Albania: A Taxing Journey Toward Democratic Consolidation and European Integration

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Introduction

Albania is one of the most difficult democratising cases amongst its former communist Eastern European peers, although puzzling enough, Albania had consistently followed a separate path from the myriad of problems that were occurring in neighbouring Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Chief among these were the ethnic conflict that involved most of Yugoslavia in the secessionist and separatist wars that were driven by expansionist nationalisms and used ethnic markers to achieve full-blown political goals. Albania remaining unscathed from such conflict, can be explained by its ethnic homogeneity, but also a period of autarchy and isolation especially after 1975, when the breakup with China occurred and that combined with an economically paralysed state and general poverty, led Albanians to massively flee the country in the aftermath of the totalitarian regime. So, the desire of the majority of people was to leave the country, rather than fight to expand it through irredentist wars, which at the time meant evoking nationalist claims vis-à-vis Albanian-speaking territories in former Yugoslavia etc. This was the major reason, coupled with reasonably high foreign pressures that constrained Albanian politicians not to take any step in the dangerous road of irredentist claims, which by that time were already enough threatening to take the volatile Western Balkans faster downhill.

Furthermore, Albania had signed a trade and cooperation agreement with the European Union in 1992, when Albania as a result became eligible for PHARE funding – under the external relations aid scheme. Although the new political elite opted for a fast breakthrough with the past, trying to adopt a quick turnover and radical market economy by firing up the privatisation of state assets and rapidly downsizing the bureaucracy, these reforms that elsewhere proved to be successful, in Albania did not give the desired effect. Meanwhile, democratisation was difficult and political consensus minimal. The main reasons have been a weak legacy of political culture, an intense domestic political warfare and poor constitutional and institutional checks. These in turn were combined with a weak and voiceless civil society and lack of a vibrant middle class.

In the present chapter, first I delineate the last years of Communism, starting with an overview of the 1980s, while mainly focusing on the key events and tendencies, to proceed then with the process of regime change in the immediate aftermath of the Communist system. Then, I briefly discuss the political institutions and their changes, for example the

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constitution, the parliament, the electoral system, the government and other important, special features. Then it goes on with governments and party politics (elections, main dynamics of politics) before I wrap up the conclusions in the end.

The Last Years of Communism

Albania has been the only totalitarian country in the former Eastern Europe, with the exception of the Soviet Union under Stalin's rule. Different from Polish authoritarianism, Czech mature post-totalitarianism, Bulgaria's frozen post-totalitarianism[1] or the decentralist communist system of Yugoslavia, Albania adopted Stalin's model of totalitarianism. It was a model that was well kept even after Khrushchev denounced Stalin's crimes, which resulted in Albania breaking the ties with the Soviets, because of Hoxha's fear of revisionism which would rehabilitate some of his political opponents. After the break with China, Albania went totally autarchic and isolated in the international system, until becoming the last communist regime to be overthrown in the former Eastern Europe, if we do not count here some former Soviet Republics which neither started, nor completed the transition to democratic rule.

On the other hand, the identifying features of the Albanian communism went from rapid and forced collectivisation in the early 1950s to violent livestock gathering by the state in the late 1980s. That started and ended a cycle that was doomed from the start, at least when it came to economic planning. Furthermore, they took absurd proportions, like the Albanian-style internment "gulags" (such as Tepelene or Torovice), or the horrifying prisons, as the examples of Burrel and Spaç testify. Moreover, most of the population endured unspeakable suffering, from rationing of food to harsh punishment for so-called anti-regime propaganda – the infamous Article 55 of the Criminal Code. On the other hand, Albania during communism has steadfastly resisted both internal and external shocks, as well as the calls for change. It went as far as not to have any political or cultural dissidents or underground (samizdat) publications and other forms of cultural resistance, like elsewhere in Central Europe, as the example of the Visegrád countries during the Cold War can testify. Every effort to form some sort of pluralism of thought, let alone assembly or rival political organisation was met with fire and fury by the Communist regime, which was truly monocratic both in name and practice.

The last years of Communism in Albania were characterised by brutal food shortages and desperate attempts of trying to escape the country, until hundreds of discontented and oppressed youth took over the Western embassies in Albania and were in the end offered free passage as political asylum seekers. Under these conditions, the regime that was now ruled by Ramiz Alia, the successor of Hoxha after his death in 1985, started to show the first vestiges of opening up by the beginning of the 1990s, long after such reforms have started in all of the former Eastern European countries. But it was the student protests that erupted at the end of the 1990s that finally sent the spark that forced the hand of Alia and his collaborators to take seriously the students' protests and to initialise the process of political pluralism. A critical psychological factor was no doubt the execution of the Romanian dictator Ceaușescu and his wife by a firing squad and the violent removal of Stalin's monument from the centre of Tirana by a self-organised mob.

[1] Linz–Stepan 1996.

The Process of Regime Change

The immediate period after the collapse of communism that had divided Eastern Europe from its Western counterpart, was ripe for new and challenging ideological currents and political pluralism that challenged the core beliefs of the communist dogma and monocratic regimes. More often than not, these countries had to deal with the issue of the triple transition toward "democracy, market economy and state-building",[2] as well as the issue of revisiting the concept of national identity. In federations such as the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, the (re)creation of new national identities that would be congruent to new state borders[3] was one of the most difficult issues to deal with and set up a whole different game that rivalled the paradigm of "democracy as the only game in town".[4] As was often the case in many of these transitioning countries of Eastern Europe, the dominant ethnic group in many newly established states found themselves to have little proportional numerical supremacy. This had significant consequences for everyday politics because it raised the old forgotten spectre of ethnic markers which was especially problematic in the relations that newly nationalising states created with their minorities.

Although Albania had the luxury as a monoethnic state to escape the prolonged nation-building stages that most of former Eastern European countries were facing, still nationalist mobilisation was too lucrative a card not to be used instrumentally for domestic political goals, as the events after 1991–1992 clearly show. It was during these turbulent early years that new windows of opportunity opened up for nationalist discourse and identity issues becoming a trend.

The Democratic Party leadership used an ethnically inclusive rhetoric that was addressed to Albanians inside and outside state borders with promises for its revindication and a more active role to be played by the 'homeland' in the affairs of ethnic kin, while allowing the diaspora to actively take part in domestic politics. After coming to power, however, the discourse was suddenly 'normalised', with nation and state mapping onto each other in the political and cultural discourse, while dissenting nationalist voices that visualised a pan-Albanian federation were marginalised. This shift mostly happened because of the rising pressures of international actors that could not tolerate such discourse on the eve of ethnic conflict ruptures in nearby rump Yugoslavia, as well as an internal longing for escaping the impoverished country after decades of full isolation, rather than trying to expand the nationalist map through irredentist policies.[5]

Then came the period of other political unstable years which culminated in 1997 until 1999, with Albania breaking down after the collapse of some Ponzi schemes where Albanian citizens saw the loosing of 1.3 billion Dollars and the Socialist Party saw the opportunity to come to power in a big coalition that included some right-wing parties and members of the civil society. The popular revolts soon led to the anarchy of armed groups and the paralysing of the state, which made the government inexistent in the most parts of the territory for a few months, until order was restored and elections were called. The elections were heavily disputed but they brought to power the new left-wing coalition that

[2] Offe 1996.

[3] See more in Gellner 1983.

[4] Di Palma 1990, 113.

[5] Kalemaj 2014.

continued in various forms to rule for the next eight years, until the 2005 political elections. The economy during these turbulent years was in shatters, from a 13% economic all-time high growth in 1996 to a rapid downturn and depression in 1997 when it had a negative growth for the first and last time in the post-communist period. The new government had to face the double challenge of restoring trust in institutions while redoubling the efforts to get the economy back to its feet. But as an observer has duly pointed out: "[h]owever, Albania recovered from the pyramid scheme crisis within a relatively brief period, and continued its reform agenda, making progress on many fronts".[6]

On the other hand, Kosovo's crises situation suddenly erupted at this instance, with many Kosovar refugees fleeing to Albania to escape ethnic cleansing and persecution from Serbia's strongman, Slobodan Milosevic's regime. Albania, with the assistance of the international community managed the crisis well, considering its own lack of infrastructure and the burden on its weak public finances. Most of the burden was actually shared by the people directly because most offered their own homes to shelter the Kosovars that were fleeing the mass cleansing of Milosevic's regime. The dynamic of events in this first decade of post-communist period, from state and institutional building at home to confrontation with a volatile Western Balkans in a region that historically has been considered a "powder keg", led ultimately to a chaotic period with much progress checked by retreats and spill-backs that resembled that of a tango danced in reverse.

The end of the monocratic system in Albania and the emergence of political pluralism, made possible a diversification of views regarding the Albanian national question, in particular with reference to Kosovo. Sali Berisha who was elected the first post-communist president and the Democratic Party that he led, showed renewed interest in the fate of the Albanians in Kosovo and the Albanian diaspora at large in Yugoslavia. Berisha had an early connection to Kosovo, being born in Tropoja that borders Kosovo and having most relatives on Kosovo's side of the border. This was an abrupt change from Hoxha and the generally Southern leadership of the communist era which were closer to Belgrade than Pristina.

However, the political landscape in Albania at the time was fast-changing, with the start of the anti-communist student protests and the emergence of the first opposition party, the Democratic Party.[7] The new government prioritised the fight against corruption, state capture and organised crime and worked in tandem with international actors to address these emerging issues that prevented a rapid and successful integration of the country in the European Union.

From the early post-communist years that Berisha and the Democratic Party came to power, the main political and public discourse shifted to an EU and NATO enlargement agenda as the top priorities of official Tirana policy and has remained so to this date. Like in many countries in the region and generally as a symptom of former communist Eastern European countries, membership in Western "clubs" reinforced or replaced the lack of legitimacy coming from normal political processes domestically. Soon the directives for the negotiation of a Stabilization and Association Agreement with Albania were adopted on 31 January 2003. On this date, Chief Commissioner Prodi officially launches the negotiations for a SAA between the EU and Albania. Later, in June in the same year, at the

[6] Biberaj 2015.

[7] The party was formed on December 12, 1990.

Thessaloniki Summit, the SAP was confirmed as the European Union policy for the Western Balkans. The EU perspective for these countries was confirmed based on the Regatta principle, which meant that evaluation was going to be based on individual progress.[8] Then, in December 2005, the Council of Ministers made the decision on the principles of a revised European Partnership for Albania, whereas on 12 June 2006, finally the SAA was signed at the General Affairs and External Relations Council, thus signalling a significant progress on the path toward the candidate status, albeit lagging behind in its integration speed, even by regional progress.

Meanwhile in April 3, 2008, Albania was finally accepted in NATO, a high achievement for the poverty-stricken country that further legitimised the progress done in the past two decades by being able to consolidate its rule of law and democratic credentials in the eyes of the international community. The admission to this high-level military-security organisation which was in a way consecrated as the beacon of the free world – especially during the turbulent years of the Cold War – was also a major political victory for the centre-right democratic party which used it as a political capital to win the next local elections.

Meanwhile, the process of visa liberalisation started with an agreement in Zagreb in 2007 and was successfully concluded in 2010 when the Council approved visa-free travel to the Schengen Area for Albanian citizens. Shortly thereafter, on 28 April 2009 Albania formally applied for membership in the European Union. On 24 June 2014, under the Greek EU Presidency of the time, the Council agreed to grant Albania the candidate status, which was endorsed by the EU Council a few days later.

In March 2015, at the fifth "High Level Dialogue meeting" between Albania and the EU, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement – Johannes Hahn, notified Albania for a start date for accession negotiations to begin. This required the following two conditions to be met: First, the government needed to reopen political dialogue with the parliamentary opposition and second, Albania must deliver quality reforms for all five earlier identified key areas not yet complied with, which were and continue to be: public administration, the rule of law, corruption, organised crime, fundamental rights.[9] This official stance was fully supported by the European Parliament through its pass of a Resolution comment in April 2015, which basically agreed with all conclusions drawn by the Commission's latest 2014 Progress Report on Albania.

The Albanian Parliament approved constitutional amendments on justice reforms on 22 July 2016. Albania had hoped to open membership negotiations by December 2016. Although the Commission recommended the launch of negotiations on 9 November 2016, on 26 November Germany announced that it would veto the opening accession talks until 2018. In early 2017, the EU Parliament warned the government leaders that the parliamentary elections in June must be "free and fair" before negotiations could begin to admit the country into the Union. The MEPs also expressed concern about Albania's "selective justice, corruption, the overall length of judicial proceedings and political interference in investigations and court cases" but the EU Press Release left room for some optimism when it said toward the end that: "It is important for Albania to maintain today's reform

[8] European Commission 2013.

[9] "Albania needs to implement EU-related reforms credibly, and ensure that its June parliamentary elections are free and fair, if it is to start EU accession negotiations." European Parliament 2017.

momentum and we must be ready to support it as much as possible in this process."[10] The fate of the Judicial Reform for which repeatedly Brussels, as well as Washington have consistently expressed the urge not only to see it finalised on paper but also implemented in practice is the real test of political willingness. The quantifiable measure of success is the arrest of what the current American Ambassador in Albania, Mr. Donald Lu has called euphemistically "the big fish" that need to go behind bars. These "big fish" range from corrupt judges and prosecutors to big political weights that only a fair and equal justice need to demonstrate how they have enriched themselves in a very short period beyond all reasonable calculations. The old dictum "follow the money" can be very useful in instructing the new law enforcement specialists to go after the pioneers of state capture and organised crime, thereby dealing with the oldest problems that prevent the successful integration of the country in the European Union.

Political Institutions and Their Changes

Albania operated under the auspices of the Main Constitutional Dispositions[11] until 1998, because a proposed constitution by the then President Sali Berisha in 1994 was defeated in a national referendum. The first parliament that was constituted in 1991 had 250 deputies. On 22 March – in the preliminary elections that were called by the Communist Government in the belief that they would carry an easy win – the opposition won. This parliament had a total of 155 deputies, while later this number dropped to 140 deputies, a number that continues today. The electoral system in the whole decade of the 1990s and also in the beginning of the 2000s, continued to be the majoritarian one with national proportional correction, the so-called German model, since it borrowed characteristics from its German counterpart. Under this system, 100 deputies were directly elected from the 100 electoral zones that Albania was divided into, while 40 deputies came from national proportional lists of the parties and coalitions. Under this system, the threshold to qualify for the national proportional system for the parties was 2.5% and 4% for the coalitions.

From 1992 to 2014, the territory was divided into 12 districts, as 65 municipalities and 308 communes. Then, on 31 July 2014, the Albanian Parliament passed Law 115/2014 *For Administrative-Territorial Division of Local Government Units in the Republic of Albania.* The new territorial division created only two new levels: 12 districts and 61 municipalities, thus getting rid of the previous communes that were largely rural areas or groups of villages collected together. Also it reduced a bit the number of municipalities. This new and simplified territorial division was made effective after the local elections of 2015.[12]

Meanwhile, the two biggest political parties that have continually shaped the political system in Albania SP and DP decided to effectively rule out the electoral weight of smaller parties which could be a hindrance to stability and especially get rid of the Socialist Movement for Integration that was created by former Socialist Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister (in various times), Ilir Meta. Thus, they proposed a regional proportional system.

[10] European Commission 2017.
[11] Ligj 1991.
[12] Official Journal 2014.

This so-called "Spanish system", because of its parallels with the Spanish model was meant to improve several components.

According to Kastriot Islami, who was largely thought as the brain behind the formula, the new system would bring several advantages by correcting some of the inefficiencies of the previous model. Among those, he pointed out the following: 1. getting rid of the tension that accompanied the two-round system of the past.[13] This is important since it used to create the so-called "Dushku" effect, named after an infamous Albanian village/zone, which paradoxically elected a number of deputies in the second round after the biggest party on the left, the Socialist Party, ordered its voters to re-direct their votes to its political allies in order to get them in the Parliament through the proportional national list. Also among other reasons he enlisted were the following: 2. guarantees fair representation; consolidates the political system; 4. because it gives the voters the opportunity to select its favourite leader, party and program; 5. because it reinforces the role and cohesion of political parties; 6. because it eliminates the "salamander" type electoral zones; 7. it eliminates North–South political divide; 8. it prioritises regional and national development.[14] Yet another reason that politicians of both camps were propagating was the fairer gender balance that it would guarantee due to the fact that the previous existing majoritarian system was fairly unfair to women candidates.

The opponents on the other hand, both smaller political parties and civil society actors, strongly criticised the new law because it was detrimental to the democratic process. It also inhibited the role of smaller parties that represented certain segments of the society and it would give the monopoly of the political power solely to the duopoly of the two biggest parties: Socialists and Democrats. The political opposition to this law went as far as to enter a hunger strike inside the confines of the Parliament led by the Socialist Movement for Integration and its leader, Ilir Meta.

The effects of the new electoral system, seen in retrospective, seem more negative than positive. The number of women in parliament has increased a little, which in itself is a positive signal. But that was mainly done because of a new law on representative gender-based quotas, than voluntary inclusion by party leaders of women candidates. Although it removed North–South political divides, it made general representation much worse with only a handful of parties being represented in the Parliament (seven altogether) and of these several represented only by one or two deputies. On the positive note, it helped create more stable governances and the new governments were able to sit in for the full mandate, thus improving the political instability that characterised the early 2000s. Thus Prime Minister Berisha of the Democratic Party had the luxury of a stable rule for two four-year consecutive mandates from 2005 to 2013 and it seems that current Prime Minister Edi Rama, after winning in June 2017 a second parliamentary majority, is headed toward a successful déjà vu.

[13] Islami 1998.
[14] Islami 1998.

Governments and Party Politics

The data reveals that in 1992 in Albania, with the start of the democratic transition and power shifts from the autocracy of communists to a multi-party system, a new opportunity for power grabbing and elite rivalisation came up and this was reflected in the mushrooming of the political parties, a trend which continues to the present date.[15] The years 1992–1996 were years of overnight state industry transfer of hands to private entities. Massive privatisation was followed also in other areas of societal and economic life. On the other hand, massive emigration started with the shattering of foreign embassies' walls by disappointed Albanian youth who simply had nothing to lose and wanted to break free from a poverty-stricken Albania. More than 1 million Albanians left in those years, with half a million settling in Greece, 300 thousands in Italy and the rest in Germany and other European states. This coupling of rapid privatisation with remittances sent home by the new emigrant waves, resulted in an economic boom that was very welcomed in a country that had very little to offer in terms of comparative advantage even by regional standards. It also brought many risks altogether, including deep polarity divides, major societal ruptures and prices skyrocketing overnight, thus dealing simultaneously with high inflation and high unemployment.

In 1992, Albania experienced the first free post-communist elections which brought the right-wing Democratic Party and other opposition parties and groups to power. The DP and its allies stayed in power until the collapse of the pyramid schemes in 1997 when they were replaced by the SP and its allies. From 1997 to 1999, the government had to fight many internal crises like the assassination of a leading opposition figure, Azem Hajdari and external crises, like the humanitarian disaster in neighbouring Kosovo which faced ethnic cleansing from Serb paramilitary troops and sought refuge in Albania and Macedonia and to a lesser extent to other countries, as well. However, this period was more an effort to return the missing state back and to recreate the institutions that were shattered by the civil conflict of 1997, rather than an effort to secure a strong foundation for democratisation. Prime Minister Fatos Nano was credited to share power with a number of former prominent leaders from the opposition and in general a rather liberal way of governing. Also of symbolic importance was the inclusion of some noted journalists and civil activists in important functions in the government and state apparatus.

But these were seen as efforts to secure a relatively comfortable governance, without the common nuisance from the opposition, rather than credible efforts of democratisation and addressing legitimacy questions. Democracy standards continued to suffer and as a result, the political crisis became acute. The temporary détente between the Socialists and the Democrats in 2002, following the consensual election of President Moisiu, was only a fleeting example of success that resembled just a glimpse of hope, amidst the overall scepticism that surrounded both camps. As a result of such a degree of misbelief between the two parties and respective political leaders, Albania continued to have an antagonistic political scene, where the opponent was demonised and considered an enemy, rather than simply a political adversary with whom pacts were possible.

[15] According to the National Electoral Commission, there are 135 registered political parties in Albania, although only half of them participate in local or national elections.

Albanian elections can be taken as an example of democratic deformation and lack of consolidation of good practices, because of their irregularities and mutual contestation that falls into the line of partisan politics. In turn, it enforces the notion of a problematic country that while is on the track of joining the EU, being a candidate country that waits to open negotiation chapters in the coming months, it still has problems often encountered by new and weak states. The international observers in the country have consistently rated Albanian elections as problematic, partially free or generally regular and free, but with minor problems.[16]

The elections of 1996, won by a landslide by the Democratic Party, were considered especially problematic, then the elections of 1997 that were won vice-versa by the Socialist Party under extraordinary conditions and to some degree those of 2001 because of electoral rules that favoured the governing coalition. The majoritarian system, corrected with a national proportional system or the so-called "German system" that Albania had at the time was later on changed to a regional proportional system, the so-called "Spanish system" that divided the country on regions and fixed a certain number of deputies for each district/region. The new proportional system also gave free reigns to party chairmen to make their own lists and to basically place higher on the party lists their favourites, which was highly criticised by the civil society activists as a step back in the democratisation process. On the other hand, though, it highly increased the representation of women in parliament and also in local elections, where half of municipality councils have to be women to correct the gender gap. The decriminalisation act of parliament that was passed with mutual agreement between the DP that proposed it and the SP that is currently governing the country after winning the second election in a row, have also started to clean up the parliament from deputies that have criminal precedents. A political veto that covers the investigation of current and active politicians' wealth is also recently proposed by the opposition but is facing a stiff resistance from the majority which claims that this is already provided by the new institutions that are created by the consensual Justice Reform.

International observers, such as OSCE and ODIHR roles have often been disputed. As I have stressed elsewhere: "The OSCE public stances are often politicized and attributed specific political interpretation by different political parties, to remove sensitive issues away from public scrutiny, technocratizing the speech. […] International actors not only have largely played a significant role in influencing the political processes in Albania but in addition their actions or inactions have often been treated as rock solid evidence of fairness and beyond domestic judgment."[17]

The often-opaque nature of politics in Albania, when many sensitive issues are solved away from public eyes, have led to a degree of anomie and social withdrawing, which coupled with lack of a consolidated political culture, have led often to a weak and voiceless civil society. Seeking legitimacy chiefly from the outside (the international actors) rather than inside (local agents) has been usually more profitable in short-term gains for local politicians and they have used this to their advantage. This in turn has influenced the prolongation of the transition toward a consolidated democracy, solid rule of law and functioning free market economy, able to withstand the forces of foreign competition and to create well-being for its citizens.

[16] Kalemaj 2008, 169–174.
[17] Kalemaj 2016, 107–112.

The last general elections in 2017 were a special challenging test because they were preceded by uncertainty until the last moment. The opposition led by the Democratic Party first refused to go to what it called "rigged electoral process" and required the creation of a technical government composed of representatives of both sides of the political spectrum in order to create the proper climate. In order to achieve this goal, it started nation-wide protests and kept close contact with the international community by lobbying and advocacy. In the end, the compromise was achieved when the DP proposed six ministers while the SP and its Premier Edi Rama maintained the rest of the actual ministers. They went to elections with the DP fiercely attacking the minor coalition partner, the Socialist Movement for Integration but not so much the Socialist Party because of the pact. Although the DP largely concentrated on an economic electoral platform, talking about the necessity to bring back the flat tax system, get rid of an increasingly criminalised economy and fight money laundering and corruption, the SP proved largely victorious. Its strategy was simple and it was basically a one-man show by the current Prime Minister Rama. By using popular language and also blaming the Socialist Movement for Integration and its other allies in government for the mischiefs and corruption, he promised to govern in the name of all Albanians if elected by a simple majority. Contrary to all initial predictions, Rama and the SP won a straightforward simple majority which the opposition was quick to denounce as rigged, the elections bought with money generated from illicit trade and the involvement of underground figures in the electoral battle. However, the elections were largely recognised by international observers, which nonetheless noted that forms of abuse, such as the use of administration on behalf of collecting votes for the SP or patterns of family voting have been noted. The SP had thus the opportunity to create the government all by itself.[18]

Currently and curiously the Democratic Party and the Socialist Movement for Integration are strong coalition partners in opposition and they were recently joined by the fourth largest parliamentary party (the Party for Justice, Integration and Unity). On paper, the government is nonetheless strong and has a solid parliamentary majority, while the opposition has recently tried to base its message on the necessity for change and has come up with an economic platform that seeks to fight oligarchs, prevent widespread corruption and annihilate organised crime. Critics have noted that the opposition should instead focus on the upcoming local elections because it is too late on the organisation part and might suffer a great loss due to the nature of local elections, the gerrymandering (political map drawing) and administrative strengths where the SP has the upper hand.

Meanwhile, the civil society has increasingly grown fragile, with an exception of a massive protest against the building of skyscrapers in the centre of Tirana which require *inter alia* the demolition of the National Theatre. The media on the other hand has recently shown some signs of vitality with two international cooperation of two recent televisions, one affiliated with CNN and the other a subsidiary of Euronews. There is some hope that this will further open up space for democratisation and freedom of expression and will allow more competition by different media actors.

[18] OSCE 2017.

Conclusion

Albania in retrospective seemed to be initially a likely case of rapid democratisation, given its positive factors at start, like the ethnically homogeneous population, the religious coexistence and generally an indifferent attitude toward organised religion as the result of the Communist legacy, which declared Albania constitutionally the first world atheist state back in 1976. This was a must for state and identity-building in a country with four state recognised religions (in the post-communist period) and many others that mushroomed later on. Also, given the vibrant youth eager to emigrate for better prospects, the country's democratisation challenges proved to be arduous in the long run. Nonetheless, Albania faced one of the most difficult trajectories to democratisation, even compared to regional standards in the eve of the ethnic wars that led to the dismemberment of Yugoslavia.

I have argued elsewhere that "political antagonism, the increased authoritarian tendencies and lack of institutional bedrock, were the primary factors that can explain the Albanian case in temporal axes from early 1992 to present day."[19] Some critical junctures have had a more significant impact on Albania's lack of progress as the main impediments of Albania's democratisation process.

Albania's difficulty with democratisation lies especially in a continuous political antagonism that is based neither on principles, nor ideology divides. The roots of the problem is the extreme political antagonism that is chiefly manifested in the electoral battles and is often vested in a technical jargon about the rules of engagements in devising electoral systems as it was specifically mentioned above. This in turn, is often fuelled by personal attacks in order to fill the ideological vacuum, to keep the attention away from major economic and infrastructure problems and the inability of the political class to offer long lasting solutions.

In general, there is a paradox that lies between the promises of the European integration that the whole political class backs up unanimously, and also supported by the absolute majority of all Albanian citizens and the little will showed to follow up the suit to realise the necessary reforms to perform the homework required by EU institutions. If the Western Balkans backyard is to be integrated only and if the homework are dealt with and measured individually for each state by Brussels, Albania has repeatedly failed the test so far not because of philosophical differences, neither because of identity politics or state-building impasses, nor because of minority rights or problems with neighbours, but simply and chiefly because of a lack of political will to follow suit with the EU recommendations. This is a *conditio sine qua non* for opening the negotiations, which has kept Albania in place so far, not being among the next wave of countries with a promise of accession by 2022–2023, like Montenegro for example. The Albanian Government remains convinced that it will open the negotiations chapters with the European Union by the summer of 2019 after the negative answer it received in June 2018. This will allow it to proceed smoothly with legislation transposition, as well as to effectively address the problems in the justice system through judiciary reforms and reduce informality through new regulations, while removing bottlenecks that hinder business and entrepreneurship development. These combined measures in turn, will enable the country to successfully

[19] Kalemaj 2016, 107–112.

speed up the fight against the systemic corruption and organised crime, which are the main impediments to full EU integration as far as the annual reports of the EU Commission indicate.

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