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THE INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION OF CITIZENS IN THE EUROINTEGRATION PROCESS OF ALBANIA

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Abstract: *Albania's national interest is the integration into the European Union. To fulfill this objective, every state component, public institutions, civil society, the media, and the citizens, play a very important role. The main focus of this paper is the public sphere, the attitudes of Albanian citizens toward the EU membership, and their role in the process. By applying qualitative and quantitative methods, the main theories of the field, global and regional indexes, studies, surveys, interviews, and personal observations, we aim to focus on the citizens' attitudes toward the EU membership process. Our in-depth analyses have shown that the Albanian institutions, CSOs, and media to inform and include the citizens in the Europeanization process have not been effective enough. Thus, there is a knowledge gap between sensitive groups and the other part of society.*

Keywords: *European Integration; Public Sphere; Public Opinion; Inclusion; Albanian Citizens*

INTRODUCTION

The role of the public during the eurointegration process is crucial and underrated at the same time. Because at the core of the European Union (EU) are the fundamental rights, such as peace, security, and prosperity, one of the objectives of this process is to guarantee the wellbeing, the freedoms, and rights of its citizens, including those nations that are potential candidates for membership. For this reason, studying the public opinion attitudes toward the European policies has enormous importance in the frame of the future enlargements of the Union, when for every new member or a new exit from the EU, there are the citizens that give the final verdict through the referendums.

In Albania, a public sphere exists, although not a very consolidated one, which has its beginnings since the fall of communism in the 90s. Currently, this public sphere enables the free exchange of ideas and gives life to independent and responsible media, a healthy and reliable civil society, and informed and socially active citizens. Meanwhile, the Albanian institutions have to be very careful to fully integrate the Albanian public sphere in decision-making to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria better.

At this point, the attitude of the Albanian citizens towards European integration is a very important component to be measured, analyzed, and compared in the frame of the national agenda for EU membership. Even though the Albanian public sphere is not fully consolidated, there must be admitted that it provides coherent and enthusiastic support compared with the support that the public in Albania has for the EU integration.

Since creating the democratic and independent public sphere in Albania, this support has been significant, especially if we compare the public opinion attitudes in the neighboring countries, which are also potential candidates for EU membership. Been measured and analyzed for more than two decades, the public opinion support for the EU integration has not reached levels under 80%, giving us an important clue that the Albanian citizens have an enormous trust in the European institutions and in the Union itself, and that they do expect benefits from the membership. The Albanian citizen's expectations from the EU membership are reinforcing law, economic prosperity, and the freedom to study, travel and work in the EU. All the analytical data from the surveys conducted during the last two decades have shown that the Albanian expectations of the EU membership are quite unreal. This unrealistic point of view is related to the education and the information gap, the economic level, and the insufficient inclusion of the Albanian citizens in the eurointegration processes.

This paper, focusing on the public opinion attitudes toward the eurointegration, compares the analytical data from many studies in the field by using global and regional indexes, surveys, interviews, and personal observations and aims to show the existing gap of knowledge among the Albanian citizens about EU membership, the lack of the national platforms implemented from the institutions and especially the marginalization of the sensitive groups, in the frame of the eurointegration process.

METHODOLOGY

This paper applies a mixed methodology, combining qualitative and quantitative research. In this study, we have used both the qualitative approach, including contextual understanding like interviews and surveys or observations, along with facts or statistics of the quantitative research. An important part of the methodology has been comparing the annual qualitative reports such as the Standard Eurobarometer, Balkan Barometer, or other important studies that measure the perceptions of the Albanian citizens as effective leverage to show the importance of the public support for the eurointegration process.

One of the main theories used in this research is the 'public sphere'. The public sphere is where civil society can connect with the state's power structure. Habermas has elaborated on this idea in his 1962 book 'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere'. In Habermas's characterization, the public sphere can best be described as a network of communicating information and points of view (Habermas, Between Facts and Norms 1996, 360). The public sphere is seen as a domain of social life where public opinion can be formed.

This sphere is open to all citizens and constituted in every conversation in which individuals come together to form a public (Habermas 1991). In Habermas's view, the idea of the public sphere is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction (Fraser 1992, 57). An effective and active public

sphere is not possible if there is no significant participation of key factors such as the CSOs (Civil Society Organizations) and the media. In order to further elaborate on the connections between the citizens, the CSOs, and the media, we used another source of knowledge as, Jeffrey C. Alexander's book 'The Civil Sphere' (Oxford University Press 2006). In this book, the author underlined the importance of social relationships and how they are broadcasted by civil society institutions specializing in communicative, not regulative, tasks-by the mass media, public opinion polls, and voluntary organizations. The author tries to build a model that defines the relationship between civil society and other kinds of institutional spheres.

To make possible the existence of the public sphere, the European processes have to be visible to citizens. For this to be a reality, the mainstream media's role in making the EU visible is crucial (Salvatore, Schmidtke, and Trenz 2013, 142). Analyzing the connection between media and the public sphere, Machill, Risse, De Vreese, and Boomgaarden have defined that the media's role in the Europeanisation of the EU public sphere and the Member States is vital. Covering the eurointegration process news is very important, considering the powerful impact that media has on the public support for the EU (De Vreese, Boomgaarden 2006, 419-436).

It is also important to include the main concepts of the 'Knowledge Gap' theory, as a communication theory proposed in the 1970s by Philip J. Tichenor, George A. Donohue, and Clarice N. Olien (1970, 159-170). This theory is primarily focused on the information gap that exists within society. The theory proposes that "as the infusion of mass media information into social system increases, the higher socio-economic status segments tend to acquire this information faster than lower socio-economic status population segments. Hence the gap in knowledge between the two tends to increase rather than decrease" (Communication Theory 2019). The 'Knowledge Gap' theory is applied in this paper to make evident the educational, economic, and knowledge gap in Albanian society and the exclusion of marginalized groups such as women, people with disabilities, LGBT and Roma communities, etc.

The Role of the Institutions and Media

There is a complex chain of institutions, organizations, and bodies that coordinate, promote and make visible the European process in a candidate country for EU membership. It is important to highlight their functions and their role in this process.

Albanian institutions: At this point of the process, the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs is the coordinator of the process of Albania's integration into the European Union, and consequently, it is the institution in charge of coordinating and leading the process with all other accountable institutions part of the eurointegration process. Albanian governmental institutions have made some efforts to implement the national policy documents, such as the National Plan for European Integration (NPEI). In April 2019, the government approved the updated biannual NPEI for 2019-2021 (Council of Ministers 2020).

Through a study conducted by Madhi and Sopoti (2020), the European Integration Partnership Platform has noted a lack of the right information from the Albanian institutions. The institutions do not have an approved communication plan to set out the respective rules. Institutions have chosen to publish the events on their official websites. They include them in other sections, thus making it difficult for organizations/individuals interested in participating in

these roundtables to find the announcements. So practically, organizations/individuals need to be well informed about the process to be able to follow these announcements. Despite a communication plan to ensure adequate information coverage of all actors involved in this process, such a plan is hardly felt (Madhi and Sopoti 2020).

In this case, the study sample included three groups from civil society, with 104 questionnaires completed, out of which 84% were from civil society organizations, 12% from business organizations, and 4% from media. Asked if they were aware of a communication strategy by the Albanian government for the process of Albania's integration into the EU, more than half (55.8%) stated that they were not aware. In comparison, 29.8% of them stated that there is a communication strategy, and about 9% stated that there is no communication strategy. A very high rate had no information, bringing to attention the lack of promotion of the process by institutions (Madhi and Sopoti 2020, 48).

Another study, conducted by Elda Zotaj and Gentiana Madhi in December 2019, supported by the 'Streha' Center and the European Commission, focused on the Albanian citizens' perceptions of the European process and the human rights in Albania. In the framework of this study, a sample of citizens and CSOs in Albania has been asked 'if the Albanian government has a communication strategy for eurointegration. After collecting and analyzing the data, the authors concluded that 70% of the respondents admitted there is no such document, and 30% did not have any information about an institutional communication strategy. According to Alba Brokaj (2019), "the absence of a strategy for the communication in the frame of the eurointegration, not only does undermine the government job, because the reforms and the events do not reach the citizens as a pure, balanced and as an apolitical information, but also undermines the work that will be done in the future because a citizen not informed will not be an active citizen in the decision-making". The absence of this strategy creates a knowledge gap in the information process, making the citizens indifferent and disinterested in the eurointegration process. They also admit that the majority of the Albanian citizens have no information at all about the key documents that define the way of the European integration of our country (Zotaj and Madhi 2019, 52).

Civil Society: More than 7,600 non-profit organizations are registered in Albania, yet their high number does not guarantee their impact on important processes in Albania. This is significantly evident in the case of Albania, where their engagement in decision-making and the monitoring of the policy-making processes is not yet fulfilled. One of the main structures relevant to reaching this priority in Albania is the National Council for Civil Society, established in 2015, which has a consultative role and aims to offer the space for dialogue among the CSOs and state institutions regarding topics of interest and reforms are undertaken by the government. Another structure established to include the civil society and non-state actors in policy-making is the National Council for European Integration (NCEI) which plays the role of the highest national advisory structure for the eurointegration of the Albanian Assembly. This Council promotes and guarantees the comprehensive cooperation between political forces, public institutions, and civil society; and ensures increased transparency in decision-making on integration issues as stipulated by Law 15/2015. When it comes to the eurointegration process, the local communities, including local CSOs and local government, face the challenge of not

being properly and fully informed. This makes it difficult and almost impossible for the mentioned actors to be engaged and contribute to this process (EMA 2020, 04-06).

Considering the most recent data, the Progress Report for Albania (2021) concludes that limited progress has been made in implementing the roadmap to an enabling environment for civil society. On the other hand, adopting the law on the registration of non-profit organizations brings some improvements.

It is important to emphasize that the National Council for Civil Society remains not a very stable one. There is an urgent need for this Council to be reformed to provide the appropriate representation of the Albanian civil society. Moreover, substantial efforts are necessary when developing meaningful and systematic consultations with civil society as part of inclusive policy dialogue for reforms.

When it comes to the legal aspects, the law on the National Council has not been amended. It does not reflect the necessary changes in ministerial portfolios and representation in the Council and improves its functioning. The Agency for the Support of Civil Society remains the main public body providing financial support for civil society. However, its budget was reduced by 40% in 2020, making public funding insufficient to sustain CSOs' activity, particularly in social services (European Commission Report 2021, 13).

The study 'Civil Society and Albania's EU Integration Process', supported by the European Commission, AIEN, and Partners Albania for Change and Development (Madhi and Sopoti 2020), highlighted the important role of the CSOs in the eurointegration process of the country. According to the authors, CSOs do not often actively participate in or contribute to the European Union accession negotiation process. Their rather passive role is caused by irregular feedback from national authorities and neglect of CSOs' contribution, an overall lack of transparency, an absence of trust in the established platforms for CSO participation, and a perceived lack of expertise in certain areas. An additional issue to be addressed is the inadequate and insufficient information provided to citizens, for which both national authorities and CSOs are responsible. In this study, Madhi and Sopoti (2020) have attempted to categorize the CSOs that operate in Albania. The least common fields of activity are International Relations and European Scientific Integration in only 12% of cases. The geographical area of the organizations' activity is considered an important indicator of the potential of organizations to be key actors in important processes such as eurointegration. More than half of them (53.8%) state that the geographical area of their activity is national, followed by 28% of organizations declaring local, 16.3% regional, and only 2% European. This clearly shows the potential of civil society organizations to contribute to Albania's EU integration process. It is already evident that CSOs play an important role in the eurointegration process of Albania. They are represented as partners and/or contributors to the EU agenda and strong implementers of key policies and strategies. To assess the capacities of CSOs, respondents were asked about the role of civil society in this process. More than half of the respondents (58.7%) stated that they perceive the role of CSOs in informing and raising public awareness regarding the membership process and 28.8% in providing expertise according to the respective field of expertise.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that only 12.5% of them report that they perceive the role of CSOs in monitoring the harmonization of the Albanian legislation and public policies with the EU (Madhi and Sopoti 2020, 44).

Media: Many recent studies have shown that media has an enormous impact on public opinion, and they do contribute to the formation of public perceptions regarding political, economic, or social issues. Mass media have been identified as very important when linking EU politics to its citizens (Adam 2009, 6). The way the news is covered and served to the citizens, the sources involved, or the language used to describe what has happened affects how this news is decoded or understood by the mass and can also affect their feedback.

While information is an important tool that helps shape opinions, the source of information plays a major role in interpreting that information. The Balkan Barometer is an annual survey of public opinion and business sentiments in six Western Balkan economies commissioned by the Regional Cooperation Council. The survey analyzes the aspirations and expectations on life and work, prevalent socio-economic and political trends, and regional and eurointegration[1]. Based on Balkan Barometer (June 2021) for the public opinion, in the Western Balkan economies, there is a similar attitude towards accessing information, with an above-average level of residents acquiring information through local media.

Specifically, in Albania, 78% of the entire population uses media as a channel for creating an opinion, while 42% shape their opinion based on information through friends and family. Interestingly enough, social media represent another channel widely used by participants (31%), while only 24% claim to take a certain attitude only if they are informed by governmental communications (Balkan Barometer 2021).

In this regard, the Albanian Institute for International Studies surveyed in the spring of 2020 to measure the public opinion support for the integration process. Citizens have been asked to self-evaluate their information about the EU and the eurointegration process and identify their information sources. Slightly more than half of them (53%) say they feel averagely informed about EU and integration, whereas 23% feel that there is a lack of information. On the other side, a similar group of 22% feels quite well informed about it. TV continues to be on top of the list of information sources, with a full third of the sample using TV news and programs to be informed about the EU and the process of integrating Albania and the region. This is followed by the Internet, which has been gaining prominence year by year and now stands as the primary source for 26% of Albanians, primarily young. Conversations with friends are the way to be informed for 10% of the sample, and newspapers are the 'go-to' source for another tenth of them. Various publications of civil society organizations and the events of the EU Delegation in Albania stand for about 5% each (AIIS 2020, 15-16).

When considering the data received from the monitoring process of the visual media (Albanian TV channels: Top Channel, Klan TV, and Vision Plus) for the period September-November 2021, it is generally seen that the European themes, events, or issues are not covered deeply enough by the respective media. There are not enough news chronicles about the eurointegration process, nor in number or diversity. The Albanian media carefully covers the events, the visits of high officials, or EU delegations. However, there is no further explanation of some complicated notions or the EU process per se for those citizens who do not have deep knowledge of the terminology related to the process. Headlines like: "The negotiations, at the end of the year/Von der Leyen in Tirana: The Open Balkan is welcomed", (Vision Plus 18 September 2021); "The BE-Western Balkans Summit/Rama for the Spanish "El País: We don't

[1] See more at: https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/about

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expect anything from the European Union" (Top Channel 6 October 2021); "Rama: EU should be ashamed for holding us hostage" (Klan TV 25 October), show that the Albanian TV channels are just covering the events, but do not explain or go deep enough in the core of the Europeanization processes, to reflect, discuss and evaluate the positive or negative effects of the eurointegration in our economy or finances. We came to the same conclusion from the monitoring of the news agencies (Albanian News Agency and Balkan Web), highlighting some headlines such as: "PM Rama for RTVE: Europe is our faith and future in EU is our free choice", (ATA 10 October), or "EU-Western Balkans, the Voice of America: We are engaged for the expansion, but there are no deadlines" (Balkan Web 7 October).

The data collected from monitoring some Albanian newspapers (Panorama and Gazeta Shqiptare) in the same period (September-November 2021) showed that the eurointegration process is covered better than the TV channels, including in-depth interviews, commentaries, interviews, and analyses. For example, headlines such as "EU increases the hopes of Tirana and Skopje for the negotiation process/The experts: good signals from the Biden Administration" (Panorama 3 October 2021), or "Albania deserves the negotiation process, but the corruption is still a problem" (Gazeta Shqiptare 20 October), do show that the newspapers have the space and the possibility to cover the themes and events about the eurointegration widely. In general, the Albanian media are not careful and dedicated to covering reports and analyzing the news about specific issues according to the benefits and costs of the Europeanization process. In most of the reports, we can see that the media cover the events; they just describe what happened, who said this, or that but rarely explain the facts or analyze the steps Albania is taking in its long and challenging path to the EU.

The Attitudes of the Albanian Citizens about the Eurointegration Process

The Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS) has been measuring the support for the eurointegration process since 2003. Hence some lines of comparisons through the years should be drawn to complete a panorama of developments in perceptions.

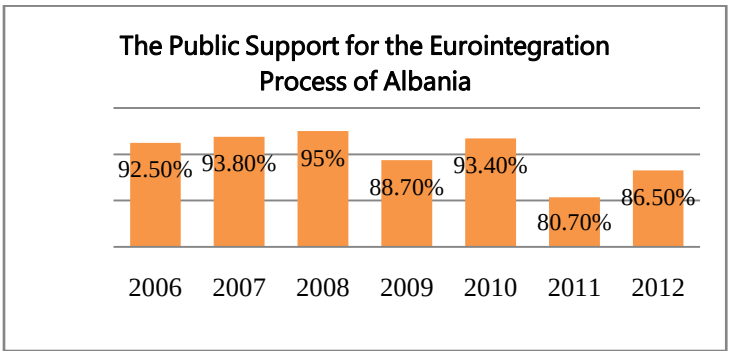


Figure 1: The Public Support for the Eurointegration Process of Albania (2003-2012) (Source: AIIS: Perceptions and Realities 2012, 10)

Figure 1 shows that support for Albania's membership in the EU has remained high. Since the first measurement of the perceptions about the eurointegration in 2003, Albanians' support for the EU has never reached below 80%.

The explanation and interpretation of this kind of support must be made beyond academic/scientific curiosity. The following are a few arguments given by the experts of the Albanian Institute for International Studies and could explain somehow this consistent high support in Albania: first and foremost, the political spectrum in Albania does not include any party, organization, or influential individual that has been against the membership project even as critical voices have risen in the last few years. In her study 'Political Parties Attitude, Voter Trust and EU Integration: Albanian Case', Bërdufi highlights the Albanian political parties' support for the eurointegration process. A survey conducted in 2014 showed high public support for the EU integration from the Albanian political parties: PD, 93.3%, PS, 93.4%, and LSI, 93.4%. The other smaller parties (coalition parties) have fewer high levels of support PBDNJ 73.40%, PDIU 66.70%, PKDSH 57.10%, PR 80.00%. Overall, these political parties support the EU integration in their public stance (Bërdufi 2019, 321). General criticism has been mostly related to the process of integration rather than directed at the EU or the perspective of being in the EU itself. Second, the expectation about the benefits that Albanians link to EU membership is quite high and often unrealistic. However, they provide powerful incentives for support.

Moreover, the membership itself in the EU could signify the end of the post-communist transition from a social perspective. The almost unanimous vote of Albanians for membership in the EU could also be related to the political culture of a society, which is used to being afraid to declare what it thinks openly, and especially, could be afraid to speak against what both the government and opposition say, along with the media, NGO's, etc. Finally, support at such a large scale is also related to the glorification of the West, the mystification of the West in general, and Europe in particular (AIIS 2012, 13-14).

In their study about citizens' attitudes toward EU membership, Peshkopia, Arifi, and Sheqiri (2020) have concluded that the Albanians' support for EU integration remains very high. The authors test their argument with public opinion data collected in the summer of 2017 in Albania and Kosovo. According to the results of the abovementioned study, there is strong support for EU membership among citizens of Albania and Kosovo, with respectively 81.58% and 83.86% of respondents combining much and very much support (Peshkopia, Arifi, Sheqiri 2020, 459). Very high support for the EU membership from a candidate country such as Albania was also recorded from the Standard Eurobarometer (summer 2018). According to the data collected from this report, the EU membership support is quite high in Albania, where most respondents (93%) believe that the EU membership is a good thing for their country (EB90 2018, 78).

During the period 2018-2021, the Balkan Barometer data reveals that the public opinion support in Albania for the EU integration remains high and stable in its trend. On the question about the meaning of the EU membership for the citizens personally, the Albanian respondents are primarily associated with economic prosperity (respectively, 49% in 2018, 62% in 2019, 59% in 2020, and 66% in 2021), freedom to study and/or work in EU (respectively, 47% in 2018, 29% in 2019, 60% in 2020 and 63% in 2021), and freedom to travel (respectively 19% in 2018, 20% in 2019, 21% in 2020 and 57% in 2021).

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In the last two years, we have seen an increasing trend in the need for Albanian citizens to work and travel in the EU countries (Balkan Barometer: 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021).

According to the survey conducted by the Albanian Institute for International Studies (June 2020), when been asked how important this process is for them, almost 60% of Albanian citizens, a significant majority, responded that it is very important, followed by 32% who admitted that it is important. Only 6% did not consider this an important process. These data are a clear indicator that almost all the society assigns key significance to the developments related to the European perspective of the country (AIIS 2020, 3-5) (Figure 2).

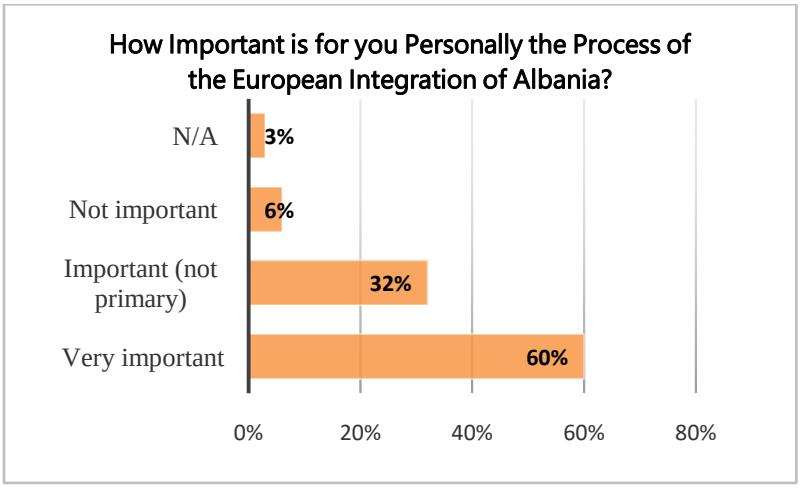


Figure 2: The Albanian Public Support for the European Integration (Source: AIIS 2020)

In the case of a referendum, it is more than evident that an overwhelming majority of 86% of Albanians would vote 'Yes' for their country's accession to the EU. In contrast, a very small minority of just 7% would vote against it. It is comforting that most Albanian citizens back the reforms and consider this perspective unrivaled. However, when it comes to concrete and detailed understating and expectations about the process, the support seems to be based partially on some lack of real information, which raises doubts. According to the AIIS, the reasons why so many Albanians support EU integration remain unchanged over time pertain to the expected rise in living standards. The economic justification of their choice for citizens has always been the first reason for the hypothetical positive vote for accession. Recently, about 40 percent of citizens have made the same choice and have been followed by 16% who claim they support integration because there will be more employment opportunities. Finally, 11% of the respondents expect less poverty. Moreover, a quarter of Albanians expect better functioning of the rule of law and less corruption, thereby stressing the institutional aspect of the process both in establishing and consolidating the right overall framework for further political and economic development. Only 9% associate their support with a hope for a stronger democracy (AIIS 2020, 5-7).

Another confirmation of the Albanian citizens' enthusiastic support for the EU membership comes from the Standard Eurobarometer (winter 2020-2021). According to this report, the support for EU membership remains strong in Albania (83%), despite a three-

percentage point decline since the last Standard Eurobarometer survey in summer 2020 (EB93). Responding to the question: 'Taking everything into account, would you say that your country would benefit or not from being a member of the EU?', 91% of the Albanians have responded that their country would be better after being part of the EU (EB94 2021, 87).

The Perceptions of the Marginalized Groups and the Knowledge Gap

The study 'Perceptime mbi integrimin në BE dhe zbatimin e kuadrit ligjor për të drejtat e njeriut' ('Perceptions for the EU Integration and the Law Enforcement in the Frame of the Civil Rights'), in December 2019, part of the project 'Unë zgjedh Europën' ('I choose Europe'), by Elda Zotaj and Gentiola Madhi, is a serious attempt to collect, analyze and describe the differences in the perceptions of the marginalized groups with the rest of the society in the frame of the eurointegration process. The study explores two different groups' perceptions, knowledge, and attitudes: online and offline samples.

The data gathered in this study shows that 80% of the offline sample (people interviewed in person) declare that they do not have any knowledge or have minimal knowledge about the European Union. Only 20% of them have average or very good knowledge about the institutions of the Union. 60% of the online sample (people interviewed through the Internet) declare that they have an average or a high level of knowledge of the EU institutions. We can see a knowledge gap between the people interviewed online and offline. These results derive from several factors: internet access, age, the level of education, and economic status (Zotaj and Madhi 2019, 33).

The authors understood that most online respondents were young during the data analysis process. 62.3% of the people interviewed online had an average age of 18 and 24 years. Meanwhile, about 35.5% of the offline sample were 25 to 35 years old. This comes because the Internet is widely used by the youth, who are fond of social media. Considering the educational level of the sample, 60% of the offline sample had only their primary school (9 years of school), and the majority of them were people with disabilities or did belong to the Roma and Egyptian communities; meanwhile, the 67.2% of the online group declared they had a university diploma. 64.8% of the offline group declared they were unemployed, while 46.7% of the online group did have a job. This high level of unemployment is linked to the educational level of the offline group and the difficulties they face in finding a job (Zotaj and Madhi 2019).

According to World Bank Report,[2] Albania is an upper-middle-income country. Data from the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) Report 2020[3] reflect the high ratio of registered Albanian asylum-seekers in EU countries, ranking first among other countries, indicating a high ratio of poverty and inequality. Despite positive achievements in 2014, when Albania gained EU candidate status, and later in 2018, when the European Commission gave a positive recommendation to open the negotiations process, the government has been motivated to pay greater attention to tracking poverty and social exclusion. To the question 'How do you evaluate your knowledge about the EU institutions?', 55-60% of the offline respondents answered 'no knowledge at all', and about 20% of the respondents have minimal knowledge. The low level of

[2]For more details see at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/albania
[3]For more details see at: https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ALB#pos9

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the information and knowledge that the marginalized groups (Roma, Egyptian communities, LGBT, and people with disabilities) have about the EU in general and about its institutions and their functions is not only linked with the education and economic factors or the access at the sources of information but also with the absence of an institutional strategy for the communication, in order to raise the people awareness for the EU integration process.

Again, going back to the study, the data gathered from the online sample show that 60% of the respondents have good and very good knowledge of the EU. Their education, economic status, employment, access to information sources, and ability to use ITC technology allow them to be in touch with the right information and knowledge about EU integration processes. As the media experts, public institutions, or CSOs have underlined during the interviews held in the frame of this study. There is a bias in information because only the educated or the people of a high social status become part of the training, seminars, or forums. The EU integration processes are discussed (Zotaj and Madhi 2019, 36). Specifically, to the question 'Do you see the EU membership as a good thing for your country?', 88-89% of both groups (online and offline) did respond positively, with 'Yes'. This is a very positive attitude that the Albanian citizens have toward the EU integration, incomparable to any other candidate country.

According to the implementation of the law concerning civil rights, in the frame of the eurointegration process, the Albanian citizens (both the online and offline groups) are generally not satisfied. When asked how they will evaluate the law's implementation regarding the right to education, property, public health, and information, the study's authors did get interesting answers. The results described in Figure 3 show that 49.2% of the offline sample declare that these rights are not respected at all, and only 1.7% of them think that these rights are respected. Even respondents in the online sample believe these rights are not respected, with 40.2 percent believing they are not respected at all and 1.6 percent believing they are.

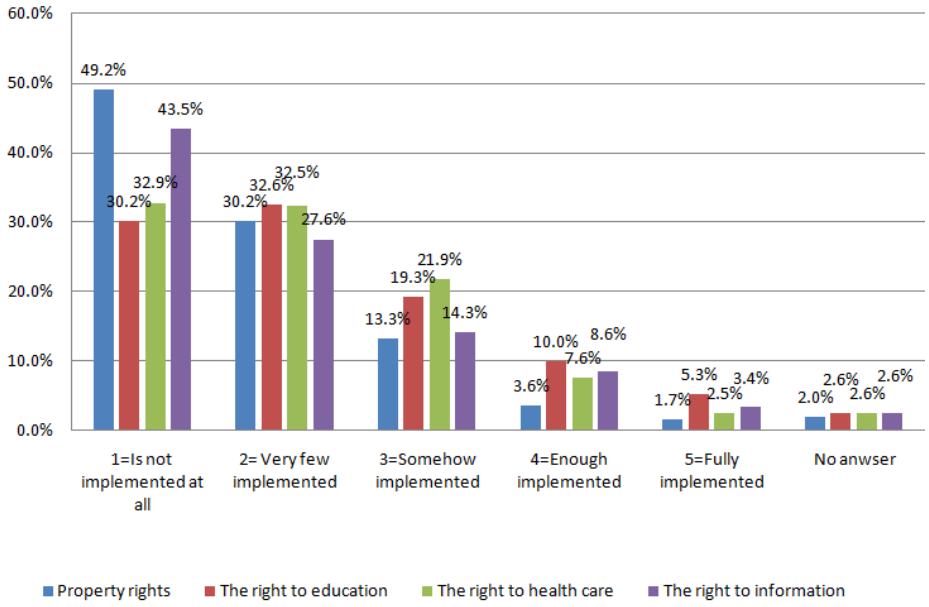


Figure 3: The Perceptions About the Implementation of the Civil Rights (Offline Sample) (Zotaj and Madhi 2019, 39)

Figure 3 reflects people's high dissatisfaction with enforcing their basic rights. One of their concerns is related to the access to information, so critical for a healthy democracy and so relevant in the frame of the EU integration process. The offline sample (nearly 43.5% of them) declares that they do not have the right to information. Meanwhile, 20% of the online sample say that this right is not respected by public institutions, the same institutions with the constitutional duty to enforce these rights. Overall, citizens' perceptions about human rights enforcement are very negative in the offline sample rather than the online sample.

The last two questions of the questionnaire conducted by the study's authors were about the perception that both samples have regarding Albania's costs and benefits within the framework of EU membership. In this regard, the results indicate that two of the main costs Albania is expected to have (both samples do agree) are that 'the EU favors larger countries at the expense of smaller countries' and that 'the EU costs money'. In addition, for the offline sample, another cost is that 'the tax structure in Europe does not encourage the development of new businesses. For the online sample, a future cost for Albania is going to be 'the high levels of bureaucracy and administration within the EU'. Albania's benefits once part of the EU (both the online and offline groups agree) are considered in the field of 'civil and human rights' and 'employment and free movement of citizens'. The estimate of costs and benefits from both samples is perceived equally (Zotaj and Madhi 2019, 49-50).

CONCLUSION

The European Union foundations are based on human rights, on the birthright for peace, prosperity, and integration. The power of public opinion to influence EU policies is enormous. The same importance has the public opinion in every candidate country for EU membership. An informed and active public opinion is vital for the Europeanization process of the country.

There has been a modest but visible public sphere in Albania since the 90s. There is a crucial need for an institutional strategy for the citizens to be integrated into the EU public sphere. To be active and productive, public opinion must have access to the right sources of information and be trained to understand and evaluate the benefits and costs of EU membership with a balanced sense of reality.

The data gathered from many recent studies show that the Albanian institutions do not have a clear strategy for the proper inclusion of the citizens in the Europeanization process. The Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs is the coordinator of the EU integration process and should coordinate and lead this process efficiently. Many experts cited in this study note a lack of transparency from the Albanian institutions that do not have a generally known communication plan with the civil society and the citizens. The public sphere mirrors the negligence of the Albanian institutions; the citizens are not an active part of the Europeanization process.

Another important component that facilitates the inclusion of the citizens in EU integration is civil society. The CSOs must involve, inform and train different groups in the public sphere to prepare them for the European future of Albania. There are more than 7,600 non-profit organizations registered in Albania, but only 12% of them are focused on the fields of eurointegration.

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The role of the CSOs in informing and raising public awareness regarding the membership process is crucial and underlined in every Progress Report from the European Commission. Unfortunately, the CSOs do not actively include the Albanian citizens in the eurointegration process by providing inadequate and sufficient information. Their rather passive role is caused by irregular feedback from national authorities and neglect of CSOs' contribution, an overall lack of transparency, financial support, and a perceived lack of expertise in certain areas.

For informed and active public opinion, the media is one of the main and most important tools. Many studies have shown that the media have the power to create and influence public perceptions. According to the Balkan Barometer (June 2021), 78% of the entire population uses media to create an opinion in Albania. Social media represent another channel widely used by participants (31%). From the monitoring of the Albanian media (TV channels: Top Channel, Klan TV, and Vizion Plus), (News agencies: Albanian News Agency and Balkan Web), (Newspapers: Panorama and Gazeta Shqiptare), for the period September-November 2021, is generally seen that the European themes or events are not covered deeply enough from the media. We observed that the Albanian media covers the news, the press conferences, or official events. However, it is not informing the citizens of what is behind the facts, behind the news. The media is not speaking to exclude marginalized groups from the integration process; the media is not speaking about where the EU funds go; media is not explaining difficult issues about the EU; media is not speaking about the costs or the benefits of the EU membership.

The public opinion in Albania is very enthusiastic about the EU integration, although the long and difficult way of Europeanization. This is connected with the conceptual framework that the perspective of EU integration is a strong stimulus throughout society for achieving progress and democratization of the country. The EU is associated with good governance, human rights, economic development, and prosperity. Since 1992 the dream of the Albanians has been to be like the Europeans, reaching the mentioned above objectives. According to Blendi Kajsiu (2008), "the request of Albanians to become members of the EU does not simply mark the formal act of Albania member in the EU. Contrary, it marks such a demand for work, development, modernization, pride" (p. 7). This is why the support by citizens for Albania's membership in the EU has been and remains very strong, for example, 95% in 2008 (AIIS 2020).

For more than two decades, the public perceptions of EU integration have been measured. The Albanians' support for the EU has never reached below 80% - this is considered an impressive level of support. Having in focus all the surveys are done periodically since 2006 by the Albanian Institute for International Studies, the Standard Eurobarometer (EB90, EB94), the Balkan Barometer Reports, etc., we have concluded that the citizens' support for the EU integration in Albania is higher than all other countries, in EU or the Western Balkans. The expectations about the benefits that Albanians mostly link to EU membership are unrealistic. This is because of the integration perspective of Albania in the EU. The Albanians' unanimous support for EU membership is mainly related to the lack of qualitative information about the country's costs that will probably have once part of the EU. The absence of institutions', CSOs, and media to include Albanian citizens in the EU process explains this 'totalitarian' and unreal support for the EU.

From the surveys, studies, interviews, and observations, we conclude Albanian citizens are not included enough in the eurointegration processes, especially the sensitive groups like people with disabilities, LGBT, the Egyptian or Roma communities, etc. The data gathered from the study of the 'Streha' Center (Zotaj and Madhi 2019) show that 80% of the offline sample do not have any knowledge about the European Union, while 60% of the online sample declare that they have an average or a high level of knowledge for the EU. We can see a knowledge gap between the people interviewed online and offline. From the HDI index and other global indexes, the surveys, and interviews conducted, we did conclude that the marginalized groups in Albania are excluded from the integration processes. They lack the appropriate education, economic status, and the right information to participate in the public sphere. We do recommend that the Albanian institutions, in cooperation with the CSOs, create an immediate communication plan to include and integrate the Albanian citizens, especially the marginalized groups, in the EU integration process. Further investments in education and the information of the sensitive groups in Albania about the eurointegration process must be made.

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Statement of human rights:
All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were following the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Statement on the welfare of animals:
This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any authors.

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