimed to address these deficiencies through the creation of specialised structures, such as the Special Structure against Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK), and a nationwide vetting process for judges and prosecutors. As the European Commission pointed out in its annual report (2020), 'the vetting process and its results remain crucial to restore public trust in the judiciary and law enforcement bodies of the State.' As many agree, judicial reform achieved significant institutional restructuring and anti-corruption milestones, particularly through the vetting of magistrates. However, studies, such as Urias (2025) present severe shortcomings, including extreme case backlogs, heavy personnel shortages, and ongoing concerns regarding judicial independence. Also, findings of a study done by Artan Manushaqe (2025) reveal that judicial reforms have achieved some institutional improvements - however, persistent corruption continues to undermine public trust and economic stability. Furthermore, the opposition has constantly criticised the judicial reform as politically biased and controlled by the ruling Socialist Party (Exit.al, 2019).

A professional, stable and depoliticised public administration is another essential indicator. In Albania, the civil service has been repeatedly criticised by international organisations, and in nearly every annual European Commission report, as non-professional, inefficient, and characterised by high turnover and extensive political interference (European Commission, 2022). Husi (2015) points out

how high staff turnover, clientelism and corruption have historically undermined the development of an independent, meritocratic civil service, and have led to high levels of politicisation and a lack of transparency. Similarly, Kraja and Spahija (2023) highlight how political turnover and strict regulations hinder flexible and merit-based performance instruments.

Other indicators within this group include the existence and implementation of a democratic legal framework; the decentralisation of state power; civilian control over the military; and economic stabilisation and the functioning of a market economy, criteria that Albania has only partially met.

The second group of indicators relates to the creation of a 'Civic and Democratic Political Culture'. As Parsons (1995) observes, 'Without a broader democratic culture, formal democratic institutions are likely to be undermined by corruption and inconsistency in the application of laws.' The creation and dissemination of democratic culture and values among both the political elite and the wider public is neither easy nor immediate; it typically requires at least one generation.

Among the most important indicators in this group is the rule of law. In a consolidated democracy, the rule of law is impartial and uniformly applied, ensuring equality before the law. In Albania, however, it remains weak and, to a large extent, an alien concept. The endemic culture of impunity among the political elite continues to persist.

Another crucial indicator is the accountability, transparency and legitimacy of political parties. During the transition, Albania's political landscape has been highly polarised. Relations between parties have been marked by hostility, uncivilised political conduct, and a lack of dialogue and tolerance. The absence of internal democracy and transparency, along with the suppression of factions and dissenting views, has characterised all political parties, particularly the two main ones. As Bogdani and Loughlin (2007) argue, parties, especially during the first decade of the transition, have exerted an overwhelming influence in Albania, a phenomenon described as '*Partitocrazia alla Albanese*', rooted in the communist legacy. Political renewal has been minimal; even after 35 years, the political spectrum remains dominated by the same parties and figures. As noted by the ICG (2003), 'Political leaders are widely perceived as corrupt, self-interested, dishonest and not serious about working for their country.' The Transparency International in its 2023 Report on Albania notes, 'Political parties have embraced clientelism, offering benefits in return for electoral and financial backing, increasing doubts about the involvement of criminal groups in this relationship. Intra-party democracy struggles with non-contested party leadership, staged consultations on candidate lists and strategies to align members' opinion with that of the leadership'.

Civil society, another significant indicator, should be strong, autonomous and influential in a functioning democracy. In Albania, it has remained weak, with minimal impact on political, economic and social life. Emerging without any legacy from the communist era, when civil society was non-existent, the post-communist period saw the proliferation of NGOs, professional associations and other organisations. However, as Bogdani and Loughlin (2007) observe, most of them have just tried to milk international donors, rather than to address priorities and needs of the country. A study of Institute for Democracy and Mediation in Albania (IDM, 2020) finds that 'the legal and policy frameworks for enabling cooperation between public institutions and civil society are largely in place, but the challenges remain: lack of feedback and follow-up mechanisms, poor implementation of legal framework, and superficial collaboration with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) with very limited substantial impact. By and large, the structures and processes of collaboration with the CSOs are badly integrated, not sustainable, loosely defined and lack internalization. Institutions have limited capacities to prioritize public information, consultation, and overall cooperation with CSOs'. There is limited proactive approach on the side of CSOs to build systematic and sustainable interrelations with state institutions and participate in policy and legal processes'.

Media represent yet another essential component. In democratic societies, the media are often described as the 'fourth power' of the state and are expected to operate independently and professionally. The emergence of an opposition press in the early 1990s marked a historic moment for a country that had previously lacked freedom of expression. However, an independent and professional media sector has yet to be fully realised in Albania. In general, the media lack credibility and responsibility, as reflected in their limited adherence to ethical standards, human rights and liberal-

democratic values. Albanian media outlets are typically characterised by low levels of professionalism and are frequently affiliated with or financed by political parties, powerful business groups, or oligarchs, circumstances that have undermined the development of a genuinely independent press and television sector. According to the 2025 Transparency International Report 'Concerns persist regarding high concentration within the media environment and a lack of transparency in media ownership. Public service media, in particular, struggles with independence and there is a concerning rise in attacks targeting journalists'.

A fully consolidated democracy is also distinguished by low levels of corruption and negligible organised crime. In contrast, corruption and bribery have been among the most defining and persistent problems of Albania's post-communist transition. Corruption has become institutionalised and, to some extent, socially accepted as a moral norm. It has been endemic, systemic and routine across virtually all sectors of Albanian life: public services, administration, healthcare, education, the judiciary and law enforcement. Albania has been consistently criticised for its high levels of corruption in the annual reports of the European Commission and other international organisations. According to the Transparency International reports, Albania scores low on the global index, falling into the category of countries with a high prevalence of corruption and a worsening trend in recent evaluations. 'Since 2016, when Albania was ranked 83rd in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, its performance has declined. In 2022, it ranked 101st out of 180 countries. This reaffirms the European Commission's repeated conclusion that corruption remains prevalent'.

Organised crime has similarly expanded as a major negative force in post-communist Albania, particularly in drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling and other illicit activities. Albania has served both as a transit route for narcotics moving from East to West (heroin and cocaine) and as a producer of cannabis. The opposition has referred to this phenomenon as the 'Cannabization of Albania' (Freedom House, 2018), accusing the ruling Socialist Party of transforming Albania into the 'Colombia of Europe', a phrase coined in an investigative article by *The Independent* (2019). In the past decade, money laundering has become a particularly acute problem. According to reports from the US State Department and other international organisations, the sectors of tourism, construction and real estate, have been major channels for converting illegal funds (primarily drug trafficking) into legitimate assets (Albanian Daily News, 2021). Organised crime has flourished largely due to its close ties with political actors. Throughout the transition period there have constantly been allegations that politicians and government officials are on the payroll of criminal organizations. While the government denies it, experts say the traffickers have thoroughly infected politics and business, at the deepest levels. Scores of high-level Albanian officials, from mayors to ministers, have been implicated in the drug trade, and perhaps enable it (Independent, 2019).

6. Accession to the EU – The third Indicator

This indicator is essential, as the implementation of the EU conditionality and the Copenhagen criteria indicate the completion of domestic democratization reforms. The path toward EU accession involves two complementary processes: democratization and Europeanization. Democratization refers to the transformation of a country into a liberal democracy through political and socio-economic reforms. It is true that a country can make the transition to democracy without the EU - one thinks of African or Latin American countries which have done so. But, in the case of European countries such as Greece, Spain and Portugal, accession to the EU became a factor in facilitating the process from dictatorship to democracy. This was the model adopted after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the liberation of its Eastern and Central European states from communist rule. In practice, in these cases, democratisation has been strongly associated with Europeanisation. This denotes the alignment of domestic policies, institutions and legal frameworks with those of the EU, resulting in convergence and deeper European integration. These two processes are complementary because both pursue their respective objectives through the same mechanism, democratic reforms.

Albania's aspiration to join the EU began as the communist regime collapsed. 'Return to Europe' became one of the distinctive slogans of the 1990 demonstrations and soon emerged as a central

ideological orientation among the public, the intelligentsia, young people and even political parties (Bogdani, 2020). It symbolised the rejection of communism and 'Europe' became synonymous with 'democracy'. Consequently, successive Albanian governments after 1990 placed European integration at the forefront of their political agendas. Albania's foreign policy became explicitly oriented toward integration into both the EU and Euro-Atlantic structures.

Relations between Albania and the then European Community (the name of today's EU before the Maastricht Treaty) began in 1991. In 1992, Albania signed its first Cooperation and Trade Agreement with the EU, becoming the first South-Eastern European country to conclude such an agreement. In early 1995, Albania formally requested the opening of negotiations for an accession agreement. However, the developments of 1996–1997, including the disastrous parliamentary elections of May 1996 and, a year later the collapse of the pyramid schemes, severely undermined Albania's democratic credentials and halted progress towards integration.

At the turn of the millennium, the EU undertook a major initiative. At the Feira Council in 1999, the European Commission proposed the 'Stabilisation and Association Process' (SAP) for five Balkan countries collectively referred to as the Western Balkans (WB), including Albania. The 2000 Zagreb Summit further strengthened the EU's commitment by confirming all five countries as 'potential candidates' for EU membership and establishing two SAP components: a tailor-made contractual relationship known as the 'Stabilisation and Association Agreement' (SAA), and the CARDS programme, a new financial assistance instrument designed specifically for SAP countries. In the 2003 Thessaloniki Declaration, the EU reaffirmed that 'the future of the Balkans is within the European Union' (Launey, 2025).

The SAP marked a historic turning point for Albania, offering for the first time a concrete and structured path toward EU integration. The SAA promised stronger incentives for advancing reforms and introduced more demanding political and economic conditions. These were not merely obligations, but also opportunities that Albania could choose to seize.

Albania made considerable progress in meeting the requirements for opening negotiations, which were officially launched on 31 January 2003 (European Commission, 2003). Three years of negotiations culminated in the signing of the SAA in Luxembourg in June 2006. The completion and ratification of the agreement took respectively six and three years, longer than for other Western Balkan countries. Albania also faced significant delays in reaching two additional milestones: visa liberalisation (finally approved in December 2010) and recognition as a candidate country (granted in 2014 after three rejections). Albania formally applied for EU membership in April 2009.

Although Albania hoped to open accession negotiations by December 2016, domestic crises and scandals, such as the discovery of vast cannabis plantations across the country and the major scandal involving alleged links between Albanian, Italian organised crime networks and the then Minister of the Interior, shocked public opinion and exposed the severity of the links between the Albanian state and organised crime (Balkan Insight, 2017). Three years later, in March 2020, the Council of the EU decided to open accession negotiations with Albania. However, progress was again stalled because Albania's candidacy was linked to that of North Macedonia, whose accession path was vetoed by Bulgaria. In June 2022, Bulgaria's parliament lifted its veto, enabling both countries to proceed with accession talks (Brzozovski, 2022). After eleven years since applying, Albania officially launched its accession negotiations on 19 July 2022.

Albania's path toward EU membership has been long and tumultuous. As Bogdani (2023) notes, Albania has lagged behind other Western Balkan countries that began the SAP simultaneously: Croatia has already joined the EU in 2013, while Montenegro and Serbia have advanced significantly in their negotiations, having opened 33 and 18 chapters respectively.

After 23 years on the path toward the EU, Albania has yet to join the Union. The country remains far from fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria, facing substantial challenges in both political democratization and socio-economic development. According to the 2024–2025 Freedom House ranking, Albania is classified as a 'hybrid democracy' and 'partly free' (68/100) (Freedom House, 2025). EU membership, however, requires countries to be 'functional democracies' and 'free', a status that typically takes at least a decade to achieve through sustained and meaningful reforms. Thus, the third indicator remains unfulfilled.

7. Conclusions

Albania overthrew its communist regime in 1990 through a 'velvet revolution', similar to most other countries of the former Eastern European communist bloc. The resignation of the last communist government in June 1991 officially marked the end of forty-seven years of communist rule. In 1991, Albania entered a period of democratic transition, moving from an isolated authoritarian political system toward liberal democracy.

The analysis of Albania's transition trajectory was conducted through the application of a multi-dimensional model, introduced by the authors for the first time in this study, and which constitutes an original contribution and novelty to the existing literature on democratic transition and democratisation. The model provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding Albania's transition process by identifying three categories of determinants: contextual factors, actors, and exogenous influences.

The authors argue that Albanian transition has been lengthy, challenging and tumultuous. The difficulties stem primarily from historical, political, cultural and socio-economic legacies inherited from the past, as well as from several setbacks during the first decade of transition, the most dramatic of which was the collapse of the pyramid schemes, bringing the country to the brink of civil war.

The second decade of transition, by contrast, began with a highly positive and significant development: the European Union opened a new perspective for Albania, integrating it into the emerging geopolitical concept of the Western Balkans and granting it a credible prospect of EU membership. Consequently, the democratization processes of the second and third decades were strongly influenced by this transformative prospect, alongside the complementary dynamics of Europeanization.

Nevertheless, a fundamental question remains: has Albania completed the democratic transition that began thirty-five years ago with the collapse of communism, and has it entered the subsequent phase of democratic consolidation?

To address this fundamental research question the authors employed a set of indicators, that served as the study's principal explanatory variables and examined democratic consolidation through several interconnected lenses. These indicators are grouped into three broad categories: institutional development, creation of a civic and democratic political culture, and accession to the European Union (EU).

An assessment of Albania's current political and socio-economic situation, with regard to the first two groups of indicators analysed in this paper, reveals that many remain unfulfilled and several areas continue to be problematic, most notably the rule of law, elections, public administration, corruption and organised crime. Significant efforts are still required to address the political, economic and social challenges, as well as the priorities set by the EU. With the exception of judicial reform, which has yielded some positive results, the remaining issues continue to hinder progress: almost all elections have been contested and deemed not free and fair (including the most recent of May 2025); the rule of law remains weak and characterised by a persistent culture of impunity; corruption is still endemic and pervasive; public administration continues to suffer from lack of professionalism, high levels of corruption, and widespread politicisation; and organised crime remains deeply entrenched, particularly in relation to drug trafficking and money laundering.

Albania does not meet the third indicator either, as it has not yet become a member of the EU, despite a long and complex accession journey that began in 2003 and culminated in the official launch of accession negotiations in 2022. Nevertheless, the prospect of EU membership and the broader process of European integration have served as highly positive factors and strong incentives for Albania's democratization. As Bogdani and Loughlin (2007) argue, Albanian democratization might have followed a very different trajectory in the absence of sustained EU pressure and guidance. Without the influence of the EU and the international community, Albania risked remaining a 'Balkan Banana Republic', governed by irresponsible, ineffective, and self-interested political elites; a context in which corruption and organised crime would flourish, with mafia networks, criminals and politicians, the country's *nouveaux riches*, enjoying wealth and privileges, while the majority of the population

faced persistent poverty. The EU has therefore been the primary locus of Albania's efforts to navigate the difficult transition period and define its long-term aspirations, largely because the EU membership prospect represents a credible political horizon, a powerful incentive and a key driving force behind domestic reforms.

In conclusion, Albania has not yet completed its democratic transition and remains far from achieving democratic consolidation.

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