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Konferencë ndërkombëtare shkencore / International scientific conference

**THE LAST STEP:
PREPARING THE COUNTRY
FOR THE FULL EU MEMBERSHIP**

PROCEEDINGS



Tiranë, maj 2024

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Albania is doing well in its foreign policy¹

Xan SMILEY

Xan Smiley, senior editor of the British magazine «The Economist».

Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman.

I am greatly honoured to be here in Tirana. It is exactly 80 years almost to the very day that my father, David Smiley, arrived in Albania in April 1943. He was one of the first two British officers sent to help the Albanians in their fight against the Italians and Germans. He went on two separate missions to Albania. The first, by parachute into northern Greece and then by foot across the border, was from April to October of 1943. The second, arriving directly by parachute, was from April 1944 to November of that year. Then, from 1949 (the year I was born), he led the British side of an British-American attempt to overthrow the government of Enver Hoxha by sending in anti-communist agents by sea, mainly from Corfu, after they had been trained in Malta: the American flew their agents from Bavaria, dropping them by parachute.

This mission, I need hardly say, was a complete failure. There were several reasons for this but it was certainly not helped by the fact that the liaison between the British and Americans was a certain Kim Philby, a senior British intelligence officer who was later revealed to have been a spy for the Russians. This was undoubtedly the worst episode in my father's life: the fate of the brave Albanians whom he had trained weighed heavily on his conscience. Almost all of them were caught, interrogated, tortured and shot.

After the fall of communism in 1991 my father returned several times to Albania, where he was warmly welcomed. I remember on my only trip before this one, when I accompanied him in around 1993, that we met a daughter of Abas Kupi, the Zogist leader. She was about ten years old at the end of the second world war and had been left behind when her father escaped: it turned out that she had been imprisoned in a labour camp as an enemy of the people for her entire life until the end of the communist regime.

My father always spoke fondly of Albania and the Albanian people and had many Albanian friends in exile. After communism ended he enjoyed the company of many of those who had stayed on under Enver Hoxha but who later became free to travel. Many visited my father in his flat in London, where he died aged 92 in 2009. I am not an expert on Albania but you could say I was brought up to feel a little bit Albanian.

My subject today is a broader one: 50 years of the life in journalism as a foreign correspondent and editor. I will tell my tale in a way that I hope will reflect how Britain saw the world, including the Balkans and Albania, though I should warn you again that I am not an expert on those places.

I should also say a little about the Economist, the magazine, sometimes called a newspaper, for which I have worked for most of the past 42 years, as political editor, Europe editor, Middle East & Africa editor, and now Editor at Large, a post that refers not to my body-weight but which lets me travel almost anywhere in the world as a roving correspondent and editor. Every week I also read through all our foreign coverage before it is published. I have been the oldest member of our editorial staff of around 350 for quite a few years. I am very lucky.

The Economist sells about 1.2 million copies a week, most of them nowadays digitally, but anyone who buys a subscription can read it both in print or online. It now provides films and podcasts and news analysis all through the week. (We make about a hundred small films every year, which I am told is a good way to attract younger readers.) The title "Economist" can be misleading, because most of the content is *not* about economics or business, so I often have to tell people I have little interest or knowledge in economics.

¹ The speech delivered during the plenary session of the Scientific Conference "Albanian Studies Days", UET 2023.

The Economist considers itself a liberal magazine, both in economics and in social issues. It was started in 1843 as a free-market pamphlet at a time when the big argument in the United Kingdom was about free trade versus protectionism. Free trade and open markets remains a fundamental part of our philosophy, which tends to place us on the political right in terms of economics and business. But we have also always tended to support human rights, gay rights, racial rights, social and sexual freedoms, looser laws on drugs, a certain wariness of established religion and a certain scepticism towards monarchy (one of our recent editors-in-chief was a republican). So all of this tends to place us on the political left in *social* issues.

It is a combination that seems to work well commercially. In recent years we have made an annual profit of about \$60m, sometimes more. We have no majority owner, but about six different families plus many members of the staff (including me) together own most of the shares. They have no influence at all on the editorial content.

About 60% of our sales in North America, 14% in Britain, 12% in continental Europe, 10% in Asia and the rest in Latin America and Africa. But in *style* we like to sound British. We certainly have the most comprehensive coverage of world affairs of any weekly in the world. The Economist is widely considered the world's most influential weekly journal. Wherever I go abroad, the door opens to many interesting and influential people. But I always try hard to talk to as many ordinary people as possible, starting with the taxi driver and the restaurant waiter, and I always insist on getting out of the capital city. (I have just been to Berat and some of the villages nearby.) Otherwise you can get a very false impression of a country, especially if it is still a very rural one.

Now I will say a little about myself. I should admit that I was a child of empire. My father was a soldier of Northern Irish and Scottish stock. [OPTIONAL: After Albania he commanded his regiment, known as "the Blues", and commanded the escort at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, exactly 70 years before the coronation next week of our new King Charles III. In his last jobs, he commanded the armed forces of the Sultan of Oman, he helped to prop up the ruling Imam of Yemen in a civil war, and he was a military adviser to King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, who was later assassinated. My mother's father was the leading politician in the British colony of Kenya before the second world war; my mother's grandfather was the viceroy of India, in those days one of the biggest jobs in the British empire.]

So I was steeped in imperialism and colonialism. As a young man I was inclined to the left and spent a lot of time annoying my father by arguing against imperialism and his military values, but as I got older and travelled more widely I began to see two sides of the argument, something which has become difficult in the present climate in Britain and America, where anyone who suggests that colonialism was not 100% evil is likely to be what we call "cancelled" or "no-platformed", especially in academia. My parents' and grandparents' generation genuinely believed that colonialism was bringing benefits to the Africans and Indians and other people living under the British empire. They may have been wrong, but most of them really believed it. No doubt some of the Ottoman Turks believed they were doing good by imposing their rule on Albanians!

This reminds of an anecdote my father used to laugh about. Once he and Enver Hoxha were together looking at a map of the world. "One day all this map will be painted red," said Hoxha. "Yes," said my father, "But I prefer a different kind of red." In those days, the colour red on British maps was the colour of the British empire.

Much of my earliest journalism---for about ten years---was in Africa, where I worked in more than 40 of the 55 countries. I wrote for a variety of newspapers and magazines in Britain, America and Scandinavia. For some years I edited and later co-owned a specialist newspaper in London called "Africa Confidential".

It was during this period that I noticed that countries in Africa like Kenya, which developed a free-market approach to the economy, developed a lot quicker than those like Tanzania, the neighbouring country, which was socialist. At the same time, inequality and corruption in Kenya was worse than in Tanzania. But on balance it became clear to me that most Kenyans were doing better than most Tanzanians.

I still visit Africa regularly. British influence in the former territories is still strong but it is steadily shrinking, while China steadily gains ground. Many African governments like taking cheap loans from China and having cheap but new roads, but on a personal level there is little love for these new economic imperialists. And more African countries are more careful not to fall into a Chinese debt trap.

Of course it is understandable that African countries do not want to be controlled by *any* outside power---British, French or Chinese. Russia, by the way, has never made any inroads into Africa, though President Putin's Wagner group is becoming active. Marxism never really caught on, except briefly in the former Portuguese territories. At one time the leaders of the small Marxist group known as the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front which until a few years ago controlled Ethiopia admired the communist version of Albania.

I first visited a Communist country when I hitchhiked into Czechoslovakia during the Prague spring of 1968. I was overwhelmed by the greyness of the system, the dullness, the orthodoxy, the repressiveness---and by the courage of the people. I felt certain that they would one day throw off the Soviet yoke.

One early lesson as a journalist is that you can never tell exactly when a dramatic change will come. I lived in Moscow as a correspondent for three-and-a-half years under Mikhail Gorbachev. When I arrived in 1985 I never met a single expert---I repeat, not one single expert---who thought it possible that the Soviet Union would collapse---certainly not within the next five years. When Gorbachev began to reform and the whole system began to wobble, I can say with some pride that I did consistently write that Gorbachev would either have to put the lid back on, very harshly, or everything would spin completely out of control.

This was a good lesson for a journalist. A situation may seem completely solid and static. No chance of a revolution. No chance of reform. Then suddenly something changes. One little brick is pulled out of a big building. The genie pops out of the

bottle. As the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville once warned, a repressive regime is often most vulnerable when it starts to reform. Then it is extraordinary how fast it can unravel.

I made another mistake, though, after the fall of communism. I was too confident that a decent capitalist system could quickly replace the rotten communist one. I met so many bright and energetic Russians who seemed ready to rebuild society. But I didn't realise how long it takes to rebuild institutions---or build new ones from scratch---and to create a sense of civic responsibility. In countries such as the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic and Poland, there was still a historical memory of what had existed before. In Russia there was none of that, only a sense of humiliation as the old empire and the old system disappeared. Poor people in small towns with maybe only one big factory saw their old world collapse and no better new one to take its place. Maybe this process happened in parts of Albania.

Another big mistake was to assume America would remain the undisputed leader of the free world, even as China began to move out of its former state of poverty and chaos. After my time in Moscow I was a correspondent in Washington, when America was enjoying its unipolar moment. In those days the Republican Party had a civilised leadership. Republicans and Democrats often co-operated on big issues. There were liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats. Together they sometimes---not always---used their hard power wisely. When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, they forced him out, then left Iraq alone. This was a success: America the good policeman

When it came to the Balkans, I would argue that it was the Americans who in 1995 saved the day by imposing the Dayton agreement on Slobodan Milosevic, after the Europeans, including Britain, had dithered, doing nothing to stop the terrible war that spread almost to the borders of Albania. (By the way, I had done a little bit of journalism in Yugoslavia in the 1970s and 1980s and I'm sorry to say I never took seriously some of the warnings of people in the area who said that the break-up of Yugoslavia would be bloody. How wrong I was.)

Going back to the question of Russia, I was also too kind in my thoughts to Vladimir Putin when he took over in 2000. I thought maybe Russia needed a firm hand after a decade of chaos. I was slow to realise what a vicious monster he would soon turn into. I do not know how the war in Ukraine will end. He is still fairly popular among his own people. The only hopeful possibility is that his own circle of securocrats, tiring of the stalemate in Ukraine, will replace him with one of their own, who might find it easier to make concessions. Incidentally, Russia is still a relative economic weakling: when communism collapsed, its economy was the size of the Netherlands. In this century, thanks entirely to oil and gas and minerals, it has slowly caught up with Spain and is now about the same size as Italy's. It still cannot make a toaster or a television or a car of its own.

But for me the saddest recent development in global affairs is America's declining influence. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have had a devastating effect on America's reputation and its ability to be accepted as the world's policeman and upholder of democracy. The isolationist and economically protectionist instincts in parts of the Republican Party will be almost as dangerous, if Donald Trump gets back into power.

Two small recent incidents illustrate this. Saudi Arabia and Iran have recently come to a kind of accommodation with each other. It was China that brought about this unexpected rapprochement. That would have been unthinkable ten years ago. America's diplomatic muscle in the Middle East is waning.

Even more recently, look at Sudan. Once the biggest country in Africa, it was a British territory until 1956. Three years ago the Americans were deeply involved in trying to help the transition from military dictatorship to civilian rule. But in the past few days the Americans and British have struggled to make peace: another stark example of the waning of American and British influence in Africa.

So we are left with a multi-polar, often chaotic world, with much bad feeling between three great powers---America, China and Russia---while poverty, climate change and dictatorship still blight much of the rest of the world.

It is good, here in Albania, to see that a small country in the Western Balkans doing well with its own foreign policy. It is the only country in the region with no serious differences with its neighbours. It is an active member of NATO. It has chaired the United Nations Security Council. It is a valued member of the pro-Ukrainian bloc. It is very slowly but steadily heading towards membership of the European Union (which Britain, by the way, very foolishly left.)

If my father were here today, exactly 80 years since he came over the beautiful rugged mountains on foot and on a donkey, he would have been astonished and delighted by the changes. A few days ago I was looking at his album of photographs taken in 1943 and 1944, with pictures of Enver Hoxha, Mehmet Shehu, Abas Ermenji, Abas Kupa and others. Life must have been really tough for most Albanians in those days, even before the war. It would be ridiculous, even insulting, for me to mention to this audience the hardships of the Hoxha period. I am aware that the past 30 years under capitalism have not been easy. The rate of emigration is frightening. But I am quite certain that if my father had been here today he would have been thrilled by what he would have seen in this dynamic city and in this dynamic university.

I feel honoured to have followed in his footsteps in a happier time.

Thanks you so much for having me.

PANEL I

**EU INTEGRATION JIGSAW:
THE ECONOMIC CHALLENGES
FOR ALBANIA**

Digital marketing in Albania and it's impact on consumer behavior

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Abstract

Consumer interactions with brands are rapidly changing, due to advances in digital technologies and marketing channels of social media. Marketers nowadays seek to grab more consumer attention on social media than on the physical medium to promote their products or services. In this research we focus on the role digital marketing has in shaping consumer behavior in Albania. We conducted a survey in the capital of Albania to understand how trustworthy is the WOM technique to consumers and how valuable it is to companies that rely on it to sell. Results indicated that social media has built a positive reputation, as a good sales channel, and that companies should continue investing in digital advertising on social media because it can increase sales and brand image if done properly. Furthermore, companies that do not have a presence on popular social media outlets or have no strategy implemented on their outlets suffer from lack of brand recognition.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Social Media, WOM, Consumer Behavior.

Introduction

Nowadays, the internet has opened the doors for various firms to avail tremendous digital marketing opportunities. The advancement of markets and technologies that are highly competitive with the use of the internet have made digital marketing strategies replace those of traditional marketing (Alnsour, 2018). Moreover, digital marketing covers a wide area in the global market and includes business models that use digital technologies that reduce costs and increase businesses worldwide (Rafiq & Malik, 2018). Currently, digital marketing aims to grow businesses in the future, because customers are much more satisfied with online shopping, and they see digital marketing as safer than traditional marketing (Alzyoud, 2018).

Digital marketing has been around since the 1990s. "Online Marketing", "Internet Marketing" and "Web Marketing" are all terms used to describe digital marketing. The use of electronic media to promote goods and services in the market is known as digital marketing. The goal of digital marketing is to attract customers and allow them to interact with companies they are interested in through digital media. Through a series of digital marketing strategies, the main goal is to promote businesses, build preferences and increase sales.

Digital marketing is an important platform in brand development, promotion and brand management as it encompasses all marketing efforts that use an electronic device or the Internet. Businesses use digital channels, such as search engines, social media, e-mail and their websites to connect with current and potential customers. The main advantage of digital marketing is that the target audience can be reached in a more cost effective and measurable way. Other advantages of digital marketing include increased brand loyalty and greater online sales (Alexander, 2021).

Digitalization has revolutionized the world of marketing during the last 15 years. The digital marketing industry gave positive signs during 2021 even in Albania, where one of the main factors was the outbreak of the global pandemic of COVID-19. Previously, consumers did not focus on online communication, sales or as it is otherwise known “e-commerce”, and the moment they faced the situation where the world stopped and the only communication window with the market became the internet, orders directed to digital marketing increased dramatically. Of course, the situation in Albania is quite different from years ago. The digital part grew significantly in 2020 and results point to an average increase of 8%, compared to 2019. Traditional media (TV, radio, print) fell in 2020 drastically by about 18%.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the impact of social media marketing on the consumer's purchase decision. This study sheds light on consumer culture, how each of us experiences, is influenced and reacts to these very digital environments that we surround ourselves with as part of our daily lives. But this work also has limitations which are mainly considered for the generalization part of the data, since the survey was carried out only with a small part of the consumers of the city of Tirana. The obtained results are not intended to serve professional marketers but are intended to give non-field researchers an insight into how digital marketing is used today and what impact it has on consumer behavior.

Data Methodology

A comparative method of literature review, based on numerous research of foreign and Albanian authors, articles, scientific papers, books, scientific journals on the latest trends in the field of digital marketing, has served for the realization of this analytical, descriptive and comparative work. The obtained data are primary data, collected from 95 questionnaires, addressed to consumers in the city of Tirana, during the period September - October 2022. The interviewed consumers were chosen randomly, not all social media users, as well as residents not only in city center but also in rural areas. The questionnaire was designed in a simple sampling technique in such a way as to obtain all the important information necessary for the realization of this study. A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed and 95 filled samples were collected. The questionnaire was constructed from 11 questions, which received valid responses, providing information about demographics and consumer behavior towards digital marketing. The collected data have been analyzed through statistical programs, helping to reach the valid conclusions of this paper.

Literature Review

Marketing can be described as a management process between a firm and the consumer. There are many definitions of marketing, but they all revolve around the activities carried out in the context of improving customer relations. Shopper marketing is a new concept that has emerged, creating a new touchpoint for interactions between businesses and consumers. Shopper marketing is “the planning and execution of all marketing activities that influence a buyer along and beyond the entire purchase path, from the point at which the motivation to buy first manifests itself through purchase, consumption, repurchase and recommendation” (Shankar et al 2011). The development in marketing theory has seen the conceptualization of the “marketing mix”. This theory has been used strategically by marketers to adapt a product to a specific market based on the characteristics of that market (Gilaninia et al., 2013). While the marketing mix is still widely used by many organizations to drive their strategies, the development of relationship marketing (Stauss, 2000) brought another dimension to marketing which created another change in the way firms sell their products and services.

Digital marketing has been proven to change consumer behavior (Khwaja et al., 2020). Many businesses claim that social media and digital marketing have become integral components of their marketing business plan (Cait Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). The use of digital marketing allows companies to achieve their marketing goals at a relatively low cost (Ajina & Tvaronavičienė, 2019). Organizations can also benefit significantly from creating social media, an integral element of the overall business strategy (Salma et al., 2016). Even during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, not only the needs and purchasing behavior of customers partially changed, but also the internet and social media contributed to their change (Yogesh, 2021). Consumers spent more time shopping online when digital marketing flourished during this period (Coresight Research, 2020). Moreover, it is believed that digital platforms are a sustainable strategy of increasing consumer purchase (Verhoef et al., 2021). One area that has been greatly influenced by various technological developments is marketing. But digital marketing that is carried out through a digital platform cannot be thought of without effective online advertising channels such as Facebook Ads, Google Ads or email marketing. Digital marketing helps businesses to sell their products to consumers through several channels such as E-Mail Marketing, online advertising, social media marketing, mobile marketing, etc. Digital marketing channels, (Levy & Gvili, 2015) are a set of channels that marketers use to interact with customers to sell their products.

- e-mail marketing is one of the digital marketing methods used to deliver orders to the same individuals at a convenient time. With Email, businesses can send emails that meet customer needs (Ugonna et al., 2017).
- online advertising is a form of promotion that persuades customers to make purchasing decisions and provides information about the audience. Also, a strategy that uses the internet to get website traffic and attract the right potential customers (Budiman, 2021).
- mobile marketing is considered one of the most important channels of digital marketing which provides access to consumers to know the benefits, needs and impact on their purchase decisions (Tiffany et al., 2018).
- social media marketing is a new trend and a fast-growing method to reach target consumers effortlessly and efficiently (Bansal et al., 2014).

The growth and spread of the internet also led to the emergence of a new form of “Word of Mouth Marketing” (WOM) considered one of the most influential informal media among consumers, businesses and the general population. Consumers increasingly use online tools (e.g., social media, blogs, etc.) to share their opinions about the products and services they consume (Gupta and Harris, 2010; Lee et al., 2011) and to research the companies that sell them. These tools are significantly changing daily life and relationships between customers and businesses (Lee et al., 2011). The rapid growth of online communication through social media, websites, blogs, etc., has increased academic interest in word of mouth (WOM) (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hussain et al., 2017; Yang, 2017). Today’s new form of online WOM communication is known as electronic word of mouth or eWOM (Yang, 2017). This form of communication has gained particular importance with the emergence of online platforms, which have made it one of the most influential sources of information on the web (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2016). One of the most comprehensive concepts of WOM was proposed by Litvin et al. (2008), who described it as “All informal communication via the internet directed at consumers and related to the use or characteristics of goods or services. The advantage of this tool is its availability to all consumers, who can use online platforms to share their opinions and ratings with other users.

In the field of consumer behavior, some previous studies (e.g., Park and Lee, 2009) have shown that consumers pay more attention to negative information than to positive information (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). For example, the most satisfied customers with a product or service tend to become its loyal representatives through positive WOM (Royo-Vela and Casamassima, 2011), which can bring very competitive advantages to enterprises, businesses or sellers, especially small ones, which tend to have fewer resources. Several studies have suggested that traditional WOM is the sales and marketing tactic most often used by small businesses. Furthermore, WOM offers businesses a way to identify customer needs and perceptions and even a cost-effective way to communicate with them (Nieto et al., 2014). Today, WOM has become an important medium for companies’ social media marketing (Hussain et al., 2017).

The new digital age has brought about a change in the way of thinking and doing things. The traditional marketing paradigm has shifted to a new paradigm facilitated by digital technologies. Many countries have used this change to their advantage and adopted new age technologies and digital media marketing channels to respond to changing customer needs, while others have not been able to adapt to the revolution. digital and use the various opportunities available to them effectively (Goel, 2020). After the advent of the Internet and the evolution in digital technologies, there has been a drastic change in the wants and needs of consumers. Two-way communication tools, especially social media, have brought about changes in the traditional model of communication. Consumers now prefer to interact directly with brands and share their opinions and preferences publicly. Consumers expect brands to be more accessible and available across multiple touch points for ease of communication and interaction (Goel, 2020; Reynolds-Pearson & Hyman, 2020).

As traditional advertising media channels are losing popularity, marketers and advertisers must find new strategies to get their commercial messages to the consumer. Marketing practitioners must pay attention to how consumers interact with brands, how they respond to and engage with marketing promotions. Ho et al. (2020) in their study propose a strategic content marketing framework with the aim of providing guidance to companies starting fresh their content marketing strategies, guiding marketers through the strategic elements of vertical content marketing, and the opportunities of growing and executing content marketing horizontally. This model provides the essential elements for a content marketing strategy, depending on the maturity level of the company in relation to content marketing practices in general (emerging, developing or mature).

In addition, digital marketing uses channels to reach the preferred target audience through several channels, including social media, websites, multimedia advertising, online advertising, e-marketing, communication marketing such as opinion polls, adding games, mobile marketing (Garg et al., 2021). According to these researchers, marketers can conduct online surveys to get the information they need from customers, analyze the responses, and take appropriate actions based on customer responses to meet their needs.

Social media is a relatively new term that has evolved as a way to describe various platforms for online communication. In general, the term social media refers to “any technology that facilitates the distribution and sharing of information online” (Robbins and Singer, 2014: 387). More specifically, Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as a “group of internet-based applications that are based on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and sharing of User-Generated Content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Social media marketing is a new trend and a fast-growing method to reach target consumers effortlessly and efficiently. Furthermore, social media marketing can be modestly defined as the use of social media channels to promote a business and its products (Bansal et al., 2014). This type of marketing can be considered a subset of online marketing activities that

complement traditional web-based promotional strategies, for example, email newsletters and online advertising campaigns (Omar & Atteya, 2020). Thus, with this new marketing approach, new channels are being created and improved for businesses.

Social media as explained by Mayfield (2011) is changing the way information is communicated to and by people around the world. The rapid use of social media is changing the way organizations respond to the needs and wants of consumers and is changing the way they respond to their competitors (Mayfield, 2011). Marketers now have the opportunity to engage in broader and more innovative forms of online mass communication using social media marketing tools (Stelzner, 2010). Social media marketing is about passion, emotion and genuine expression towards a brand (Brandz, 2010). Social media marketing represents communication opportunities for marketers to reach wider audiences (Kweskin, 2007), and allows marketers to access valuable information that influences building and maintaining relationships with consumers (Evans, 2010).

Social media marketers are now becoming better and more influential by introducing analytics applications from the official social networking website platform (Nur, 2021). Social Media refers to any software channel that allows and encourages engagement in discussions. Thus, the general forms of social media are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube. Currently, social media is a platform for businesses to have more conversations and interaction with consumers. Moreover, it is the brand that is now attracting consumers through social media (Budiman, 2021). Social media has also spawned websites and apps designed to allow customers to share content faster, more efficiently, and in real time.

Consumer behavior is a term that can be used generally to refer to the actions and decisions that influence the purchasing behavior of consumers (Solomon et al., 2017). Consumer behavior mainly includes purchasing activities, consumption and disposal actions, behavioral, mental and emotional responses related to the decision to make a purchase (Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). However, its understanding on the digital platform is quite possible through some analytical software. The behavior of any consumer depends on many factors which are very important for any marketing management team in any business or any organization that deals directly with consumers. The study of consumer behavior is very important for businesses because it enables them to understand and predict the buying behavior of consumers in the market; it is not only about what consumers buy, but also why they buy it, when, where and how they buy it, how often they buy it, and also how they consume it. New technology has changed consumer behavior online.

In today's digital age, consumers have many more opportunities to search and gather information to make decisions about their planned purchases. Rami (2012) in his study on factors influencing consumer behavior, explains that buyer behavior and purchase decision are strongly influenced by cultural, social, personal and psychological characteristics. Understanding the impact of these factors is essential for businesses in order to develop appropriate marketing methods to attract the target customer. Cultural factors refer to the social environment, ideas, customs and social behavior of a certain people or society; social factors include groups (reference groups, aspirational groups and member groups), family and social roles and status; personal factors include such variables as age and life cycle stage, occupation, economic circumstances, lifestyle (activities, interests, opinions, and demographics), and psychological factors include motivation, perception, learning, beliefs, and attitudes.

Advantages and disadvantages of using digital marketing:

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Updated information on products or services. Consumers can stay up-to-date with information, while companies can update information about their products and services.	Reliability in technology. Digital marketing is completely based on technology and internet connectivity also plays a crucial role in consumer behavior. On the other hand, the reach and usability of digital devices/technologies still remains a challenge for a large portion of consumers everywhere.
Greater exchange of information. Digital communication can help exchange information in a more convenient way and with greater speed. Customers can engage with various company activities by visiting websites, reading posts about products or services, placing online orders, and providing feedback or sharing experiences with others. The Internet provides comprehensive information that helps customers make purchasing decisions.	Security, Copyright and Privacy Issues. Cyber security is the main requirement for the successful implementation of digital marketing. The problems of online payment frauds are also increasing day by day and that is why many of the consumers do not trust electronic payment methods and give up online shopping because of this.
Easier comparison with other companies. There are many companies in the market promoting the same products and services. By using digital marketing, the customer can compare these products or services with cost and time without visiting another retail store, to get knowledge about these products or services.	Consumer Mindset. Digital marketing is still not fully accepted by all consumers. Digital platforms do not allow the consumer to "touch and feel" the products before buying it, preferring to use traditional shopping methods. Also, there is a lack of consumer confidence in digital platforms due to numerous scams with virtual promotions, payments, non-delivery of products or services as shown on portals/posts etc.
Enables 24/7 shopping. E-marketing platforms provide 24/7 services to the customer, which is not possible in the traditional way of marketing.	The impossibility of small business development. There is a need to have a trained and specialized team to manage the elements of digital marketing. Also, tools, platforms and trends change rapidly, which require keeping up to date to meet customer demands. These are the main obstacles for small business owners to use digital marketing strategies to expand and reach a larger number of customers.

Cost efficiency and personalized services. Digital marketing is cost effective solution compared to traditional mass media marketing. Also, it is possible to create personalized offers and programs based on customer profiles and preferences.

Complaints and customer feedback. Many times competitors use famous brand personalities, bloggers, influencers and opinion leaders to advertise or to criticize the image of a certain brand that affects the business. Also, using the digital platform, consumers can give any negative or critical feedback about the brand online, which can be visible to any other consumer who visits the post / portals or social media and reviews the websites. Thus, performing effective online customer service is a challenge for protecting against brand reputation damage.

Data Analysis

The results obtained from the questionnaire will prove the fact that Albanian consumers are recently massively using social media for their purchases. In the following, more specifically, we will present all the empirical data with analysis and comments from the respondents.

Demographic data analysis for the questionnaire

FIGURE 1. Questionnaire results based on Gender of participants.

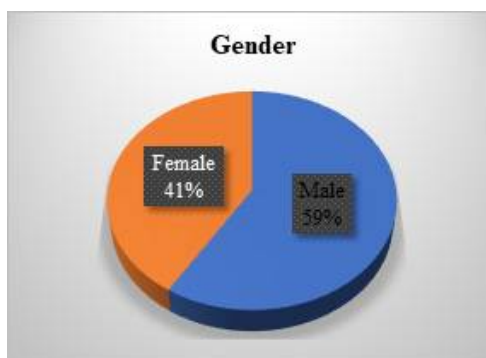


FIGURE 2. Questionnaire results based on Age of participants.

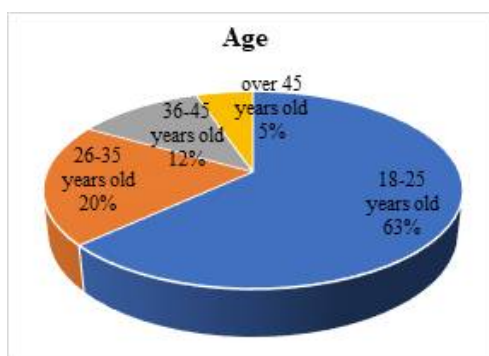
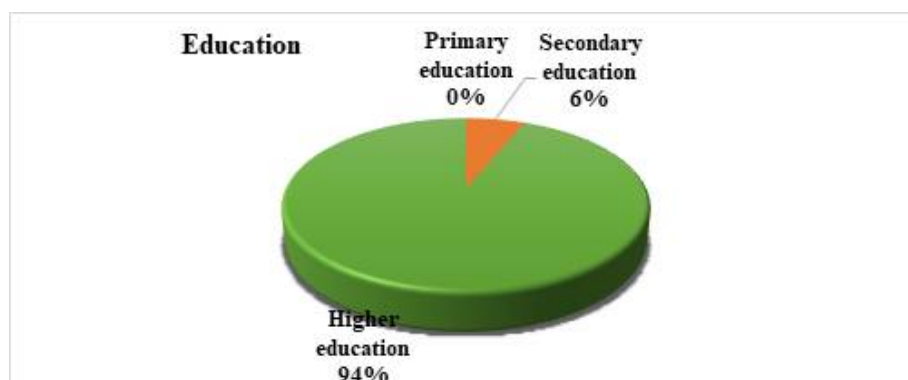


FIGURE 3. Questionnaire results based on Education level of participants.

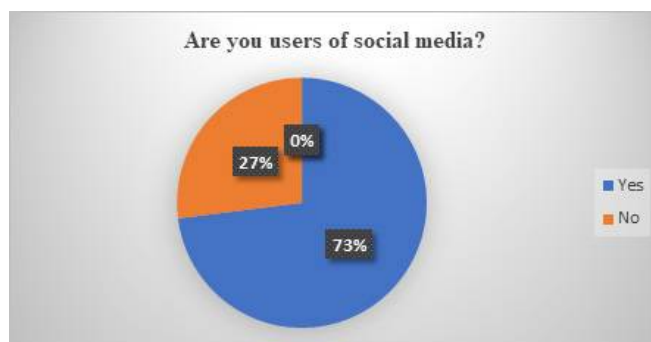


Based on the demographic data of the 95 people interviewed, the dominant gender was men with 59%, whilst women 41% (See Figure 1). The predominant age group in this study was the 18-25 age group with 63%, followed by the 26-35 age group with 20% of the interviewed population, 12% age group 36-45 years and 5% over 45 years old (See Figure 2). Asked about their educational level, 95% of them had a higher education and only 5% of them had a secondary education (Figure 3).

Data analysis for assessing the importance of using social media.

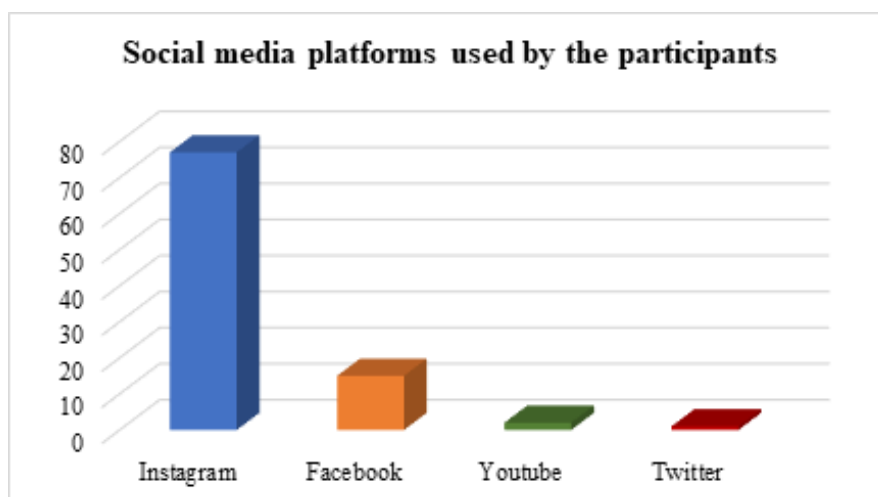
In order to get information about whether they were users of social media or not, they were asked the question presented in the graph below (Figure 4). The interviewees stated that they use social networks and have open profiles on these platforms (73%), and only 27% of them stated that they are not social media users. This part included consumers living in suburban areas.

FIGURE 4. Are you users of social media?

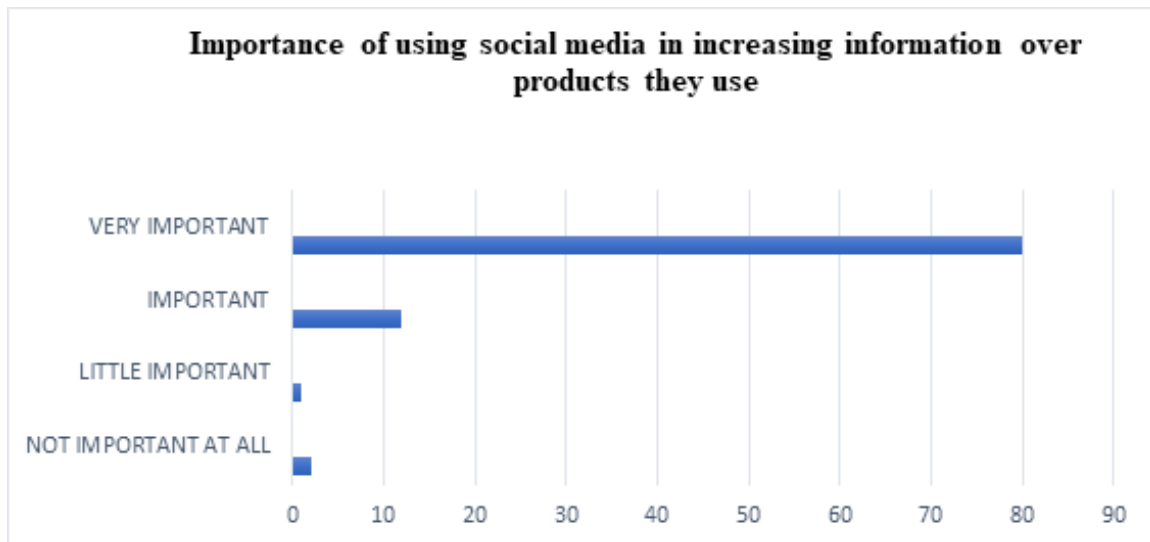
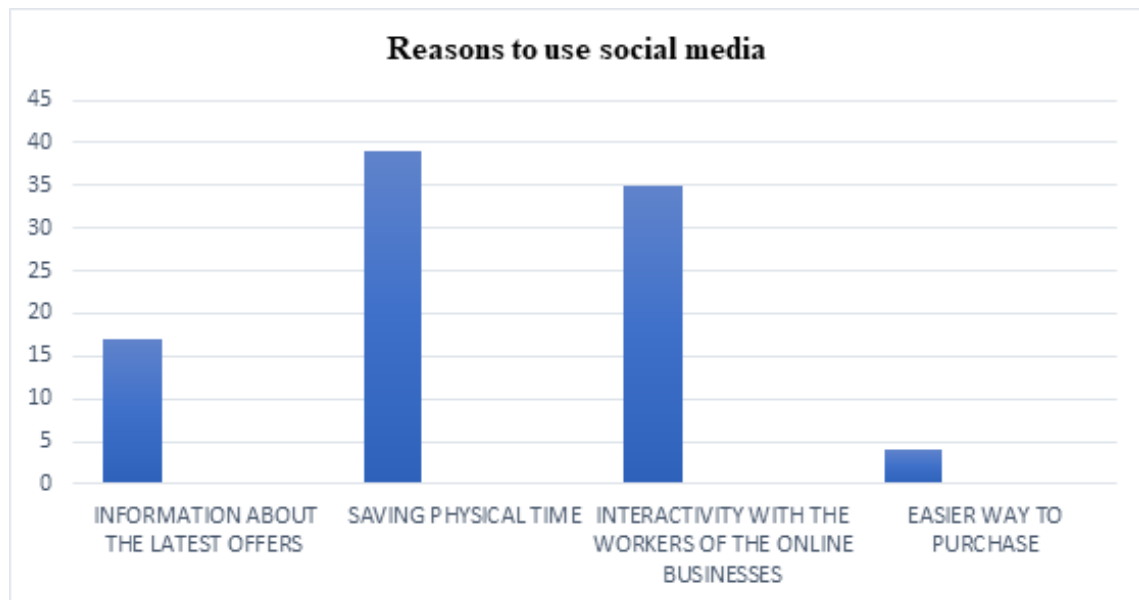


According to the questionnaires distributed to different people chosen randomly, it was found that many of them use different categories of social networks (Figure 5). The social network Instagram is the social network that dominates in terms of use, 81% of the participants stated that they are users of this social media channel, followed by Facebook which is used by 16% of the participants, YouTube by 2% and Twitter by 1% of the respondents of the questionnaire.

FIGURE 5. Social media platforms used by the participants



The results obtained from the answers to the question below (Figure 6), show that for the majority of respondents, the use of social media is very important in their decisions for the purchase of products. 84% have affirmed this, while 13% consider it important, and very few of them do not attach importance to the use of social media in informing about the products that companies offer on their sites.

FIGURE 6. Importance of using social media in increasing information over products they use.**FIGURE 7.** Reasons to use social media.

Undoubtedly, social media nowadays has become the best means for consumers to be informed about the latest offers and discounts on a company's products. This was confirmed by the answers given by the respondents in the next question of the questionnaire, where they were asked what are the reasons they use social media (Figure 7). 18% of the respondents answered to be informed about the latest offers. 41% of the answers from the respondents are because buying online saves more time and they don't get "tired" at all by going directly to see the offers or discounts of companies in physical stores, since something like this is all done from the phone, where obviously they enter social networks and see their offers. 37% of the respondents answered that there is interactivity with the responsible persons of the pages where they can ask them on social media about the questions they may have about products and this makes it easier to decide to buy a certain product.

The following questions were designed to provide information on how familiar the respondents in this study are with WOM strategies and what influences it has on their purchase decisions.

FIGURE 8. Are you informed on WOM strategy?

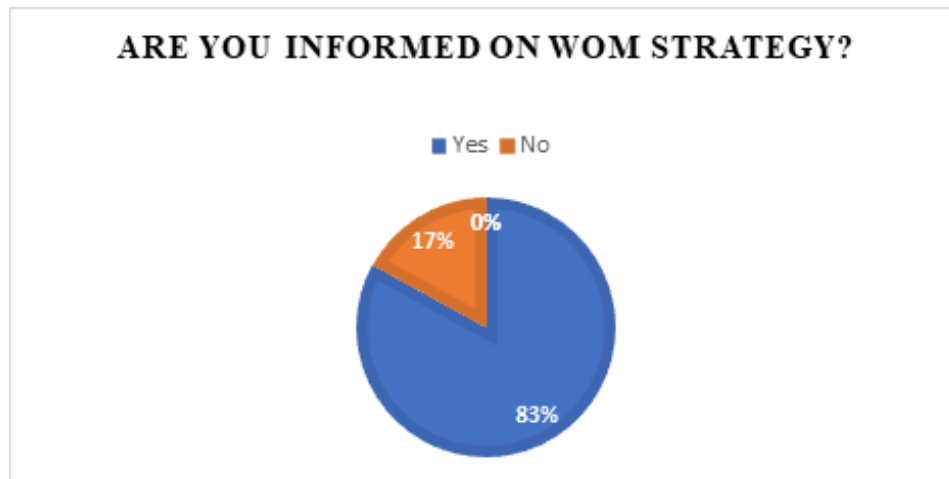
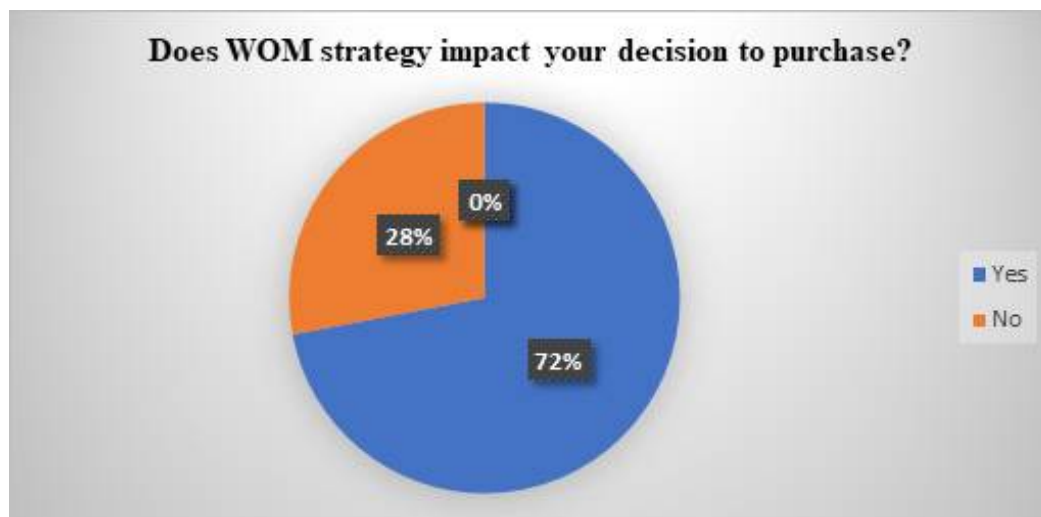
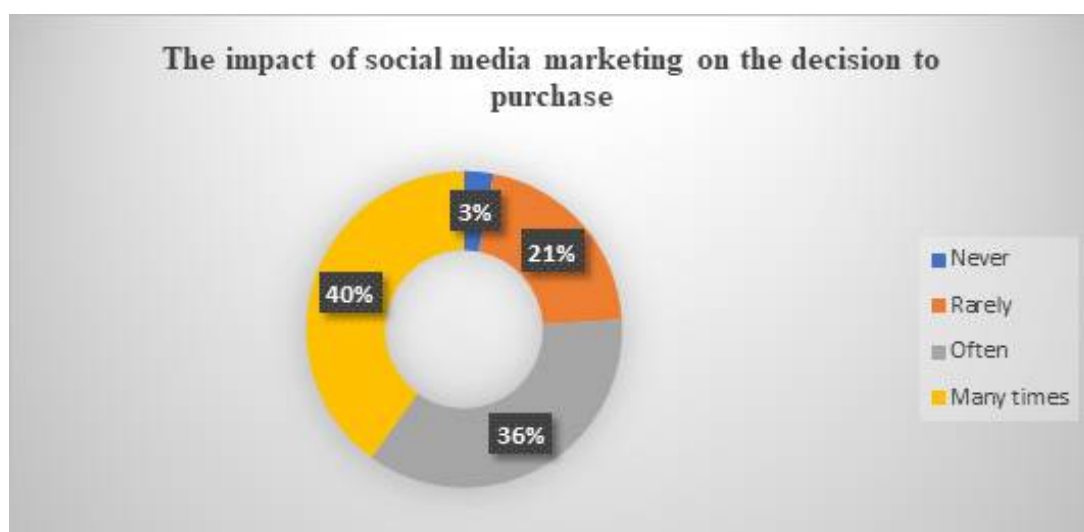


FIGURE 9. Does WOM strategy impact your decision to purchase?



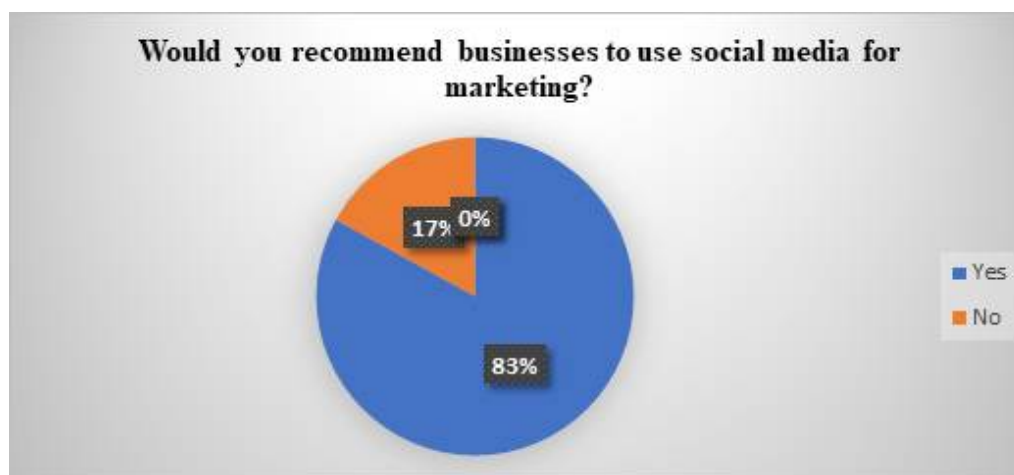
The two figures above (Figures 8 and 9) prove that most of the individuals questioned have information about the WOM strategy, which they see as an important strategy that also affects their consumer behavior.

FIGURE 10. The impact of social media marketing on the decision to purchase



After the previous questions, the respondents were also asked about the fact that social media marketing has influenced them to buy the products of a company operating in our country (See Figure 10). Some 40% of the respondents stated that social media marketing has influenced many times that they choose and then buy products of different companies or enterprises. About 36% of respondents answered that social media marketing has often influenced them to buy a company's products. Roughly 21% of the respondents rarely had an impact, who expressed the opinion that they rarely bought company products from the marketing they did on social media. Only 3% of them stated that the marketing of these companies on social media has never influenced the purchase of any product. Finally, the interviewees were asked if they recommend different businesses to do marketing in different social media (See Figure 11).

FIGURE 11. Would you recommend businesses to use social media for marketing?



Undoubtedly, the majority of the interviewees (83%) have affirmed that they recommend different companies to develop marketing in social media, in order to be as attractive as possible, and clearer about their products as this will be a more convenient way for them to establish relationships with customers and to be as close to them as possible.

Conclusions

In recent years, technological developments have played a vital role by increasing the awareness of consumers who are fully convinced of the effectiveness of various social media in their purchasing behavior. However, the consumer mindset has changed from mall to mobile, as consumer behavior has changed, companies are also trying to attract customers through the digital age. Digitalization has inspired people to market through social media platforms, and consumers are constantly changing their mindset and taking advantage of online shopping. Undoubtedly, social media is playing an important role in making people aware of social media companies, which are offering online sales and increasing their profits through social media. Through digital marketing, the company has created all the facilities that the customer needs.

Marketing has always aimed to connect the company with the audience at the right time and place. Today, companies must meet consumers where they spend most of their time: online. People's lives changed a lot with the invention of the internet, and the way of doing business changed forever. The goal of companies in the past has been to meet consumer needs while meeting target profits. Today, with all the information that is available to everyone and free of charge, companies are forced to provide a customer experience in addition to fulfilling needs.

Therefore, today it is not enough for companies to simply fulfill these needs, but to provide satisfaction to consumers. Also, Word of Mouth Marketing (WOM) is an action taken recently by various companies that have begun to pay attention to motivating people to talk about their products, services or brand spontaneously, becoming into a valuable marketing resource.

From the answers obtained from the interviewees in this study, we noticed that:

- They attached very high importance to the quality of the product or service in choosing the product/service brand. This is a very important point that directly affects the company's marketing since the whole company can be destroyed from negative feedback by its customers, whether they are new or existing customers.
- They were users of social media, mainly the Instagram platform, where they bought new and existing products of companies thanks to the digital marketing of the product through social media. They could be considered loyal customers, as long as the company met its targets and marketed the identical product as marketed.
- The main reasons why these interviewees used social media were: information about the latest offers, saving physical time, interactivity with the people of the pages where they buy, easier way of buying.
- Digital marketing had a significant impact on the selection and then on the purchase process of a product.
- They were informed about the WOM strategy and the importance it had on consumer behavior.

Regardless of the positive impact social media has on consumer behavior, assumption that we derived from the questionnaire responses, Albanian consumers should be more loyal to social media, seeing it as an opportunity and not as a risk. But this is insufficient as there is always a need for improvement. Since the fight for survival in the market is becoming more and more fierce, companies operating in our country must work to improve marketing incentives in order to be able to convey the right information in the right way to consumers. It would also be recommended that companies use to their advantage other forms of social media platforms in order to differentiate themselves from other competitors in the market.

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Representation of ethnic communities in state institutions, the case of the Republic of North Macedonia

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Abstract

Even though the state started to carry out activities based on democracy and human rights, many dissatisfactions prevailed in the state from its citizens, having very few freedoms and rights. All ethnic groups had these objections, including the Macedonian community even though at that time they enjoyed much more rights compared to other communities. The Macedonian community seeking more rights than it had, other communities seeking basic rights, often encountered disagreements and conflicts between one group and the other.

So in 2001, the armed conflict between the Albanians and the Macedonians took place, where the Albanians demanded their rights, which they did not have until that moment. The war ended by agreeing and giving rights not only to Albanians but also to other ethnic groups in the country. With the Ohrid Agreement, it was decided that all citizens will have their rights, which will be equal for everyone. The right to speak their own language, each community in RMV, the right to be informed in their mother tongue, the right to cultural life, to be educated in their mother tongue, to participate in state institutions and other rights.

The principle of adequate and fair representation aims at achieving the participation of members of all communities in all areas of the public sphere, as a prerequisite for building a modern civil state, stability in the country and social cohesion. Since 2001, there has always been an improvement in the participation of communities in state institutions, where the number of other ethnic groups has obviously increased, and today Albanians participate in all state institutions with a satisfactory number compared to the past. Also, even though we have representation of all communities in state institutions, we have gaps and we can say that the Ohrid Agreement has not been fully implemented, with the hope that in the future we will have a strict implementation of this agreement and all communities will enjoy their rights equally.

Key words: multi-ethnic, communities, ethnic, state institutions, Ohrid Agreement

Introduction

People from prehistoric times until today have stayed in groups and thus performed activities, bringing good to their own group, fighting for common interests as well as the general interests of a country. Throughout history, separate groups of people who have an origin, have preserved a history, a language as well as common cultural characteristics as collective entities constitute certain ethnic groups. There are many ethnic groups in the world, where they differ from each other based on the above-mentioned characteristics.

Conflicts, various disagreements, wars around the world very often occur due to not finding a solution to a problem between two or more ethnic groups, where everyone fights and wants to be more progressive than the other group. Many times, ethnic minority groups in a country suffer persecution or are discriminated against. There are even ethnic groups that were victims of genocide or were forced into exile.

Advocacy can be defined as the practical use of knowledge and skills to effect social change. These changes may be directed to state policies, laws, procedures and sometimes to ourselves. Representation is the act of giving support to an issue and

influencing the one who is the bearer of the power to act and support this issue. The main purpose of representation is to achieve concrete, specific and measurable results in function of the purpose of representation (Makraduli, Georgiev, Janevska, 2017) . Representation represents community animation and mobilization. It starts from a small group of citizens who are exclusively affected by a problem or share that concern with other citizens and are ready to dedicate their professionalism, time and resources to the realization of this goal.

It is an impossible mission for different ethnic groups to be always in agreement with each other and live in harmony, but by respecting the human rights guaranteed by the Law and Constitution of each country, we can reduce conflicts and disagreements among ourselves.

The Republic of North Macedonia is a multi-ethnic state, where different ethnic groups participate in social life. At the beginning of the creation of this Republic, the Macedonian ethnic group was the main and only group that had all the rights available, while other ethnic groups, and in particular the Albanians who were not even a minority, did not enjoy basic rights in this state.

With the Ohrid Agreement, the foundations of all other ethnic groups of Macedonia were laid, ensuring equal rights and freedoms to Macedonians, security in all territories of the Republic of Macedonia and representation in state and private institutions from all ethnic groups in place (Reka B, 2011).

Ohrid Framework agreement

Until 2001, Albanians lacked a large number of their rights and they were a violated nation who demanded their rights and basic human freedoms. Moreover, before the war of 2001, Macedonian Albanians had their freedoms and rights violated in the field of education, health in particular, freedom of movement, so they were belittled in every sphere of the state. Albanians are in large numbers in the RNM and they are autochthonous but their rights were demanded, and for this reason in 2001 the War took place, where large clashes with a large number of victims and large damages happened, but the Albanians won by gaining their rights.

In RNM there are also other nationalities, which are a minority and social conflicts often occur in this country, demanding that each person and each social group have their freedoms and rights and enjoy free movement and freedom of speech. Everywhere in the world, basic human rights are respected, so regardless of the size of a social group, its basic rights must be guaranteed as a living genius. The war in Macedonia in 2001 stopped as they decided to agree to the drafting of the Ohrid Agreement, giving guaranteed rights to the ethnic communities in the RNM.

With the Ohrid Framework Agreement, stability began to be promoted and peace and understanding prevailed in our country. By guaranteeing rights to each individual, each citizen of RNM, regardless of gender, religion, nation and other affiliation, this agreement was undoubtedly a very important step to stop the conflicts and inter-ethnic disputes that prevailed for years in the country. The Ohrid Framework Agreement was drawn up based on numerous principles, which in general all rested on stability and security in the country, protection of the interests of each ethnic group, so the aim was the prevalence of democracy in the Republic of North Macedonia.

The Ohrid Agreement brought radical changes to the functioning of our state. This agreement, putting an end to the inter-ethnic armed conflict, opened the way for the democratization of society and state institutions. The Ohrid Agreement has important economic relevance, as a guarantee of stability, which is the main prerequisite for economic development. Also, this agreement is the basis of economic development with equal opportunities for all citizens of Macedonia. The respect and implementation of the Ohrid Peace Agreement is the basic criterion for Macedonia's integration into NATO and the European Union. In this aspect, the integration perspective is closely related to the success or failure of the internal integration, which in turn is guaranteed by the principles and spirit of the Ohrid Agreement.

All citizens of RMV are equal behind the Law and may participate in social life without distinction. Through this agreement, the peaceful and harmonious development of society will be promoted, while respecting the ethnic identity and interests of all citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia. The Ohrid Framework Agreement focuses on the element of non-discrimination and equal representation in public administration and public enterprises through special measures in order to ensure equal representation of all communities in public administration and public enterprises in the Republic of Macedonia. The spirit of the Ohrid agreement calls for actions to correct inequalities in the composition of public administration institutions through the employment of members of non-majority communities (Reka B, 2011). This is crucial for the integration of excluded communities in the institutions of the system.

The Secretariat for Implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement

The Government of the Republic of North Macedonia in 2004 established the Sector for the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement as a central point for the implementation of the OFA. With the changes in the Law on the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, this Sector was transformed into the Secretariat for the Implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement.

The Secretariat provides support to the government for the implementation of strategic priorities related to OFA, in particular the principle of equal representation of all ethnic communities in the public administration and other public enterprises in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Ethnic Communities in North Macedonia

Ethnic Communities as an integral part of the state

Ethnic identity is closely related to national identity. It also determines the origin, respectively to which people or ethnic group the person belongs.

Different ethnic groups live in our country, so the citizens, according to ethnic identity, in RMV are: Macedonian, Albanians, Roma, Serbs, Vlach community, Bosnians and any other ethnic origin.

Macedonia is a multi-ethnic country and according to the census of 2021 reported by State Statistical data, the total resident population is 1,836,713 persons. The total non-resident population, which includes the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia absent abroad for more than 12 months and the foreigners temporarily present in the Republic of North Macedonia for less than 12 months, is 260,606 persons included in the Census. In the total enumerated population, 54.21% declared themselves as Macedonians, 29.52% as Albanians, 3.98% as Turks, 2.34% as Roma, 1.18% as Serbs, 0.87% as Bosnians and 0.44% as Vlachs.

In the total resident population in the Republic of North Macedonia, 58.44% of the population declared themselves as Macedonians, 24.30% as Albanians, 3.86% as Turks, 2.53% as Roma, 0.47% as Vlachs, 1.30% as Serbs and 0.87% as Bosnians.

In the total non-resident population included in the Census, which includes the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia absent abroad for more than 12 months and foreigners temporarily present in the Republic of North Macedonia for less than 12 months, 24.45% declared themselves as Macedonians, 66.36% as Albanians, 4.79% as Turks, 1.02% as Roma, 0.19% as Vlachs, 0.35% as Serbs, 0.81% as Bosnians and others.

All these communities make up the population in Macedonia, where they live and act respecting everyone's interests.

The rights of ethnic communities in North Macedonia

All people are equal to each other regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, political affiliation and others. No one can enjoy more rights than another just because he belongs to the majority.

People are united in groups in terms of cultural life, history that characterizes them, language as well as on the basis of customs and traditions. Every nation has its own language and traditions, and thus they practice and use them in different activities in their daily life. A greater number of ethnic communities can live in a state and thus everyone must live in harmony with each other, first respecting the right to life, freedom and equality, and then respecting each other in every activity in the state bodies.

Ethnic communities in Macedonia enjoy all the rights as the Macedonian people, who are the largest in this country. The following are the rights of ethnic communities in RMV:

- The right to education
- The right to use the mother tongue
- The right to fair representation of all ethnic communities in state institutions
- The right to inform in the mother tongue both in printed and electronic media.
- Ethnic communities have the right to practice their cultural life as well as to use their symbols in all external environments of the country.

Ethnic communities in state institutions

Representation of communities in state institutions

The principle of adequate and fair representation aims at achieving the participation of members of all communities in all areas of the public sphere, as a prerequisite for building a modern civil state, stability in the country and social cohesion.

The principle of adequate and fair representation is in line with the common conviction of European countries that a plural and democratic society should not only respect the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of every person who is a member of an ethnic community that is not the majority, but also to create suitable conditions that enable participation in public life. Diversity should be a source and factor, not for division, but for the enrichment of any society.

Regarding the principle of discrimination in the Republic of North Macedonia, the Commission for Protection from Discrimination has been established as an independent and independent body that works in compliance with the powers defined by law.

The law on prevention and protection against discrimination was approved on 30.10.2020 and this law regulates the prevention and prohibition of discrimination, forms and types of discrimination, procedures for protection against discrimination, as well as the composition and work of the Commission.

The rights of ethnic communities guaranteed by the Constitution

The Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia of 1991 guarantees equal rights for the Macedonian people as well as for all Albanian, Serbian, Turkish, Vlach and other citizens, so that everyone can live together in harmony, respecting each one's rights basic human. Citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia are equal in freedoms and rights regardless of gender, race, skin color, national and social origin, political and religious belief, property and social position. Citizens are equal before the Constitution and laws.

The Constitution guarantees the adequate and fair representation of citizens, who belong to all communities, in state power bodies and other public institutions at all levels. Where this also completes article 8 paragraph 2 of the Constitution on the free expression of national affiliation guaranteed by the country's Constitution.

The Constitution directly guarantees the implementation of this principle in the judicial system. During the selection of judges, jury members and court presidents, fair and adequate representation of citizens belonging to all communities will be respected. During the selection of public prosecutors, the fair and adequate representation of citizens belonging to all communities will be respected.

Other legal frameworks on the representation of ethnic communities in state institutions

All laws in the RNM must be in accordance with the Constitution of the country as the highest legal act. There are numerous articles in some of the laws in our country on the representation of members of all ethnic communities in the state institutions of the RNM.

The fair representation of members of ethnic communities is also mentioned in the Law on the Public Prosecutor, and during the election of public prosecutors, the principle and adequate representation and the rights of citizens belonging to all communities are applied. During the selection of judges and jurists without violating the criteria established by law, adequate and fair representation of citizens belonging to all communities will be ensured.

According the Law of public servants, in the employment of public servants, the principle of equal conditions and equal access to all interested candidates in the workplace is respected, thus guaranteeing the selection of professional and competent candidates for the performance of work and work tasks in the respective workplace. The principle of adequate and fair representation of community members is applied during the employment of public servants and the establishment of the Commission for the selection of public servants.

Regulation on fair representation of communities

The Ministry of Information Society and Administration has compiled a regulation which contains annual data on the fair representation of communities in state institutions. The annual plan contains:

- data on the number and percentage of representation of Macedonians and community members, namely: Albanians, Turks, Roma, Vlachs, Serbs, Bosniaks and others in total.
- the number of employees in the authority, their gender structure, representation in state groups, officials and other employees without civil servant status
- the effects of previously taken and implemented measures, foreseen in the previous annual plan, including data on activities related to employment from the previous year (the number of published announcements for the employment of civil servants and persons without the status of the civil servant, data on the ethnic affiliation of the candidates from the selection lists and for the selected candidates the number of employees belonging to the communities and successfully completed exams for civil servants);
- data on jobs for civil servants and persons without the status of civil servant officers who would be filled with members of the communities during the coming year (vacant, that is, free jobs and new planned jobs) and methods and the dynamics of their filling;
- measures for training and professional improvement related to the implementation of the principle of adequate and fair representation of community members in state bodies.

Obdusmani and its role in protecting the rights of communities

The ombudsman is not an executive, legislative or judicial body, he is a separate body whose task is to protect the rights of all citizens in the RNM. Obdusman receives a variety of complaints, all of which contain violations of their rights and with the aim of protecting these rights and getting what they are entitled to by the Law and the Constitution.

Obdusman's activity consists of accepting complaints and giving advice, various suggestions, cooperating with the person who complains and acting together towards the realization of their rights.

The People's Advocate examines citizens' complaints about maladministration in specific areas of public administration. It is an institution that protects the constitutional and legal rights of citizens, violated by state administration bodies and other

organizations that have public authorizations. The power of the People's Advocate is popular-moral and he influences with the strength of his authority and not with compulsory means.

Obdusman represents one of the types of control over the work of the administration. Obdusman pays special attention to the protection of the principle of non-discrimination, fair and adequate representation of community members in state administration bodies, bodies of local self-administration units and public service institutions.

The Law on the Obdusman consists of a large number of provisions, one of which is the monitoring of conditions and protection from discrimination, as well as fair and adequate representation of all members of ethnic communities. So, Obdusman maintains contacts with all state institutions and takes care of non-discrimination in the fair representation of members of ethnic communities in the country, and if he notices that in a specific institution this principle is not applied, then he takes measures, and together with other instances higher ones decide justice for one or more members of different communities.

Agency for realizing the rights of communities

This Agency operates on the basis of the Law and regulations, which contain certain provisions on the protection and realization of the rights of all communities in the Republic of North Macedonia that are a minority, i.e. less than 20%.

With the decree for the protection of the rights of communities that are less than 20%, any form of direct or indirect discrimination based on ethnicity, language, religion, race or any other basis against communities or members of communities is prohibited. Also, any activity or measure of violent assimilation of community members is prohibited.

The goals of the Agency are the realization, promotion, protection and supervision of the rights of the members of the communities that are less than 20% of the population in the Republic of North Macedonia, guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic. North Macedonia promotes mutual understanding and tolerance of all communities in order to preserve, nurture and strengthen social cohesion in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Analysis – Statistical processing

Imbalance in public administration and imbalance in employment creates dissatisfaction in the long term and is a source of potential disputes. To overcome inequalities in society, rights are introduced that enable greater access of minorities to institutions and their integration (Shikova, Gjeorgjievski, Andeva, 2023).

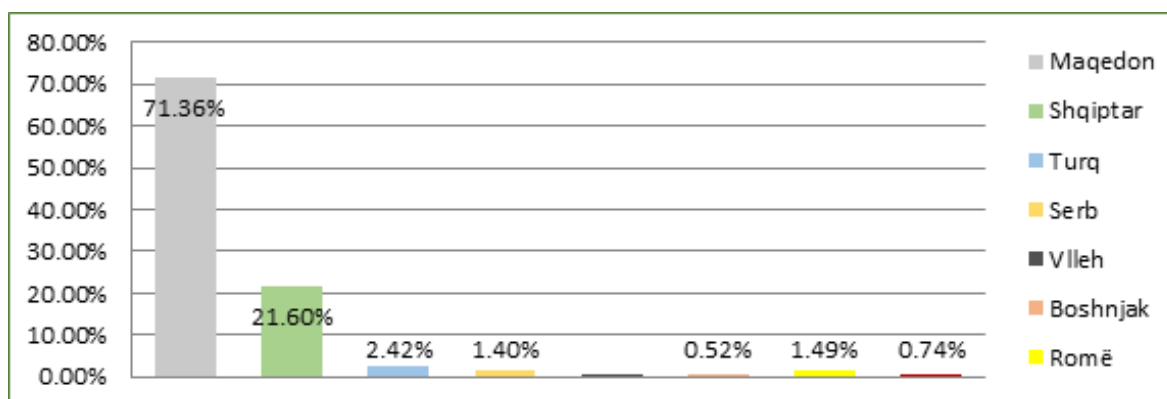
The law on employees in the public sector foresees a mechanism for the implementation of the constitutional principle for adequate and fair representation of community members, at the level of each of the public sector institutions and based on the needs of the institutions themselves expressed through the Annual Employment Plans.

But here it should be noted that the legal solution provides that the employment procedures are carried out according to merit based in combination with the article “positive discrimination” or “affirmative action”, that is, ethnicity is only one of the parameters that is taken into account during employment, after the candidates demonstrate in the selection procedure that they are fully qualified for this job.

TABLE 1. Structure according to community membership in 2022¹

Ethnicity	Employed	%
Macedonians	78.833	71.36%
Albanians	23.855	21.60%
Turks	2.675	2.42%
Serbs	1.542	1.40%
Vleah	527	0.48%
Bosnians	569	0.52%
Roma	1.651	1.49%
Others	813	0.74%

¹ Ministry of Information Society and Administration, (2023), Annual report from the register of employees in the public sector for the year 2022, Skopje

CHART 1. Employees in public institutions

From the table and graph, we see the employees in the state institutions for 2022, where the Macedonian community prevails as every other year and the Serbian community is in smaller numbers.

TABLE 2. Representation of community members, according to types of institutions²

Type of institution	Macedonians	Albanians	Turks	Serbs	Vleeh	Bosniaks	Roma	Others
Government of RNM	70.59%	13.97%	4.04%	2.21%	1.84%	1.47%	5.51%	0.37%
Public Enterprises	71.68%	17.70%	2.23%	1.26%	0.42%	0.64%	5.06%	1.01%
Public Institutions	71.77%	22.16%	2.41%	1.34%	0.40%	0.47%	0.75%	0.72%
Public Prosecution	80.26%	14.10%	2.31%	0.77%	0.77%	0.26%	1.28%	0.26%
Ministries	63.17%	28.26%	3.00%	1.80%	0.80%	1.01%	1.29%	0.68%
Ombudsman	45.24%	40.48%	0.00%	4.76%	3.57%	2.38%	3.57%	0.00%
National Bank	82.00%	14.35%	0.23%	0.91%	0.00%	0.00%	0.23%	2.28%
Municipalities	73.49%	19.92%	2.61%	1.53%	0.63%	0.36%	0.93%	0.53%
The bodies of the ministries	67.13%	26.21%	3.10%	1.42%	0.58%	0.33%	0.72%	0.49%
Legal entities with public power	64.36%	30.51%	1.43%	1.28%	0.57%	0.36%	0.64%	0.86%
President of RNM	80.95%	12.70%	1.59%	0.00%	3.17%	0.00%	1.59%	0.00%
Regulatory bodies	73.97%	20.19%	1.95%	1.46%	0.73%	0.24%	0.00%	1.46%
Indipendent state bodies	74.84%	18.62%	1.26%	1.89%	1.26%	0.25%	1.26%	0.63%
Indipendant bodies of state admsitration	69.43%	21.61%	3.18%	2.44%	0.57%	0.74%	1.40%	0.63%
Independent professional bodies	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Secretariats in the Goevernment oif RNM	59.35%	28.46%	4.07%	0.81%	2.44%	2.44%	0.81%	1.63%
Services in the Government of RNM	88.42%	7.06%	0.56%	1.69%	0.56%	0.85%	0.85%	0.00%
Parliament	66.67%	28.17%	1.98%	1.19%	0.00%	0.40%	1.59%	0.00%
Council of public prosecutors	75.00%	25.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Courts	77.91%	16.09%	1.79%	1.24%	1.05%	0.41%	1.15%	0.37%
Court Council	66.67%	18.18%	3.03%	9.09%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	3.03%
Constitutional Court	81.82%	11.36%	4.55%	0.00%	0.00%	2.27%	0.00%	0.00%

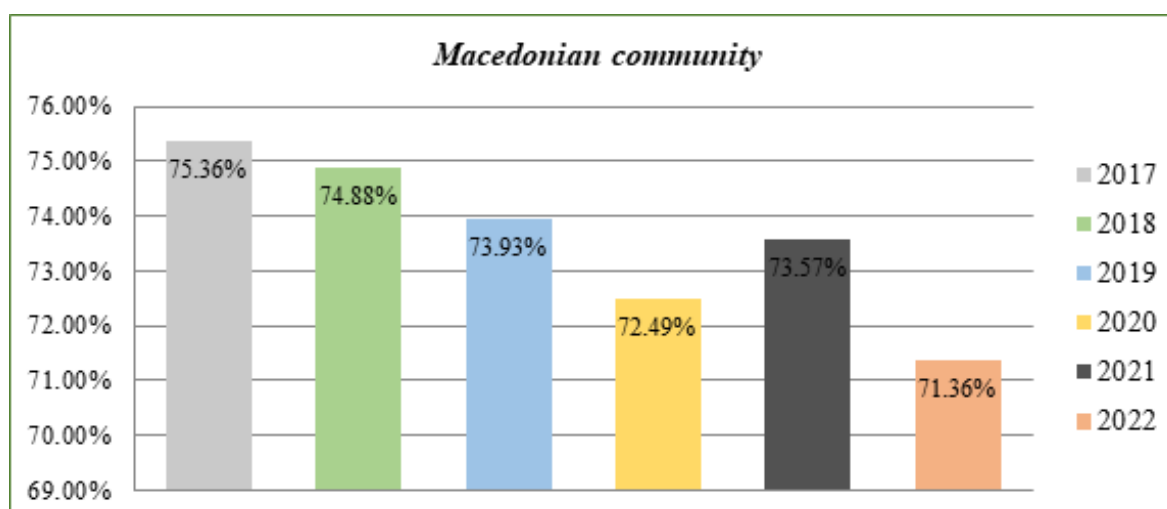
The largest number of Macedonians are in the Services in the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia with 88.42% of the total number of employees here. There are mostly Albanians employed in the Ombudsman and less in the Services in the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia with 7.06%. Turks, Serbs, Vlachs, Bosnians and Roma do not appear at all in the Council of Public Prosecutors. The majority of Serbian community representatives are in the Judicial Council with 9.09%.

The Roma community is more present in the Government of the Republic of NM with 5.51%, while they do not appear at all in the Constitutional Court.

² Ministry of Information Society and Administration, (2023), Annual report from the register of employees in the public sector for the year 2022, Skopje

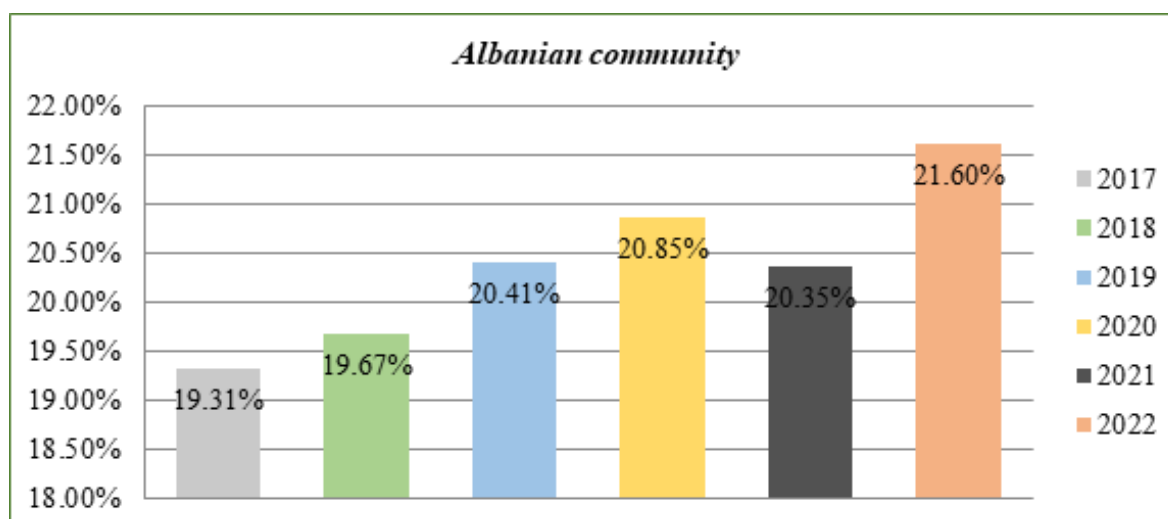
TABLE 3. Structure according to community membership in state institutions from 2017-2022³

Ethnicity	Employees %					
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Macedonians	75.36%	74.88%	73.93%	72.49%	73.57%	71.36%
Albanians	19.31%	19.67%	20.41%	20.85%	20.35%	21.60%
Turks	1.84%	1.88%	2.07%	2.18%	1.95%	2.42%
Serbs	0.91%	0.91%	0.93%	1.16%	1.07%	1.40%
Vleoh	0.37%	0.38%	0.38%	0.49%	0.43%	0.48%
Bosnians	0.39%	0.40%	0.43%	0.51%	0.49%	0.52%
Roma	1.14%	1.21%	1.21%	1.40%	1.19%	1.49%
Others	0.67%	0.67%	0.64%	0.91%	0.9%	0.74%

CHART 2. Macedonian community represented in state institutions from 2017-2022

The Macedonian community has mainly had a decrease in their representation in state institutions, where, making the difference between 2017 and 2022, its number is reduced by 4%.

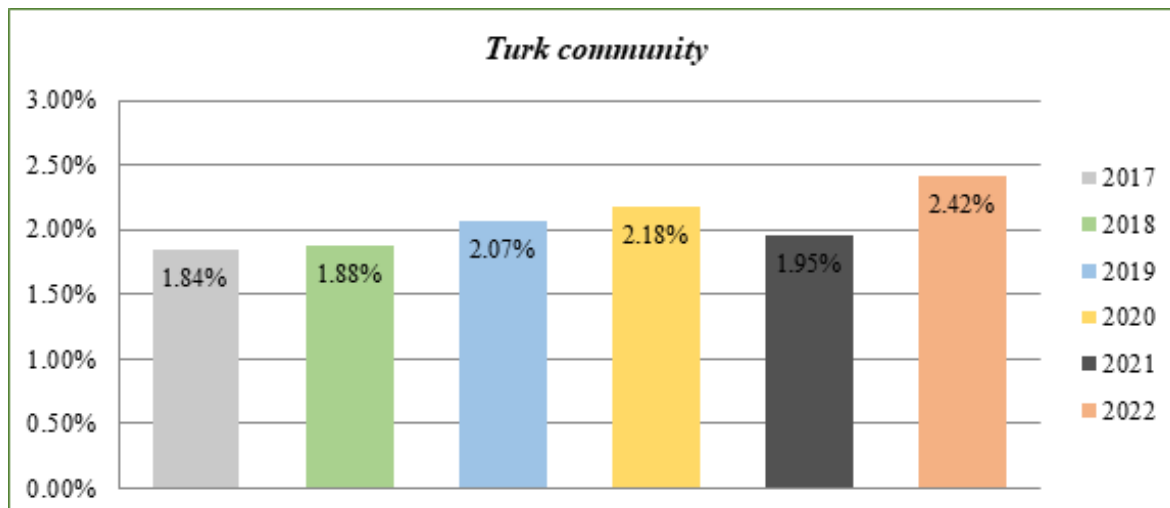
The Macedonian community has always been much larger, taking into account their total number in the country, but based on respect for fair representation, other communities should also have space and this number will normally have to still decrease.

CHART 3. Albanian community represented in state institutions from 2017-2022

³ Ministry of Information Society and Administration, (2023), Annual report from the register of employees in the public sector for the year 2022, Skopje

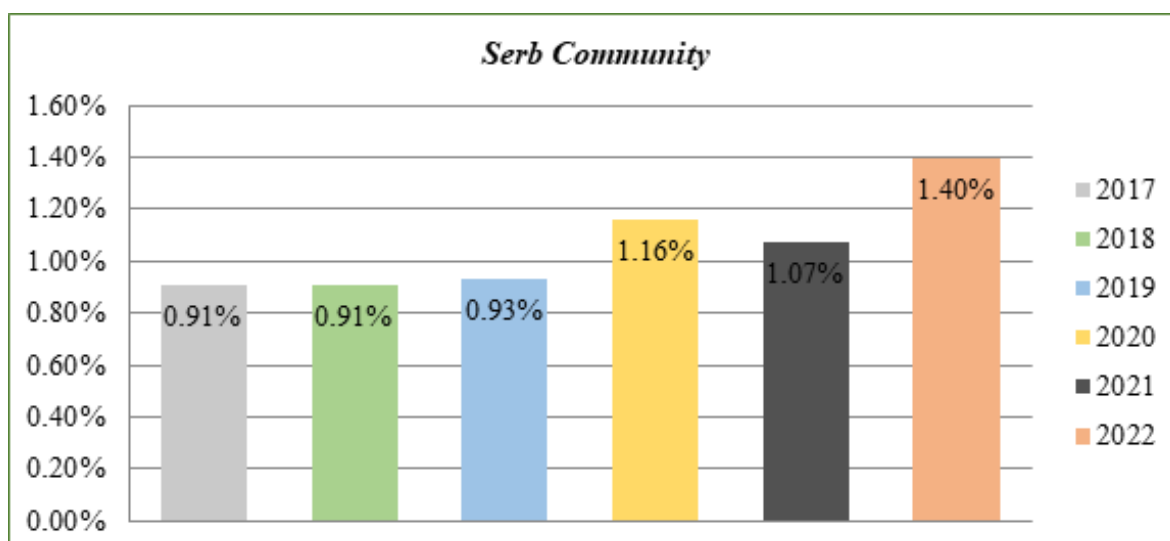
The representation of the Albanian community in state institutions before the 2001 conflict was very low, where there were many institutions in which Albanians did not appear at all. Thus, based on the Laws, the Constitution and the observance of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, the representation of Albanians began to increase significantly, where the required number has not yet been met in 2023. But every year we have an increase in their number in state institutions and who carry out activities for the benefit of the state where they live and operate. From 2017 to 2022 we have an increase, even for only 2.29%.

CHART 4. Macedonian community represented in state institutions from 2017-2022

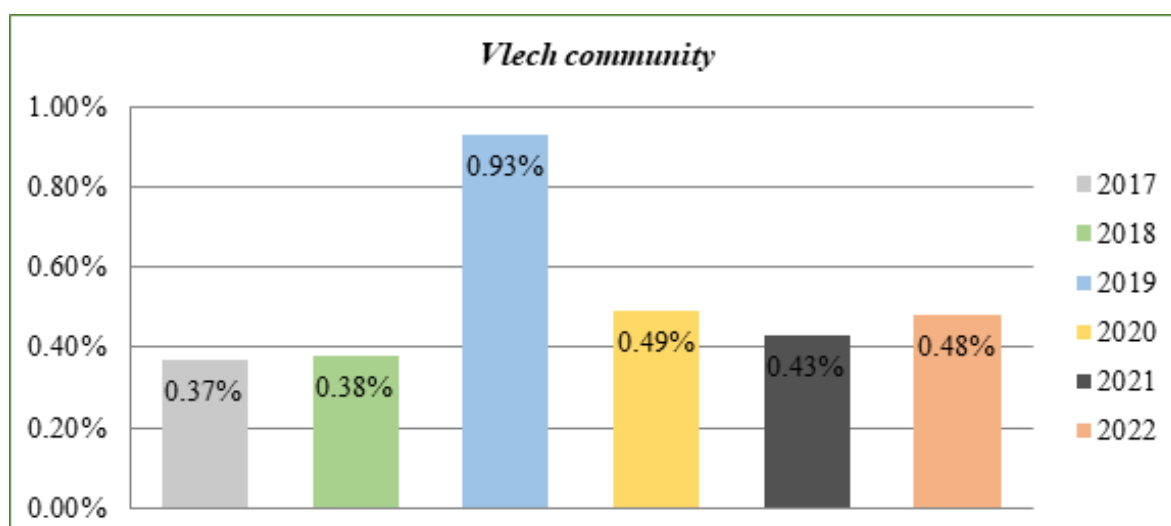


So, the Turkish community, as we can see in the graph from 2017 to 2022, have an increase in their representation in state institutions by 0.58%.

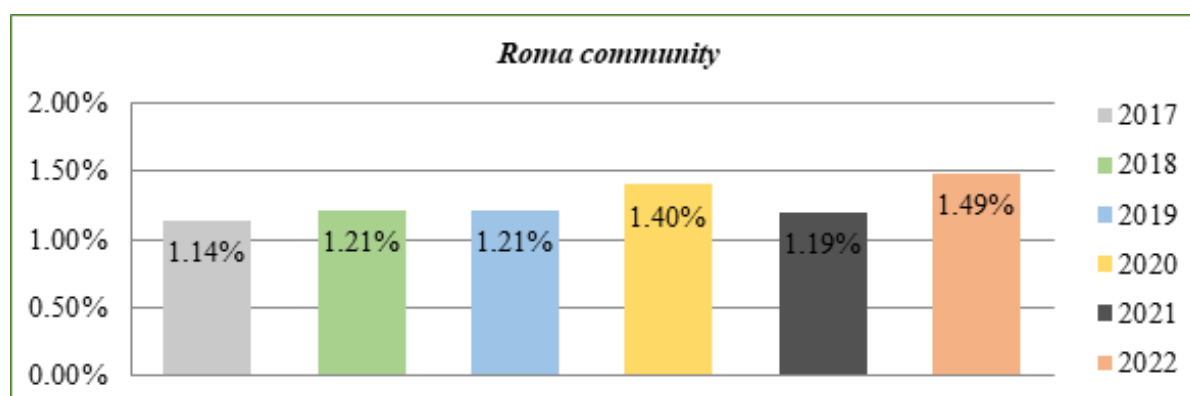
CHART 5. The Serbian community in state institutions from 2017-2022



From the graph 5, we can see that the representation of the Serbian community in the state institutions of the RMV is increasing during the 6-year period. From 2017 to 2022, we have an increase in their representation in these institutions by 0.49%.

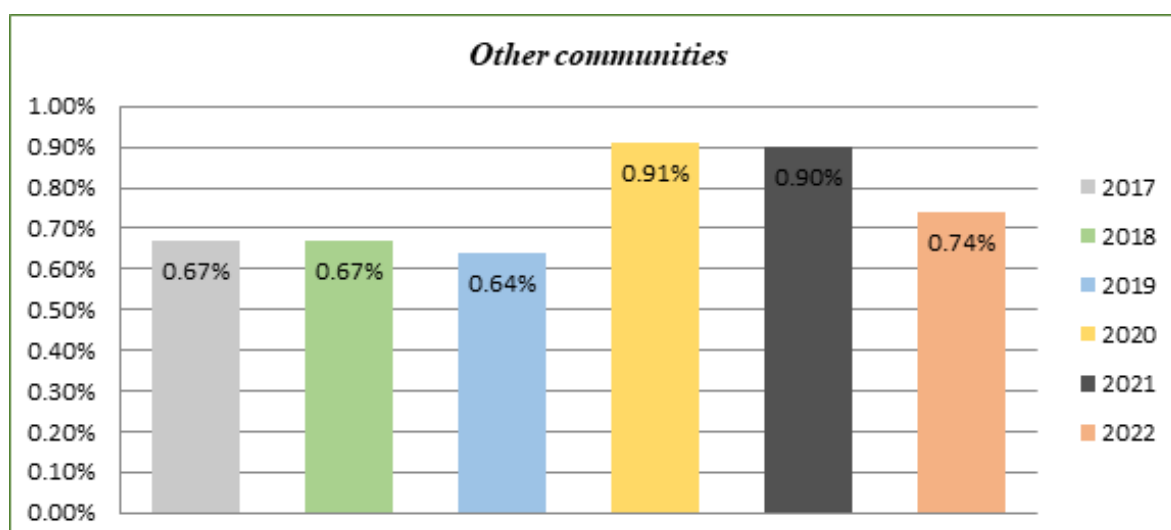
CHART 6. The Vlach community in state institutions from 2017-2022

With the largest number in state institutions, the Vlachs were the largest during 2019 with 0.93%.

CHART 7. The Roma community in state institutions from 2017-2022

The representation of Roma in state institutions is not as much as it should be, based on their number in the country, but there is a constant rise and more representation, where the difference between 2017 and 2022 is 0.35% increasing.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, we also have other ethnic groups that are in smaller groups than the others, where in the graph below we will see their ups and downs in terms of their representation in state institutions.

CHART 8. Other communities in state institutions from 2017-2022

From the graph above, we can clearly see that the other communities with the largest number of their representation in state institutions were during 2020.

Ministries and community representation

TABLE 4. Membership structure of communities in the Ministries of RNM for 2022.

Ministries	Macedonians	Albanians	Turks	Serbs	Vlach	Bosnians	Roma
Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning	56.52%	37.68%	0.97%	2.42%	0.48%	0.97%	0.00%
Ministry of Health	65.25%	30.51%	2.54%	0.00%	0.85%	0.85%	0.00%
Min. of agriculture, forestry and water development	72.84%	18.01%	3.58%	2.19%	0.80%	0.70%	1.29%
Ministry of Information society and administration	62.61%	29.41%	3.36%	0.84%	0.42%	1.68%	1.68%
Ministry of Culture	62.12%	26.52%	0.76%	4.55%	3.03%	1.52%	0.76%
Ministry of Self Governance	44.44%	44.44%	0.00%	3.70%	1.85%	5.56%	0.00%
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	67.05%	25.19%	3.49%	1.55%	0.39%	0.00%	0.78%
Ministry of Education and Science	52.14%	38.03%	3.85%	2.99%	0.00%	1.71%	1.28%
Ministry of Defence	79.48%	12.95%	2.77%	1.89%	0.29%	1.16%	0.87%
Ministry of political system and collaboration between communities	5.13%	84.36%	4.10%	0.51%	0.77%	1.03%	2.31%
Ministry of Justice	55.12%	35.61%	2.44%	0.98%	0.98%	0.98%	2.93%
Ministry of Transport	73.58%	17.07%	2.44%	2.44%	0.81%	1.63%	1.63%
Ministry for Social work and Social policy	70.78%	20.58%	1.65%	2.06%	1.65%	0.41%	2.47%
Ministry of Finance	73.57%	18.96%	2.96%	1.39%	1.04%	0.52%	1.04%
Ministry of Economy	41.96%	47.55%	4.90%	0.70%	1.40%	2.10%	0.70%

Data shows that in the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning there are mostly representatives of the Macedonian community with 56.52%, and in this Ministry, there are no representatives of the Roma community.

In the Ministry of Political System, the representation of ethnic Albanians is 84.36%, while in the Ministry of Economy, it is 47.55%. In these two departments, the representation of Macedonians is 5.13%, respectively 41.96% in the economy department.

The highest percentage of Bosnians is represented in the Ministry of Local Self-Government with 5.56% and in the Ministry of Economy with 2.10%.

The Serbian community with the highest percentage of 4.55% are represented in the Ministry of Culture, while the Roma with the highest percentage of 2.93% are in the Ministry of Justice.

The Turkish community has the highest representation in the Ministry of Economy with 4.90%, while there are no representatives of this community in the Ministry of local self-government.

The largest number of Vlachs are in the Ministry of Culture with 3.03% and they do not appear at all in the Ministry of Education and Science.

Conclusion

Not only in North Macedonia, but in all countries, there is a right for ethnic communities, regardless whether they are a minority or a majority, they have the right to be educated, to practice their culture and to use their language while performing social activities.

There are no absolutely homogeneous countries in the 21st century. This diversity of peoples magnifies the value of the ethnic component in modern politics.

Ethnic diversity has always been a potential factor in conflict and a source of political instability. Therefore, the national question is of special importance for almost all countries of the world.

Each country has developed its own measures for the regulation of inter-ethnic relations, where by means of regulations, laws try to fulfill this aspect more and more. Although there have been and continue to be gaps in this aspect

It is quite difficult to identify a universal set of factors that are effective for the political representation of ethnic groups in any country. One thing is clear that, despite the significant differences, all states should not forget the issues of ethnic nature, also need continuous monitoring of the inter-ethnic situation, improvement of legislation in this area, analysis of the international situation, collective method of work on a regional scale and the promotion of patriotic and civic education and many others.

Also, every individual in the world, based on the basic human rights guaranteed by Conventions and other documents, has the right to be employed in any institution of the country where he lives.

Adequate and fair representation of the citizens of all communities in the bodies of state power and all public institutions at all levels is a fundamental value of the constitutional system of the Republic of North Macedonia.

The Ombudsman, in relation to the authority defined by the Constitution, monitors the implementation of the principle of adequate and fair representation every year and by collecting data from the bodies for which he is responsible.

Monitoring the implementation of the principle of fair and proper representation of members of all communities is essential in the development of the society of equal and equal citizens regardless of which community they belong to.

At the same time, the consistent application of this principle, in addition to the real representation of the state of adequate and fair representation, aims to show the ratio of the realization of the rights of the members of the communities and their sense of belonging to the institutions of the system.

The implementation of the principle of adequate and fair representation, in addition to affirming the interests of all ethnic communities, also contributes to building trust and multi-ethnic tolerance between members of all communities in the Republic of Macedonia.

So, in conclusion, we can say that we have a change in terms of the rights of all ethnic communities in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Given that since its appropriation until the armed conflict in this country, there have been many dissatisfactions and it has been an alarming situation in the country, in terms of relations between ethnic groups, as well as the leadership of the state itself towards other ethnic groups otherwise from the Macedonian community.

Macedonians obviously had much more freedom and rights and was a leading part with decision-making functions in the state.

From 2001 until today, there is peace in the country and ethnic communities participate in the various state institutions, all contributing to a single goal, the most efficient functioning of the state, the promotion of peace and harmony in the country, offered only good to the citizens of this country regardless of their ethnicity. All citizens of RMV enjoy freedom and rights regardless of gender, race, nationality, religious, political and other affiliations.

According to the Constitution of the country, all citizens are equal in the country, and it is forbidden to violate the rights of others.

The representation of ethnic communities in state institutions is one of the key principles of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, and since 2001, we have more and more realization of this agreement, even though there are many loopholes and it has not yet been fully implemented.

The members of the five smallest communities are not adequately represented in the bodies of local self-government units, with certain exceptions in a smaller number of municipalities where a large number of them live or in whose territories they traditionally reside. Smaller communities (Serbs, Turks, Bosnians, Vlachs and Roma) are still not adequately represented in administrative bodies.

According to the annual reports that we analyzed in this paper, the People's Advocate finds that in 2022 there is mostly respect for this principle compared to previous years, but there are still gaps in many institutions, where there is still no completely fair representation for the Roma, Vlachs Bosnians and other members of smaller ethnic groups.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, despite the laws and regulations, there is no fair representation of the ethnic communities in the state institutions, where there are constant gaps and dissatisfaction, especially from the smaller ethnic groups. We have representation of members of ethnic groups mostly in those countries, municipalities where that ethnic group is in the majority and not in all institutions, where they also have the adequate qualification for a job. So, even against the same qualifications that a member of the Turkish community has with another member of the Macedonian community, priority is always given to the Macedonian member. The Ohrid Framework Agreement is not being fully implemented in its main task, representation of members of all ethnic communities in state institutions in the country.

Taking into account the fact that this principle is guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia and represents a fundamental value of the country's constitutional order, the People's Advocate considers that the construction of a democratic society of equal citizens should continue to be permanent and fundamental definition of our society, respecting the right of all ethnic communities, based on equal conditions, to participate in the construction and strengthening of democratic processes in the state, in such a way that every citizen feels integrated and part of the order social.

The Ombudsman for 2017 received 2.17% of requests for non-discrimination and fair representation of communities, in 2018 a total of 2.23%, 1.74 in 2019, 2.53% in 2020, 2021 and 2022 with 1.60 and 2.37%.

For the year 2022, a total of 76 requests or 2.37% have been submitted, of which 1 is anonymous, 13 are from various organizations (associations), 52 have not declared their ethnicity, 6 are from the Macedonian community, 2 are Albanian, 1 Roma and 1 of the other smaller communities in the country.

Recommendations

After all the above analysis, we would like to give the following recommendations:

- To take measures to reduce the abuses of members of a certain community who are present from time to time in state institutions. For example, we have cases where in state institutions a member of a certain community is neglected by the rest of the majority and is often bullied in various forms.
- The representation of ethnic communities in state institutions is necessary in a multi-ethnic state, but in our opinion, employment in RNM needs to focus more on the quality of employees than on the quantity of members of a specific community. Many people who are qualified apply for a job, but despite the qualification that is required in a job, we would say that a form of selection should be made as to which of the people is more capable in carrying out the specific activity, not taking it as a basis the ethnicity of the candidate, but his ability and talent. We think that since many bodies are concerned with the fair representation of ethnic communities in institutions, little importance is paid to how precisely these people are performing state affairs.

The Republic of North Macedonia, as a multi-ethnic state, needs equal distribution and fair distribution of members of ethnic communities in state institutions, but at the same time it needs ambitious, talented and hard-working people.

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Digital marketing usage by business with main focus SMEs. A theoretical framework

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Abstract

Today marketing managers are highly responsible in businesses for choosing the types of marketing communication. They have to decide whether to apply traditional marketing, digital marketing or combined one. As digital marketing expands opportunities to businesses, it is growing significantly. It has various channels among them social media marketing, content marketing, email marketing, blogging etc. which are of special interest for being studied. This paper research will explore through a variety of research papers, the basic concepts of internet and digital marketing, digital marketing tool, SMEs, 5Ds of digital marketing, B2B digital marketing, B2C digital market, usage benefits and will reveal a theoretical framework. It will provide information how digital marketing has changed and affected in general business willingness and in specific SMEs to use digital marketing tools for informative and interactive issues. Secondary data collecting, data processing, and data analysis were the three stages of this process.

Keywords: internet, traditional marketing; digital marketing; small medium enterprises; etc.

Introduction

Traditional online internet technologies have been used and grown exponentially in business since the early 1990s, and more especially in marketing strategies from businesses (Hanna et al. 2011; Sashi 2012; King et al. 2014). Over the years things have evolved and the trend of internet marketing has developed.

Delivering a message to business is the primary goal of traditional marketing media found in newspapers, news websites, radios, and television.

Online marketing quickly receives, communicates, and exchanges thoughts, opinions as well as impressions and ideas (Dury, 2008). According to Cant and Wiid (2016), many businesses see internet marketing as an addition to traditional marketing. The majority of businesses have come to understand the necessity of adopting and implementing technologically advanced apps to support their operations and deliver timely and up-to-date information (Aggarwal, 2017).

Utilising digital communication technologies as well as marketing tools for entrepreneurs and business owners, digital marketing has altered the way how brands and businesses are run, and how marketing strategies are designed.

The digital revolution is indeed changing value within sectors, whether they are industrial or service sectors, whether businesses work with industrial clients or in the wider public sector (Besson, 2016). Small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) are the dominant form of business and are one of the main catalysts to the economy growth.

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Their role and contribution in terms of the number of companies, employment possibilities, and GDP contribution is crucial in developed and developing countries.

According to various research, SMEs most frequently choose digital marketing tools, social media, emails, and websites to market their products (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015; Abed et al., 2016).

According to Bouwman (2019), digital marketing improves SMEs performance.

SMEs can have at any time, a detailed analysis of the number of Instagram followers, Facebook page likes, YouTube subscribers, website visits, time spent on a company's website, messages sent and received, online orders etc. For example, Gregory et al. (2017) cites that using e-commerce improves business performance. Garg et al., (2020) found that there is a significant positive link between social media use and business performance mediated by customer interaction.

According to Apăvăloaie (2015) the Internet has brought opportunities and problems for existing and start-up business that have direct contacts with the customers.

Not all SMEs have adopted or mastered digital marketing. It has been so because there are some enterprises that prefer to utilise traditional strategies and still don't believe in digitalization.

Regarding first opportunities given by digital marketing, Kumar, P., et. al (2015) claim that businesses by the use of internet and digital platforms can gain knowledge of the new markets, can promote and sell online products 24/7, can identify competences of SMEs in the global markets, can match the demand and manufacturing strategy and target in international market, can participate in business events such as trade fairs, and customize their products.

Some serious concerns, business encounter when adopting digital marketing are: security concerns, the lack of education, the lack of technological know-how, slow adoption of technology, significant costs for internet technologies investment etc.

Because of these disadvantages, in order to utilise these online platforms SMEs may need support from governments and other external institutions that are the key players in their environment (Järvinen et al., 2012; Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015).

Terms and classification

Marketing means the actions a business makes to get connected to customers and convince them to purchase any goods or services. It enables businesses to build long-lasting relationships with customers and marketers for growth Yoga et al. (2019).

Internet marketing makes use of the potential of e-commerce to market and sell goods. Electronic commerce enables online purchasing, selling, and trading of goods and services. It is a subcategory of internet marketing. Generic suppliers like eBay, Amazon, and Yahoo auctioneers, which sell a wide variety of goods and services, are the largest and most well-known online marketing platform providers (Bapna et al., 2001; Gregg & Walczak, 2003).

According to Chaffey et al. (2009), internet marketing is simply "achieving marketing objectives through applying digital technologies.

Kiveu & Ofafa (2013) and Njau & Karugu (2014), say that internet marketing aims to inform, converse, promote, and sell goods and services online.

Digital marketing encompasses the activities of establishing and maintaining relationships with digitally focused customers. According to Chaffey (2013), digital marketing is the use of technologies to support marketing initiatives in an effort to better understand customers by meeting their demands. It is essentially the promotion of company's brand of goods through the use of all digital advertising channels, including radio, mobile phones, the internet, television, and social media, to reach specific target audiences.

The following definition of "digital marketing" given by Bressolles et al. (2016)

in the book "Le marketing digital" says: "Digital marketing can be defined as the process of planning and implementing the development, pricing, communication, and distribution of an idea, product, or service to create exchanges, in whole or in part using digital technologies, that are inconsistent with individual and organizational objectives. The implementation of digital marketing techniques is aimed at acquiring new customers or improving the management of the relationship with existing customers. Digital marketing is of course integrated with traditional marketing tools in a multi-channel/cross-channel marketing strategy."

5 Ds of Digital

It is very important to understand the 5Ds of digital marketing in order to succeed with the campaign plan. This is because it's essential to know how to visit the internet sites by using the digital devices. The appropriate parties in that situation can get digital media with exact information.

Technologies are useful to create experiences and increase the efficiency of marketing initiatives. The way that products are advertised has changed and improved in today's technologically advanced society.

In the paper of Raj (2014) are explained “5Ds of Digital”:

- Digital devices
- Digital platforms
- Digital media
- Digital data
- Digital technology

Digital devices: People use a variety of linked devices, such as smartphones, tablets, desktop computers, TVs, and gaming devices to interact websites and mobile apps.

Digital platforms: the majority of interactions take place through a browser or apps from the major platforms namely Facebook (and Instagram), Google (and YouTube), Twitter, and LinkedIn.

Digital media: Various paid, owned, and earned communication channels using digital media for audience engagement.

Digital data: the information that companies gather about the profile of their customers and how they engage with them, is now required to be protected by law in the majority of countries.

Digital technology: technology skills and usage enabling companies to operate globally can be a good tool for SMEs to expand (Tseng et al., 2004) [30]. Small businesses that export can gain from Internet marketing in the age of global commerce. The first step in implementing internet technology and digital marketing, important to establish a global presence must be taken by SMEs’ promoters and owners.

Benefits of digital marketing usage

One way and two way communication channels

Websites, SMS, banner ads, and emails are examples of one-way online communication channels that allow businesses to control their marketing efforts (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). These channels are also known as e-media and technology enabled marketing channels (Kallier, 2017).

On the other hand, using social media for business purpose, results in less control over activity. Social media offer two way of communication since they make the contact to companies simpler for customers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015).

Impact of technology on business operation

As Elena-Iulia cites in her study mentions, according to Middleton (2010) there are some ways in which the technology changed the operation of business.

Instant global news has an immediate influence; ideas and information spread more quickly. Geographical significance has diminished with time; and location is a factor that influences economic decisions less and less.

From 9 to 5, to 24 hours a day, seven days a week, businesses today operate in three shifts in accordance with the three major time zones of the America, East Asia/Australia and Europe. In a global society where online contact is possible whatever time, day or night, the phrase “working day” has lost any significance.

Small enterprises can now supply services that, in the past, were only provided by large enterprises. Customer service is changing; inquiries and requests that handled by phone can now be handled online at a far cheaper cost.

The Internet gave new enterprises the opportunity to compete for new customers on an equal footing with established enterprises. Enterprises that think that small businesses which are present and active online, do not pose a danger to their main business operations, due to careful planning, research, brand-building and marketing activities, they are wrong.

Digital marketing tools and their relevance

According to Lee and Kim (2009) digital marketing strategies include social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), email marketing, blogs and websites, marketing products and services through online personalities and social influencers. Businesses can also use other digital marketing strategies like video advertisement, sponsoring content on more well-known websites etc.

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is the digital marketing tool that is currently most frequently used and it is considered a must for the companies that own a website.

According to Wienclaw (2017), SEO is the practise of showing and listing a website in internet search results prominently. Weinclaw (2017) notes some SEO tactics, such as customizing website content, including keywords, properly indexing website, and making sure that website content is creative and unique. Sites like blogs, infographics, and websites benefit from SEO. According to Statista (23 April 2023), the Google search engine accounts a search traffic share of around 93.63%.

An essential tactical instrument for digital marketing is search engine marketing (SEM). According to Jalang'o (2015) search engine marketing is the practise of businesses paying search engines to display their advertisements. This occurs when businesses purchase certain keywords related to their industry, and their advertisements appear when consumers search the phrases they have purchased.

Social media is a revolutionary tool that can also influence how products and services are marketed. Mangold & Faulds (2009) mentioned the use of social media in business creating new marketing opportunities and allowing companies to interact with millions of individuals, about their goods and services. Nawal (2015) identifies 4 aspects of social media which have an impact in entrepreneurship such as: advertising and branding, information access, customer service, and social capital.

According to Desai (2019) as a result of the rise of social media in the 2000s, customers developed a strong reliance on digital devices in their routine daily life for using social media of LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Social media marketing channels that are strongly utilized today are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snap Chat, Pinterest, and Google+. 72% of people use social media networking including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Google, and LinkedIn. Today, Facebook is regarded as the world's most well-known social networking company.

There are currently more than 2.7 billion active users each month as of the second quarter of 2020. Registered users can share content with other users images, videos, articles, news, notes, events, etc.

Instagram came into play in 2010, as another social network to allow its members to post videos, photographs, and images. The social media network had 500 million daily active users as of June 2018 and more than 1 billion monthly active members worldwide (Tankovska, 2021).

Twitter is a social network where users can add links, photos, and videos to their material. Based on active users, Twitter is now ranked among the top social networks globally. Twitter had 192 million monetizable daily active users as of the fourth quarter of 2020 (Tankovska, 2021).

Paid advertisements on Facebook, promoted tweets on Twitter, and sponsored messages on LinkedIn are a few additional marketing platforms. These tactics are known as Pay-Per-Click technique (PPC). Pay-Per-Click is used to increase traffic to the company website by paying a publisher each time the ad is clicked. Google Ad Words is one of the most popular PPC models. It enables the business to pay for prominent positions on Google's search engine results pages at a cost "per click" of the links inserted.

According to Zhang, Dubinsky, and Tan (2013), blogging is another digital marketing tool that has a positive effect on growing sales, particularly for products that users can read reviews and leave comments about their own experiences.

Any digital marketing strategy that includes blogging will be more effective because it can increase leads by 67% and generate up to 97% more links to your website. Visitors are attracted by interesting blogs that are well-written and offer useful information. Blog subscription newsletters, follow-up emails to website visitors who downloaded something, customer welcome emails, holiday promotions to loyalty programme members etc. Businesses should be credibly present through websites, blogs, email marketing, online PR, social media etc.

It is possible for SMEs to use even other tools such as email marketing which entails delivering offers and information to people who have consented to receive emails. Email marketing is frequently used to advertise events, promotions, and exclusive material, as well as direct customers towards a company's website.

McCloskey (2006) says email marketing is a type of digital marketing, which is an essential channel for marketing communication, particularly for businesses looking to establish and maintain close relationship with their customers.

According to Marta Joanna (2021), very interesting is content marketing which is used to draw in and keep the attention of customers by producing valuable content that addresses their needs. This content may be presented in a variety of ways, including articles, films, webinars, and multimedia presentations. In content marketing, it's crucial to consider both the way the material is published and its substantive aspect. It is a tool made to create intense, long-lasting relationship with the brand. The most popular content marketing platforms are social media, newsletters, online articles, blogs, specialised e-journals, infographics, and mobile applications.

Digital marketing usage by business with main focus SMEs

The majority of businesses have adapted well in new media, but they have yet to fully realise the potential and value of digital technology. The saying "If a company cannot be found in Google, it does not exist" suggests that digital marketing is no longer an option but rather a necessity for the business if it wants to grow and remain competitive.

SMEs are no exception, but it appears that they underutilised the potential that digital channels could provide (Inside Small Business, 2017).

According to the Albanian law the term "Enterprise" is any entity that carries out an economic activity, regardless of its legal form. SMEs streamlines non-subsidiary independent businesses with fewer than a specified number of employees

because this figure varies among countries. Small and medium sized business sector is classified into: small enterprises with 10 to 49 people, and medium enterprises 50 to 249 people. In Albania, based on the results of the Structural Statistics Survey, for the year 2021 SMEs represent 99.8% of active enterprises and they employ 81.6% of employees.

Digital marketing it is especially relevant to small and medium sized enterprises, which typically have a tight budget for marketing communications. Despite their limitations in terms of expertise, finance and experience, SMEs must take advantage of rapid growth in internet usage. Consumers are using internet and digital devices rather than visit physical stores. Businesses may now market and compete for online customers against their competitors thanks to digital marketing. Therefore, the use of digital marketing by businesses has become an important issue.

As claimed according to Fruhling and Digman (2000) the use of the internet by companies can help in increasing the number of customers and market share as well as contributing to their business growth. Consumers are more influenced by online services than by traditional communication channels (Helm, Moller, Mauroner & Conrad, 2013).

Today, it is possible to simultaneously reach an audience of over 2 million people at a significantly cheaper cost, which makes possible to quickly establish the company's brand, boost credibility, and communicate the value of the product.

SME development should be encouraged because of their potential for efficiency and innovation as well as their ability to compete on both the domestic and global markets. Marketing gives an important hand in this aspect.

B2B and B2C Digital Marketing

B2B Digital Marketing

The growth of digitalisation, according to Kannan (2017), has raised interest in B2B relationship. This is as a result of how customers behave today and how business offer their goods and services, and go digitally.

Artificial intelligence, block chain, data security, and data analytics are a few of the elements that influence how B2B partnerships are managed, according to Hofacker et al. (2020). Grewal et al. (2015) in their paper highlight the differences of digital marketing communication channels between developing and developed countries.

For example, the frequency of internet use has a significant impact on how B2B digital tactics are adopted by businesses. Among other, low PC penetration it is a challenge for business interaction with the customers. The growth of B2B digital marketing is mostly due to the rising rate of mobile phone us.

B2C Digital Marketing

The goal of B2C digital marketing is to build long and strong relationships with the customers, so they will always return and make repeated purchases. To achieve this it is important to choose and use the proper marketing strategy that can be profitable for businesses and customers as well. To do so, business can use a variety of tactics explained previously such as: Search engine optimization (SEO), pay-per click (PPC) advertising, social media advertising, web design and development, content marketing, and email marketing are a few of these techniques.

In their paper, Bettiol, et al. (2012) affirm that the managers of SMEs are a factor in the development and use of marketing strategies. In order to improve their business performance, business must be efficient and adaptable to the continuous changing business environment.

Some statistics of digital marketing use in Albania

Digital marketing comes in a variety of touch points such as website, video, SMS, social media, smartphone which allows companies for a deeper understanding of the customer experience. The most important one that small and medium enterprises use is the social networks where they decide to be present online. Since social media is the quickest and most direct way for businesses to reach their customers, 88% of businesses make an important investment in having proficient social profiles.

When the pandemic spread in Albania, many SMEs began relying more on social media and digital marketing to maintain their activity. They established and/or increased online interactions with the customers sold online products and set or expanded the use of digital payments. Many of them faced difficulties when they went online: less knowledge of ICT infrastructures, opportunities awareness, cost implications for IT investment etc.

According to the Information Communication Technology Usage Survey data of 2020, aged people 16 to 74 years old that use the internet make up 88.2% of the overall population, and 72.2% of them use the internet on a daily basis.

98.8% of people have used smartphones or other mobile devices to access the internet. In the meantime, 7.2% of people use tablets to access the Internet, and 24.4% of people use laptops.

Based on abovementioned Instat survey data, «Online» purchases include placing an order for products or services online and purchase for personal use (e-shopping) were made by using any kind of device (PC, laptop, mobile including mobile phone or smart phone). These purchases were made online during 2020 by 19.5% of people aged 16 to 74. Among online

purchases, the products/services that occupied the largest weight were clothes / shoes / accessories at the level of 84.8%. An increase in purchase level of 16.6% was registered also for food and drink products and 9.2% for medications/supplements and vitamins.

There are around 8 billion people in the world, out of whom 4.9 billion people use the social media in 2023. At the beginning of 2023, DataReportal estimates that there were 2.27 million Internet users in Albania. In January 2023, there were 1.60 million social media users in Albania, who represent 56.4% of the whole population.

In Albania, there were 3.47 million active mobile phone connections at the beginning of 2023. 1.55 million users were aged 18 years.

According to Venugopal and Swamynathan (2016) and Purnamaningsih and Rizkalla (2020), young people today play a significant role in the market, both as a buying force and as a source of influence, having an impact on both trend followers and trend shapers,

In January 2023, 70.4% of all Albanian Internet users (regardless of age) used at least one social media platform. During this period, 57.6% of users of social media were male users and 42.4 % were female users.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper dealt theoretically different aspects of digital marketing affecting business performance in general and SMEs in specific. Through a systematic review of the literature examined over 25 research papers on digital marketing issues. In the analysis were incorporated sources, authors, different countries thanks to the method used.

The goal was to provide useful information to enterprises and academia.

This paper provided a brief review and understanding regarding digital marketing issue. It brought the conclusion that the digital marketing is very important to business in general and in specific to small and medium sized enterprises.

SMEs have some limitations in terms of expertise, finance and experience, but can take advantage of rapid growth in internet usage and low cost. Consumers are using internet and digital devices rather than visit physical stores. Businesses may now market and compete for online customers against their competitors thanks to digital marketing.

Customers for SMEs today are just a click away. Thus, they can improve their performance and expand their market segment and profitability.

SME's perform better when using digital marketing. Mobile phones, the Internet, and social networking sites all play important roles in attracting, reaching, and maintaining the relationship with the customers, which leads to increased sales volumes and profitability. In addition, compared to other traditional and similarly pricey methods, the digital marketing tools offer an efficient and affordable way for the enterprises to reach the targeted customers.

With the digital marketing tools, technology adoption has become a need for business promotion and development, representing a golden for development.

But online marketing is difficult to be applied because businesses lack the necessary skills.

Areas for Further Research

As described in this paper, this study only focused on a review of a variety of research papers. Therefore, future research needs to be progressed on: systematic literature review, explore and interpret other available research, pertinent to the field of study, identify any research gaps in the body of knowledge and make additional research.

In addition to literature review could be of interest to test the conceptual framework through a survey addressed to licensed top SMEs that run a business activity in a certain sector, in urban and or rural areas, which are actively present online with their digital media.

The theoretical and practical aspect would provide further extensive information and feedback on the benefit of the use of digital marketing and would be very helpful to SMEs in developing their strategies and to academics for more research.

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Relationship with education expenditure and economic growth in Albania and the Balkan Countries

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Abstract

In the last couple of decades, human capital research has flourished due to the strong correlation between investing in people and boosting a country's economy, a finding validated by several theoretical and empirical studies. According to the Inner Growth Theories, the literature on the correlation between economic growth and educational spending supports the importance of human capital. Data for the years 2000 to 2019 were analysed in this study, which aims to demonstrate the impact of economic growth on educational expenditures, including those in our nation. Using statistical methods, this study conducts regression analysis and find that education expenditure is highly correlated with economic expansion. The key drivers of Albania's economic development are the country's high educational standards, the hiring of competent individuals, improved employment prospects, and rising incomes. The purpose of this paper is to see the impact of higher education on economic growth in Albania and the Balkan countries and to perform an empirical analysis to see its effects on economic growth. The results indicate that policymakers may craft a complete policy relating to human development to achieve sustained economic growth. In this study, two hypotheses are put forth: first, that higher education has a large beneficial impact on economic growth, and second, that higher education spending on the part of the states has a considerable effect on the economies of these nations. The results of the empirical research show that investing in higher education by the government has a favourable impact on economic growth and that it is a critical factor in these countries' long-term economic success.

Keyword: Human capital, education expenditure, economic development, Albania, Balkan Countries.

Introduction

Nowadays, education is considered as one of the most important and main factors that play a role in the economic development and social development of a country. It is very important because the knowledge and information that the teachers convey to the students later become and turn into a development force for the countries. The strong link between education and the economy has changed its characteristics and intensity over the years. Since it is widely known that education is a determining factor of economic growth, many of the classical and neoclassical economists, such as Adam Smith, Robert Solow and Romer, have pointed out the contribution in terms of education, which has influenced the

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development of theories of economic growth, making and for them to build models. The two main theoretical approaches are those of Robert Solow (1957) and that of Romer (1990) of neoclassical growth. There are also many empirical studies that have analyzed this impact that higher education has on economic growth, apart from the theoretical aspects. The economic growth of developed countries is no longer the same as that of developing countries (Kule, 2015). About 235 million students were enrolled in higher education in the world in 2020 (UNESCO, 2022). We can define education as a process of acquiring knowledge and knowledge in public or non-public educational institutions or acquiring knowledge in different ways such as: formal, non-formal & informal. Education being an essential development factor in every aspect, it is one of the sectors that is treated with high priority in every country.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the effects of higher education on the economic growth of a country, and the case studied is the 10 countries of the Balkans.

The research questions posed are:

- What is the importance of higher education for a country?
- What are the impacts and effects that higher education has on the economic growth of a country?

The hypotheses raised in this paper are:

- Higher education has a significant positive impact on economic growth in the Balkan countries.
- State budget expenditures have a great and important impact on the economic growth of a country.

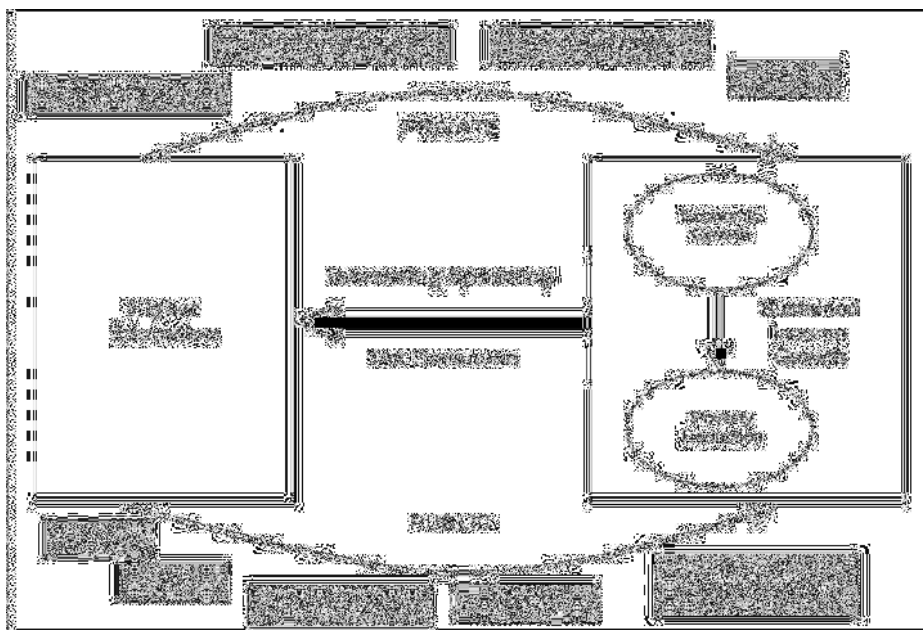
The number of qualified persons in higher education institutions is a factor that largely affects the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In this paper, to see how higher education affects the economic growth of the Balkan countries, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which is an indicator of economic growth, is taken as a dependent variable. The independent variables are enrollment in higher education, state budget expenditures on education (total), and labor force with advanced education (higher education). The data for the above variables was obtained for the period 2000-2021. The databases with the data of various variables were obtained from the World Bank.

Literature Review

High-quality university education is now more crucial than ever before, both in industrialized and developing nations, as it is widely acknowledged that it is a vital driver of economic competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy. Those that are being created (Pillay, 2011). Many economists think that to increase output and productivity at work, it is very important to invest in human capital or education. Since the economy is being oriented by the knowledge behind the post-industrial economy, investment in human capital is considered a key factor for the future (Dickens, Sawhill, & Tebbs, 2006). The determinants of economic growth are interrelated factors that affect the growth rate of an economy (Boldeanu & Constantinescu, 2015). The determinants of economic growth are formed by natural resources (land), human resources (work) and capital (physical capital). These factors can affect the level of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and output that a nation can achieve. The first model which revolutionized the understanding of economic growth theory was first developed by Robert Solow (1956). He said that to understand the potential, power, size or economic growth, physical capital and labor were not the only inputs that had all the information needed. Solow's model also had a shortcoming in that it was imprecise in determining how technological change came about. (Kule, 2015).

A theory derived from the Solow model is the theory of income convergence (Barro, 1991). Malthus and Ricardo first studied the diminishing returns to capital from which convergence is based. The neoclassical model of economic growth cannot provide an explanation for the changes that occur in real rates of return on capital. (Mankiw, 1995).

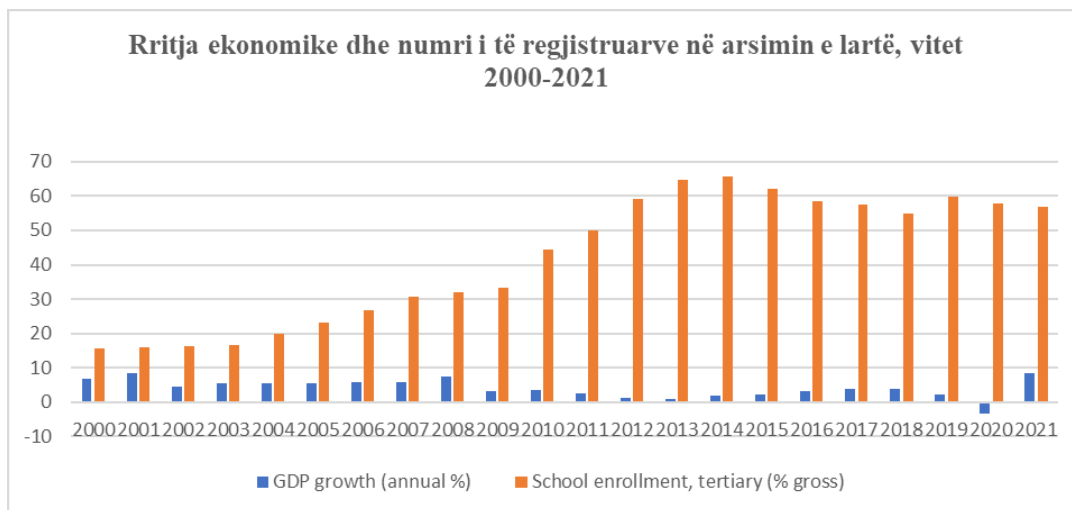
Models that oppose the Solow model's assumption of exogenous change in technology are called endogenous growth theories. These models attempt to provide an explanation on the rate of technological progress, which is considered an exogenous variable by the Solow model (Mankiw, 2015). The effects of variables such as trade, human capital or endogenous technology, introduction and different mechanisms of the technological process are considered by this theory, important in influencing the growth of production. Technology is produced by countries that are leaders in the field of technology, and its distribution takes place between countries through the trade of goods. Developing countries to promote the spread of technology coming from developed countries, make continuous investment in human capital and economic institutions. While developed countries use human capital and natural resources to create new technologies. (Kule, 2015).

FIGURE 1: Relationship between Higher Education and Economic Growth.

Source: Kule, D (2015).

According to Castells (1994), higher education will help the world economy grow. Higher education is crucial to a nation's economic success, and we might think of it as an investment in the growth of human capital. It has a lot of advantages and makes a significant contribution to the development of educated workers and people who can thrive in the information economy (Hamdan, Sarea, Khamis, & Anasweh, 2020). In today's world, education is a key contributor to social advancement and economic prosperity. The possibility for self-expression, creative fulfillment, and moral gratification from one's current activities are all provided by education, in addition to enabling the individual to earn a greater wage. People with education have longer lives that are also more interesting and instructive. A better degree of education also makes people happier (Stryzhak, 2020). According to Stryzhak (2020) asserts that there is a connection between measures of money, education, happiness, and freedom. It begs the question: Can education provide happiness and financial security? Or in a higher affluent society where individuals are content and have more educational options. Since education affects many aspects of society and the economy, its significance should not be understated.

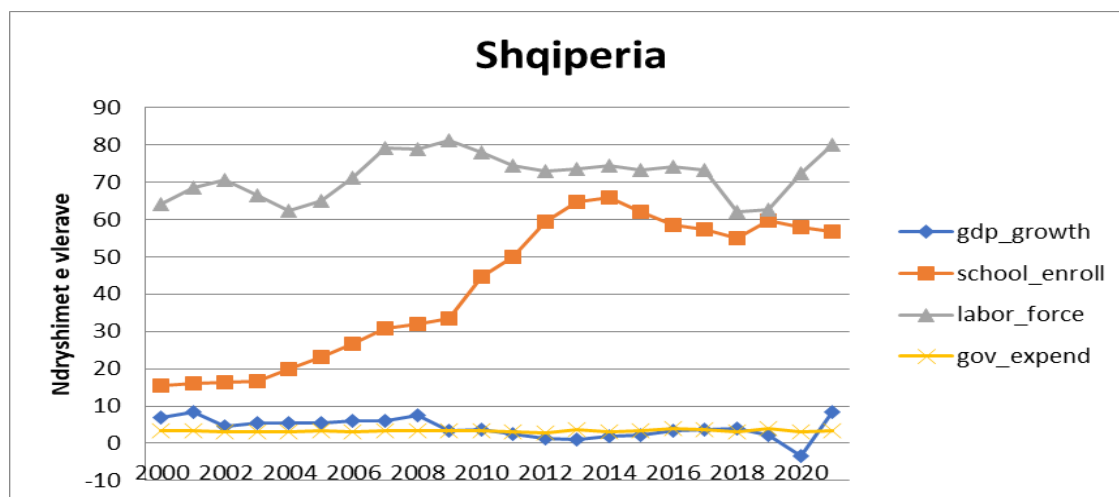
According to the World Bank, in 2021 the economic growth of Albania was approximately 8.5%, which we can say is quite good compared to the years 2019 and 2020, from where it was 2.08% and -3.5%, because of the earthquake with consequences the devastating events of November 26, 2019, where the global crisis of Covid-19 appeared amid efforts to rebuild the country (World Bank, 2021).

GRAPHIC 1: Economic growth and the number of people enrolled in higher education, years 2000-2021.

Source: Author (2023).

As we can see from the figure, we noticed that there is an increase in the number of people enrolled in higher education, where the highest value is in 2014 with 65.7%, which has maintained an almost stable trend, with very little decrease and rising, from 2014 to 2021 where it is 56.7% respectively. We also see that economic growth is almost the same during the years 2000-2021, except for the interval of 2009, which marks the year of the global financial crisis, until 2015, as well as 2019-2020, where the lowest value is in 2013 by about 1% and even lower in 2020 where the economic growth marks a value of -3.5%. This low value of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) came because of the devastating earthquake that our country faced in 2019, as well as after the efforts to rebuild the country again, the country faced the Covid-19 crisis, which took over the world, causing enormous damage to all sectors of the economy. The highest value of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for Albania is in 2021 with 8.5%. Two of the most important and priority factors for companies are academic achievements and graduate degrees. They consider the professionalism of future employees related to their experience, as companies place great importance on their education and training. (Kule,2015).

GRAPHIC 3: Indicators for Albania 2000-2020.



Source: Author (2023).

In the Western Balkans, many students in higher education are enrolled in public institutions. Even though in the region the enrollment rate in higher education is high, on average about 50% of students graduate, so the percentage of students who graduate is very low. According to available estimates, for Croatia, North Macedonia and Albania, graduation rates are approximately below 40% for students who have been enrolled in the educational institution for 10 years. So, these not-so-good educational results, the very high unemployment rate, as well as the structural issues, present very big challenges for the countries of the Western Balkans. In the early 1990s, after the war of dissolution of Yugoslavia, many countries in the region faced a very difficult period of transition. Some factors that have continuously affected the academic sectors of countries are structural and political weaknesses, which are related to inefficient bureaucratic structures, weak government accountability and corruption, and this happens because they are overseen by their respective governments (Brajkovic,2016).

Methodology

This research is a quantitative study that studies the relationship between government expenditures and GDP. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP), since it is the main indicator of economic growth, will be taken as a dependent variable, to see the impact of higher education on the economic growth of the Balkan countries. Independent variables are Number of students enrolled in higher education, Labor force with advanced education and Government spending on education. The data for the variables were obtained in the period 2000-2021, i.e., for a period of 22 years. Data have been collected for 10 Balkan countries, namely: Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia, Greece, Slovenia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Romania. So, we have panel data. The databases used in the analysis are obtained from the World Bank. (The World Bank, GDP growth (annual %), 2023) (The World Bank, School enrollment, tertiary (% gross), 2022) (The World Bank, Labor force with advanced education (% of total working-age population with advanced education), 2023) (The World Bank, Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP), 2022).

Descriptive analysis

Descriptive analyzes in time series econometrics involve the use of a variety of statistical methods to describe and analyze the trends and characteristics of time series. Some of the most common descriptive analysis methods are:

- Time Series Charts: Graphical display of time series helps in identifying various trends and patterns that may be present in them.
- Depth statistics: This includes the calculation of figures such as mean and standard deviation, as well as other depths such as covariance and correlation.
- Frequency analyses: This analysis describes the number of times an event occurs in a time series. For example, the number of times a product is sold in a given period.
- Spectral analysis: This analysis is used to identify the different characteristics of the time series in frequency, such as cycle and period.

The use of descriptive analysis is an important step in time series analysis and helps to understand their various characteristics and patterns. Descriptive statistics are included in the table below for each of the variables. These statistics include the mean, median, normality statistics, etc.

TABLE 1: Descriptive analysis.

	GDP GRO...	GOV EXPEND	LABOR FO...	SCHOOL E...
Mean	2.951705	3.788248	75.61834	53.79407
Median	3.377926	3.614100	77.12089	50.38716
Maximum	12.76547	5.985367	83.71000	156.5647
Minimum	-15.30689	2.100347	60.15872	11.10287
Std. Dev.	3.824397	0.739235	5.584420	26.75554
Skewness	-1.110193	0.899466	-0.890234	1.262158
Kurtosis	5.921179	3.701796	2.850841	5.463067
Jarque-Bera	123.4145	34.17954	29.26285	114.0229
Probability	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000	0.000000
Sum	649.3751	833.4147	16636.03	11834.70
Sum Sq. Dev.	3203.097	119.6766	6829.678	156773.1
Observations	220	220	220	220

Source: Authors (2023).

The statistics for each variable are displayed in Table 1. All variables are regularly distributed, as demonstrated by probability, sum, and sum sq. dev. A normal distribution is symmetrical and has a bell-shaped shape, with a peak that has a Skewness of 0 and a tail that has a Kurtosis of 3. The normal distribution is rejected if the Skewness is not close to 0 and the Kurtosis is not close to 3. The statistics for each variable are displayed in Table 1. All variables are regularly distributed, as demonstrated by probability, sum, and sum sq. dev. A normal distribution is symmetrical and has a bell-shaped shape, with a peak that has a Skewness of 0 and a tail that has a Kurtosis of 3. The normal distribution is rejected if the Skewness is not close to 0 and the Kurtosis is not close to 3.

Fisher Chi-Square Test

TABLE 2: Fisher Chi-Square Test.

Dependent Variable: GDP_GROWTH				
Method: Panel EGLS (Cross-section random effects)				
Date: 03/28/23 Time: 23:32				
Sample: 2000 2021				
Periods included: 22				
Cross-sections included: 10				
Total panel (balanced) observations: 220				
Swamy and Arora estimator of component variances				
Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	4.650788	2.898747	1.604414	0.1102
GOV_EXPEND	0.218245	0.032822	6.649156	0.0000
LABOR_FORCE	0.076585	0.036168	2.117468	0.0325
SCHOOL_ENROLL	0.026981	0.010475	2.575879	0.0107
Effects Specification			S.D.	Rho
Cross-section random			0.523494	0.0465
Period fixed (dummy variables)				
Idiosyncratic random			2.371714	0.9535
Weighted Statistics				
R-squared	0.639877	Mean dependent var	2.951705	
Adjusted R-squared	0.595554	S.D. dependent var	3.752565	
S.E. of regression	2.386483	Sum squared resid	1110.584	
F-statistic	14.43675	Durbin-Watson stat	1.837868	
Prob(F-statistic)	0.000000			

Source: Authors (2023).

The above table is estimated with random effects both by time series and by units. It can be seen from the table that the model can be written in this form:

$$\text{GDP growth} = 4.65 + 0.21 \cdot \text{gov expend} + 0.07 \cdot \text{labour force} + 0.02 \cdot \text{school enroll}$$

The coefficient of determination is a statistic used in regression analysis to assess how well the variability of the responsible variable can be captured by the regression model. This statistic is expressed as a number between 0 and 1 and can be interpreted as the percentage of the variability of the responsible variable that can be explained by the other variables in the regression model. The closer the coefficient of determination is to the value 1, the better the model is at explaining the variation of the responsible variable. The coefficient of determination can vary depending on how the variables are selected in the model, so it should be remembered that a high coefficient of determination does not guarantee a good model. Also, it is important to consider other statistics to assess the quality of the regression model, such as tests of the intercept statistic (F-test) and t-tests for model coefficients. The model explains the relationship at the level of 63.9%, so it has good correlation. All variables have probability values smaller than 5%. This means that they are all statistically significant and Fisher's value for the global significance of the model is $14.4 > 5$. So, the model in total is also significant.

The Durbin-Watson I test is a statistical method used to verify whether there is autocorrelation in the residuals of a regression model. Autocorrelation in the residuals causes problems in accurately estimating the model coefficients and estimating the standard error. The Durbin-Watson test uses the serial correlation value of the residuals of the model and assesses whether there is an autocorrelated model. The value of the test is between 0 and 4, and a value of 2 indicates no autocorrelation of the residuals. In the case of serial correlation, this is a category of autocorrelation that indicates the presence of correlation between the values of a time series with previous or future values in the same time series. This can happen in many time series, such as stock prices, GDP growth, etc. Serial correlation causes an increase in the standard error of the model coefficients and can lead to an incorrect estimation of the significance of the variables in the model. To reduce the influence of serial correlation in the model, techniques such as using the first difference of the time series or building panel models with random effects can be used. Also, from the table above we noticed that the I Durbin-Watson test is at the value of 1.83, being close to the value of 2 we can say that there is no serial correlation in this multiple regression.

ARDL Test

The ARDL (Autoregressive Distributed Lag) test is a regression estimation method, which is suitable for evaluating high degree interdependence relationships between an independent variable and a dependent variable, especially in cases where the time series for these two variables have different structure. This method was first used by the pessimist Brooks (2001) and is considered an improved variant of the regression model with multiple sums, including time series information.

TABLE 3: ARDL Test.

Dependent Variable: D(GDP GROWTH)				
Method: ARDL				
Date: 04/19/23 Time: 22:19				
Sample: 2002 2021				
Included observations: 200				
Maximum dependent lags: 3 (Automatic selection)				
Model selection method: Akaike info criterion (AIC)				
Dynamic regressors (3 lags, automatic): LABOR FORCE				
SCHOOL_ENROLL				
Fixed regressors: C				
Number of models evaluated: 9				
Selected Model: ARDL(2, 1, 1)				
Note: final equation sample is larger than selection sample				
Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.*
Long Run Equation				
LABOR_FORCE	0.067140	0.032918	2.039596	0.0430
SCHOOL_ENROLL	-0.096646	0.009391	-10.29080	0.0000
Short Run Equation				
COINTEQ01	-1.069740	0.182473	-5.862463	0.0000
D(GDP_GROWTH(-1))	-0.089877	0.152571	-0.589079	0.5566
D(LABOR_FORCE)	0.480909	0.201972	2.381072	0.0184
D(SCHOOL_ENROLL)	0.107187	0.107809	0.994233	0.3215
C	3.219695	0.718998	4.478033	0.0000
Root MSE	3.035591	Mean dependent var		0.234317
S.D. dependent var	5.007714	S.E. of regression		3.473761
Akaike info criterion	4.983213	Sum squared resid		2027.259
Schwarz criterion	5.785343	Log likelihood		-496.1534
Hannan-Quinn criter.	5.307134			

*Note: p-values and any subsequent tests do not account for model selection.

Source: Authors (2023).

From the above results we can see both the long run and short run equations. If we make an interpretation in the long run, we notice that labor force and school enrollment will affect the change in the first difference of GDP growth with +0.067 and -0.096 percent, respectively. Their values are statistically significant, because the p value is 0.043 and 0.000 respectively for each of them. So less than the critical probability of 5%. If we look at the results in the short run, we have included the first-order difference for GDP growth, as an independent variable with an impact of -0.089 percent, and the changes in the first difference for labor force with +0.48 and +0.10 percent, respectively. Of the three independent variables in the short run, only labor force has statistical significance, because the probability value is 0.018, i.e., smaller than 5%.

Conclusions

Albania and the Balkan countries have undergone an economic transformation in recent years, which is a result of the increase in the standard of living and well-being. Although the economic situation during the period of Covid-19 worsened a lot, now it has started to recover again. According to the first and third hypothesis in my paper, which states that higher education has a significant positive impact on economic growth in the Balkan countries, it is confirmed by the results of the empirical analysis, where it was seen that the variables school enroll (enrolled in the education of high) and labor force (labor force with advanced education), had a strong positive relationship with the dependent variable GDP growth (Gross Domestic Product growth). Therefore, the raised hypothesis is confirmed.

In these countries, higher education is often endangered and influenced by corruption and various political parties. It often happens that many students buy an exam or a diploma with money and not with their knowledge and merit. The same is true for the academic staff, where a very large part of it is employed, not based on experience, knowledge, and training, but based on personal acquaintances or on the side of political parties. This phenomenon must be eliminated absolutely since the higher education system must be completely independent and not influenced by corruption or by different political parties. It should

be an institution of meritocracy for both students and academic staff. The main goal of the governments in these countries has been education reforms, which have been continuous and aimed at increasing the quality of higher education, as well as funding support in the field of scientific research.

The second hypothesis of this paper has to do with the great and important influence of state budget expenditures on the economic growth of these countries. This hypothesis is supported because based on the results of the empirical analysis, we saw that between the variables gov expend (government spending on education) and GDP growth (Gross Domestic Product growth), there was a strong positive relationship. So, the state budget expenditures have a significant impact on the economic growth of these countries. According to the empirical result, any government spending on higher education will have a positive impact on the growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

All independent variables have a positive correlation with the dependent variable GDP growth (Gross Domestic Product growth), which indicates a strong positive relationship between them. What is new and worth saying in this paper is that according to the results obtained from the statistical analysis of these countries, we concluded that a quality higher education will affect the economic growth of these countries. And only when these countries have an education system according to European Union (EU) standards, only then will their economy flourish and develop.

Recommendations

- It is necessary to increase the quality of education, initially by improving the quality of the academic staff, which should be chosen based on their experience, as well as their training and qualifications. It is very important that phenomena such as corruption or political influences in higher education disappear completely and higher education institutions are independent and not influenced by them.
- It is very necessary to fundamentally change the teaching methods, replacing them with teaching methods where innovative and modern technology is used, which give the possibility of teacher-student interaction, thus influencing the student's critical thinking process. The preparation of students by lecturers with modern technology will create a human capital which will be in line with global developments.
- The cooperation of faculties and businesses should be developed more; in addition to the theory taught at the university, the universities should provide their students with the practical part to connect theory with practice. As well as after completing their studies, these students are guaranteed a job, as well as the recruitment costs are reduced for the business, since thanks to the cooperation with the university, it knows the individuals who have practiced there. So, this increases even more the impact of education on economic growth, through the employment of graduate students.
- More reforms should be made in the field of higher education, the aim of which should be to increase the quality and autonomy of universities as well as to increase the standards of universities. The educational system must be in accordance with the standards of the European Union (EU). There should be more financial aid for students from minority groups or different minorities, as well as for those with different abilities, so that they too can get an education.
- Another very important thing is financial support in the field of scientific research, as through it you are given solutions to many important economic problems of the country.

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The EU's Politics of Differentiated Integration Made Albania's Membership a 'Catch-22'

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Abstract

Albania's persistent pursuit of European Union (EU) membership over three decades is marred by a perplexing pattern of progress and regression. What has remained constant, however, has been the uncertainty of Albania's membership. Despite being a NATO member and an EU candidate country, which, according to the Commission, meets the criteria to start accession negotiations, the current foreign policy clash between Greece and Albania is again blocking its accession process for the foreseeable future. Hence, this paper explores the EU's distinctive "differentiated enlargement" approach with the Western Balkans (WB) and its profound implications on Albania's arduous journey towards membership. Albania finds itself entrapped in a paradoxical situation—unable to advance without becoming a member and unable to attain membership without advancing. Within this context, the paper scrutinizes the intricate nuances of the EU's politics of differentiated integration. This distinctive enlargement strategy deviates from the uniform policies applied to Eastern European (EE) countries during the 1990s. The notion of being a "good neighbor" has introduced historical complexities and tensions that EU candidates in the Balkans must navigate. Before joining, they must resolve all bilateral issues with EU and non-EU states, yet EU membership often signifies the best platform for resolving such conflicts. This dynamic within the "good neighbor" criterion is examined. It has served as the primary tool to halt the WB countries' EU path and provides more clarity regarding the perspective of new candidates like Ukraine.

Keywords: Differentiated Integration and EU Enlargement, Catch-22 dilemmas, Albania and Greece, Western Balkans, Ukraine

Introduction

Context

The path to EU membership is a multifaceted journey marked by diverse experiences, aspirations, and obstacles. What remains constant, however, is the uncertainty of Albania's membership. The current foreign policy clash between Greece and Albania is enough yet again to block its EU accession process. This paper examines the role of regionalism, a significant element within the Stability Pact (SP) and Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) policies used by the EU to impede WB integration and enlargement. Croatia's successful accession via the SAA pathway inadvertently legitimized a problematic approach that adversely affected the WB and the EU. The Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 formalized the concept of regionalism within SP, further empowering EU member states during accession negotiations. If an EU member, say Slovenia, applied regionalism during Croatia's accession, it could have delayed their entry for an extended period. EU integration is not an objective process but a decision made by veto-holders in the EU Council.

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As this paper unfolds, we delve into Albania's aspirations to join the EU within the broader context of EE success stories and the WB's distinct challenges in realizing its ambition. The EU's "differentiated enlargement" policy casts a long shadow over Albania's EU integration efforts, making it imperative to scrutinize the pitfalls of this approach. Economides (2008) first applied the concept of differentiated integration to the EU's enlargement strategy. The EU's politics of differentiated integration in the Balkans—an approach that arguably allows EU aspirants or candidates to progress at varying speeds and levels of integration based on their individual merits, has de facto morphed, this paper argues, into a discriminative policy of differentiated enlargement based on the national interest of existing EU members.

Inside the accession literature, we find a popular story accounting for the puzzle of why Albania's EU bid overall has been a failure. This story, sold by both policymakers and academia as a scientific fact, states that Albania alone bears the blame for not yet Europeanising; Albania has failed to westernize—there is a lack of rule of law and democratic mechanisms; Albania has failed to develop a free and dynamic economy; and so, Albania has failed to join the EU. Although the above failures are actual, the narrative blaming only Albania is a myth. It is a myth because the speed of integration and enlargement lies not in "the hands of the [EU candidate] countries," as famously stated in the Thessaloniki Summit Communiqué 2003. However, it lies exclusively in the hands of members (Economides, 2008). The speed of westernization of Albania depends on the EU.

In Albania's accession, the most determinant members are Greece, France, Holland, Germany, Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria. They decided Albania's geopolitical fate, directly impacting the whole region and its people. The EU, deeply divided by the petty national interests of members, seems unable to act on its geopolitical interest in Albania. Members like Greece, France, Holland, and now Bulgaria have stalled the integration and enlargement process not only for Albania but for all the countries of the region referred to as the WB—North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro. Enlargement fatigue has left the entire region in a geopolitical limbo, exploited by anti-western great powers and politicians.

Albania, situated in the heart of Europe, boasts a rich and diverse history that spans millennia. However, the contemporary trajectory towards EU membership is inseparable from the tumultuous events of the 20th century. During Hoxha's nearly 40-year reign from 1944 to 1985, Albania became one of the world's most isolated and closed societies. The isolationist policies of Enver Hoxha came to an abrupt end with his death in 1985. This event marked the beginning of a profound transformation for Albania, characterized by political upheaval as the communist regime crumbled under the weight of its contradictions. In 1992, Albania held its first multiparty elections, signifying the official transition to democracy. This political transformation ignited aspirations to 'rejoin' Europe.

Since the Maastricht Treaty, the EU has deployed different enlargement policies towards different countries, yielding a varied degree of success. Most of the countries in the former EE during the 1990s were offered the standard EU entry deal—the Europe Agreement (EA), and successfully joined roughly ten years later, independent of whether they met or not all the entry criteria. From a Euro-Atlantic perspective, the EU's 'Big-Bang' enlargement rounds throughout the 2000s secured the eastern flank of the West vis-a-vis the former Soviet Union (USSR) by even incorporating three former USSR republics. Whereas the remaining EE countries in the region, now called the WB, were only offered the SP and later the SAA.

Interestingly, in 1992, the EU promised Albania the EA entry deal but later reneged on this promise. The research for this paper shows that this was chiefly due to the tense Greek-Albanian relations between 1993 and 1996. In the 1990s, as Albania transitioned from communism to democracy, it faced a significant challenge in strained relations with its EU neighbor. The incarceration of an Orthodox priest in Albania led to the expulsion of thousands of Albanian refugees. The humanitarian aid the EU promised Albania gets vetoed. Only Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, and arguably Croatia in the Balkans get the fast-entry EU pass without the obstacle of regionalism. According to the literature, only Albania's extreme domestic situation in 1996-1997 is to blame for halting Albania's EU perspective.

The truth is that Albania's economic collapse between 1991-1994 was primarily due to the legacy of the failed communist system. However, it was sped up by the free trade deal Albania signed with the EU in 1992. Moreover, the political state collapse throughout the 90s was also because the EU did not offer Albania the EA to enter the EU. This political deal should have shortly followed the economic deal in 1992. Leaving Albania without a clear political perspective to 'rejoin Europe' at this crucial juncture—during the hastiest implementation of the most drastic liberal reforms in the most import-substitute centralized economy in Europe, was misguided by the EU. It delegitimized the democratic and trade reforms, especially in the eyes of the elected Albanian politicians who were free to go rogue.

Geopolitical limbo and isolation are common in Albania. The despotic tendencies of Albanian politicians, like all Balkan leaders, are also common. Albania's Prime Minister, Edi Rama, has used the narrative of the Europeanising rule of law reforms not to address development and democratic deficits but to personally control most democratic mechanisms—turning Albania into a prime ministerial dictatorship (Moikom, 2023). This, of course, is a choice political entrepreneurs like Rama make, and it is not an innate cultural trait of the Albanian people. The EU has a determinant role here, too. Albania's geopolitical limbo—in the West's sphere of influence and NATO member, but without full access to the EU facilitates authoritarian personal rule regimes.

Linking with this, we will consider the concept of regionalism, the critical element in SP/SAA because that is the tool the EU used to slow down to a minimum the integration and enlargement of the WB. Croatia's successful bid via the SAA route helped to legitimize a flawed policy that has done more harm than good to the WB and the EU. The Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 codified and institutionalized SP's regionalism concept, further empowering the asymmetric power of EU members during the accession negotiations of candidate states. Note that if Slovenia enforced the concept of regionalism during Croatia's bid, it could have blocked EU entry for decades (for example, FYROM).

The tentative conclusion to be reached is that the EU's politics of differentiated integration and enlargement have placed Albania in an impossible 'Catch-22' situation. No matter what it does, the result is the same: first, Albania cannot westernize until it has joined, but the EU says 'not yet' because Albania has not westernized; second, Albania's economy cannot develop until it has joined, but the EU says 'not yet' because Albania has not developed; and thirdly, and most importantly, Albania cannot be considered a 'good neighbor' to join until it has joined, but the EU says 'not yet' because Albania is not a 'good neighbor.' All the remaining WB countries face a similar 'Catch-22' impossible situation, particularly North Macedonia and Kosovo. Moldova and Ukraine will face similar paradoxes in their EU's path.

Will the EU's supranational institutions, like the Commission, be able to confront and change the stance against further enlargement of some members in the Council —EU's all-powerful intergovernmental body, with the WB, Moldova, and Ukraine? The EU, supported by the US, must now deliver on enlargement promises, first and foremost with the near countries of the WB, to inject new optimism for Ukraine's EU perspective, too. To enhance the EU's enlargement policy, this paper considers whether the WB should collectively join the EU simultaneously or not. This approach could help resolve the frozen conflict between Serbia and Kosovo, adding credibility to the EU's enlargement policy, especially in light of Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Literature review

Most studies of EE's post-Communist transition and EU accession are either too comprehensive or too confined in their framework, thus portraying a myopic view of reality.

In the former set, focused on quantifiable data, policymakers and scholars rationalize peaceful yet destructive and traumatic processes—like the systemic collapse of the failed communist system and the 'shock therapy' reforms for the liberal system. We should remember that Albania's principal achievement during the 90s was the most significant peacetime economic and state collapse ever recorded. In the latter set, most notably for this paper, scholars and policymakers painstakingly describe integration and enlargement as an objective and fair process and tend to blame diverging outcomes more on the agency of aspirant members—known as the EU candidates (Elbasani, 2011). In the literature, there is a strong focus on the initial conditions and entry criteria rather than geopolitics. Ultimately, geopolitics is a great research friend to shed new light on EU-Albania relations.

Second, and most crucially, comparing EE countries and contrasting their paths towards becoming or not liberal democracies and EU members yields erroneous results if one ignores this banal fact. The fact that different countries, at different times, were offered different binding bilateral deals by the EU. The EU's three-decade-long relationship with Albania provides an opportunity to explore the concept of differentiated integration and enlargement. The paper will initially look at the context of the EU-Albania relationship and trace the origins of the policy of differentiated integration with Albania through the context of actual policies. It will be argued that even though there is a public perception and portrayal that only Albania is to blame for the spectacular failures in its westernization processes, a deep inquiry shows that the reason why the EU-Albania relation goes 'zig-zag' is because of EU members.

Both sets tend to conflate two basic assumptions: first, modernization or EUnisation/Europeanisation or westernization—i.e., building a liberal democracy and joining the EU, is not a sociological process for a nation-state. Treating it as a sociological matter—i.e., Albanians cannot build a liberal democracy; it is nonsense and carries racial undertones. Modernization is a purely geopolitical process (Kotkin, 2001). For example, European Romania and Bulgaria are more Western — the rule of law, democratic institutions, free trade, and values, today because they were allowed to join the EU. At the same time, Albania and North Macedonia are less Western because they were not allowed in. EU membership is not a guarantee for full Europeanisation, as the case of Hungary shows, and in its absence, there could still be democracy, as in the case of Kosovo. However, the EU membership status is a better catalyst for westernizing the WB.

The main research objectives of this paper are as follows

First, this paper will analyze the EU's "differentiated integration" concept in its enlargement strategy and examine how this approach affects Albania's progress towards EU membership. This leads to investigating Albania's paradoxical challenges in meeting EU accession criteria and the contributing factors. In so doing, a better understanding of Albania's challenges to membership will emerge with a focus on Greek-Albanian relations. To conclude, we must propose viable solutions and policy recommendations to the EU to facilitate Albania's membership (and other countries in the WB and broader region, including Moldova and Ukraine).

Methodology

Reviewing official EU documents, reports, and policy papers related to enlargement policies is fantastic for research, and it leads to discovering critical facts regarding the EU's stance on Albania's membership. Their meaning is enhanced by examining historical events, policy developments, and political dynamics that have influenced Albania's accession process. We use Albania both as a case study to gain a better understanding of its challenges and also as part of a comparative analysis to provide recommendations for the wider region, too.

Differentiated Enlargement: Understanding the EU's Approach

The Eastern European Success and the Western Balkan Failure

The fact that the EU, back in the mid-90s, pursued a politics of differentiated integration and enlargement—not offering the EA to Albania and others, looks mundane and evident in this paper. Nevertheless, it is not the story we have so far regarding Albania's integration. In this famous story, the EU is an infallible organization that sets out clear and objective membership criteria, and the enlargement process is led by balanced supranational institutions—like the EU Commission. In the 1990s, most EE countries were offered the standard EU entry deal, the EA. In contrast, the remaining EE countries—the WB- encountered different policies. Instead of being offered EAs, they were initially presented with the SP and the SAA. Unlike EAs, which were pathways to EU membership, the SAA is a pre-accession agreement that does not guarantee eventual EU membership.

Croatia in 2010 showed that the Thessaloniki agenda worked. However, for some time, the rest of the WB countries have only seen the EU's insistence on regional cooperation as an indication that their prospects of accession are dim. Indeed, the Thessaloniki agenda shows that the EU was not keen to let the WB via the quick traditional way — the EA. Instead, regionalism was codified as the critical criterion for WB's EU accession. So, the critical condition to join the EU was good relations with all non-EU members, particularly to address all bilateral issues with any EU member state. The EU offered different binding contractual agreements because of the critical geopolitical development, particularly the war in Yugoslavia, which was seen as a Balkan War.

The confusion of attitudes and the conflation of Albania and Yugoslavia was due to the lack of a distinction between the geo-strategic threats or consequences of Yugoslavia's disintegration and the socio-cultural issues underpinning potential regional unrest. The popular view was that Yugoslavia's wars – and hence the essence of Balkan politics, including Albania – were a nationalist struggle. This said, the EU was careful to distinguish only Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria (after the war in Bosnia in 1995, the EU extended only to them EAs). From then on, the EU's policy towards Albania—also not part of Yugoslavia, was not one of integration and enlargement but of reconstruction and stability.

As Economides (2008) explained, institution-building, in this context, referred to something different than simply preparation for entry negotiations, but “democratization for the sake of democratization” with no membership guarantees and much conditionality. It represents a departure from the uniform enlargement policies applied to Eastern European countries during the 1990s. This tailored approach apparently allowed the EU to be more flexible and responsive in its engagement with aspiring member states, recognizing that a one-size-fits-all strategy may not effectively address the diverse realities of candidate countries (Schimmelfennig, 2004).

EU's Tailored Approach with Albania

In the 1980s, the European Communities, the precursor of the EU, extended free trade deals to countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia. There was a German-led attempt to reestablish relations with Albania following the normalization of relations between Greece and Albania in the 1970s, which only ended in a bilateral political recognition with no free trade deal. The situation in Albania continued to deteriorate in the 80s, and Ramiz Alia (simultaneously Albania's last dictator and first democratically elected president), who had resisted a free trade agreement with the Germans, was now reaching out to the European Communities, making Albania a signature of the Helsinki Agreement.

In this context, Albania, still under communist rule and facing mass famine, tries to establish relations with the EC. The first official meeting was held on Monday, 19 February 1991. The Albanian delegation led by Mr Petraq Pojani (short info about him), Director of Multilateral Cooperation within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, met with the EC Commission delegation headed by Pablo Benavides, Director in DG1. The meeting resulted from Ramiz Alia's attempts to establish relations; hence, the EC press release says, “The discussions aimed to examine follow-up to the request of the Albanian authorities to establish relations with the European Communities.” The Press Release includes what the Albanian delegation expressed, namely informing the Commission on the process reforms undertaken in Albania, particularly the general election scheduled for March 1991.

The fall of Communism in Albania, the last such event in Europe outside the Soviet Union, started in December 1990 with student demonstrations in the capital, Tirana. However, protests started in January that year in cities like Shkodra and Kavaja. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Labour of Albania allowed political pluralism on 11 December, and the largest opposition party, the Democratic Party (DP), was founded the next day. March 1991 elections left the Party of Labour in power, but a general strike and urban opposition led to the formation of a “stability government” that included non-communists. Albania's former communists were routed in elections in March 1992 amid economic collapse and social unrest, with the DP winning most seats and its party head, Sali Berisha, becoming president.

The EC waited until Albania had a democratic democratically elected government with Prime Minister Berisha to finally extend to Albania, at the same time as the Baltic countries, in December 1992, a free trade deal granting ‘most favored nation’ status. In all four deals, there is a mention that both sides are working towards the EA. Therefore, when Albania signed the

economic deal with the EU, it was offered the political deal, too—the EA. However, while the Baltics signed the EA in 1995, this agreement was withdrawn for Albania. The 1992 Agreement between ECC and Albania on Trade and Commercial and Economic Cooperation (TCEC) was signed by Genc Ruli, Albania's Foreign Minister, representing Albania, and the EEC representative, João de Deus Pinheiro, President-in-Office of the Council of the European Communities. It states that both parties are “working towards the objective of an association agreement in due course when conditions are met.”

What is also interesting is that unlike the TCEC the EU signed with the Baltics that month, the deal with Albania includes in Article 10 a protective measure that “Goods shall be traded between the Contracting Parties at market-related prices and on terms which neither cause nor threaten to cause injury to producers of like or directly competing products at a comparable stage of marketing.” During the early 1990s, Greece feared cheap Albanian products would harm its agro-producers. Hence, the Greek government of Konstantinos Mitsotakis must have lobbied the EU Council to include this provision. Nevertheless, Albania was given a perspective to trade with the EC. This resulted in the EC grouping Albania with the Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) to provide measures to improve access to the Single Market for their products. This initiative was in response to the agreement reached by the Council on 1 October to include those countries in the PHARE programme of coordinated assistance provided by the Group of 24. Following the war in Bosnia and Rambyet, Albania was grouped not with the Baltics and Romania but joined the former Yugoslavia, although it had not been part of the union. Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia still got the EAs in the late 1990s, whereas Albania, like FYROM, got lost in the SP/SAA.

Albania's history is marked by geopolitical instability, making its European integration inherently challenging. The EU's insistence on resolving bilateral disputes among Western Balkans countries with EU members before granting membership creates a “Catch-22” scenario for Albania that we will examine later in this paper. For now, it has over-empowered existing EU members vis-a-vis EU candidate countries during their accession process. Members are able and aloud without restraint to make maximalist demands to EU candidates desperate to join. In the 1990s, as Albania transitioned from communism to democracy, it faced a strained relationship with neighboring Greece. These tensions were primarily related to issues such as the expulsion of Albanian migrants from Greece by Andreas Papandreou's government due to the incarceration of Omonia members in Albania.

Early EU-Albania Relation

The EU reneged on its promise to offer a European Agreement to Albania in 1994 due to the tense Greek-Albanian relations in the early 1990s. Two examples will help to illustrate this point. First, five Ominia members are arrested and accused of treason - as a result, Greece expels some seventy thousand Albanian refugees from Greece. Secondly, the incarceration of the Orthodox priest in Albania resulted in the expulsion of a further twenty thousand Albanian refugees. So, we have an agitated situation between Berisha and Papandreou. There is a provocation from Greece and an overreaction by Berisha's government. Greece's international reputation was harmed when it blocked the EU's humanitarian aid to Albania in 1994-1995. As a result, it vetoed Albania's EU accession via the traditional route—the EA. From then on, the EU formulated policies that address Albania as part of the territorial cluster of WB, urging them to adopt and promote regional cooperation with non-Eu countries as a critical step in their ‘European perspective’ while simultaneously differentiation between states in their approach to membership.

Bilateral relations were only normalized in 1996, two months before the infamous general election in Albania, with the signing of the Friendship Treaty, which is up for renewal this year. In theory, this treaty had also to address the crisis of the Albanian refugees in Greece. In practice, this treaty conditions the recognition of Albania's territorial borders with the wealthfare of the Greek minority in Albania. Like the friendship treaty between Bulgaria and FYROM, these bilateral treaties deserve a more visible place in EU enlargement literature.

For the prevailing narrative, the Thessaloniki Summit is only a success that opened the EU's door wide and open for the Western Balkan countries. In reality, what was promised was a delayed accession process, which has put countries like Albania in limbo—an impossible ‘Catch-22’ situation. It codified the concept of regionalism, first developed with the stability pact, which says that countries must solve all bilateral issues with all their EU and non-EU neighbors to join the EU. This was already back in the 90s and visibility in 2003. However, his concept is not applied to Cyprus—a frozen conflict, to the Baltics—former USSR republics, and Croatia—the territorial dispute with Slovenia remains a hot issue.

Slovenia, an EU member during the latter part of Croatia's EU accession path, managed to veto the process one year. However, due to international pressure, it lifted the veto and allowed Croatia to become a member and continue its path of Westernization. On the one hand, it demands that countries like Albania solve all their issues now. On the other hand, it granted membership to countries that did not solve their territorial disputes even with their EU neighbors. Moreover, it accepted Romania and Bulgaria without meeting all the Copenhagen criteria. The EU's Politics of Differentiated Enlargement shows that the enlargement is not an objective process led by the EU's supranational institutions. Instead, it is a subjective geopolitical process led by the interest of EU veto-holding members.

‘Catch-22’ Implications of Differentiated Enlargement for Albania

In Joseph Heller’s (1961) novel —titled *Catch-18*, the term ‘Catch-22’ describes a no-win situation or a dilemma with no apparent solution because the conditions for resolving it are mutually contradictory. Albania’s membership challenges are profoundly interconnected and encompass political, economic, and diplomatic aspects of Albania’s EU accession journey. Hence, Albania’s ‘Catch-123’ represents a multifaceted set of seemingly impossible challenges. Understanding and addressing these challenges is essential for understanding the complexities of Albania’s path to membership.

Political Catch: A Paradox of Democratic Reform

Significant political reform is one of Albania’s central challenges to EU membership. The EU has established democratic standards and principles that aspiring member states must meet to ensure a stable and democratic environment within their borders. These standards encompass areas such as the rule of law, human rights, electoral processes, and the functioning of democratic institutions.

However, a paradox arises in this context. On the one hand, the EU expects Albania to implement comprehensive political reforms to meet its democratic standards. On the other hand, the EU insists that Albania must already be a Western liberal democracy to join its ranks. This paradox complicates the political reform process, as Albania must meet these standards and demonstrate democratic maturity before becoming an EU member.

Since modernization is not a sociological process but a geopolitical one, we can formulate Albania’s political ‘Catch-22’ in the following way:

- Albania cannot EUropeanise without joining the EU.
- But it cannot join the EU until it has EUropeanised.
- Or accept the maximalist demands of EU members
- Which could harm Albania’s interests.
- Hence, remain out and non-western.

Economic Catch: A Vicious Cycle of Development and Membership

Another significant challenge for Albania is its economic development and EU membership aspirations. The EU is seen as a critical driver of economic development, and countries in the Western Balkans, including Albania, often view EU membership as a gateway to economic prosperity. However, this situation creates a Catch-22 scenario where Albania must develop a solid economy to meet EU standards, but membership itself is considered a crucial catalyst for economic growth. This economic catch can create a cycle in which progress toward economic development is stymied by the lack of EU membership, as economic reforms and investments are often contingent on the prospect of EU accession.

We can formulate Albania’s economic ‘Catch-22’ in the following way:

- Albania cannot catch up economically to the EU until it has full access to the single market and monetary union.
- But it can only get full access once it has caught up economically with the EU.
- Or implement the SAA aspects that are contradictory. On the one hand, it gives Albania full access to trade its agricultural products with the EU. On the other hand, it demands that Albania open up its economy to its non-EU neighbors, competitive agricultural exporters.
- Hence, Albania remains poor and out.

Geopolitical Catch: The ‘Good Neighbor’ Diplomatic Quandary

Albania’s path to EU membership is further complicated by the “good neighbor” criterion (Poli, 2018). Albania must resolve bilateral issues and conflicts with all EU member states to be considered for EU accession. This requirement is particularly challenging in the Western Balkans, where historical tensions and disputes have persisted for decades (Tocci, 2007). Paradoxically, while joining the EU is often seen as a pathway to resolving these bilateral issues, Albania must first demonstrate progress in resolving them to gain EU membership.

We can formulate Albania’s geopolitical ‘Catch-22’ in the following way:

- Albania cannot join the EU until member states deem it a good neighbor.
- But Albania will not be deemed a good neighbor until it joins the EU.
- Or accept the maximalist demands of EU members,
- Which by definition harms Albania’s interest.
- Hence, Albania remains out as it is not deemed a good neighbor.

Impact on Albania, the Western Balkans, Ukraine

Rule of Law reform, Veto power, and Albania

Since gaining candidate status for European Union membership in 2014, Albania has committed itself to a comprehensive set of reforms to strengthen the rule of law, enhance the independence and efficiency of the judiciary, and combat corruption. These efforts, driven by a strong desire to align with EU standards and values, were financed by Western partners. The EU has played a pivotal role in supporting and monitoring these reforms, providing financial assistance and expert guidance.

Albania began SAA negotiations on the 31st of January 2003. Poland and Hungary were the first members to ratify it once signed in 2006. The last member was Greece, only signing it on the 26th of February 2009. Two months later, Greek prime minister Kostas Karamanlis went to Tirana to sign an agreement with Berisha that delineated the continental shelf border in the Ionian Sea between Greece and Albania. Albania's membership application, which quickly followed the deal between Karamanlis and Berisha, was dependent on the Sea Demarcation deal. As a result, Greece green-lighted Albania's application for membership.

Nevertheless, Albania was only granted EU candidate status in 2014. From 2009 to 2014, there were five years during which time Albania's EU path was yet again blocked. It had to do with Albania's Constitutional Court landmark decision rejecting the Greece-Albania treaty as unconstitutional. Edi Rama, back then leader of the opposition, deposited at the court the request to rule on the Greek-Albanian treaty from which Albania's EU path depended. Only once Albania, with Edi Rama now as prime minister, passed consensual constitutional reforms about the rule of law, which completely halted and revamped the Constitutional Court, did the EU Council side with the Commission to grant Albania candidate status.

Greece's historical and contentious use of its veto power in the context of both North Macedonia and Albania's EU accession process should attract more attention and debate than it does currently. One of the most contentious issues between the two countries has been the treatment of the Greek minority in Albania. Additionally, territorial disputes have strained relations, notably regarding maritime boundaries in the Ionian Sea and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) delimitation. Recently, tensions have increased following the arrest of Omonia member Fredi Beleri, allegedly for vote buying. He ran for mayor of Himara during this year's local elections held across most Albanian municipalities. The Greek prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, immediately warned that Greece would use its veto unless Beleri is released and allowed to take the office of the Mayor.

Veto power is a double-edged sword in the EU. On the one hand, it ensures that member states retain sovereignty and control over important decisions. On the other hand, it can lead to deadlock and impede the Union's ability to act swiftly and decisively, especially when member states have divergent interests or political considerations. The deadlock could be hard to address as Albania's new prosecution and courts, financed by EU members like Greece, are the ones that issued the arrest warrant and kept Mr. Beleri imprisoned. This situation resembles the tension between these neighbors in the early 1990s. Albania lost the EA back in 1995 because of its relationship with Greece. Today, Albania risks losing out from the new enlargement impetus in the EU following the war in Ukraine.

Potential Solutions and Strategies to Addressing the 'Catch-123'

Addressing the 'Catch-123' dilemma, which encompasses Albania's political, economic, and "good neighbor" challenges Albania faces on its path to EU membership, requires a strategic and innovative approach. One potential solution that has garnered attention in scholarly and policy circles is the concept of simultaneous group accession for the Western Balkans. The concept of simultaneous group accession draws inspiration from the EU's previous enlargement processes, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. During those expansions, the EU extended invitations to multiple countries, encouraging them to collaborate on reforms and alignment with EU standards.

Simultaneous group accession is a strategic approach that involves the EU extending invitations for accession to multiple Western Balkan countries simultaneously. Rather than individually dealing with each country's accession process, this approach treats the Western Balkans as a cohesive group, acknowledging the interconnectedness of their challenges and progress toward EU integration. One of the primary advantages of simultaneous group accession is its potential to address regional conflicts and historical tensions among Western Balkan countries. Many of the disputes and conflicts in the region are bilateral or multilateral. By inviting multiple countries to join the EU simultaneously, the EU can create a strong incentive for Western Balkan states to resolve their differences.

For example, Albania, Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina have various bilateral and regional issues to resolve. These include border disputes, recognition issues, minority rights, and historical grievances. Simultaneous group accession could provide a structured dialogue and conflict resolution platform since it could expedite the EU integration process for WB countries. The 'Catch-123' dilemma presents a significant obstacle to progress, as each challenge is intertwined. For instance, economic development often depends on EU membership, while political reforms are required for EU accession. By addressing these challenges collectively, the EU can provide WB countries with a more

streamlined path to membership. Croatia proposed the solution in 2023 during the Bled Strategic Forum. While simultaneous group accession presents several advantages, it also comes with challenges and considerations, like consensus among EU members, reform progress, resolution of conflicts, EU absorption capacity, and public support. Moreover, it would suffer from a moral hazard problem as it would allow non-complaining EU candidates to join.

During the Bled Strategic Meeting held in Slovenia, the Western Balkans panel witnessed a vital proposal by Andrej Plenković, Croatia's Prime Minister since 2016. Plenković suggested an alternative approach to group enlargement for the Western Balkans. He emphasized the complexity of the issues between these countries, highlighting that an en bloc approach might not be suitable. Over the years, Croatia's foreign policy strategy has been characterized by a deliberate effort to discourage the EU's regional approach to enlargement in the Western Balkans. Plenković argued that such a regional approach would have been detrimental to Croatia's EU path, potentially delaying its accession by another decade. His proposal also emphasized that all bilateral issues not directly related to the *acquis communautaire*, the body of EU law, should be automatically excluded during the EU accession process. From Croatia's experiences, he asserted, "That is the only way to go forward." This proposal reflects Croatia's perspective on the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans and its commitment to streamlining the accession process for aspiring member states.

Conclusion

Albania's EU accession journey is emblematic of the challenges posed by "differentiated enlargement." While this approach allows the EU to tailor its requirements to individual countries, it has created a 'Catch-22' situation for Albania, where the conditions set by the EU impede progress toward EU membership. This paper has shown that Albania's political, economic, and diplomatic challenges are interconnected. Moreover, the consequences of the EU's approach extend beyond Albania, affecting the stability and development of the entire WB region. The war in Ukraine has given a new impetus to the EU's drive to enlarge. However, the structural issue highlighted in this paper, caused by the EU's politics of differentiated integration and enlargement, remains unsolved.

Addressing the 'Catch-22' dilemma Albania and the WB face requires innovative and strategic solutions. Simultaneous group accession offers a promising approach to overcoming the paradox of political, economic, and "good neighbor" challenges to promote regional stability and expedite EU integration. The WB region is so intertwined in culture and history that it must, like the Visegrad group, join the EU simultaneously as a region. Drawing inspiration from the EU's successful enlargement processes in Central and Eastern Europe, simultaneous group accession recognizes the interconnectedness of the WB. While it presents challenges in consensus, reform progress, conflict resolution, EU capacity, and public support, the potential benefits for both the WB and the EU make it a concept worthy of consideration and further exploration in the context of EU enlargement.

The EU's policy of differentiated integration, which has morphed into differentiated enlargement, must be reevaluated. Simultaneous group accession could change the 'Catch-22' dilemma and pave the way for the region to realize its European aspirations. The power of individual member states to extract maximum demands from the EU candidates during the accession should be better managed. The EU Commission and Parliament could limit the power of members in the enlargement process if they treat the WB as a region or remove non-*acquis* bilateral issues from the negotiation process. Ultimately, only when the WB becomes part of the borderless Union can the risk of conflict stemming from territorial claims in the Balkans evaporate, particularly tensions between Serbia and Kosovo in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine.

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The EU enlargement process. Relevant Steps to be Expected by the Western Balkan Countries

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On 6 December 2022 a sort of “reparation conference” was quickly organized by the European Commission and the European Council in Tirana. All the 27 member-states and the 6 countries of the Western Balkans attended. The main reason of this event laid in the need of granting to the Western Balkan Countries the EU commitment for enlargement after years of hesitations and delays, widely justified by the “enlargement fatigue” and the required “absorption capacity”. This approach was unexpectedly abandoned in the spring 2022, as a consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On that occasion, the status of candidate country was assigned to Ukraine and Moldavia, even though they were included so far only in the “Eastern Partnership program”, which did not contain any commitment to the EU membership.

As a result, in order to avoid further disappointments and confusion in South-East Europe, the status of candidate country was speedily assigned to Bosnia-Herzegovina, the negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro pushed forward, the negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia started, as soon as Bulgaria partially removed its veto to Skopje. At the end of the year, also Kosovo submitted its application, despite 5 member states do not recognize its independence declaration yet.

Under these circumstances, so synthetically mentioned above, the EU, during the Tirana conference, offered a package of € 1 billion in grants to face the energetic crisis by assigning 50% of the amount to vulnerable families and 50% to investments into renewable energy projects, LNG, and electricity. In return, the EU was expecting from the Balkan candidate countries to adopt the EU CFSP measures against Russia, sanctions included; to strengthen the rule of law in the struggle against corruption and organized crime; to ensure free movement of goods and people, mutual ID and university diplomas recognition, the Erasmus + inclusion in the European Universities. Moreover, the EU institutions encouraged the consistent implementation of regional reconciliation processes, in order to create the best conditions for the integration within the block.

It is to remind, in fact, that the region is still suffering from war legacies and state collapse consequences, which occurred in the 1990s. Aspirations for borders adjustments to the detriment of Bosnia-Herzegovina are still alive in the Croatian and Serbian societies. The 2021 non paper produced in Slovenia and sent to the President of the EU Council Charles Michel about the further partition of Yugoslavia is an adamant confirmation of how rooted these beliefs are. Not by chance controversial readings mark the sense of the most relevant Peace treaties. Particularly, the Dayton and Ohrid framework agreements, the Kumanovo and Belgrade accords outline opposite perspectives for the region. Some of them are still interpreted as a post-war first step towards a geopolitical reintegration. Some others, towards further partitions in a near future.

In addition, despite the wide international intervention, as well as the EU patter of reconciliation, the local mutual rejection of recognizing winners and losers is annihilating the potential of the France-German experience in the 1950s, thus making it impossible to emulate. Meanwhile, Albania had to cope with the fragility of its institutions and their doble collapse, occurred in 1991-1993 and in 1997. In the first case Italy, which was the target of a mass emigration across the Otranto channel when

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the communist power was disintegrating, guaranteed humanitarian aid and transport of goods with the Pellicano Operation. In the second case, with the Alba Operation, the Italian government was able to lead an international peacekeeping force with the UN support. Such action was aimed to restore the rule of law and avoid a civil war.

At the end of these enmities and troubles, which lasted from 1991 to 2001, the EU Summit in Thessaloniki held in 2003 finally offered the prospect of EU integration to all Western Balkan countries, as soon as the requirements for membership will be fulfilled.

Under these circumstances, the Albanian authorities submitted their application on 24 April 2009 and the status of candidate was granted in June 2014. However, it was only in July 2022 that the negotiations for membership began. Despite these delays, the support of the Albanian population for the EU integration remained very high, around the 89%, a record if compared with the other Western Balkan countries (with the exception of Kosovo, where the percentages of consensus are similar).

An annual progress review was published by the EU commission in December 2022. The document appreciated the Albanian improvement in advancing the EU reform agenda, although limited progresses were noted in the following matters: public administration (especially digitalization); judiciary; market economy; public procurement; statistics; competitiveness; and green agenda. Nonetheless, the document recognized a development in the implementation of the rule of law, but required intensified efforts aimed to establish a solid track record on high-level corruption. Furthermore, the document suggested to strengthen the freedom of expression and to consolidate property rights in a transparent manner.

In March 2023 the 12th meeting of the Stabilization and Association Council was convened for the first time in Albania with the aim to focus on the accession strategy, including political, economic and EU-law criteria for membership. It was also an opportunity for an exchange of information about the regional context.

It is a matter of fact that the Albanian future is facing both domestic and regional challenges. Actually, Albania was never involved in the wars for the Yugoslav partition, with the exception of 1999 when it faced, although temporarily, a mass migration from Kosovo. However, regional controversies affected the country under different profiles. A wide international and local literature has scrutinized them. Here suffice to mention that Albania suffered from the member-state resistance to proceed faster with enlargement since 2007-2008. Moreover, despite the huge number of international organizations active in the Western Balkans (as for example RCC, CEFTA, SEECP, EUSAIR, CEI, Adriatic Euroregion, the Berlin Process), the regional cooperation as well as the economic and social improvement of the country were significant, but remained fragile in face of global challenges. Truly, in 2018 the Albanian GDP recorded a growth of 4%, according to the World Bank. However, the pandemic of the following years provoked a decline of -3,5% in 2020. The prime minister Edi Rama complained about the lack of EU solidarity in sharing the vaccine against the COVID/19, prompting local Balkan authorities to turn to China, Russia and Türkiye. Nonetheless, the Albanian GDP recorded a strong rebound of 8.5% in 2021.

Meanwhile, the government had to face the assessment of the high educational system, with the flourishing of private and often qualitatively uncontrolled Universities as well as the impact of the Albanian migration flows within the region and across the region. It had to achieve an agreement with the United Kingdom about the return of illegal immigrants and identify effective policies able to contrast the intention of part of the youth to go abroad for education and job, consistently increasing the brain drain.

On the other hand, Albania has been active to promote a new project of regional cooperation, the “Open Balkans”, together with Serbia and North Macedonia. Originally defined “mini-Schengen”, when the idea was elaborated during a meeting in Novi Sad in 2019, the initiative was reinforced in 2021 changing the name in “Open Balkans” and establishing a narrow relation with the “Berlin process” and the European single market strategy. In fact, at least initially, the idea was not welcome by the EU, which considered it foreign to communitarian politics. However, the three leaders recurrently stressed their intention to implement the 4 EU liberties in order to strengthen their economies with the aim to be better prepared to face the competition of the EU markets, according to the second Copenhagen criterion. Subsequently, a labor market investigation was made in order to understand its current structure, including the dynamic that marks the demand and supply of the labor force. This activism and the convergence with the EU strategy led, at the end of the day, to a meeting with the “Berlin process” on November 3, 2023 where the mutual recognition of the diplomas and the green agenda were agreed. Therefore, the relations between the local initiative and the EU process were integrated to the benefit of the regional cooperation, which began to attract Montenegro and, more reluctantly, Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the authorities of Kosovo remained firmly critical towards the “Open Balkan”.

To conclude, it seems that the enlargement process has been accelerated since 2022. The previous reluctance of some member states has been scaled back, to a large extent due to the war in Ukraine. As a result, the number of candidate countries has suddenly grown up. Prospectively, this might have different impacts. On the one hand, if the pattern of negotiations so far experimented will be followed, the future of enlargement will still require multiple and comprehensive efforts from the candidate countries to adapt themselves to the EU normativity and values. On the other, if the geopolitical interests of the EU prevail, it can be predicted that a differentiated policy of inclusiveness will be implemented to the detriment of the normative dimension, based on a shared legal order. The controversies between Brussels and the governments of Poland and Hungary about justice, freedom of expression and civil rights are a confirmation that EU integration does not necessarily imply a democratic consolidation.

Moreover, the current fluidity, mainly determined by the legacy of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the deep political changes under way in a number of EU governments to the benefit of “sovereigntist” coalitions, while the elections of the European Parliament are expected to be held next spring 2024, confirms that radical transformation in the EU politics are going to occur. In which direction, it is still to be seen.

Factors affecting commercial banks' profitability in Albania

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Abstract

This study analyzes factors that impact profitability of commercial banks in Albania, considering 7 specific banking factors: bank size, asset management, asset liquidity, credit risk, operational efficiency, capital adequacy and funding costs. It also considers 2 macroeconomic factors (economic activity and inflation) and 1 specific industry factor (concentration). Econometric analysis of data from 2014 to 2020 has been done to identify factors that affect profitability, using return on assets (ROA) and return on equity (ROE) as dependent variables. Results show that bank size affects profitability positively, as it shows statistical significance for both ROA and ROE models. Asset management affects profitability positively for both ROA and ROE models, as it shows statistical significance for both models. Asset liquidity shows a negative relationship with profitability for both ROA and ROE models. Asset liquidity is statistically insignificant in the ROA model and statistically significant in the ROE model. Credit risk is statistically significant in both ROA and ROE models and shows a negative relationship with profitability. Operational efficiency has a negative relationship with profitability for both ROA and ROE models and is statistically insignificant in the ROA model but statistically significant in the ROE model. Capital adequacy has a positive relationship with profitability (ROA, ROE) and is statistically significant only in the ROA model. Funding costs have a negative relationship with profitability (ROA, ROE) and are statistically significant only in the ROE model. Inflation has a positive relationship with ROA and a negative relationship with ROE. Inflation is statistically insignificant for both models. The relationship between economic activity and profitability is positive and shows statistical significance in both ROA and ROE models.

KEY WORDS: bank profitability, RoE, RoA, diversification, credit risk, asset management, financial stability.

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Introduction

Commercial banks are regulated and licensed institutions by the Central Bank. The banking industry provides financial services, directly or indirectly. The main function of traditional financial institutions is to transform the nature of assets. Financial intermediaries increase the efficiency of investment of savings in the economy through economies of scale, reduce risk through portfolio diversification, achieve efficient distribution of collected funds, play a role in transmitting monetary policies and increase payment efficiency. The positive performance of financial intermediaries has a positive impact on economic growth, while poor performance can lead to systemic crises, such as the financial crisis of 2007-2009.

Countries with a disciplined, efficient, and effective banking system are the ones that experience the fastest growth in various sectors of the economy. Factors that influence the profitability of commercial banks are particularly of interest to bank managers, the government, investors, and customers. General economic growth, resilience against negative shocks, and stability of the financial system are achieved only in the presence of a banking sector that generates profits.

This study focuses on the factors that influence profitability of commercial banks in Albania, considering both internal factors (specific to banks) and external factors (macroeconomic and industry specific). Internal factors are factors that can be managed by commercial banks, such as: level of credit, level of deposits, investment in securities, capital adequacy, etc. While external factors are factors that are not manageable by commercial banks, such as: inflation, GDP growth, money supply growth, market concentration, etc.

Considering the importance of banking sector in the overall economic growth and financial stability, this paper focuses on the factors that influence profitability of Albanian banking sector for the period 2014-2020. Factors that have been considered as potential influencers of the profitability of commercial banks in Albania are bank size, credit risk, asset management, capital adequacy, asset liquidity, funding costs, operational efficiency, economic activity, industry concentration and inflation.

Research questions

1. Which are the macroeconomic factors that influence commercial banks' profitability in Albania?
2. Does concentration (industry-specific factor) have an impact on the profitability of commercial banks in Albania?
3. Which are the specific banking factors that influence commercial banks' profitability in Albania?

Hypothesis

The hypothesis raised in this study is: The main factors that have the greatest impact on the profitability of banks in Albania are bank size, asset management, asset liquidity, credit risk, operational efficiency, funding costs, capital adequacy and economic activity. The sub-hypotheses raised in this study are:

- H1: There is a positive relationship between the size of commercial banks and their profitability.
- H2: There is a positive relationship between asset management and the profitability of commercial banks.
- H3: There is a negative relationship between credit risk and the profitability of commercial banks.
- H4: There is a negative relationship between funding costs and the profitability of commercial banks.
- H5: There is a negative relationship between operational efficiency and the profitability of commercial banks.
- H6: There is a negative relationship between the liquidity of assets and the profitability of commercial banks.
- H7: There is a positive relationship between capital adequacy and the profitability of commercial banks.
- H8: There is a positive/negative relationship between inflation and the profitability of commercial banks.
- H9: There is a positive relationship between economic activity and the profitability of commercial banks.
- H10: There is a positive relationship between concentration and the profitability of commercial banks.

Methodology

To achieve a reliable analysis, this study has been carried out by going through some steps. Step 1: Literature Review. Studies carried out mostly by foreign authors, who have conducted empirical analyses of factors affecting profitability of commercial banks, have been taken into consideration. The independent variables studied are internal factors and external factors. The dependent variables taken into consideration are return on assets (ROA) and return on equity (ROE). Internal factors studied are asset management, bank size, asset liquidity, credit risk, capital adequacy, operational efficiency, and funding costs. While external factors taken into consideration are inflation and economic activity. Lastly, industry concentration is taken into consideration as an industry-specific factor.

Step 2: Data collection. As far as data collection is concerned, this work is focused on the annual supervision reports published by the Bank of Albania, data published by the International Monetary Fund, data published by FRED, and data published by the World Bank. To achieve more reliable results, the entire population has been analyzed for the period 2014-2020.

Step 3: Data analysis. Multiple regression analysis has been carried out for the period 2014-2020 using SPSS 26. Through regression analysis, the relationship and strength of the relationship between the factors taken into consideration and the profitability of commercial banks in Albania has been seen. For the empirical analysis, the significance level of alpha 5% has been taken into consideration. Through the Fisher test and the student's t-test, the overall significance of the model and the individual significance of the parameters has been seen. While, through the coefficient of determination, the influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable has been seen.

Literature Review

According to (Bank of Albania, 2021), banking sector accounts for 93.8% of GDP and 89% of the financial sector assets in Albania are held by the banking sector. Given the importance of the banking sector in the overall economic growth, it is essential to identify the factors that influence the profitability of commercial banks in Albania.

Theories of profitability of commercial banks

Theories taken into consideration in this study are the SCP (structure-conduct-performance) theory, the EFS (efficient-structure) theory, expense-preference theory, and the risk-aversion theory.

Structure-Conduct-Performance (SCP) Theory

By market structure, we refer to the market conditions, concentration, and technology. While, by performance, we refer to social welfare and market profits. The link between market structure and performance is referred to as the behavior of firms in the market in relation to marketing decisions, pricing decisions (commissions, fees, interest rates), investment decisions in research and development etc. The SCP theory postulates that the conditions of entry into the market, the number and size of firms (level of concentration) are determining factors of the competitiveness of commercial banks, which in turn affects their profitability. This theory assumes that the performance of companies is linked to the structure of the market.

According to (Staikouras & Wood, 2004) the SCP hypothesis postulates that in highly concentrated markets, commercial banks realize high revenues (like monopoly firms), being that they offer a lower return on deposits and at the same time apply a higher return on loans given. In financial markets where concentration is high, firms realize a reduction in costs due to secret agreements because of low competition. In a study carried out by (Maudos, 1998) the traditional hypothesis of secret agreement is rejected. In this study, efficiency is found to be the best determinant of profitability, compared to the market share controlled by commercial banks and concentration.

Efficient-Structure Theory

In contrast to the SCP theory, which assumes that the profitability of commercial banks depends on market concentration, the efficient-structure theory assumes that profitability of commercial banks depends on their efficiency. According to (Staikouras & Wood, 2004), more efficient firms achieve higher profits and, as a result, they grow in size and market share. This leads to higher market concentration. To prove the EFS hypothesis, there must be a linear relationship between concentration and efficiency and/or between market share and efficiency. According to Berger (1995), (as quoted by Mensi, 2010), the efficiency hypothesis is divided into XE and SE hypotheses. The X-efficiency hypothesis assumes that firms with lower costs are more efficient and therefore have higher profitability. The scale-efficiency hypothesis refers to the fact that through economies of scale, the cost of transactions is reduced, and the profitability of firms increases.

Expense-preference theory

Expense-preference theory assumes that managers in regulated institutions are more prone to maximizing their benefits rather than maximizing profits of the firm. According to (Edwards, 1977), companies that aim to maximize benefits pay higher salaries to their managers and employ more staff, unlike companies that aim to maximize profits. According to Williamson (1963), as quoted by Edwards (1977), in those markets where competitiveness decreases, costs of companies increase because of managers' preferences to increase salaries and expand the staff, since the profits of commercial banks increase.

Risk-aversion theory

According to (Bhaumik & Piesse, 2005), the capital asset pricing model assumes that return and risk are positively related. An increase in financial leverage and a decrease in the capital-to-asset ratio leads to an increase in the profitability of commercial banks, as the level of risk increases. The Galbraith and Cave hypotheses refer to the fact that the market power of large firms directly affects their avoidance of uncertainties. Firms that are part of a competitive market take more risk than monopolistic firms. The latter choose safer portfolios to avoid risk.

Determinants of Commercial Banks' Profitability

The independent variables to be considered are divided into macroeconomic variables, industry-specific variables, and bank-specific variables. Internal factors (bank-specific) are factors that can be controlled by commercial banks, while external factors (macroeconomic and industry-specific) are factors that are not under the control of commercial banks.

Internal factors

Size of banks: According to (Flamini et al, 2009), large banks reduce transaction costs through economies of scale, and as a result, their profits increase if they do not operate in highly competitive environments. Since the diversification of product and the loan rate is higher for large banks compared to small and medium-sized banks, the relationship between profitability and the size of commercial banks is expected to be positive. In this study, total assets show the impact of the size of commercial banks on their profitability.

Asset management: Regarding asset management, the econometric analysis uses the ratio (operating income)/(total assets) to study how assets enable the generation of income. The relationship between profitability and asset management is expected to be positive.

Credit risk: In order to measure credit risk, the econometric analysis uses the ratio (provision for loan loss)/(total loans). Provision for loan loss is reported in the income and expense statement, which reflects the quality of the commercial banks' loans and the risk of capital. The ratio (provision for loan loss)/(total loans) is expected to have a negative relationship with the profitability of commercial banks, as profitability decreases with an increase in the level of bad loans.

Funding costs: According to studies by Bourke (1989) and Jiang et al. (2003) (as cited by Vong & Chan, 2008), the relationship between expenses and profitability is negative, implying that commercial banks with higher profitability operate with lower costs. In the econometric analysis, funding costs are measured by the ratio (interest expenses for deposits)/(total deposits). The relationship between profitability and funding costs is expected to be negative.

Operational efficiency: According to (Belete, 2017), operational efficiency is expected to have a negative relationship with profitability, and it is used as an indicator of the ability of commercial banks' managers to control costs. Better management of expenses leads to an increase in efficiency, and as a result, the profitability of commercial banks increases. In order to study the relationship between operational efficiency and profitability, the econometric analysis uses the ratio (operating expenses)/(total income). The relationship between profitability and operational efficiency is expected to be negative.

Liquidity of assets: In order to measure the liquidity of commercial banks' assets in Albania, the (liquid assets)/(total assets) report will be used. Commercial banks' profitability decreases if they hold liquid assets, as the return from liquid assets is lower. The relationship between profitability and liquidity of assets is expected to be negative.

Capital adequacy: In the econometric analysis, capital adequacy is measured by the (equity capital)/(total assets) ratio, expressing the percentage of total assets funded by equity capital. According to (Belete, 2017), a high capital adequacy ratio is an indicator of a low financial leverage, and thus a lower risk. According to (Hallunovi, 2016), banks with a higher capital adequacy ratio are considered safer, resulting in profitability even when economic conditions are difficult. The relationship between profitability and capital adequacy is expected to be positive.

External factors

External factors are outside the control of commercial banks' managers. External factors are divided into specific industry factors and macroeconomic factors. Macroeconomic factors that have been studied in the econometric analysis are inflation and economic activity. Meanwhile, concentration is considered as a specific industry factor.

Inflation: If revenues grow faster than costs, it is said that inflation has a positive impact on the profitability of commercial banks. On the other hand, if the bank's costs grow faster than its revenues, it is said that inflation has a negative impact on the profitability of commercial banks. In the econometric analysis, the annual inflation rate is used to measure inflation. Empirical studies suggest a mixed relationship between inflation and profitability.

Economic activity: In the econometric analysis, economic growth is measured using the annual rate of real GDP growth. If the economic conditions are weak, the payment capacity of borrowers deteriorates. As a result, banks hold more provisions since the quality of the loan portfolio deteriorates. Conversely, if economic conditions improve, the payment capacity of borrowers also improves. The demand for credit from companies and individuals increases, resulting in positive effects on the profitability of commercial banks. The relationship between profitability and economic activity is expected to be positive.

Concentration: If higher concentration would result in greater competition in the banking sector under normal conditions, then the relationship between market concentration and the profitability of commercial banks would be negative. However, if commercial banks have secret agreements with each other, concentration will have a positive impact on the profitability of commercial banks, as banks apply practices where the interest rates of loans are higher than the interest rates of deposits. In the econometric analysis, a positive relationship between concentration and the profitability of commercial banks is expected, as suggested by SCP theory.

Discussions on the factors that affect the profitability (ROA and ROE) of commercial banks.

In the study conducted by Athanasoglou et al (2005), the macroeconomic, bank-specific, and industry-specific factors were analyzed to measure their impact on the profitability of Greek commercial banks for the period 1985-2001. From the empirical analysis, it was found that an increase in credit risk decreases the profitability of commercial banks and capital is found to be an important variable in explaining profitability. An increase in labor productivity has a positive and significant relationship with profitability, while operating expenses have a negative and significant relationship with profitability. Regarding the size of banks, the estimated effect on profitability does not provide evidence of economies of scale in commercial banks in Greece. Ownership structure is found to be an insignificant variable in explaining the profitability of commercial banks, implying that the profitability of private banks is generally not higher for the period under consideration. In this paper, the SCP paradigm is disproved, as the concentration of the industry does not appear as a significant variable. With regards to macroeconomic variables, cyclical production and inflation appear as statistically significant variables.

In the study conducted by Obamuyi (2013), the effects of bank size, bank capital, expense management, economic conditions, and interest income on the profitability of commercial banks in Nigeria were examined. Twenty banks were studied for the period 2006-2012. The results of the study suggest that higher performance of commercial banks in Nigeria is influenced by improvements in interest income and bank capital, as well as efficient management of expenses and favorable economic conditions.

In the study conducted by Frederick (2014), factors affecting the profitability of commercial banks in Uganda were studied. This study took both local and foreign banks into consideration, for the period 2000-2011. From the study, it was found that managerial efficiency, adequacy of capital, quality of assets, inflation, and interest income are factors that affect the performance of local commercial banks in Uganda.

In the study conducted by Al-Qudah and Jaradat (2013), the impact of macroeconomic and specific banking variables on the profitability of Jordanian Islamic banks were studied, for the period 2000-2011. From the study, it was found that the size of banks and the adequacy of capital have a positive and significant effect on ROA and ROE. In this study, the increase in monetary supply appears as a statistically significant variable in terms of profitability with regards to the Jordanian Islamic banking sector. Liquidity is shown as an unimportant variable regarding the return on assets, while it appears to have a significant negative impact on return on capital. Meanwhile, the financial leverage measured through the ratio (total deposits)/(total assets) is statistically significant for both models, negatively affecting both return on assets and return on capital.

In the study conducted by (Moci & Duraj, 2015), the impact of macroeconomic, industry-specific, and banking-specific factors on the profitability of commercial banks in Albania was examined. In the study, ROE is taken as the dependent variable, while the independent variables under consideration are liquidity risk, credit risk, GDP, inflation, and total loans. From the multiple regression analysis for the period 1999-2014 and for 16 banks under consideration, it was found that: total loans, liquidity risk, inflation, and GDP are important factors that have an impact on the profitability of commercial banks in Albania. Furthermore, the analysis showed that only credit risk is an insignificant variable.

In the study conducted by (Jeon & Miller, 2005), the relationship between industry concentration and performance of commercial banks in the US is examined. The study suggests that during the last three quarters of the 20th century, the market power theory is applied in the banking industry in the US. The market power theory implies that only firms that control a large market share and have differentiated products can use market power in terms of setting product prices (monopolistic competition) and realizing above-normal profits.

Research methodology

Research approach

In the social and business fields, there are two approaches to conducting a research study, the deductive approach, and the inductive approach. The deductive approach is undertaken in the case of adopting a theoretical approach through data collection. While the inductive approach is undertaken in the case of a theoretical explanation (cause-effect relationship) through data collection and analysis, or in the case of exploring the subject. The difference between the deductive and inductive approach is that the former is a theory-driven project, while the latter is a data-driven project. According to (Hallunovi, 2016) the deductive approach presents a high level of objectivity since the selected questions in the research work are not subjective. While the inductive approach presents a high level of subjectivity in the research work. In this study, the deductive approach has been used, since the results from previous literature are reviewed, and then these results are used to see if they hold for the period under consideration (2014-2020). Through the deductive approach, a theoretical framework has been developed, which has been tested through data collection.

The methods used in a research approach are categorized into three groups: quantitative methods, qualitative methods, and mixed methods. The mixed method is characterized by collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, and further comparing how quantitative and qualitative data support each other. The qualitative method is mainly used in inductive

approaches, to contribute to an existing theory or develop a new theory. The quantitative method examines the relationship between variables and is used in the deductive approach, where the theory is analyzed through data. In this study, the quantitative method has been used to see the impact of internal and external factors on the profitability of commercial banks in Albania, for the period 2014-2020.

Selection and Size of the Sample

Initially, it's important to distinguish when it's appropriate to study the entire population and when it's appropriate to study a sample. If the following conditions are met, then it's more appropriate to study the entire population. If the population size is small, if the cost of making a mistake is high, if the errors of the sample are high, and if information needs to be obtained from every element of the population, then it's more appropriate to study the entire population. If the following conditions are met, then it's considered more appropriate to study a portion of the population (sample). If the population size is large, if the time and cost of obtaining information from the entire population is high, if quick decision-making is necessary, and if studying the population is not feasible then it's more appropriate to study a portion of the population. In this study, the size of the sample is 100% of the population, therefore, the expectations are that the conclusions about the population and the purpose of the work are sound.

Data collection

To reach valid and reliable conclusions, the econometric analysis of specific industry variables and specific banking variables was carried out based on data obtained from FRED and from the annual monitoring reports published by the Bank of Albania. Meanwhile, for the econometric analysis of the macroeconomic variables taken into consideration, the data was obtained from the World Bank and from the International Monetary Fund. The data was collected from public databases, where secondary quantitative data was reviewed. According to Andreas and Gabrielle (2011), (as cited by Hallunovi, 2016) secondary data have higher quality than primary data and are more reliable because they are available in a public format, and they are a source of permanent data.

Variable definition

Dependent variables

ROA represents the return on assets and expresses how much the company's net profit is for 1 unit of total assets. In this study, the ratio that is used to measure return on assets is: $ROA = (\text{Net income})/(\text{Total assets})$. While ROE represents the return on equity and expresses how much net profit is realized by the company for 1 unit of owner's capital. In this study, the ratio that is used to measure return on owner's capital is: $ROE = (\text{Net income})/(\text{Shareholder's equity})$.

Independent variables

Specific banking factors

The size of commercial banks is measured through the natural logarithm of the total assets. The relationship between the size of banks and their profitability is expected to be positive, as the loan rate and product diversification are higher for large banks than for small and medium-sized banks. Asset management is measured through the (operating income)/(total assets) ratio. Through this ratio, it is shown how assets enable the generation of income in the company. The relationship between asset management and the profitability of commercial banks is expected to be positive. Credit risk is measured through the (provision for loan loss)/(total loans) ratio. The ratio expresses the risk of capital and the quality of the banks' loans. The relationship between credit risk and the profitability of commercial banks is expected to be negative. Funding costs are measured through the (interest expense on deposits)/(total deposits) ratio. The ratio expresses the funding costs of commercial banks, taking deposits as the source of funding. The relationship between funding costs and profitability is expected to be negative, as with the increase in costs, the profitability of commercial banks decreases and vice versa. Operational efficiency is measured through the (operating expenses)/(total generated income) ratio. Operational efficiency expresses the ability of company managers to control expenses. Since better management of expenses affects the growth of efficiency and profitability of commercial banks, a negative relationship between operational efficiency and the profitability of commercial banks is expected. Asset liquidity is measured through the (liquid assets)/(total assets) ratio. The ratio expresses how much liquid assets are held by commercial banks. The relationship between the liquidity of assets and the profitability of commercial banks is expected to be negative, as the return from liquid assets is lower. Lastly, capital adequacy is measured through the (equity capital)/(total assets) ratio. The ratio expresses the portion of total assets financed by equity capital. With an increase in the capital adequacy ratio, the profitability of commercial banks increases even in difficult economic conditions, so it is expected that the relationship between capital adequacy and the profitability of commercial banks is positive.

Industry-specific factor

Concentration: Concentration expresses competitiveness in the banking sector. In econometric analysis, concentration is measured through the total assets of the five largest banks in relation to the total assets of all commercial banks.

Macroeconomic factors

Inflation: The impact of inflation on the profitability (ROA, ROE) of commercial banks is highlighted through the annual inflation rate. If revenues are experiencing a faster growth than costs, then inflation will positively impact the profitability of commercial banks. On the other hand, if costs are experiencing a faster growth than revenues, then inflation will have a negative impact on the profitability of commercial banks.

Economic activity: The impact of economic activity on the profitability of commercial banks is measured through the annual growth rate of real GDP. The relationship between economic activity and the profitability of commercial banks is expected to be positive, as suggested by theory and by empirical evidence in various previous studies.

Econometric model specification and data analysis

The total number of observations for the 2014-2020 period is 102, as the entire population was taken into consideration for a time frame of 7 years. The statistical method used in this study is regression analysis using the method of ordinary least squares. The specification of the econometric model means identifying the dependent and independent variables that will be included in the model and the expectation regarding the magnitude and sign of the parameters.

Two empirical models are raised, through which the impact of independent variables on the profitability (ROA, ROE) of commercial banks in Albania is identified, as follows: First model (ROE):

$$ROE = c + \beta_1 MADH + \beta_2 MAK + \beta_3 RKR + \beta_4 KFN + \beta_5 EOP + \beta_6 LIK + \beta_7 KAP + \beta_8 INF + \beta_9 PBB + \beta_{10} PRQ + \varepsilon$$

Second model (ROA):

$$ROA = c + \beta_1 MADH + \beta_2 MAK + \beta_3 RKR + \beta_4 KFN + \beta_5 EOP + \beta_6 LIK + \beta_7 KAP + \beta_8 INF + \beta_9 PBB + \beta_{10} PRQ + \varepsilon$$

Where:

ROA and ROE are the profitability indicators of the banks.

C – the constant

β - the function coefficient for the factors of the industry, macroeconomic, and specific to the banking sector

MADH – the natural logarithm of the total assets

MAK – operating income over total assets

RKR – provision for loan loss over total loans

KFN – interest expenses on deposits over total deposits

EOP – operating expenses over total generated income

LIK – liquid assets over total assets

KAP – equity capital over total assets

INF – the annual inflation rate

PBB – the annual real GDP growth rate

PRQ – assets of the five largest banks over total assets

ε – the error term.

Statistical examination of determinants

In this study, the significance of the overall model and the significance of each of the independent variables has been tested using the p value. In this way, it was verified whether the model is significant as a whole and whether the independent variables are statistically significant. The significance level taken in the econometric analysis is 5% alpha. It is said that the model is significant as a whole if $p < 0.05$. Similarly, the independent variables are statistically significant if $p < 0.05$ and statistically insignificant if $p > 0.05$. In the study, the regression coefficients show the impact of each of the independent variables on the dependent variable (ROA, ROE), as a result they can be positive or negative.

Diagnostic tests of the model

In econometric analysis, diagnostic tests of the model are carried out to see if the assumptions of the least squares method hold in the model or not. The diagnostic tests that have been carried out are the normality test, the heteroskedasticity test, the serial correlation test, and the multicollinearity test. The normality test implies that the residuals are independent of the independent variables and have a distribution: $u_t \sim N(0, \sigma^2)$. The basic hypothesis raised for the normality test is: H_0 : The error term has a normal distribution. The Jarque Bera test for normality is used to test the basic hypothesis of the normal distribution of the error term. Another test that is carried out in the econometric analysis is the heteroskedasticity test.

Heteroskedasticity is not preferred and implies the problem of variance change among observations. Homoskedasticity, in contrast to heteroskedasticity, is preferred and implies that the error term has the same variance (dispersion), for any given value of the independent variables x . The errors are heteroskedastic if they do not have a continuous variance, while homoskedasticity implies the same variance of the errors. Heteroskedasticity is tested through the White test. The basic hypothesis raised for the heteroskedasticity test is: H_0 : The variance of the errors is constant. If the basic hypothesis is accepted, then there is no evidence to suspect heteroskedasticity. The multicollinearity test is concerned with the relationship between the independent variables. Assumption III regarding the least squares method has to do with the non-existence of perfect multicollinearity, which means that the independent variables taken into consideration should not have a very strong relationship with each other. It is said that in order for the model to suffer from multicollinearity, the model as a whole must emerge as important, while most of the independent variables must be insignificant (the variables should not have a strong relationship with each other). If the model as a whole emerges as important and most of the independent variables are insignificant, then it is said that the model suffers from multicollinearity. If the opposite is true, it is said that it cannot be determined if the model is suffering from multicollinearity, as a result, other tests must be carried out. According to Hair et al. (2006), (as cited by Belete, 2017), if the correlation coefficient is less than 0.9, then there are no major problems of multicollinearity. Lastly, if the same variable appears in different time periods (different lags), then it is said that the model suffers from multicollinearity. The serial correlation test is the last diagnostic test that is performed in this study. Before interpreting the model, the serial correlation must be tested. The autocorrelation problem arises when the residuals are correlated in different time periods. Assumption VI is about the absence of serial correlation, which means that in different time periods, the residuals should not be correlated. The test that is used in this study to prove if the autocorrelation problem is present is the Durbin-Watson test. The basic hypothesis raised for the serial correlation test is: H_0 : Residuals do not show serial correlation.

Data analysis and findings

Tests for the validity of the models (ROA, ROE)

Normality test. The hypotheses raised to test whether the errors have a normal distribution are as follows:

H_0 : The error term has a normal distribution.

H_a : The error term does not have a normal distribution.

The level of significance (α) taken in this study is 5%. To test the normality of data, the p-value is used. The rule followed in this study is that if the Jarque-Bera p-value is less than the significance level (α) 0.05, then the null hypothesis is rejected. Based on the results for the ROA and ROE models, the data have a normal distribution. As a result, H_0 is accepted.

Test for heteroskedasticity. To perform the test for heteroskedasticity, the White test was used. The hypotheses raised to test whether the residuals have the same variance for each given value of the independent variables are:

H_0 : Error variance is constant.

H_a : Error variance is not constant.

The significance level (α) taken in this study is 5%. To test whether the error variance is constant, the rule used is: if the p value is less than 0.05, then H_0 is rejected. Based on the results of the heteroskedasticity test, the conclusions are that for both models (ROA, ROE) the error variance is constant.

Test for serial correlation. The residuals should not be correlated in two different time periods. The assumption raised is that the errors are independent from each other. Therefore, the error is not related to the preceding or following error. To perform the serial correlation test, the Durbin Watson test was used. The hypotheses raised in this study are as follows:

H_0 : Residuals do not show serial correlation.

H_a : Residuals show serial correlation.

Based on the results, the base hypotheses are accepted for each of the models (ROA and ROE), as a result the residuals do not show serial correlation.

Correlation Analysis for the ROA/ROE models

To perform the correlation analysis for the ROA and ROE models, Pearson Correlation was used. The Pearson correlation coefficient varies from +1 to -1. The Pearson correlation coefficient of +1 indicates that the relationship between variables is perfectly positive. On the other hand, the Pearson correlation coefficient of -1 indicates that the relationship between variables is perfectly negative. Lastly, if the variables do not have a linear relationship, the Pearson correlation coefficient is 0. The higher the Pearson coefficient regarding the relationship between the dependent and independent variables, the stronger the relationship between the variables. Conversely, the lower the Pearson coefficient, the weaker the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. As for the independent variables, the Pearson coefficient should be as low as possible to fulfill the third assumption of the least squares method, regarding the absence of perfect multicollinearity. The independent variables should not have a very strong relationship with each other in order to say that perfect multicollinearity is not present in the model.

From the results of the correlation analysis for the ROA and ROE models, none of the Pearson coefficients exceeds 0.9. As a result, it is said that perfect multicollinearity is not present in the model. The strongest positive relationship presented through the Pearson coefficient is between return on capital and return on assets. Also, a strong positive relationship is seen between return on assets and economic activity. Meanwhile, a strong negative relationship is seen between return on assets and asset liquidity, which appears to be the strongest negative relationship. The relationship between economic activity and return on capital is the strongest positive correlation. While it is seen that the correlation between liquidity and return on capital is the strongest negative correlation. As for the relationship between the independent variables themselves, the results show a positive but not strong relationship between asset management and capital adequacy. A positive but not strong relationship is observed between capital adequacy and funding costs. A negative but not strong connection is observed between liquidity and inflation. Also, a negative relationship is observed between the size of banks and asset liquidity.

Results of the regression analysis for the ROA/ROE model

Results of the multiple regression analysis for the ROA model

The adjusted R^2 is 52%, which means that the independent variables explain the dependent variable (ROA) by 52%. It is stated with 95% confidence that the independent variables: asset management, bank size, operational efficiency, asset liquidity, credit risk, capital adequacy, concentration, funding costs, inflation, and economic activity, explain the dependent variable (ROA) by 52%. Given that the explanatory power is high, it is stated that the model is good.

The size of banks, asset management, capital adequacy, inflation and GDP have a direct relationship with return on assets (ROA). Asset liquidity, credit risk, operational efficiency, funding costs and concentration have a negative relationship with return on assets (ROA). Empirical analysis results match theory, except for concentration, which appears to have a negative relationship with return on assets. As far as the significance of independent variables is concerned, it is seen that the size of banks, asset management, credit risk, capital adequacy and economic activity show statistical significance, since the p value of each of the variables is less than the significance level (α) 5%. The capital adequacy of the banking sector in Albania has been above the minimum required level (12%) for the period under consideration. The well-capitalized banks indicate lower costs for the bankrupt of commercial banks. As a result, the need for funding would be lower and the profits of banks would normally increase. The size of banks also appears as a statistically significant variable. As the size of banks increases, transaction costs fall due to economies of scale, and as a result, the profitability of commercial banks increases. Credit risk is the biggest risk faced by commercial banks in Albania. Theoretically, an increase in bad loans would lead to a decrease in the profitability of commercial banks. Empirical analysis results match theory, from where it can be said that bad loans decrease the profitability of commercial banks. Credit risk shows statistical significance. Lastly, asset management and economic activity show statistical significance. Empirical evidence matches theory, resulting in a positive relationship between these two variables and the profitability of commercial banks.

As far as liquidity is concerned, a negative and statistically insignificant relationship is seen with return on assets. Similarly, theory suggests a negative relationship between asset liquidity and the profitability of commercial banks, since liquid assets yield a lower return, and as a result, the profitability of commercial banks decreases. As for operational efficiency, a negative and statistically insignificant relationship is seen with the profitability of commercial banks, as suggested by theory. In this paper, operational efficiency is measured through the ratio (operating expenses)/(total revenue generated). The higher this ratio, the lower the operational efficiency and therefore the lower the profitability of commercial banks. Lastly, regarding funding costs, a negative and statistically insignificant relationship is seen with the profitability of commercial banks, as also suggested by theory. The funding costs are measured as the ratio of expenses for deposits/total deposits. An increase in funding costs would result in a decrease in the profitability of commercial banks. As for concentration (industry-specific factor), regression analysis concludes for a negative insignificant relationship with profitability. The results of the regression analysis are contrary to the hypothesis of this study, where it was expected that with an increase in concentration, the profitability of banks would increase due to monopolistic power. As for the macroeconomic factor (inflation), a positive but not statistically significant relationship is seen with the profitability of commercial banks. There is no universal evidence regarding the relationship between inflation and the profitability of commercial banks. From the analysis performed, it can be concluded that with an increase in inflation, the profitability of commercial banks increases. This is because commercial banks can apply an increase in interest rates for lending in the economy.

The results of the multiple regression analysis for the ROE model

The adjusted R^2 is 73.5%, which means that the independent variables explain the dependent variable (ROE) by 73.5%. It is stated with 95% confidence that the independent variables: size of banks, asset management, operational efficiency, credit risk, asset liquidity, funding costs, capital adequacy, concentration, inflation, and economic activity, explain the dependent variable (ROE) by 73.5%. Since the explanation is high, it results that the model is good.

The size of the banks, asset management, capital adequacy, and economic activity have a direct relationship with return on capital. Asset liquidity, credit risk, operational efficiency, funding costs, inflation, and concentration have a negative relationship with return on capital. The results of the regression analysis are in line with the theory, except for the variable 'concentration', which shows a negative relationship with return on capital. In terms of the significance of the variables, it is seen that the size of the banks, asset management, asset liquidity, credit risk, operational efficiency, funding costs, and

economic activity are statistically significant variables. Asset liquidity is negatively related to return on capital. This variable is statistically significant, implying that holding liquid assets reduces the profitability of commercial banks as the return from liquid assets is low. Asset management is positively related to return on capital. This variable is statistically significant and reflects how assets can generate operating revenue. The size of banks is statistically significant for the ROE model. The relationship between the size of banks and return on capital is positive, implying that as the size of banks increases, return on capital also increases. Credit risk is statistically significant and negatively related to return on capital as an increase in credit risk would lead to a decrease in the profitability of commercial banks. Operational efficiency is negatively related to return on capital and is statistically significant. This is because the profitability of banks decreases because of increased operational expenses. Capital adequacy is positively related to return on capital but is not statistically significant. Funding costs are negatively related to return on capital and the variable is statistically significant as an increase in funding costs would lead to a decrease in the profitability of commercial banks. Economic activity has a positive relationship with return on capital and is statistically significant for the ROE model. While inflation appears to be negatively related to return on capital. This variable is not statistically significant, while the negative relationship implies that the overall increase in prices in the economy affects economic entities and individuals, whose financial situation deteriorates and as a result, the banks are also affected indirectly, experiencing a decrease in profitability.

Conclusion and Recommendations.

Conclusions

The main factors that have the greatest impact on the profitability of banks are the size of the banks, asset management, asset liquidity, credit risk, operational efficiency, funding costs, capital adequacy and economic activity. From the multiple regression analysis for both return on assets (ROA) and return on equity (ROE) models, it was concluded that the base hypothesis raised in this study is accepted. As for the sub-hypotheses, it was concluded that all sub-hypotheses were accepted, except for the sub-hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between concentration and profitability of commercial banks.

1. The size of banks positively affects the profitability of commercial banks in Albania. This variable is statistically significant for both ROA and ROE models. The results of the empirical analysis led to the conclusion that with an increase in the size of banks, transaction costs decrease due to economies of scale. As a result, profitability of banks increases if they do not operate in highly competitive environments. Additionally, larger banks increase their profitability because the loan rate and product diversification are higher compared to medium-sized and small banks.
2. Asset management has a direct relationship with the profitability of commercial banks for both ROA and ROE models. This variable is statistically significant for both models and shows how assets enable the generation of revenue. An increase in the operating income to total assets ratio would lead to an increase in the profitability (ROA, ROE) of commercial banks.
3. Asset liquidity shows a negative relationship with the profitability of commercial banks for both ROA and ROE models. However, this variable is statistically insignificant for the ROA model. While in the ROE model it is statistically significant, implying that the more liquid assets commercial banks hold, the lower their profitability would be, as the return from liquid assets is lower.
4. Credit risk is statistically significant in both ROA and ROE models. The relationship between credit risk and the profitability of banks is negative.
5. Operational efficiency is negatively linked to the profitability of commercial banks for both models. This variable is not statistically significant in the ROA model. However, operational efficiency is statistically significant in the ROE model, implying that an increase in operational costs would translate into a decrease in the profitability of commercial banks.
6. Capital adequacy is positively linked to the profitability (ROA, ROE) of commercial banks. The variable is statistically significant only in the ROA model, implying that well-capitalized banks have lower costs and therefore higher profitability.
7. Funding costs have a negative relationship with the profitability (ROA, ROE) of commercial banks in Albania. The variable appears to be statistically significant only in the ROE model. The negative relationship between funding costs and profitability (ROA, ROE) of commercial banks implies that an increase in funding costs would decrease the profitability of commercial banks for both models, but with statistical significance only for the ROE model.
8. Inflation has a positive relationship with ROA and a negative relationship with ROE. The positive relationship shows that an increase in general prices in the economy would impact an increase in the rates applied by banks for lending, impacting the increase in profitability (ROA) of commercial banks. Meanwhile, the negative relationship implies that banks are indirectly impacted by the overall increase in prices in the economy, as inflation erodes the wealth of economic entities and individuals. For both models, inflation appears as a statistically insignificant variable.
9. The relationship between economic activity and profitability (ROA, ROE) of banks is positive and statistically significant.

10. Concentration appears to have a negative relationship with the profitability (ROA, ROE) of banks, refuting the sub-hypothesis raised in the study. The variable appears to be statistically insignificant. While the possible explanation of the negative relationship is that higher concentration has resulted in more intense competition in the banking system.

Recommendations

1. The results of the multiple regression analysis showed that specific banking factors are very important in explaining the dependent variables ROA and ROE. While among the macroeconomic variables, only economic activity results in statistically significant importance. Meanwhile, the specific industry factor was found to be statistically insignificant. I think that banks should give importance to the macroeconomic environment when formulating strategies for improving their profitability.
2. Improving the factors that result as statistically significant in the model would lead to an improvement in the profitability of commercial banks. These factors are the size of the banks, asset management, credit risk, capital adequacy, asset liquidity, operational efficiency, and funding costs.
3. An increase in the size of banks leads to an increase in their profitability, a variable which is statistically significant. Therefore, commercial banks' managers should take into consideration the growth in the size of banks.
4. As far as the stability of the banking sector is concerned, it is important that banks are well-capitalized. This variable shows statistical significance for the ROA model. This recommendation is in line with the developments in the Albanian banking sector for the period under consideration, where the capital adequacy has been above the minimum of 12% of regulatory capital.
5. As far as the independent variable "asset liquidity" is concerned, banks should take into consideration that the more liquid assets they hold, the more the profitability of commercial banks will fall. Liquid assets have lower returns, as a result, profitability and asset liquidity have a negative relationship with each other.
6. Credit risk is the greatest risk faced by the banking sector in Albania. This variable is statistically significant for both profitability models (ROA and ROE). As a result, banks should pay attention to continuous monitoring of subjects and individuals who apply for loans. This is because an increase in bad loans would negatively affect the profitability (ROA, ROE) of commercial banks.

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Evolution of the payment system in the Albanian banking system

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the evolution and massification of the payment system in Albania. Despite the exponential growth of new payment system methods in Albania, the country counts more than 31% of its population without access to the banking and payment services. Studying the main factors influencing the massification of the payment system, a significant relationship was found with financial education, the infrastructure of the payment system, the mentality of trust in electronic platforms and access to the Internet, understanding where we are and where we can go.

Key Words: financial education, home banking, infrastructure, credit/debit cards, POS, ATM.

Introduction

The payment system is an essential indicator of the health of an economy that aims to develop and create a modern banking system that can provide access to the vast majority of society, increasing access and use of the tools used in these systems. Since its beginnings, humanity has tried to use different means of exchange, and the need to create a means of evaluation came first due to the development of trade in that distant time. With the evolution of humanity, like any other system, the need to evolve the payment system also arose. This paper refers to the modern tools used in the payment systems of modern times, mainly credit/debit cards and their use, online or home banking and its components, the use of intelligent machines such as POS - Point Of Sale and ATM - Automated Teller Machine, electronic interbank transfers, etc. The paper aims to analyze the case of Albania and refers in its overwhelming part to Albania. Before aiming for a modernized payment system at the highest levels, it must be understood that the Albanian banking system itself is a new system, with total privatization completed by 2009.

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Purpose of the work

This paper aims to analyze the payment system in Albania in order to identify the key factors that influence the development and hinder the evolution and massification of this system. Beyond the analysis of existing customers, this paper aims to analyze mainly that part of the population that does not use banking products and services in general and payment systems in particular, trying to analyze the hindering factors in the financial inclusion of these individuals and what we can do to go further and to enable the financial inclusion of this particular part of the population.

Hypothesis

Null hypothesis: The evolution and massive use of the payment system in Albania are related to the following:

- Level of financial education and knowledge of banking products and services
- The geographical distribution of banks and the infrastructure used by them for the transmission of this system.
- Internet and media access
- The mentality of trust in electronic platforms.

Methodology used and limitations

This paper is mainly based on the descriptive and statistical analysis of data on the banking system in Albania, obtained mainly from the statistics and reports of the Bank of Albania, the Instat database, and the statistics and reports of the World Bank for Albania. The paper begins with a review of the literature of foreign and Albanian authors to first understand the basic notions of payment systems and to continue with the findings made in this field. The chapter continues with the notions of “banking from home” (the text refers to home banking) and the legislative structure in force regarding the payment system. Chapter 4 consists of a graphical and statistical analysis of home banking and its components and the use of credit and debit cards. In Chapter 5, a detailed analysis is made of all the variables presented in the hypothesis, analyzing them as separate but always in relation to each other.

Limitations

During the study for this paper, much work was done to find an econometric model that would give us a numerical relationship between the variables taken in the study and would tell us mathematically about their relationship. However, this is impossible since measuring evolution and turning it into a metric variable is impossible. The same can be said for measuring confidence or the level of financial education. On the other hand, the development of an online questionnaire was considered inappropriate, since the goal is not to understand the hindering factors for that part of consumers who are users of online platforms or online banking but for that part of the population that uses little or no services of payment systems. Questionnaires can be analyzed in future works, possibly with physical interviewing of the mentioned individuals.

Literature review

This chapter consists of reviewing the work of other authors who have worked on similar issues. It is important that before we study the evolution or not of the payment system, we dwell on the components of the components of a payment system, so this chapter summarizes common types of payments.

Payment types

In the era we are living in, we are faced with the most diverse and sophisticated forms of payment types and their component systems. In the past, money was traditionally physical, and we are not talking only about paper money but also about other forms, such as gold, silver coins, etc. In practice, monetary wealth was measured by physical forms of payment, and people were used to storing them in vaults or separate rooms. Today, with the advancement of technology, monetary wealth has turned into a digital form, the size or amount of which we see as a number in our bank account balance. We have even gone to the point where we are avoiding banks. Thousands of users today also use peer-to-peer or decentralized finance formats, which consist of making transactions without the presence of a third party. The most popular form of these types of payments are cryptocurrencies.

In this study, we will divide the types of payments into smaller units, trying to look at the most usable forms, and in the following chapters, we will also look at the case of Albania. Let us first look at some basic concepts and explain their functions briefly.

1. *Cash – Physical money.* Money is a legal tender – currency or coin – that can be used to exchange goods and services (Kenton, 2022). According to Beattie (2022), physical money is essential as a unit of account/measurement and is considered a widely accepted standard by which payments are accepted and made.
2. *Checks.* Checks are linked to a payee's bank account. Each check contains the user's bank routing number (a nine-digit code to identify the financial institution) as well as the individual's bank account number.
3. *Credit cards.* They work by offering their users a line of credit from which the user can withdraw money up to a specific limit. Using this type of card comes with a fee, often a percentage of the total used from the credit line and/or a flat fee for each payment.
4. *Debit cards.* When a debit card is used, funds are immediately withdrawn from the user's account, so practically, the limit of money that can be used is equal to the amount of money that the individual has in the account to which this card is linked.
5. *Electronic Funds Transfers – EFT.* Wire transfers and ACH – Automatic Clearing House (Payment Clearing House) payments are typically used for larger payments that would not be convenient to process by card or check. EFT is the first electronic payment system that does not depend on a central processing intermediary. According to Simanjet (2009), an electronic transfer is a financial application of EDI - Electronic Data Interchange (Electronic Data Interchange), which consists of sending credit card numbers or electronic checks through secure private networks between banks or major corporations.
6. *Mobile phones.* Recently emerging contactless payment technology has made payments more accessible than ever. The credit or debit card machine, called a point-of-sale terminal (POS), can read the customer's banking information through the application installed on the phone.
7. *Cryptocurrencies.* A cryptocurrency is a digital or virtual currency secured by cryptography, making it impossible to counterfeit. Many cryptocurrencies are decentralized networks based on blockchain technology – a distributed ledger implemented by a diverse network of computers.

Home Banking (Banking from home)

Home Banking performs banking transactions not as traditionally done in bank branches but directly from the user's home or location. Home Banking mainly refers to mobile, web, telephone, and mail banking. The rise in popularity of home banking has fundamentally changed the character of the banking industry, offering lower service fees, and reduced physical risks associated with using traditional banking. However, most importantly, in an era where time is the most critical asset for humanity, home banking has cut a tremendous amount of time it takes to get and perform banking services.

According to Nsouli and Schaechter (2002), electronic banking and e-banking (home banking) help customers compare banking products, increase competition between banks, allow banks to penetrate new markets, and helps their geographical distribution in countries that would be physically difficult and costly. From the bank's perspective, the benefits of online banking include a reduction of operational and human resource costs in carrying out transactions, increased speed of operations, service provided 24 hours a day, seven days a week, reduction of human errors, etc. (Kastrati & Dervishi, 2018).

Shilpan Vyas, in his paper "The Impact of E-Banking on Traditional Banking Services," says: "The provision of Internet banking is increasingly becoming a "need to have" rather than a "nice to have"(nice to have).He defines this form of banking as the cheapest way of providing banking services.

Forms of Home Banking

The following are key forms of home banking:

1. Banking through the mail. This form consists of using the post office for depositing checks. It is a more straightforward form for people who are traditional in their banking activities and perform these activities physically.
2. Banking via phone. This is one of the oldest forms of banking, and yet there are still some users, while in terms of the bank service itself, the use of this form is still high.
3. Web Banking - Banking through the Internet. Almost all banks have websites that allow access to current or savings accounts; therefore, this method continues to be one of the most used forms of home banking.
4. Mobile Banking – Banking through mobile phones. Using banking apps available for mobile phones is more accessible than websites as these apps offer higher levels of security from potential cyber-attacks and options that are not possible on websites that banks offer.

Keivani, Jouzbarkand, Khadadadi, and Sourkouhi (2012) see an interesting perspective on the effect of home banking and the view of how the Internet, as a whole, will erase the old order. Thus, according to them, online banks can replace traditional brick-and-mortar banks. They call this the "beached dinosaur" theory. Given that many traditional banks today have introduced online banking into their products, seen as a form that minimizes costs and gives competitive advantages, tomorrow it may lead to the loss of banks as physical institutions. Today these banks are prioritizing this form of banking. However, since electronic banks are much simpler to set up and offer convenience to users, this may lead to fading and loss of

loyalty from traditional customers. Deposits will leave traditional banks and move to online banks, reducing the liquidity of traditional banks and increasing their cost of funds, which will make their business less sustainable.

PSD2 Directive - Payment Service Directive 2

The Payment Services Directive (second) is a European regulation that regulates electronic payment services, which entered into force on January 12, 2016, and the law began its application on January 13, 2018, within the countries of the European Union. According to the summary of the directive on the official website EUR-lex (2021), this directive refers to fund transfers, credit transfers, card payments, and other types of electronic payments. This directive does not cover paper transactions. PSD2 regulates and harmonizes the two types of services that have been in existence since the first PSD was adopted (2007): Payment Initiation Systems (PIS) and Account Information Systems (AIS). PIS systems (Payment Initiation Systems) facilitate the use of online banking through different banks and users, while AIS systems (Account Information Systems) make it possible to collect and store data from different banks of a customer, allowing users to have a complete picture of their financial situation.

Polasik, Hutarska, Iftikhar, and Miluka (2020) have conducted a study to see the effect of this directive in the European Union states and to give instructions to other European states outside the union. This study is based on the number of licenses issued to PayTech companies before and after the PSD2 directive. PayTech is an intersection between payments and technology, a sub-sector of the FinTech financial technology industry that focuses on payments and transactions rather than finance as a whole (Romano, 2021). The study mentioned above showed that the number of companies operating in the EU PayTech has quadrupled with adopting PSD2. Also, the potential of the economy, measured by the size of the population and the popularity of online shopping, has a positive effect on the number of licenses issued. However, from this point of view, the countries that have benefited the most have been small countries such as Lithuania, Malta, Cyprus, and Luxembourg. The favorable climate for doing business in a country and consumer habits in the way they perform transactions also have a positive effect.

Literature Review - The Case of Albania

This chapter is a continuation of chapter two and focuses on the case of Albania. The literature on the payment system in Albania is modest, considering that the first data from the Bank of Albania on this system started in 2004. After we took an overview of home banking in the previous chapter, we will see the beginnings of home banking in our country and, in the following chapters, a deeper analysis of its development. The relevant legislature also occupies a considerable weight in the analysis of the payment system; therefore, we have tried to review and focus on the legal frameworks that have had the highest impact on the evolution of the payment system of the time we are living in, namely Law 55/2020 "On the payment system" and PSD2 directive of the European Union.

Home Banking in Albania

The first bank in Albania that offered internet banking service (banking via the internet) was the American Bank of Albania in 2002, with the introduction of the ABA Flex platform. This platform offered an inherent package of services via the internet. Raiffeisen Bank followed these efforts to introduce this challenging way to traditional banking with their MultiCash platform, which allowed the service of transfers and yet was not a real internet banking platform, as it was only reserved for a limited number of selected customers, mainly businesses and companies. Until 2007, in addition to the banks mentioned above, Banka Popullore and Credins Bank also offered the possibility of account information using the internet, while for all other banks, this concept was still intact. Being a new banking system, over the years, Albanian banks found it easier to adapt to electronic banking, with much lower costs compared to older banking systems that have inherited a much more complicated banking infrastructure.

Different authors have carried out numerous studies to understand the level of development of e-banking in Albania and the factors that influence the latter. Thus, Spaho and Ramaj (2014), in their statistical work to see the use of e-banking in Albania, found that this depends on the fact that the role of the bank in increasing the awareness of its customers is weak and the lack of education in the products and banking services, as well as demographically, the use of e-banking was significantly related to education, monthly income, good use of the internet. Vadinaj (2014), on the other hand, connects the development of e-banking with our banking culture, linking the latter to several factors, such as weak inherited culture, slow banking development, and further lack of awareness of the importance of the system banking.

Hoti (2015) gives us a perspective on the legal framework of this service. Traditionally, the services provided by the second-tier banks in Albania have focused on deposits, current accounts, and transactions. The government's continuous interventions in economic and monetary policies to minimize cash transactions by forcing state institutions to use payments through the banking system have led to the recognition and rapid development of new services, such as loans, overdrafts (credit lines), credit/debit cards, etc. Even in this paper, banks are referred to as having the most prominent role in educating customers on using electronic banking services. Kastrati and Dervishi (2014) have used a model based on the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system will be effortless (perceived ease of use), the degree to which a person believes

that using a particular system will increase his work performance (perceived usefulness), perceived safety and risk, perceived trust, amount of information and demographics. From this study, it was found that the perceived usefulness and the amount of information are factors that influence (significantly) the use of online banking, while regarding demographic factors, only gender is a dominant factor, over the others.

Important laws in the evolution of the payment system

1. *Law 55/2020 "On Payment Services"*. The primary purpose of this law is to reform the small-value payment market in all aspects of its operation. This law introduces two innovative activities: payment service initiation and account information, which will increase further competition. These activities will be provided by so-called fintech companies, which will promote electronic commerce. This law determines the authorization of the extension of banking activities by cooperating with non-bank financial institutions, which currently have a consolidated network of agents with a broad scope in the territory of Albania, the digitization of services such as opening remote accounts, creating financial institutions with well-regulated governance and law enforcement structures. (Bankieri, 2020, pp. 7-8).3.1.2.
2. *Albania, the first country in Europe to transpose the PSD2 directive by law*. Hima (Revista "Bankieri," 2019) describes the implementation of the PSD2 directive as a necessity in terms of the integration process in the EU and the SEPA payment system. Moreover, its implementation is a requirement in the SAA agreement - Stabilization and Association Agreement between the EU and the Republic of Albania. We stopped at law 55/2020, which is precisely the law drawn up and approved in implementing this directive. As we mentioned above, also for Albania, the implementation of PSD2 and the relevant law will promote the promotion of electronic payment instruments in Albania, increase competition between different market participants, reduce usage costs, and reduce the use of physical cash in economics. (Bregu, 2020).

Graphic analysis of payment systems and methods.

In this chapter, we will see in detail and graphically the state of payment systems used in Albania. The chapter begins with analyzing the use of the home banking system and its constituent components to understand distribution and use. The chapter closes with a graphic analysis of the use of bank cards in Albania.

Analysis of the use of the Home Banking service over the years in Albania

Home Banking (e-banking, online banking) is an electronic payment system that enables bank or financial institution users to perform a series of transactions using various technology tools. In Albania, it is a relatively new system, so the data from BSH date back to 2008.

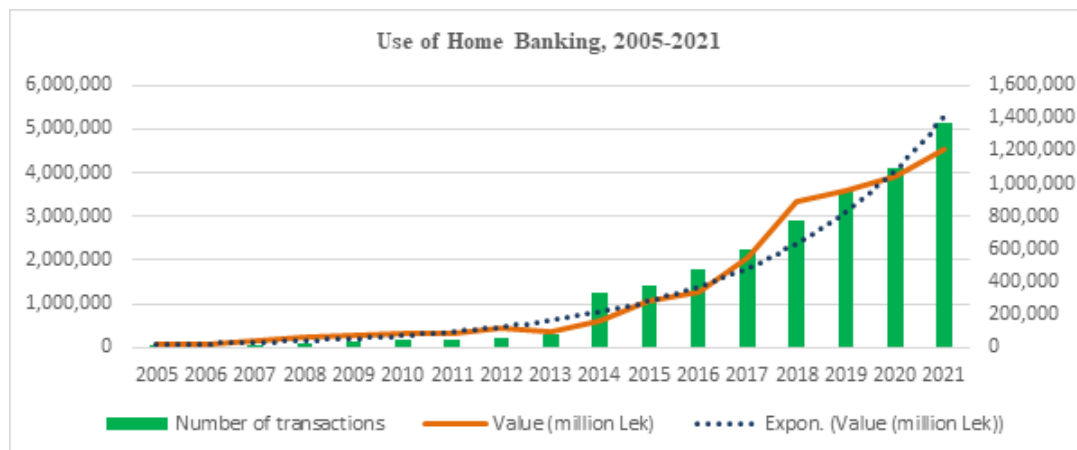
Graph 1 presents the progress of transactions carried out through Home Banking during 2005-2021. Before we start the analysis of the trend, what can be noticed with the naked eye is the big jump that both elements taken in the study have after 2013; this also came as a result of the adoption of law 133/2013 "On the payment system." The Payment System Report - 2013 of the Bank of Albania gives us a simplified view of this law. Adopting this law then would mean the liberalization of the payment system market by creating private payment systems. This law aims to increase the security, stability, and efficiency of the national payment system in Albania by defining the means, procedures, and rules with which this system will operate. Besides this, the upward trend comes from the push by financial institutions to reduce cash payments and make them via the Internet.

Since the beginning of the operation of this system 17 years ago until today, the number of transactions made in the system has increased by about 32,557%, while the total value of the transactions made has increased by about 7,483%. The highest increase in the number of transactions was recorded in 2014, with 286% more transactions than in 2013, while the highest increase in values is recorded in the beginning years (2007), with a change of 188% from the previous year.

To send the analysis deeper, let us define the trend this system has followed concretely. First, graph 1 clearly shows the upward trend presented by this system, which has an exponential upward trend (dashed curve). To understand more clearly the approaches of this graph, and to make a prediction of what may happen in the future, let us see a simple regression model.

Since we are dealing with a time series and an exponential trend, it is appropriate that we should generate a new series, $\log\_value$ of transactions, which is the natural logarithm of transaction values, respectively. Meanwhile, we index the years with periods $t=1,2,3,\dots$ respectively in ascending order.

GRAPH 1. Use of Home Banking, 2005-2021. The number of transactions (left), the value of transactions (right), and the trend (right).



Source: Bank of Albania and authors' elaborations

With the help of Excel, we use the method of least squares to derive the logarithmic form of the simple regression that generates these data:

$$\log_{\text{value trns}} = 30,34 + 0,26t.$$

So, the linear model would be:

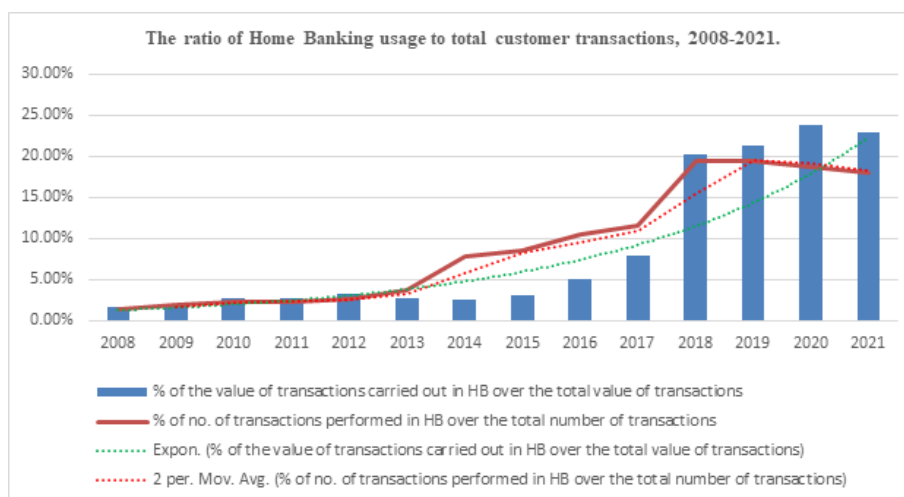
$$\text{value of trns} = e^{30,34} \times e^{0,25t} = 15\,013\, \text{Mln} \times e^{0,26t}$$

Of course, neither the economy nor finance can be predicted through mathematical equations, but starting from the behavior of the graph throughout the period under study and from an R-Square coefficient=0.96, we can give approximate predictions of what can happen. Thus, even though home banking found the Albanian banking system still laying its foundations, the progress of using this system can be said to be positive and with more and more users.

Analysis of the weight of transactions carried out with home banking concerning the total number of transactions carried out by customers

Now we will see what interests us the most and what can be approximated to measure the evolution of the use of home banking in Albania. Graph 2 shows the weight of transactions carried out through home banking concerning the total number of transactions, carried out by customers in the Albanian banking system during 2008-2021. The Bank of Albania has divided these data into two periods, singling out the last four years, but to have comprehensive picture of the progress of this system, in this study, we have referred to the entire period 2008-2021, as a whole.

GRAPH 2. Report of the use of Home Banking on the total number of transactions carried out by customers, 2008-2021.



Source: Bank of Albania and authors' elaborations

With the data obtained from the Bank of Albania, we performed simple calculations to derive the weight of the studied elements in the chart. What can be seen with the naked eye from the graph and supported by the data is the non-constant upward trend. In terms of the number of transactions, until 2017, the trend has been a constant increase, with an increase of no more than 3% from the following year, then in 2018 we have a jump of 8% more than in 2017, and that is having a constant level of weight occupied by the number of transactions carried out through home banking that remained within the range of 18-19% of the total. The situation is different in terms of the value of transactions. Initially, as seen in the blue curve in Graph 2, the graph follows a constant linear trend with an increase of no more than 3% (same as in the case of the number of transactions). However, in 2018 we have a change of 12% more than last year, bringing the total value of home banking transactions to 20.23% of the total value. In the following years, the weight maintained constant levels of 21-24%. As we said above, the big leaps or jumps in 2018 are related to the PSD2 directive put into effect for EU countries, which pushed Albanian banks to implement electronic payment systems in their systems.

If we look at them as a time series, both do not show a regular trend, so we can use the moving average method to predict the future. In Graph 2, with the dashed red line, with the help of the Excel program, the trend followed by the value of transactions is presented. Using the moving average method with interval $n=3$, we mark with $t=1, 2, \dots, 14$ the years respectively, 2008, ..., 2021, and after calculating the moving average as in table 4, we find the regression equation.

TABLE 1. Moving average for the weight of the value of transactions over the total.

Year	t	% on the total	Mov. Average
2008	1	1,69%	#N/A
2009	2	1,99%	#N/A
2010	3	2,69%	2,12%
2011	4	2,62%	2,43%
2012	5	3,15%	2,82%
2013	6	2,79%	2,85%
2014	7	2,44%	2,79%
2015	8	3,00%	2,74%
2016	9	4,94%	3,46%
2017	10	7,86%	5,27%
2018	11	20,23%	11,01%
2019	12	21,26%	16,45%
2020	13	23,82%	21,77%
2021	14	22,80%	22,63%

Source: Authors.

Thus, the regression equation in this case is:

$$\% \text{ of the value of transactions in relation to the total} = 0,02t - 0,08$$

Thus, if we make a forecast over the 15th period, which will coincide with the year 2022, the percentage that is expected to occupy the value of transactions carried out in online banking over the total number of transactions will be:

$$0,02 \times 15 - 0,08 = 22\%$$

However, this method is purely predictive and is mainly used to square the data and is not the most straightforward method in analyzing a trend, but we have a rough picture of what may happen in the future.

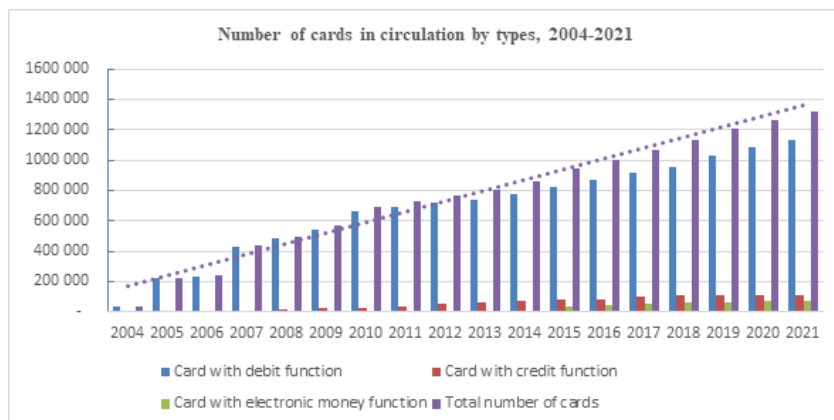
Analysis of the use of bank cards

As we mentioned in Chapter 2, bank cards are electronic means of payment, which in Albania are issued by commercial banks (second-level banks) and are part of the group of payment instruments with remote access. As in most countries of the world, in our country, the most used types are debit and credit cards. Finally, a growing trend is also observed for using cards with electronic money functions (or prepaid cards).

Number of cards in circulation.

Graph 3 shows the number of cards in circulation divided into three main types from 2004-2021. As can be seen in the graph, the largest share of card types in Albania is occupied by debit cards, 97% of the total number of cards in 2004, and year after year this share has been falling at a light pace, to reach the level of 86% in 2021.

GRAPH 3. Number of cards in circulation by types, 2004-2021.



Source: Bank of Albania and authors' elaborations.

On the other hand, the number of credit cards remains low, starting with 2% of the total in 2004 and continuing to grow at low levels until 9% in 2021. When we talk about credit cards, we are dealing with a line of credit, with money that does not belong to the user but helps him as a means of payment, which must be repaid at a second moment, and the low levels of use can also be explained by the levels of low levels of loans in our banking system in general.

Regarding prepaid cards, electronic money institutions were licensed for the first time in Albania in 2015 by the Bank of Albania; therefore, the data starts this year. Usage levels are even lower than credit cards, and their weight to the total has fluctuated between 3 and 5% over the seven years they have been in circulation.

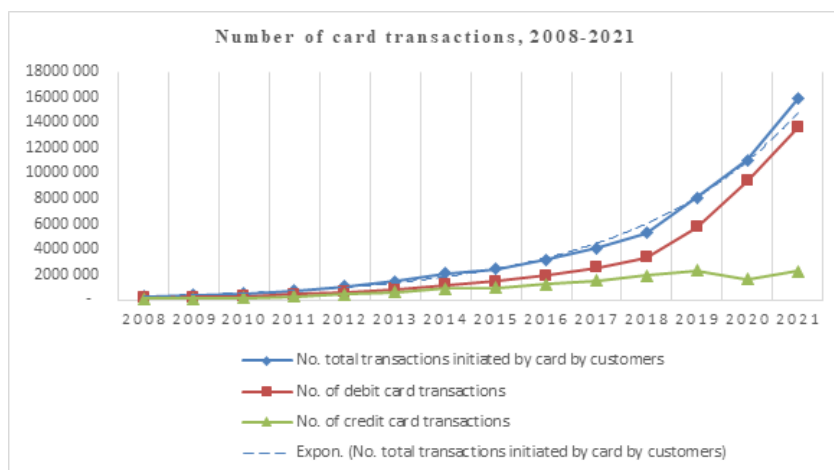
At the beginning of 2016, cards as physical elements began to be produced domestically without the need to import them, a factor that led to the elimination of international transport costs, the reduction of time, and the ease of cooperation (Monitor Magazine, 2018). Of course, this process has also influenced the upward trend described above.

However, despite the seemingly positive situation, it is worth noting that possessing a card does not necessarily mean use, which means that many Albanians own cards that are not used or are inactive.

Number and value of card transactions, 2008-2021.

Graphs 4 and 5 show the number and value of millions of ALL card transactions during 2008-2021. These data are presented in two graphs for non-overlapping values and curves. Before we analyze the trend, it is worth noting that the pace followed is explained by arguments like those of subsection 4.3.1. Both elements are related to the POS and ATM numbers, but we will discuss these further in Chapter 5.

GRAPH 4. Number of transactions made by card.



Source: Bank of Albania and authors' elaborations

For the analysis of the transaction value trend, with the help of Excel, we use the method of least squares to derive the logarithmic form of the simple regression that generates these data:

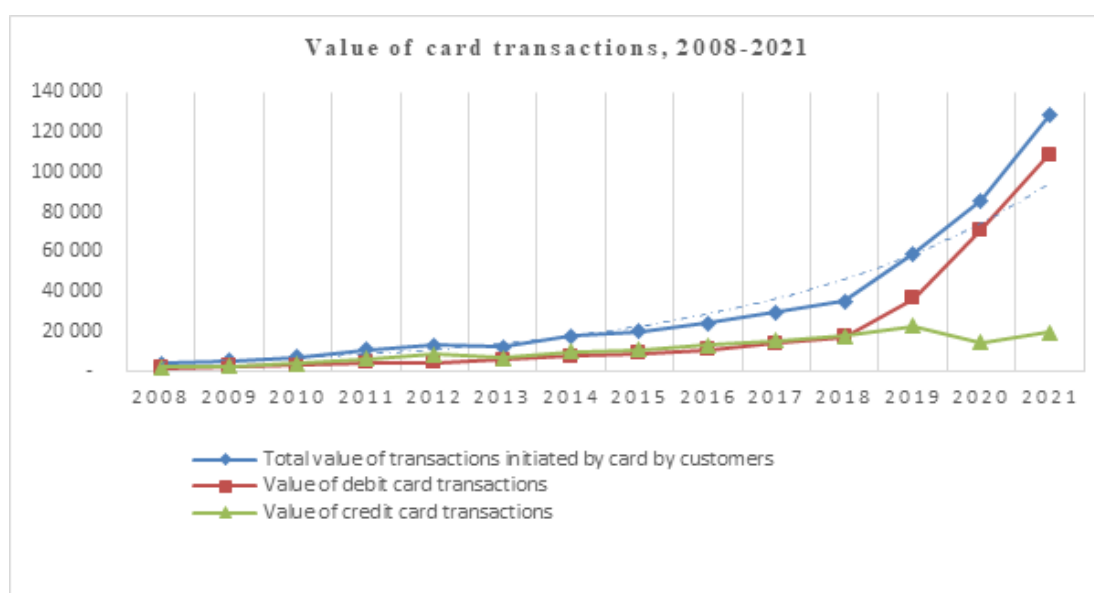
$$\log_{v_{lr.trns.}} = 0,24t + 28,85$$

So the linear model would be:

$$v_{lera e trnsk} = e^{0,23t} \times e^{28,25} = 3\,397 \text{ Mln} \times e^{0,24t}$$

Of course, functions with exponential growth are among the functions with the fastest growth, and this increase in the value of transactions at these rates indicates a sophistication of the payment systems that Albanians are using; however, as we have said before, finance cannot rely only on mathematical logic, therefore human, geographical, and financial factors must also be analyzed, which we will do in the following chapter.

GRAPH 5. Value of transactions made by card, 2008-2021



Source: Bank of Albania and author's elaborations

Analysis – the study of factors affecting payment system in Albania

Throughout this study, we have tried to understand the payment system as a component of the banking system, how this system is served to its users, the relevant rules and legislation, the changes that have occurred in the payment system over the years in our country, but first, at the beginning of this chapter let us define each so-called evolution of payments in Albania. The term “evolution” itself means adapting to current conditions. In the previous chapters, we discussed significant changes in the Albanian banking and payments system, starting with the privatization of banks in the years following communism, continuing with the regulation of the banking system, the use of bank cards, the introduction of home banking as an innovative service, and with the recent introduction of electronic money. It is clear that, the Albanian system has evolved. However, the problem lies in understanding how deep this evolution is and how competitive it is with other countries in the region and, further, the European Union. In developed countries today, more and more efforts are being made towards a cashless economy, i.e., an economy without using physical money and carrying out transactions only with electronic money, but can we talk about this in Albania? The annual report of the World Bank of 2017 shows Albania as a country with meager participation in the banking system, with only 40% of the population equipped with a bank account, while four years later, the annual report of the Bank of Albania 2021 reports that 69% of the adult population owns at least one current bank account, bringing it closer to the 70% target set for 2022. In these conditions, it is clear that we cannot ask to measure the evolution of the payment system in Albania looking for an economy that works without physical money, but first we understand how to massify the use of bank accounts by the vast majority of the population.

The hypothesis raised in this study tries to present a link between factors such as financial education; the infrastructure provided and the geographical distribution of banking institutions; internet and media access; as well as the mentality of trust in electronic platforms with the evolution and massification of the payment system in Albania. Of course, these factors will be analyzed separately in the following, but fundamentally we must understand that their combination would lead to the massive use of payment systems. Thus, to increase the level of financial education, information should be provided to the individual

both in the bank's physical branches or in training developed by the bank, as well as through access to the media and the internet, which is the fastest source of information. On the other hand, trust in electronic platforms cannot develop on its own if this service is not promoted and facilities are not offered in its use; bank and non-bank financial institutions will not expand their geographic reach or the infrastructure offered (ATM, POS, virtual POS) if they do not have users if individuals do not trust the security of banking systems or online payment systems they will not use them, and of course, if they do not have access to the internet, the use of electronic services is light years away. Thus, all these factors are closely related to each other. Now let us analyze them separately to understand where we are and where we can reach.

Financial education and knowledge of banking products and services

Before we talk about the mass use of the electronic payment system, the latest technology tools, or the use of new banking products and services, we must first understand and analyze how inclined the individual/consumer will be to use a service or buy a new product for which there is no information. Human nature generally likes to know and recognize a process before performing it, especially when it involves managing one's money and assets.

Thus, when we talk about the evolution of the payment system, we must first stop at Albanian consumers' financial education level. Logically, that part of the more educated population tends to have access to financial products and services, so before we dwell on financial education, let us dwell on the general education level.

Table 2 gives us an overview of the graduates according to their respective levels.

TABLE 2. Graduates according to the respective levels, 2017-2021.

Year	Total Population	Graduates of 9-year education	Graduates in secondary education	Graduates in higher education
2017	2 873 457	36 546	36 436	35 388
2018	2 866 376	37 795	35 278	34 331
2019	2 854 191	34 982	34 021	34 891
2020	2 837 849	33 618	31 662	32 889
2021	2 811 666	32179	31 136	32 690
Total	2811666 (Referred 2021)	1 496 835	834 891	170 189
% population		53%	30%	6%

Source: Instat and authors' edits.

The calculations of the last two rows of the table were made for different periods, but since it is not the object of our study, we are presenting only the last five years. We will refer to the year 2021 to understand the situation in our living period. Thus, considering only the students who graduated from 1991 to 2021, in Albania, there are about 1 496 835 individuals (53% of the population) with 9-year education (the sum of the total number of students who graduated each year over the number of the population in 2021 assuming that we have no deaths in the individuals involved and not taking into account individuals who graduated before 1991 because the data is missing), while in terms of secondary education, from 1992 to 2021 we have 834,891 individuals (30 % of the population) graduates (of course this includes students who completed 9-year education during the period as well as the limitations mentioned in the first case). Regarding higher education, there is no data before 2017, so in the time frame 2017-2021, we have 170 189 individuals who graduated in higher education (disregarding individuals who graduated before 2017).

Considering the limitations included above, as well as the figures mentioned, we are not dealing with a society and nation that has high levels of illiteracy, which means we are dealing with a nation that knows how to write and read and under these conditions is qualified to be financially involved and in financial education. Indeed, in the UNESCO report (2018), Albania counts about 44 thousand illiterate people in the whole country, which corresponds to 1.5% of the total population in 2018, which also coincides with the data of the World Bank (2018), according to which 98.14% of the population in Albania can read and write.

The reason why we stopped at this point is to understand that with the increase in the number of educated people, the number of employees will increase, and with the increase in the number of employees, the number of bank accounts (payroll accounts) will increase, with the increase of these the latter will increase the financial inclusion of Albanians, which will lead to their introduction to banking products and services and which will lay the foundations for their financial education.

Now let us talk more specifically about financial education. Financial education is how consumers/investors improve their knowledge and understanding of financial products and their risk through objective information, guidance, and advice and develop the skills to make appropriate financial choices to improve their well-being (Dushku, 2022). Considering the latest technological, demographic, and financial developments, the importance of financial education and "financial literacy" has increased significantly. According to the OECD, "financial literacy" is a combination of financial knowledge, financial behavior, and financial attitudes toward making decisions for achieving financial well-being. Studies to measure the financial

education of Albanian consumers have been rare and distant in time, precisely two studies carried out by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD - Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) through the Bank of Albania in 2011 and 2015. We will refer to the study of 2015, which was carried out for 30 countries. In Albania, 1,000 individuals participating in this questionnaire were selected with stratified sampling, aged 18-79. The questionnaire was developed in 3 sections: Financial knowledge (respondents scored 4.2 out of 7 possible points), financial behaviors (5.4 out of 9 possible points), and financial attitude (3.4 out of 5 possible points). Albania has an average of 12.7 points, ranking it 18th on the list and last in Europe. Although this report has an increase of 4% from the 2011 report, it indicates a low financial education in our country and an equally low financial inclusion. (Referring to the original OECD study (2016) and Isaku, Ceca, Koleniço (2019)).

Of course, the fact that in 2021, 31% of the population does not own a bank account indicates a low involvement of Albanians in the financial sector. The problem related to the lack of financial education comes from the need for an appropriate educational structure. The channels through which financial education can be obtained are numerous, starting from school, banking awareness campaigns, work, media, and the internet. In the teaching curricula (primary and secondary education), there needs to be a subject that informs students about financial products, their benefits, and risks, producing students who complete a 12-year education uninformed about the latter. Recently, the media has begun sensitizing the public to use bank payment services; however, this is often done through advertisements and publicity. Financial institutions of money banks and not - banks generally offer online information; however, information is not lacking in bank branches, but the part of the population that does not have a bank account and which will tend not to appear in the bank should be considered bank branches to get information. Given that in recent years, one of the main objectives of the Albanian government and the framework of fiscalization and data declaration has been the fight against informal money and informality, all businesses operating in Albania are obliged to pay their employees through a current account (we exclude cases where up to a certain amount the legislation allows you to pay in cash, but paying health and social insurance), which has pushed the approach of individuals to go to banks where they are familiar with banking products and this factor has influenced increasing their financial knowledge. In the context of information and financial education, the quality of the information that will be provided is essential, which means the public must be informed about banking products clearly and transparently, about the advantages of using banking products and products offered electronically, who are the facilities of the latter, how easy it is to access their finances through the use of bank applications, what are the costs and how they are minimized through electronic services, etc. We cannot expect the payment system to evolve or go towards massification when the public is uninformed about it, nor that proper financial education will lead to a 100% financial inclusion of all residents of the Republic of Albania who is at the right age to have a bank account, but financial education is the basis for the further development of this system.

The geographical distribution of banking institutions, as well as the infrastructure provided

As we said at the beginning of this chapter, when we talk about the payment system in the Albanian banking system, we certainly have evolution, and this is seen in the geographical distribution of bank branches and the number of POS or ATMs, in short in the physical access offered to Albanian customers and consumers. Thus, in 2022, 12 banks currently operate with a branch network consisting of 386 branches in total, distributed as in table 3, or 177 branches per 1,000,000 inhabitants. However, the main concentration of physical branches remains in the country's largest urban centers and even those banks with a more developed network. According to World Bank data, the rural population in Albania is 1,041,188 inhabitants in 2021, or 37% of the total population (2,811,666 inhabitants in total in 2021 in the Republic of Albania).

TABLE 3. Number of branches by banks operating in Albania, 2021.

Bank	Number of branches
Raiffeisen Bank	74
Banka Kombëtare Tregtare	63
Credins Bank	57
OTP Bank - Albania	39
Alpha Bank - Albania	34
Tirana Bank	34
Union Bank	34
American Bank of Investments	24
First Investment Bank - Albania	14
Procredit Bank	7
United Bank of Albania	6
Total	386

Source: Bank of Albania and author's elaborations.

So, assuming and reasoning that the part of the society that is not included financially consists mainly of residents of rural areas, the distribution of the network of bank branches does not help this issue. Connecting it with section 5.1., we said that one of the ways of obtaining financial information is the physical appearance at the bank, and in the absence of physical bank branches, residents of rural areas are deprived of this form of information, which will have a negative impact in the use of financial products and payment services. Two of the main methods by which the payment system operates are ATM and POS machines. ATM – Automated Teller Machine (Automated Teller Machine) is an electronic banking point that enables customers to perform basic transactions without the help of a bank employee (Kagan, 2022), while POS – Point of Sale (Point of Sale) is an equipment used to process retail customer transactions, (Hayes, 2022) which is used to process electronic transactions. Analyzing these two tools is very important, as it helps us understand the development of the infrastructure of providing electronic payment system tools. Thus, in Western countries, while customers pay for a coffee in a coffee bar using virtual tools (POS, virtual POS through mobile software), in Albania, we are still in the development phase of using these tools in large networks of supermarkets, shopping centers, prestigious restaurants, developed store networks and we cannot allude to their widespread use in the most typical payments we make every day, where actors of the Albanian economy prefer making payments in cash. While during this chapter, we have tried to understand and consider that part of the population that does not use banking services, whether physical or electronic, in this section, we will focus on the analysis of the existing infrastructure of the payment system. First, let us take a quick look at the distribution of ATMs and POS by significant regions of the country.

TABLE 4. Distribution of ATMs and POS by regions, 2021.

Regions	ATM	% over the total	POS	% over the total
Tirana	482	58,64%	11 374	82,77%
Shkodra	75	9,12%	534	3,89%
Korça	56	6,81%	431	3,14%
Gjirokastra	69	8,39%	383	2,79%
Elbasani	44	5,35%	410	2,98%
Lushnje	96	11,68%	609	4,43%
Total	822	100%	13 741	100%

Source: Bank of Albania and author's elaborations.

As in the case of the extension of bank branches, in this case, too the concentration is higher in large urban areas. Thus, 58.64% of operating ATMs in our country are concentrated in Tirana, and this weight becomes even more significant in the case of POS, where 82.77% of these machines are concentrated in Tirana. However, in the framework of the massification of the payment system, it is worth mentioning that this percentage of ATM distribution has been decreasing slowly throughout the last years, which has also reflected a slight increase in the number of POS operating in other cities of the country. In table 5, with the data obtained from the Bank of Albania, we have presented a distribution of customer accounts, accounts accessible from the Internet, ATM, and POS. We also used this table to build the graphs that we will see below.

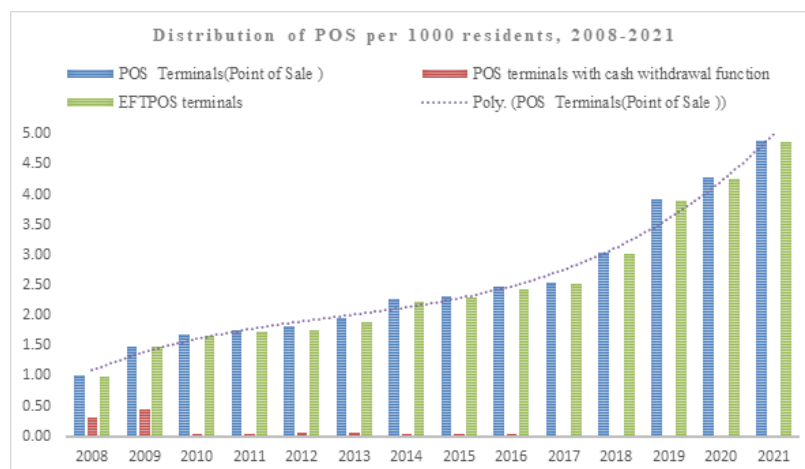
TABLE 5. No. of total accounts, accessible from the Internet, ATM and POS during 2008-2021.

Years	Total account	Acc.accessible from the Internet	Automated Teller Machines	POS terminals
2008	1 573 830	11 108	774	2 953
2009	2 086 143	15 134	741	4 370
2010	2 446 495	27 368	771	4 903
2011	2 634 971	37 138	805	5 126
2012	2 724 668	54 926	823	5 307
2013	2 919 352	113 930	822	5 668
2014	3 161 650	145 211	811	6 540
2015	3 307 663	153 211	826	6 689
2016	3 477 985	209 157	800	7 111
2017	3 141 739	322 438	747	7 294
2018	3 115 421	399 112	723	8 726
2019	2 984 912	441 591	707	11 195
2020	2 956 564	585 720	738	12 147
2021	3 047 259	708 618	822	13 741

Source: Bank of Albania and author's elaborations.

Apart from the number of bank accounts, we noticed an increase in all other components taken in the study. However, to have a more straightforward look at the massification of these services, let us look at graph 6.

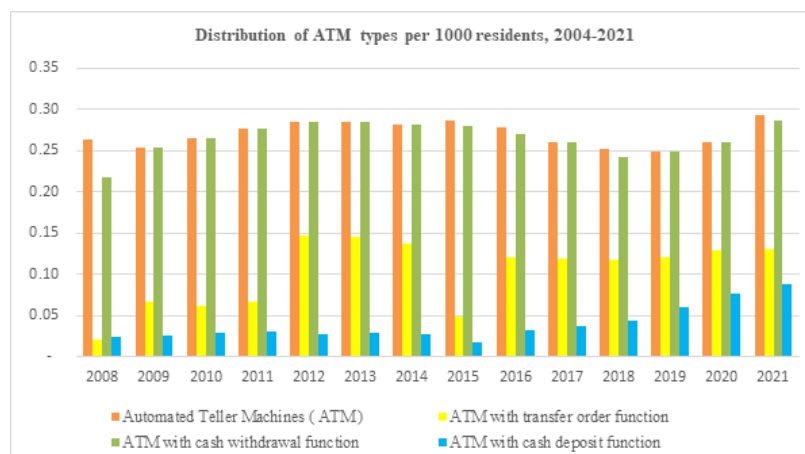
GRAPH 6. Distribution of POS per 1000 inhabitants, 2008-2021.



Source: Bank of Albania, World Bank and authors' elaborations.

Graph 6 presents the distribution of POS points of sale per 1,000 residents according to the most used types from 2008-2021. The blue columns represent the total number of POS terminals per 1000 inhabitants; the green columns represent the number of EFTPOS (Electronic Funds Transfer Point of Sale) terminals per 1000 inhabitants; and the red columns the number of POS terminals with cash withdrawal function per 1000 residents. The horizontal axis represents the period taken in the study, while the vertical axis represents the total number of POS during these years multiplied by 1000 and divided by the number of the population, respectively, according to the year studied. Of course, the upward trend is followed by POS and EFTPOS, whose trend is approximated by a polynomial function of the third order; however, the distribution per 1000 inhabitants continues to be low at 4.89 POS per 1000 inhabitants and referring to table 5 and the greater concentration of POS in this region, this distribution will be smaller in other regions. The graph generally does not show jumps in high values, but the growth has been constant, with about 2 POS more per 1000 inhabitants every year. POS terminals enable accessing remote accounts, paying through bank cards, and contributing to the reduction of physical money in the economy, but also, from the graph, it is clear that their distribution continues to be at low levels, preventing in this way the massification of hidden payments. Investing in the distribution infrastructure of banks in the addition of POS terminals and sensitizing even small markets to their use would play a positive role in the further evolution of the payment system (this in terms of consumers using banking services and products and payment systems payments offered by the bank). However, suppose we return to that part of the population that does not have a bank account. In that case, we again mention education and information on the advantages of this payment instrument, which is fast, safe, and helps to manage expenses better since bank cards, through which payment is made possible at these points, are directly linked to the bank accounts of the users.

GRAPH 7. Distribution of ATM types per 1000 inhabitants, 2008-2021.



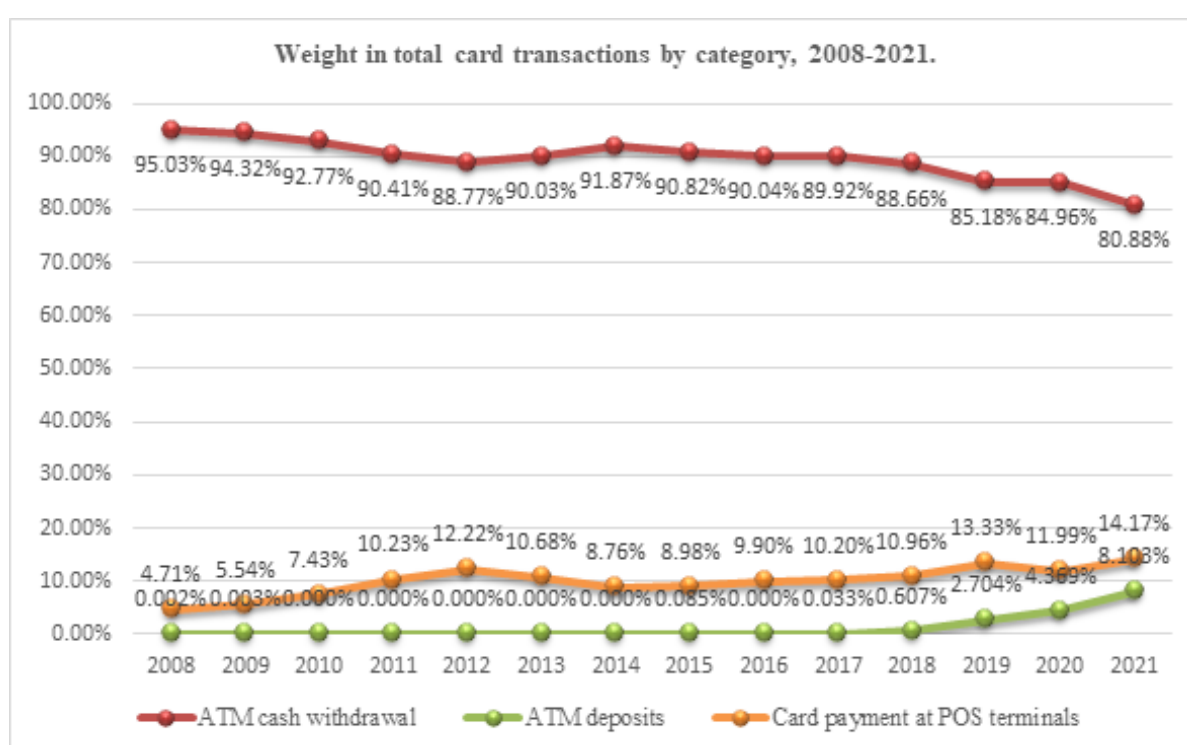
Source: Bank of Albania, World Bank, and author's elaborations.

Now let us briefly look at the distribution of ATMs per 1000 inhabitants in 2008-2021, presented in graph 7. The orange columns represent the total number of ATMs per 1000 residents, the green columns the number of functioning ATMs for cash withdrawals, the yellow columns ATM with transfer order function, and the blue columns ATM with cash deposit function. The horizontal axis represents the period taken in the study, while the vertical axis represents the number of ATMs according to the respective types multiplied by 1000 and divided by the number of the population for the respective year.

If we want to talk about massifying electronic payments, what would interest us would be the decrease in the number of ATMs with cash functions and the increase in the number of ATMs with cash deposit functions. This would indicate a decrease in the circulation of physical money in the country's economy and the direction for using electronic money. Graph 7 shows an increase in ATMs with a deposit function, but we are still at numbers that do not exceed 0.3 such ATMs per 1000 inhabitants. On the other hand, after a downward trend from 2015 to 2019, the last two years have been followed by an increasing rate in terms of the total number of ATMs and ATMs with withdrawal functions. If we want to see it in the spectrum of the financial inclusion of the Albanian consumer, of course, a high number of ATMs, whatever their function, is positive because it indicates good levels of access to their finances at any time, but still the distribution of ATMs remains at numbers that do not exceed 0.3 ATMs per 1000 inhabitants.

Now let us look at the composition of transactions carried out by means of these mentioned means. Chart 8 shows the weight in the total of transactions carried out according to the most used categories in card transactions from 2008-2021.

GRAPH 8. Weight in total card transactions by category, 2008-2021.



Source: Bank of Albania and authors' elaborations.

In chart 8, the curve in red represents the weight of cash withdrawals from ATMs concerning the total number of card transactions; the green curve represents the weight of ATM deposits concerning the total number of card transactions, and the curves in orange the weight of payments through POS concerning the total number of card transactions. Even among consumers who are somewhat financially involved (have a bank account, either current or deposit), physical money prevails as long as ATM cash withdrawals account for more than 80% of total transactions (2021). This is a consequence of what we mentioned in section 5.1., the addition of bank accounts due to the declaration of data and salary accounts, which employers transfer to the account of employees and the latter withdraw and use them in the form of physical money, increasing the circulation of cash in the economy.

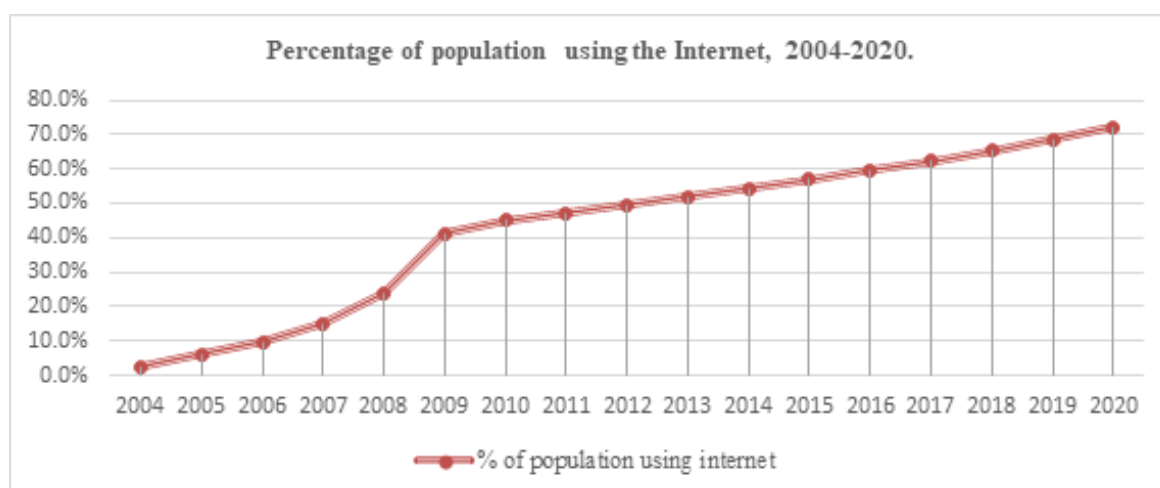
However, the positive is that this share has been falling in recent years, with a change of 15% less than in 2008, reflected in the increase of transactions carried out through POS machines to almost 15% (2021). Transactions made through POS have followed a not-very-regular upward trend but at a slow pace. The same can be said about deposits through ATMs; this is influenced by the fact that not all banks operating in Albania offer this service.

Thus, we saw in this section that payment service providers' geographical distribution and infrastructure have changed and evolved for the better but remain at low levels. This directly affects the circulation of high levels of physical money and the financial exclusion of individuals. Also, the small and almost negligible number of bank branches in rural areas and less developed towns does not help the evolution and massification of the payment system but hinders this process.

Internet and media access

At a time when everything around us is being digitized and is moving towards electronic form, the same is happening with the entire banking system in general and the payment system in particular. Today, the Internet is the most potent weapon for receiving information and giving it. Within what we have developed so far, the best way banks can distribute financial education is through this service because information costs will be lower, information will arrive in real-time to the desired target group, and users will be more inclined to read information on their smartphone as long as they do not have to go physically in obtaining this information. Let us first look at the percentage of the population with internet access in chart 18.

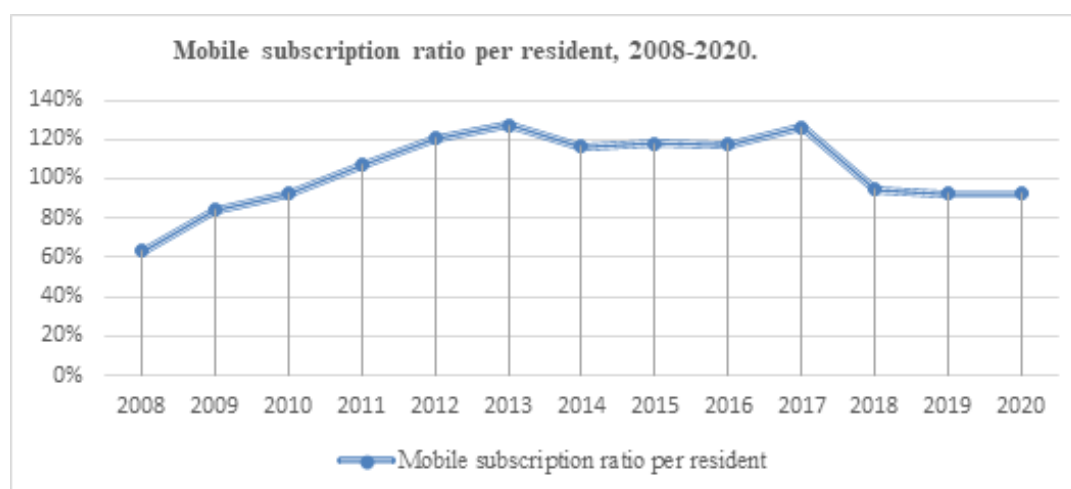
GRAPH 9. The percentage of the population that uses the Internet, 2004-2020.



Source: World Bank and authors' elaborations.

The curve presented in graph 9 gives us a picture of the percentage of the population that has access to the Internet during the period 2004-2021. The vertical axis represents the values in percentage, while the horizontal axis represents the years of the considered period. The trend was exponential until 2009, to switch to a linear trend in 2010 and back. In 2020, 72.2% of the population had access to the Internet in Albania (referred to the World Bank), and according to Monitor magazine (2022), this percentage in 2021 was 77%. Despite the high growth rates from 2004 until today, Albania remains one of the last countries in Europe for internet access due to the high difference between rural and urban areas. Regarding the number of mobile subscriptions concerning the general population, let us look at graph 10.

GRAPH 10. Mobile subscription per resident report, 2008-2020.



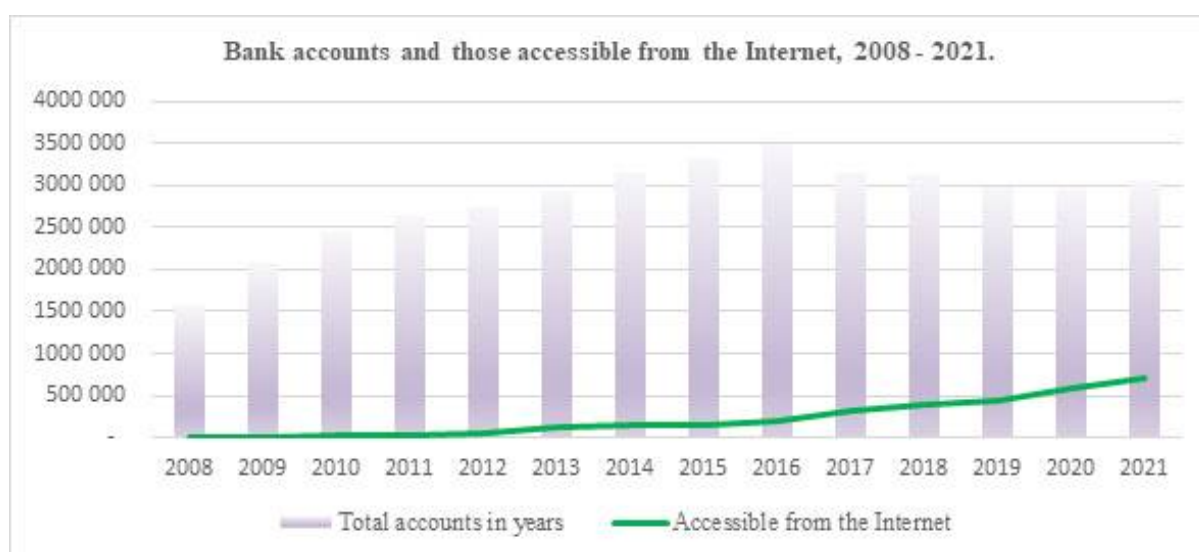
Source: World Bank and authors' elaborations.

The curve in green in graph 10 represents the number of mobile subscriptions concerning the total population from 2008-2020. The horizontal axis represents the period taken in the study, while the vertical axis represents the percentage of mobile subscriptions (calculated by dividing the total number of subscriptions by the number of the population according

to the corresponding year). We emphasize that in Albania, it is fashionable for an individual to enjoy more than one mobile number; therefore, sometimes, the percentage is higher than the total population. However, in recent years, seen the need to use the mobile tab also through social networks as a need for identity configuration, through bank accounts as a connection and as a way of access to online banking as well as the need to use the e-Albania service, which is regarding the mobile phone number, Albanians have started to normalize the use of only one mobile phone number. Owning a mobile phone, especially a smartphone, enables direct connection to the internet. Also, as discussed in the previous chapters, Albanian banks already offer their electronic platforms to access the bank account in real time, both to manage accounts and to perform transactions or services without the need for physical contact. Considering a normal level of access in electronic and digital formats, the Albanian consumer is offered access through informational portals and platforms but considering the uneven distribution between rural and urban areas, this can become a trigger for hindering the distribution of information in these the last.

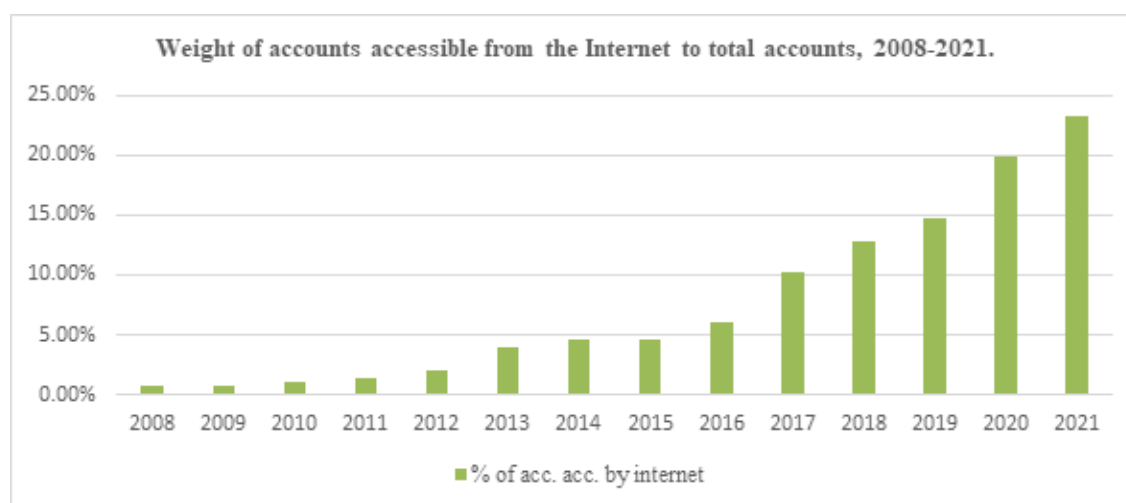
Let us now see a distribution of accounts accessible from the internet concerning the total number of customer bank accounts (refer to table 3, section 5.2.). Charts 11 and 12 present us with the total number of bank accounts and those accessible from the internet and the share of the latter in the total number of customer bank accounts, respectively. In chart 11, the curve in red represents the number of accounts accessible from the internet, and the yellow columns represent the total accounts.

GRAPH 11. Bank accounts and those accessible from the Internet, 2008 - 2021.



Source: Bank of Albania and authors' elaborations.

GRAPH 12. Weight of accounts accessible from the Internet relative to total accounts, 2008-2021.



Source: Bank of Albania and authors' elaborations.

Graph 12 presents the percentage weight occupied by accounts accessible from the Internet and the trend followed by this series with dashed lines. As in the case of home banking, the growth and trend have been exponential, indicating a rapid advancement of these types of accounts; however, the numbers are still low. Thus in 2021, 23.25% of accounts were accessible from the Internet, which means they used home banking services, either through Internet banking or mobile banking.

Internet access is vital in the massification of the payment system both for current users and for those who are new users. Internet access is, in fact, closely related to all the other variables studied, mainly to the amount and speed with which the information transmitted to online platforms penetrates and then to the creation of the corresponding infrastructure for the provision of payment services online. If individuals are adequately sensitized, the geographical distribution of bank branches is fine because most banking and payment services are offered online today. Another crucial point where we must stop in the online use of payment services is the convenience they offer. In addition to the extent of internet access and coverage, the fact that Albanians are capable of first using smartphones and then online banking platforms offered by banks is also essential. We recall that in recent months, most of the state administration services were digitized, prioritizing the e-Albania platform for receiving the most significant number of documents. Educational video guides were offered for using e-Albania, but the third age group still finds many difficulties in accessing it and prefers to go physically to the state administration offices.

Thus, in the framework of massifying the digitization of the payment system, banks must offer software/programs that are easily accessible, simple to use, clear, and with instruction manuals.

The mentality of trust in electronic platforms in general

As we try to analyze the evolution and massification of the payment system in Albania, we must focus on the tendency of Albanians to use online platforms. Of course, when we talk about the use of social networks or information platforms, Albanians are inclined to trust them even more than the information written in the television media, but what happens when information related to financial data is requested on these platforms? Albanian consumers tend to believe in things they see, in people they meet face to face, and in services offered to them by physical contact with the service provider. Although a cliché expression, many Albanians still prefer to keep their savings, maybe not under the mattress, but they trust the closets of their homes more than they could trust a bank.

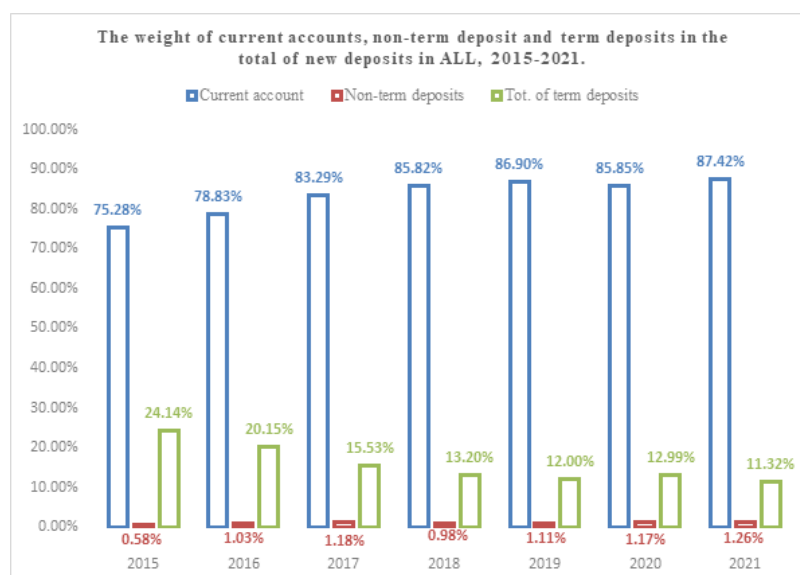
TABLE 6. The amount of new monthly deposits in million ALL, according to the term, for the banking system, 2015-2021.

Description of the indicator	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Current Account	193 363	1 485 144	1 546 170	1 859 385	1 788 864	1 612 254	1 795 096
Non term deposits	1 489	19 371	21 877	21 160	22 761	21 881	25 893
Tot. of term deposits	62 008	379 548	288 344	285 945	247 014	243 898	232 526
Tot. of new deposits in ALL	256 861	1 884 059	1 856 393	2 166 488	2 058 637	1 878 031	2 053 516

Source: Bank of Albania and authors' elaborations.

Table 6 above shows the total number of new deposits in million ALL for the banking system from 2015-2021. Except for term deposits, 2015 also recorded the highest figures for the values of these accounts. The total of new deposits in Lek does not follow a fixed trend and is characterized by ups and downs. The highest level of deposits appeared in 2015, followed by a significant decrease and ups and downs.

GRAPH 13. The weight of current accounts, demand deposits and time deposits in the total of new deposits in ALL, 2015-2021.



Source: Bank of Albania and authors' elaborations.

Based on the figures in table 6, we have calculated the percentage of the first three components of the table against the total of new deposits in Lek from 2015-2021 and have built chart 13.

Graph 13 shows the weight of current accounts, time, and demand deposits in the total of new deposits from 2015-2021. The blue columns represent the weight of current accounts, while the green and red columns represent the weight of term and non-term deposits, respectively. The vertical axis represents their weight in percentage, while the horizontal axis represents the period studied. As it is clear in the graph, the most considerable weight with a high imbalance with the others is occupied by current accounts, which, as we mentioned in the sections above, is expected given that the majority of financially involved Albanian consumers are part of the salary system. Current accounts are the most accessible accounts without any withdrawal restrictions, apart from the daily limits set by the bank to avoid liquidity risk. Time deposits occupy a somewhat significant weight, but unfortunately, their trend has been falling, which means either that money has been withdrawn and used as physical money, increasing the circulation of cash in the economy, or people have had lower incomes which they chose not to deposit but to spend, or that confidence in the safety of deposits has declined. On the other hand, time deposits occupy an almost negligible weight because individuals have preferred current accounts.

Even in strengthening trust in electronic and physical banking platforms, the primary key that can help the massification of the payment system and the use of electronic platforms is informational transparency and the provision of financial education. Thus, Albanian banks offer online security levels similar to those of European Union countries; this is a function of implementing the PDS2 directive and law 55/2020. The security systems offered are systems with more than two security layers. The applications offered by banks for mobile banking are mainly with 2-step verification, where configuration is usually required using a fingerprint or face ID in addition to a username and password. Also, when conducting online transactions, Albanian banks offer the 3D level of security, where in addition to a card or bank account data, transactions are confirmed utilizing a security code or password that can only be used once, which the user receives with an SMS message on his phone or generates it through the mobile banking application of the bank he uses.

In addition, for each ATM withdrawal or deposit, payment or transfer at POS points, and payment via home banking, users receive a confirming and informative message with the details of the payment made. Thus, the online security levels of the payment system in Albania are at contemporary levels, but consumers should be informed about them through the tools analyzed in this chapter.

At the end of this analysis, we conclude that the evolution and massive use of the payment system in Albania are closely related to these factors: the level of financial education and knowledge of banking products and services, the geographical distribution of banks, and the infrastructure used by them in monitoring the payment system; Internet and media access of existing and potential customers; as well as the mentality of trust in electronic platforms in general, and all these factors are closely related to each other, and their influence is intertwined.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Throughout this study, a look was taken at the situation of the payment system in Albania, analyzing the constituent components of this system and their progress throughout the years of operation. Below we list the most important findings and recommendations.

1. Based on the analysis carried out, **the primary hypothesis is confirmed:** The evolution and massification of the use of the payment system in Albania are related to the level of financial education and knowledge about banking products and services, the geographical distribution of banks, and the infrastructure used by them for the transmission of this system; internet and media access; and the mindset of trust in electronic platforms as a whole.
2. Analyzing the progress of home banking and its components, an exponential increase in the spread of transactions carried out through this function was observed, as an effect of the relevant legislation, the intervention of the government to initiate payments through banks, and awareness campaigns of banks.
3. The situation is presented in high growth rates also in the use of bank cards, which is mainly dominated by the use of debit cards.
4. During this study, we concluded that the level of financial inclusion in Albania is low; only 40% of Albanians own a bank account (Babka Sinjar, 2017), while the Bank of Albania presents this figure in 2021 at the level of 69 %.
5. Albania still has a high circulation of physical money (cash), not only for individuals who are not part of the banking and payment system but also for those with a bank account (over 80% of transactions are withdrawals cash from ATM).
6. Financial education is the basis of the development of the payment system because if Albanian consumers are informed through appropriate channels of information about the advantages of this system, they will be more inclined to use physical money less and turn to electronic channels to manage their finances.
7. Financial education can only be achieved with a high geographical distribution of bank branches, and what we have noticed is that this network is still narrow, mainly concentrated in large urban areas.

8. With the advancement of technology and the positive aspects it brings, governments and banks try to direct the population towards digital channels; therefore, we also analyzed the infrastructure with which the bank's digital services are offered, in addition to home banking services. The figures are still at low levels, and thus for every 1000 inhabitants today in Albania, there are 4.89 POS - Point of Sale and 0.3 ATM - Automated Teller Machines, mainly concentrated in urban areas.
9. The penetration of electronic payment services is inevitably related to the appropriate infrastructure; therefore, in the conditions where most POS are concentrated in large shopping centers or large store chains, we cannot talk about a massification of the payment system. On the other hand, access to the Internet and media is a crucial factor both for information and education and for the fact that all online payment services are used via the Internet.
10. In the spectrum of access to the payment system, the ease with which these services are offered is essential; therefore, banks should optimize the use of online applications for real-time access to account information or the initiation of payments. Considering a high concentration of the population in rural areas (37% of the population), efforts should be made to provide payment services in the simplest form.
11. The primary key in terms of the tendency of Albanians to entrust their finances to a third party is real-time information with the highest levels of security while using banking services rather than the traditional storage of money in cash.

Recommendations

1. Financial education should be normalized in lower and higher education curricula so that the individual gets used to banking culture from an early age.
2. Banks, government, and e-money institutions should focus on making the population aware of using advanced payment services.
3. Addition of remote payment infrastructure, such as POS, EFTPOS, and ATM with transfer function.
4. The extension of bank branches in rural areas to operate not only as financial institutions but also as educational institutions in increasing the financial inclusion of Albanians.
5. The media should inform the public about the security of payment systems.
6. Banks should start online awareness campaigns on the advantages of using electronic systems and the disadvantages of using physical money.
7. Mobile banking applications and software should be designed for general use, offering easy access.
8. Sensitization campaigns should be carried out in rural areas, and the study on the financial inclusion of Albanians should focus on these areas.

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PANEL II

**JUSTICE, POLITICS, AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN
THE LIGHT OF EU NEGOTIATIONS**

The rule of law in democracy.

The case of Albania

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Abstract

The principle of the rule of law is one of the most important and essential principles for any democratic state and society. The legal state or the rule of law means the close and reciprocal connection between the functions of the state itself and the right. The first ideas of thinking about the rule of law appear in the Late Middle Ages. The notion of the rule of law began to occupy a greater place in the works of many prominent philosophers and thinkers of the Renaissance, such as: Hobbs, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, etc. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the concept of the rule of law is treated more and more by other philosophers of right, and in the second half of this century it takes on more concrete nuances and a more complete state form. The concept of the rule of law, in the form of a theoretical and legal concept, but also as a constitutional act, was formulated for the first time by the German jurist Robert Von Mohl, while as a legal concept and terminology the principle of the rule of law appeared for the first time in the German right. In the general concept of the rule of law, the existence of two types of meanings is accepted. In the formal sense, the rule of law includes in itself the recognition and respect of certain forms and procedures on the construction and activity of state bodies, while in a more concrete sense of the rule of law it is about guaranteeing the content of laws, in which a special place is occupied by acts on basic human rights and freedoms. The development of democratic processes in our era cannot be understood without the application of the principle of the rule of law. Only in totalitarian regimes is this principle unacceptable. This system replaces it with the principle of class struggle and socialist legality. Recognition of the principle of the rule of law requires, among other things, the existence of a democratic constitution, the recognition and respect of the basic rights and freedoms of citizens and the development of state and social activity in accordance with the constitution and laws. In democratic countries, the implementation of the rule of law is a complex and difficult process that requires continuous, serious and extremely determined commitment from the entire state and society. Even in Albania, the recognition and implementation of this principle has been difficult and has been accompanied by numerous problems. In the reports of the EU, organizations and international forums, many flaws and weaknesses are reflected in this direction, mainly in respect of the law and human rights, in the independence of the judiciary and the media, in the fight against corruption and crime. However, it should not be denied that in the last decade, and especially in its last years, there have been notable achievements in the above areas, thanks to the help of the EU and other international factors.

Keywords: rule of law, law, judicial system, corruption, fundamental rights

Introduction

The principle of the rule of law is one of the most important and most essential principles for any state and democratic society. Its realization in every cell of the country's social and economic life remains the best guarantee for the development of democracy and the implementation of the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens. For this reason the principle of the rule of law represents the fundamental requirement of the legislation and constitution of contemporary democratic countries.

The principle of the rule of law has been increasingly perfected in both theoretical and state practice. In our era, the development of democratic processes is carried out on the basis of a number of principles. The rule of law is one of the basic principles. Only in totalitarian regimes, this principle, the essence of which aims to protect the individual from state power and guarantee his freedom, is unacceptable and unnecessary. In this type of system the liberal principle of the rule of law is replaced by the principle of class struggle and socialist legality, which are the key instruments for the implementation of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Socialist legality implies the selective implementation of the laws, which are dictated and imposed by the Communist Party, which, as a single political force, has absolutely controls all state power. The advantage of the interests of society over those of the individual is speculative, but in fact the very content of the interests of society is determined through the ideology imposed by the Communist Party. Free thought should be displayed only if it conforms to the principles and goals of the communist doctrine and ideology, otherwise, strict measures and sanctions are taken against each individual.

Totalitarian regimes, which are far from the rule of law are characterized by violence and arbitrariness in the governance of the country.

The concept of the rule of law and its evolution

As a concept and as legal terminology, the principle of the rule of law appeared for the first time in German law. In the Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland (1949) it is written: "The Federal Republic of Germany is a democratic and social federal state" (Article 20 (1)), which means the principle of democracy, the principle of the rule of law and social welfare.

In its entirety, the principle of the rule of law means the dominion of right or the absolute priority of the law in all state and social activity. While in the legal terminology of our country we find it with the term "legal state" or "state of law".

In legal opinion, the rule of law is understood and interpreted as governance and the rule of law and not the rule of man, implying that the law does not allow the appearance of arbitrariness during the implementation of its requirements, that it is equal and binding for all citizens without any distinction, that the law is the best guarantor of the freedoms and rights of citizens, etc.

The first ideas of thinking about the rule of law appear in the Late Middle Ages, at the time when the thought appeared on the necessity of the most complete legal regulation of all state life, with the conviction and belief that only in this way the freedom and security of the individual was guaranteed against the so-called police state and against the arbitrariness of the feudal principalities.

The further development of elements of the concept of the rule of law is also closely related to the theory of natural rights, a theory that spread in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. According to this theory, basic human rights were born together with man, so and for this reason they are indivisible and inalienable. These rights can neither be limited nor should they be violated by any kind of power, including political power.

Through this attitude, it was intended to limit as much as possible the arbitrary activity of the state and to protect the freedom of the individual. On the other hand, during this period, the question of the codification of legal norms in general began to be raised, as an important measure for the system of legal norms and the most complete regulation of state activity in accordance with the law.

The notion of the state of law began to occupy a greater place in the works of many philosophers and prominent thinkers of the Renaissance, such as: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, etc. For Hobbes (2000), the rule of law was related to the meaning of man's freedom "to do what he could, towards those he could, possessing, using and enjoying all that he received." (p. 79). M. Mori (2005) writes that the purpose of the state, according to Hobbes, is the safety of all...

Locke's concept, according to M. Rosen & J. Wolff (2007), was that it is better a power based on understanding free and the decisions of the majority of those who have signed the pact, against absolutist power and that political power consists in the right to make laws and to punish those who do not obey them.

Rousseau (1903) was for the state with a will oriented by the common good, legislating it and giving it new rights through laws. He writes: "The general will is always right and always tends to the public good..." (P. 150). According to G. Beaulavo (1903), the system proposed by Rousseau is based on equality between individuals.

But the most complete and concise formulation of the rule of law is found in the works of the eminent German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In Bertelsmann Universal Lexikon (1996) it is written about this: "The so-called transcendental philosophy, elaborated in detail by him, is permeated almost entirely by the idea of the necessity of ensuring the freedom of the individual in the face of political power." (p. 437)

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the notion of the rule of law was increasingly addressed by other philosophers. This was done especially within the framework of the idea of creating the so-called state of reason, which was conceived as the opposite of the despotic state and the theocratic state.

The concept of the rule of law takes on more concrete nuances and a more complete form in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this period, it begins to be emphasized more and more that the state should act only on the basis of the implementation of the law and state power; it should be limited only to the field of order to avoid risks for citizens. According to this attitude, for all other issues the individual must decide for himself in a completely independent way, within the so-called free society.

The progressive thought of the time aimed at preventing the phenomena of the exercise of state power in an uncontrolled manner. It was demanded at all costs that the individual and the whole society as a whole develop in the spirit of a general liberalism. Later, many other demands were added and took place, which spoke of the care and provision of a higher level of well-being or a more humane fiscal policy in favor of the poor, etc. In every case, the discussion and legal formulation emphasized the standard of acting only on the basis of the law and through the law.

The concept of the rule of law in the form of a theoretical and legal concept, but also as a constitutional act, is formulated for the first time by the German jurist Robert Von Mohl. Xh. Zaganjori (2002) writes: "For Mohlin, the rule of law as a legal concept also includes a number of other elements and principles, which are closely related and mutually condition each other. Such, according to him, are the separation of powers, the activity of state bodies in accordance with the law, the independence of the judicial power, the creation of legal security for citizens, etc. (p. 74)

With the rule of law or the rule of law, we must understand the close and reciprocal connection between the functions of the state itself and the law. In addition to the similarity, they are also characterized by differences between them. When it comes to the connection between them, we can stop at the Constitution of the Republic of Albania (2012), which states: "The right constitutes the basis and limits of the activity of the state." (Article 4, point 1). This proactive constitutional determination not only supports, but also paves the way for legal and political concepts of the rule of law.

In different social periods, the definition of the rule of law has represented concepts that have been expanding and shaping towards its fullness. First, we can say that the rule of law is, first of all, a theoretical model. Since it is also the fundamental feature of a democratic regime, today it has become one of the fundamental topics of political debates. According to an older definition, the rule of law is an institutional system in which public power is subject to law.

In the general concept, the existence of two types of meanings on the rule of law is accepted. In the formal sense, the rule of law includes in itself the recognition and respect of certain forms and procedures on the construction and activity of state bodies, while in a more concrete sense it is about guaranteeing the content of laws, in which a special place occupy acts on fundamental human rights and freedoms.

The two meanings of the rule of law are not separated from each other. Moreover, contemporary constitutions accept the existence and interweaving of the two aforementioned concepts with the elements of formal and material meaning.

The rule of law is also included in the Treaty on European Union. It is written there: "The union is based on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to member states in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail." (Article 2)

Application of the principles of the rule of law

In democratic countries, the implementation of the rule of law is a whole process, complicated and difficult, that requires continuous, serious, permanent and extremely determined commitment from the entire state and society. In order to recognize the principle of the rule of law, it is necessary to meet three main requirements:

- a. The existence of a democratic constitution. The rule of law requires the existence of a written constitution, in which the basic principles and rules for the exercise of state power are defined. In it, the duties and powers of the central state bodies should be given as clearly as possible and the basic principles and values of democratic governance should be known. The constitution must not leave any path or opportunity that risks the abuse of state power and the establishment of dictatorship. For this reason, it should contain the main directions and boundaries of state and social life. The constitution of the state of law should serve as the basis and main source for all laws and other legal and by-laws that the state and society need.
- b. Recognizing and respecting the basic rights and freedoms of citizens. The rule of law must necessarily be based on the recognition and respect of basic human rights and freedoms. This is also the space in which a good part of the tasks and commitments of the state take place. It is the duty of the constitution and legislation in general to clearly state the acceptance, recognition and respect of basic human rights and freedoms by all bodies of state power.
- c. Development of state and social activity in accordance with the constitution and laws. The requirement for the exercise of all state and social activity in accordance with the constitution and laws is one of the most fundamental components of the principle of the rule of law. Constitutional norms have the first priority, on the basis of which the laws adopted by the parliament are formulated.

Principles of the rule of law are also other important elements, such as:

- a. The principle of separation of powers and independence of the judiciary.
- b. Ensuring order and peace.
- c. The principle of guilt for criminal punishment.
- d. Maintaining a necessary minimum standard of living.
- e. The principle of personal responsibility, etc.

As can be seen, the elements and components of the principle of the rule of law are numerous. Whatever the interferences and common or approximate goals, they are in unison and in function of the protection and development of democracy, the best possible guarantee of basic human rights and freedoms. As a rule, some of these principles or elements are fixed in the constitution, others in the Criminal Procedure Code, etc.

Recognizing and respecting the elements of the rule of law is not done through a single act, but through the constitution and laws, which are the premise for their realization in life. The efficient implementation of the constituent elements of the rule of law requires a serious and continuous commitment of the entire state and society.

The rule of law is closely related to the respect of the hierarchy of norms, the separation of powers, the equality of subjects before the law, before legal norms, the existence of independent jurisdictions and the guarantee of the civil and political rights of individuals.

The principle of the rule of law is one of the basic elements of democracy as a form of state government. The guarantee through constitutional norms and other legal acts, as well as the application of this principle in everyday life, are necessary conditions for the functioning and development of a free society, in which the basic freedom of the individual is respected. The guarantee of democracy has as a prerequisite the cooperation of policy makers and citizens for the construction of the rule of law, which is realized through:

1. Participation in the discussion of interested parties.
2. The freedom of the citizen to express his opinion on all the laws, for which he will vote and implement them.

If a climate of trust is established between the parties concerned for the proper functioning of the rule of law, a law would be passed based on the strength of the argument and its benefit in favor of the people and not on the basis of the arbitrary decision of the blind force of the cardboard. Failure to meet the prerequisites for the discussion of legal norms can create premises for the birth of a statist and bureaucratic state.

The rule of law adopts norms through genuine dialogue with its citizens. In the statist and bureaucratic state, the formal approval of laws according to the existing hierarchy is sufficient. In the rule of law, this form and method of work violates the rights of citizens and the rule of law itself.

Of course, even the theory of consensus for the adoption and implementation of laws carries a problem: How can it be understood that the majority of citizens agree with a right? Free dialogue between the parties, in which all participants can freely raise their claims for justice, serves as a regulator of this reality.

Citizens' opinions and thoughts about the level and quality of laws remain a touchstone for justice itself and the rule of law. But, on the other hand, we cannot exclude the possibility that the majority may be wrong in its judgment, just like the minority. Therefore, we cannot say that the majority is right, but that the consensus reached between the parties participating in the discussions provides conditions for coexistence, tolerance and understanding, qualities of the requirements of the state of law, which protects the interests of all citizens, regardless of political affiliation, religion, race and origin. Consensus theory thus embodies the status of an experience that, being implemented, creates the possibility of formulating and implementing fair laws for all parties. Only the drafting of laws in this spirit of debate and understanding between the parties can "spawn" a legal system acceptable to all layers of the people.

It is true that there can be no rigid models for the best argument, because otherwise we would fall into the metaphysics of natural law (law is given by god). In the practical discussion of the law, it can happen that one's own opinion about the law is constantly corrected, and even compromises can often be made by the participants. However, the mutual influence of citizens on each other can be experienced by some special people as a loss for that party that would like to implement its views without being limited.

During confrontations, the parties fight to protect their goals and objectives, but in the democratic order there can be no defeateds or winners; this order distributes the victory in such a way that no one has to feel himself the winner of all or the loser of all. In democracy, all participating parties win because the nature of the laws considers them equal. The triumph of the democratic climate is a premise for social peace, security and social perspective.

Rights should not be understood as material things, but as relationships, that is, they should rather orient the citizen to what he can do and not what he can have or what he can benefit from. Injustice is understood as limiting the individual's freedoms and hindering his opportunities to do what he wants with his own abilities. So, justice should not only be understood as a redistribution of wealth, but also as a necessary institutional condition for the development and exercise of individual ability. With the growth and qualitative change of the duties of the state, the need for justice also changes. The constitutionality of rights and political power can be questioned, in the event that politics uses the right for the benefit of benefits, destroying the role and rights of the citizen.

In the state of law, the nursery of the birth and shaping of laws should not be the politics of the scenes, but the citizens, who are also the absolute power, the sovereign of all powers. A legal system that is for the benefit of the people would be welcomed and implemented with pleasure by the people, as opposed to a legal system that would be imposed on the people and implemented with the help of violent means.

The problem of many democratic systems is that they see law instrumentalized, that is, only as a means to achieve narrow political ends. State bodies that instrumentalize rights to achieve their narrow political goals become increasingly isolated from the citizens they must to serve and powerful enough to control the distribution of political assets that should go for the benefit of the citizens. The best indicator of a democratic system is seen in its functioning in everyday life. The problems of

the legitimacy of law and laws should not be seen only in those who lead the state, but also in the genesis of democracy in the country, for example, in the political culture of citizens, in their preparation to be politically active, in the way of organization in groups and unions, etc.

In today's state, the organic connection of laws with reality and the expansion of legislators' perspectives on the interests they represent are of vital importance.

However, it should be borne in mind that the elements of the rule of law in the formal sense are of particular importance, among which the following are of more particular importance:

- a. Obligation that the approved laws are in accordance with the Constitution of the country where they will operate.
- b. The principle of separation of powers.
- c. Legitimate government.
- d. Guaranteeing fundamental rights and freedoms.
- e. Legal certainty.
- f. Equality before the law, etc.

Western countries that fought for the rule of law and its freedoms adopted such a concept of law, which has its roots in the old European tradition. According to this concept, originally elaborated by Greek philosophers, the law should not be understood as the will of one or several persons, but as a system based on general reason.

In everyday life, the biggest difficulties or the most numerous problems are created in the implementation of special elements of the principle of the rule of law. For this reason, it is rightly emphasized that the practical implementation of the elements or standards of the principle of the rule of law is one of the main challenges that both the state and the Albanian society face today. It remains one of the most important and necessary conditions for the construction of a democratic state, the development of the country and the final separation from the totalitarian system.

Respect for the state is a premise and prerequisite for integration into the European Union and other Euro-Atlantic structures. This is an ongoing process that requires everyone's input. The rule of law is guaranteed in the preamble of the constitution as one of the basic and most important principles in the state and democratic society. It constitutes an independent constitutional norm, the violation of which constitutes the precedent of an unconstitutional law.

The development of social-economic life and the rule of law are based on the implementation of a fair legal system, with separate and independent powers, which prevent the occurrence of anarchy phenomena, social conflicts, the use of violence, and the occurrence of revolutions. On the contrary, they offer developmental alternatives and the development of the concurrence of thoughts, programs and ideas that lead to the development of free elections for the way of governing the people.

Also, laws and legal norms must be applicable and not abstract. But all that we discussed above cannot guarantee human rights. The government of a democratic state undertakes to undertake and implement all necessary reforms to strengthen the legislative process, the electoral system, central and local government, public administration and the justice system. In addition, the government is committed to taking special measures to ensure the proper functioning of the parliament. These measures are based on constructive political dialogue between all parties and interaction with independent institutions, with the aim of improving the regulatory functions, ensuring the transparency of the legislative power, as well as strengthening the administrative capacities of the parliament, in order to increase the his supervisor role.

Any action must be taken by a government in the framework of reforming the independent, general and efficient justice system, which is able to deliver justice in a fair and transparent manner.

The main policy directions include a series of actions to strengthen institutions, general monitoring by civil society, and administrative and criminal punishment of corrupt officials. A democratic government is committed to the protection of human rights and implements the anti-discrimination strategy, the improvement of the state of social rights, of the poorest groups and strata, and of minors.

The rule of law in Albania in the transition period

Albania is experiencing a long period of transition. As a country totally isolated from the world for many decades, it has experienced a difficult transition. At the beginning of this transition, there were no orientation or guidance documents for the reforms that would be undertaken in the future to strengthen the rule of law, law enforcement, the fight against corruption, the protection of human rights, media pluralism and freedom of expression, etc. For the implementation of the reforms, the main encouraging role was played by the EU. The latter has also monitored the progress of these reforms, which and has mirrored in many evaluation reports. This progress has been observed and evaluated by other international bodies, institutions, forums and organizations.

In the third meeting of the civil forum (2010), organized in the middle of the transition period by the Open Society Foundation for Albania, the implementation of reforms in several key areas is analyzed, such as: law enforcement, the state of the judiciary, standards in elections, the independence of media and corruption.

The analysis shows that in terms of respect for the law, Albania "is lagging behind other countries in the region." Flaws are also noted in ineffective implementation or selective application as well as in the composition of some laws.

In terms of the independence of the judiciary, little progress has been made, but standards for independence are lacking; corruption within this system has prevented it from carrying out its mission properly and has allowed it to be captured by the state.

In the summary of Transparency International's report (2021), it is emphasized that civil society and the media in Albania have often pointed out state capture, but it has been systematically denied by governmentals and senior officials. It also points out the strong connection between public officials, the private sector and the judiciary, as well as the latter's impunity for corruption.

Indicators in terms of media independence are also declining, as a result of the creation of highly politicized regulatory institutions and systematic business and political interventions.

Corruption and organized crime in Albania is the only threat to the functioning of law institutions in Albania. Albania remains the most corrupt country in the Western Balkans. Improvement is observed in low-level corruption, while high-level corruption poses the biggest challenge. According to Transparency International (2021), corruption is also favored by tailor-made laws to enable the theft of national resources through non-transparent procurement procedures and the lack of integrity of the legislative process and parliamentary oversight.

The negative phenomena above are also reflected in the evaluation of the situation of the rule of law in Albania (2021), published by Defenders of civil rights, within the project "European Days of Law in South-Eastern Europe". The assessment is focused on four main aspects of the Rule of Law: judiciary, corruption, media and freedom of expression and protection of human rights.

The document points out that in Albania the situation of the rule of law is still problematic, despite the trends for improvement in several areas, such as: the judiciary, the fight against corruption, and human rights. Freedom of media and expression are considered in stagnation.

The strengthening of independence and accountability in the judicial system has favored significant developments, but political pressure is still present. This phenomenon is also observed in the democracies developed in the EU. The quality and efficiency of work in this system face significant challenges.

Corruption continues to be a worrying problem, especially at high levels. In Albania, although there is a comprehensive legal and institutional framework to fight corruption, there are no concrete measures and there is a lack of culture of impunity for this phenomenon, especially at the high level.

Media and freedom of expression are also problematic. Factors such as: the unfair attitude towards journalists, the government's ties with media owners, the government's "anti-defamation package", obstacles to access to public informing etc., have a negative impact on freedom of expression.

Flaws have also been pointed out in the field of human rights protection. Their elimination requires finding the right mechanisms and financial and human resources to implement international conventions and Albanian legislation on freedoms and human rights.

The Albania Report of European Commission (2022) underlines an average level of preparation in the implementation of European standards in the field of the judiciary and fundamental rights. Good progress is noted in the direction of the consolidation of the reform in justice, in the efficiency of the work of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court after the recent appointments. The vetting process for judicial appointments has continued to advance steadily. Some progress has also been made on fundamental rights, but efforts to implement policies must continue.

Results are also seen in the fight against corruption, including criminal prosecutions and financial investigations even at the highest official level. However, corruption still remains a serious concern, especially in public life and the business field. In the future, the criminal prosecution and trial of corruption cases, as well as the seizure and confiscation of criminal assets resulting from acts related to this phenomenon, must progress further.

Conclusions

The rule of law works in democratic countries. It is not only a entirety of procedural rights, but also one of the fundamental principles of a true, effective and meaningful democracy.

The existence of the rule of law in a democracy is guaranteed by the judiciary, ensuring the application of the law in a fair, efficient and impartial manner. In this field, Western democratic countries have created a rich and valuable experience.

In Albania, although important steps were taken in this direction after the system changes in 1991, practically much remains to be done. Daily life is filled with cases of disrespect and flagrant violations of important elements of this principle not only by individual individuals, but also by high state bodies, mechanisms and functionaries, political parties and associations, etc. This has been made public in the occasional reports of the EU and of international organizations and forums that follow the developments of the democratic processes in our country.

These phenomena not only seriously infringe the rights and freedoms of citizens, but become a serious obstacle to the strengthening of the state and the further development of democracy. In this context, the recognition and implementation of the principle of the rule of law should be the center of attention and the main concern for the entire state and Albanian society.

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Victims of Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Aderaldo MEMA

Abstract

Victims of terrorism are ambassadors of collective memory. Collecting, documenting and sharing their testimonies will memorialize terrorist attacks and their victims. Although there is no universally accepted definition of terrorism in international jurisprudence, to label an act as “terrorism” means proving not only that it bears certain characteristics, but also that it cannot be justified by any political consideration, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic or religious. Terrorism occurs in many different contexts and unfolds in just as many forms. One in ten Albanians confirm that in their area there are individuals who promote religious extremism, who support violent religious extremism or who pressure believers to join extremist causes. More over, the threat does not come simply from the presence of these individuals, but more from the consequences that may derive from their actions, if the actors of the fight/prevention of violent extremism in Albania fail to address the problems of groups at risk and address the drivers of violent extremism through a tailored approach. Beyond the gap and confusion that characterizes epistemological debates and theoretical studies in this field, the lack of clear definitions for these concepts is also related to the practical problem of identifying and understanding as fully as possible the emerging threat and, consequently, how we should face it.

Keywords: Terrorism, religious extremism, radicalism, victims of terrorism, religious affiliation, community

Introduction

Terrorism continues to remain one of the main security threats, both at the country level as well as at the international level, threatening not only life and property, but also values democratic and the society's own way of life. The global trend of terrorism and its extent, especially during the last two decades, it has threatened the Republic of Albania, as well as the whole the region, Europe and beyond. Collecting, documenting and sharing their testimonies will enshrine the terrorist attacks and their victims in memory - never to be forgotten by present and future generations. The fact that there should not be a concept of a “hierarchy” of victims, or a hierarchy of their suffering, is constantly taken into account. Every victim deserves understanding, recognition and support. The safety of the victims must be guaranteed at all times.

In recent years, violent extremism has become the key word of studies, media reports and the work of law enforcement agencies of European countries. Despite the seriousness and degree of danger presented to the national security of states and the region today, there is still no clear and widely accepted definition of violent extremism. In ongoing discussions about terrorism, the terms “radical” and “extremist” are used massively and often interchangeably. According to Sedgwick 2010 the term “extreme”¹ in a conventional sense refers to deviation from the norm, although this is not enough to define a security threat. The number of lives lost to terrorism in 2014 has increased by 80 percent. According to the Global Terrorism Index, 32,658 people lost their lives last year as a result of terrorist acts. The report, compiled by the Institute for Economics and Peace, states that two terrorist groups, , are jointly responsible for 51 percent of deaths from terrorist attacks².

¹ Sedgwick 2010

² Institute for Economics and Peace 2014

International and domestic legal framework

The terms ‘violent extremism’, ‘radicalism’ and ‘terrorism’ require special attention in terms of specifying and clarifying their meanings through accurate definitions, naturally the question arises what are these terms? What do we mean by them?

- **Violent extremism:** Means a form of extremism which seeks and promotes the undertaking and carrying out of violent measures to influence and cause immediate and rapid changes to the status quo (existing condition) in the ideological, religious, political sense, social, etc. In recent times, this term has been widely used to describe the actions of various groups that promote deep and rapid changes in various factors, social aspects and that are influenced and inspired by various religious, historical, patriotic, philosophical, etc.
- **Radicalism:** It is a term similar to extremism, which also means the tendency to promote and support elements and ideas that are not common, widespread, or universally accepted in reality, or at the time of the creation of these radical ideas³. This term also means the promotion of extreme changes in existing attitudes, behaviors, conditions and/or institutions.

Unlike extremism, radicalism is more related to political aspects and elements and is often related to the demand to restore the old conservative ideas as dominant in the direction of politics. In modern times the term is being widely used to describe ideas and groups driven by certain interpretations of religious beliefs that are extreme and radical in nature.

- **Terrorism:** By this term we understand violent acts with the aim of creating fear (terror) and which are carried out for reasons of different religious, political or ideological beliefs, having as the main objective civilians (or endangering their safety) and which are generally carried out by non-governmental agencies, often with the aim of achieving political goals⁴.

National policies against violent extremism and terrorism in Albania are guided by the following essential documents: National Security Strategy (2014) - (the new 2020-2024 strategy is being drafted) The National Security Strategy reflects the development of state policies for people's security, society and the Albanian democratic state against internal and external risks and threats.

Terrorism is defined in this strategic document as a real transnational danger for the security of the Republic of Albania. “Albania's geo-strategic position is an additional element of our country to be used as a communication and logistics route.

Militant and extremist groups, which use violence as a way to achieve their political objectives, are a serious danger to the safety of human lives and to the functioning of the state in the Republic of Albania.” National policies against violent extremism and terrorism in Albania are guided by the following essential documents: National Security Strategy (2014) - (the new 2020-2024 strategy is being drafted) ⁵. The National Security Strategy reflects the development of state policies for people's security, society and the Albanian democratic state against internal and external risks and threats.

Terrorism is defined in this strategic document as a real transnational danger for the security of the Republic of Albania. “Albania's geo-strategic position is an additional element of our country to be used as a communication and logistics route. Militant and extremist groups, which use violence as a way to achieve their political objectives, are a serious danger to the safety of human lives and to the functioning of the state in the Republic of Albania”.

The National Strategy against Violent Extremism (2015) The National Strategy against Violent Extremism and the National Action Plan address the phenomenon of the approach to the prevention of inciting factors that push and empower the performance of concrete actions such as: violent acts, access to strategic communications and distribution of extremist propaganda using the Internet, as well as the reintegration of citizens who have joined these groups⁶.

National Cyber Security Strategy 2020-2025 (drafted, in consultation process). One of the main policy measures of this strategy (Policy 1, Objective 4) seeks to improve the information infrastructure to combat cybercrime, radicalism and violent extremism.

Analysis of the provisions of the Albanian Criminal Code

The legal provisions of the fight against terrorism and violent extremism are part of the criminal law. Our criminal laws punish the spread of extremist ideologies, the carrying out of radical and terrorist actions as well as the participation in combat actions abroad. Thus, the Penal Code qualifies as a criminal offense the distribution of pro-genocide computer materials, acts of violence and crimes against humanity.

³ Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism (CETS No. 196)

⁴ Constitution of the Republic of Albania 1998

⁵ National Security Strategy (2014) - (the new 2020-2024 strategy is being drafted)

⁶ National Strategy against Violent Extremism (2015)

Also, the distribution of computer materials with racist or xenophobic content constitutes a criminal offense and is punishable by law. According to Article 28/2 of the Criminal Code: “a terrorist organization is a special type of criminal organization, consisting of one or more persons, who have sustained cooperation over time, with the aim of committing terrorist acts”.

Since the entry into force of the Criminal Code of 1995, the criminal offense provided for by Article 230 of the Criminal Code, “Offenses with terrorist intent” has undergone several changes. The criminal law of the time, while listing the types of acts with terrorist intent, with the phrase “acts with terrorist intent include, but are not limited to [...]” *left open the possibility that other acts could be classified as having terrorist intent according to article 230, but always if the other conditions determined in relation to the purpose of the criminal offense were met*⁷.

This wording is almost a complete part of the Framework Decision of the EU Council of June 13 on Combating Terrorism, as well as of the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism⁸, specifically: Article 230 of the Criminal Code has been amended to include terrorist crimes that are intended to spread panic among the population or to force state, Albanian or foreign bodies to perform or not to perform a certain action, or to destroy or seriously destabilize the essential political, constitutional, economic or social structures of the Albanian state, of a other state, institution or international organization, including⁹: *i) abduction of individuals; ii) serious damage to public property, infrastructure, transport systems; the hijacking of aircraft, ships, other means of transport or fixed platforms; iii) the production, possession, purchase, transport or trade of explosives, firearms, biological, chemical or nuclear weapons, as well as scientific research for the production of weapons of destruction in measure.*

The elements of the objective side (actus reus) and the subjective side (mens rea) of the criminal image of the act with terrorist intent have remained unchanged. In relation to the objective side, the act with terrorist intent requires the presence of at least one of the acts provided by the letter a - n (or from the letter a - e, but not only).

So, according to the Albanian jurisprudence, an act with terrorist intent can appear in different forms, from crimes against the person, to the hijacking of planes, ships or other means of transport, to the destruction or damage of objects of strategic importance for the security of a state.

It is easy to understand, in fact, that each of these offenses contains high social risks, not only committed in the framework of terrorist intent, but also as criminal offenses in their own right. So, the objective elements in the acts with terrorist intent are all, in themselves, behaviors prohibited by the Albanian criminal legislation.

However, a behavior or activity may be lawful in itself, but prohibited if it is carried out for terrorist purposes. A typical case is the financing of terrorism, provided for by Article 230/a of the Penal Code, where although the element of providing or collecting funds is in itself a legal activity, it becomes illegal if it is used to carry out a terrorist act; of a terrorist organization; or by a single terrorist.

Regarding the subjective side, we can say that the criminal offense provided by Article 230 of the Penal Code is an offense with a double subjective side. To face an offense with terrorist intent, the defendant must not only intentionally commit one of the offenses listed in Article 230 of the Penal Code, but must also have committed it with terrorist intent.

The offense with terrorist intent is found in the first paragraph of Article 230 of the Penal Code. These acts must have been committed with the aim of: *a) spreading panic in the population; or b) to compel state bodies, Albanian or foreign, to perform or not perform a certain act; or c) to destroy or destabilize, in a serious way, essential political, constitutional, economic or social structures of the Albanian state, of another state, institution or international organization.*

The presence of the link “or” for the three types of goals provided by the first paragraph of Article 230 of the Penal Code, leads to the conclusion that in order to consider an offense as committed with terrorist intent, it is enough that the offense listed in the *article 230 of the Penal Code* was carried out intentionally, and with at least one of the goals provided by the first paragraph of that article, i.e. with the aim of spreading panic in the local or non-local population, to force state or foreign bodies to perform or not perform a certain act; or to destroy or destabilize, in a serious way, essential political, constitutional, economic or social structures of the Albanian state, of another state, institution or international organization.

In fact, the main purpose of terrorism is precisely related to the obligation of state bodies to perform or not perform a certain act. Both the spread of panic among the population and the destruction or serious destabilization of essential political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a state or international organization are but tools used by terrorists to achieve their final goal. It is important to analyze the difference between the purpose and the motive of committing the criminal offense “with terrorist purposes”.

In principle, the position is consolidated in doctrine, but also in judicial practice, that the motive of the author of the criminal offense is irrelevant in terms of the consumption of the subjective element of the criminal offense. For example, different people may have different motivations for committing murder. While the motive is not in itself a constituent element of the criminal offense, its existence is important for the effect of proving the subjective element of the offense.

In the case of criminal offenses with terrorist intent, the motive of the perpetrators of these offenses is usually ideological; political; or religious. The common element of these motives is the exclusion of personal gain (moral or economic interest).

The author of the act with terrorist intent identifies with an ideal, or a certain political or religious platform. So, the internal drive to commit one of the crimes listed by letter a - n of the second paragraph of article 230 of the Penal Code, with the aim of at least one of those provided by the first paragraph of the same article, is based ideological, political, or religious.

⁷ Criminal Code of 1995

⁸ Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism (CETS No. 196)

⁹ Article 230 Penal Code.

Probability of the motive is of course also used for the opposite difference, if it turns out that in the commission of the offenses provided for by Article 230 of the Penal Code, the motivation was different, and not ideological, political or religious, then one can easily reach the conclusion that the subjective element will also be missing.

This does not mean that the non-provability of the motive will automatically result in the non-provability of the subjective element. On the contrary, this simply means that knowledge of the motive will help prove the subjective element of the criminal offense provided for by Article 230 of the Penal Code.

Strategy against terrorism and violent extremism

The purpose of the strategy is to guide policies and strengthen the comprehensive approach to the prevention, protection, pursuit and response to terrorism. The drafting of this strategy, which is based on the EU strategy against terrorism¹⁰, aims at harmonizing the activity of the structures, agencies and institutions that have the responsibility of the fight against terrorism. The prevention and attack of terrorism continues to remain one of the main strategic priorities of the Albanian Government. Given that violent extremism is a contemporary global phenomenon and currently poses a serious threat to international peace and security, the Albanian government considers the fight against violent extremism one of the fundamental priorities of its political program.

To successfully prevent the spread of violent extremism, localized efforts are needed, including further empowerment of youth, family, women and minorities. By channeling these efforts towards religious, cultural and educational networks, the Strategy will ensure the involvement of civil society, as a whole, in adopting a tailored and proactive approach to dealing with this phenomenon¹¹.

The three strategic priorities are prevention, investigation/detection/strike, and response. As a function of these three strategic priorities, strategic objectives have been defined as: Keeping the terrorist threat at a “LOW” level. Disrupting the activities of networks and individuals that attract people to terrorism.

Understanding the threats of terrorism in our country through early identification of target groups and radical methods. Increasing the level of security in the field of transport, trade, exchange of goods and services. Expansion of police operational capacities and intelligence capacities. Development of strategic communication. Increasing the level of protection of critical infrastructure. Prevention of cybercrime

In order to effectively implement the National Strategy for the War Against Terrorism, the Inter-institutional Committee for Coordination of Actions in the War Against Terrorism will function. This committee is the structure responsible for the implementation and monitoring of this strategy.

Following the implementation of this strategy and action plan in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism includes a wide range of Albanian institutions such as:

Ministry of the Interior: State Police. As part of the State Police, the Anti-Terrorist Directorate operates, with a structural scope throughout the country. The main functions of the Directorate are the prevention, identification, tracking and investigation of persons suspected of being involved in terrorist acts. The Agency for the Administration of Criminal Assets (AAPSK) for the administration of funds and seized and confiscated assets.

State Information Service: (SHISH), established by law no. 8391, dated 28.10.1998, collects information from abroad for the purpose of national security, carries out counter-intelligence activities for the preservation of integrity¹², independence and constitutional order. SHISH collects information on terrorism, on the production and trafficking of narcotics, on the production of weapons of mass destruction, on crimes against the environment, collects information on organized crime, crimes that affect national security.

The prosecution. The prosecution prosecutes and represents the prosecution in court on behalf of the state for criminal offenses related to terrorism. Also, the Office of Interception of Electronic Communications operates in the General Prosecutor's Office. With a joint inter-institutional memorandum, financial crime investigation structures operate in the Prosecutor's Offices of Judicial Districts - 8 joint investigative units - set up in Tirana, Durrës, Shkodër, Fier, Vlorë, Korçë, Elbasan and Gjirokastër.

The Defense Intelligence and Security Agency, subordinate to the Minister of Defense and operates based on law no. 65/2014 “For the Defense Intelligence and Security Agency”. The law determines the methods of receiving, administering and distributing classified information against terrorism¹³.

Ministry of Finance: The General Directorate of Prevention of Money Laundering (DPPPP) serves as a specialized financial unit for the prevention and fight against money laundering and terrorist financing. This directorate functions as a national center tasked with collecting, analyzing and disseminating to law enforcement agencies data on potential terrorist financing money laundering activities. In the framework of the exercise of supervisory functions, to control the implementation of the programs of the fight against money laundering and the financing of terrorism.

¹⁰ Handbook: Voices of victims of terrorism (European Union)\

¹¹ Terrorism as a Global Challenge. Its Legal and Comparative Aspects, Tirana, May 2017. 10) Intersectoral Strategy of the war Against of Terrorism, 2021–2025, and of the Action Plan 2021–2023

¹² law no. 8391, dated 28.10.1998

¹³ law no. .10193, dated 3.12.2009

The General Directorate of Customs (DPD) cooperates with other law enforcement structures in order to fulfill its mission of guaranteeing security and public order in ports and airports, including measures in the framework of the fight against terrorism.

Bank of Albania: The Bank of Albania, within the exercise of its functions as a supervisory authority, for the subjects under its jurisdiction, to control the implementation of the programs of the fight against money laundering and the financing of terrorism.

Ministry of Justice: The Ministry of Justice, through its structures, ensures the necessary cooperation between the Prosecutor's Office, Interpol and foreign justice authorities in matters related to the fight against organized crime and terrorism and its financing, pursuant to law no. .10193, dated 3.12.2009 "On jurisdictional relations with foreign authorities in criminal cases".

Albania is known for its tradition of religious tolerance, while violent acts with religious motives have been almost completely absent in the country. However, the peaceful coexistence of religious communities in Albania does not mean that radicalism and religious extremism are completely absent. Strategy designed with the involvement of many actors to gradually address the broad social, economic and cultural context that drives extremist and violent behavior, especially among young people. For the prevention of which the initiatives coming from the local community, local government, public institutions, religious communities, media, civil society organizations and other actors of the society are combined. According to some studies done in our country, the most important actors for preventing the spread of religious extremism in Albania are:

- Senior leaders of religious communities
- Local clergy
- Central government (Government, ministries)
- Civil society
- Social assistance services
- Law enforcement institutions (police, prosecution, courts)
- Religious believers
- Schools

Recent studies show the factors of resistance to violent extremism in Albania, which lead to the rejection of extremist religious ideologies:

- Albanian culture and tradition of religious tolerance
- Close social relations, family and community influence
- Education
- Good economic and financial condition
- State (institutions, reforms, actions)
- Fear of consequences
- Preparation of religious clergy
- Media Atheism or religious indifference

Although there is no consistent set of factors that drive terrorist radicalism, some have been identified as more specific. Among the conditions that favor terrorism, which are recognized by the UN and the OSCE, are included "prolonged unresolved conflicts, the dehumanization of victims of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, the absence of the rule of law, the violation of human rights, discrimination due to ethnic, national and religious affiliation, political exclusion, social and economic marginalization and bad governance".

There are a number of structural conditions of a social, economic and political nature that can push individuals towards terrorism, such as: discrimination and other forms of human rights violations. It is important to take into account some other psychological, interpersonal and ideological factors to explain the mobilization

In creating favorable conditions for the spread of radical and extremist ideas. Factors such as absolute and relative poverty, social exclusion and discrimination, illegal economic activity, among others, are known to be associated with disillusionment with the economic and political system.

Indicators and Features

The analysis of statistical data shows that:- The ratio of crimes with terrorist intent to the total number of proceedings registered in the prosecutor's office for 2017 is 0.02%. The specific weight of crimes with terrorist intent in the total number of proceedings registered in the prosecutor's office for 2017 is 0.019%, the same indicator as in 2016.

- **Tendency-** Statistical data show that the total number of proceedings registered for criminal offenses with terrorist intent in 2017 is 6, the same indicator as in 2016. Meanwhile, 1 defendant was convicted by the court for criminal

offenses with terrorist intent. In 2017, the prosecution registered 1 criminal proceeding for Article 230 of the Criminal Code “Offenses with terrorist intent”, 3 criminal proceedings for the criminal offense provided for by Article 230/a of the -Criminal Code “Financing of terrorism”, 1 criminal proceeding for the criminal offense of provided by article 230/b of the Criminal Code

- **”Hiding funds and other assets that finance terrorism”** and 1 criminal proceeding for the criminal offense provided for by article 232/b of the Criminal Code “Threat to commit acts with terrorist intent”.
- **The Defendants-** The sociodemographic data of the defendants for this group of criminal offenses, such as gender, age, education, social status, residence and judicial status, are presented in detail below: All the defendants are male, adults.
- **Regarding the education of the defendants**, it turns out that 64% of the defendants have a secondary education and 36% have a 9-year education.
- **Regarding the social situation**, from the statistical data it can be observed that 74% of the defendants are from the private sector, while 26% of them are unemployed.
- **Regarding the place of residence**, it turns out that 73% of the defendants have their place of residence in the city, while 27% of them live in the village. So, the trend is such that there is a greater presence of this phenomenon in the city. Regarding the judicial status of the defendants, we emphasize that they have not been convicted before.

In most cases, for the perpetrators of the crime of terrorism, who the victims are does not matter at all, for them it only matters that there are as many victims as possible and that the consequences of the act are as great as possible¹⁴. Criminal acts of terrorism are intended to shock public opinion as much as possible, they have a great potential to produce fear and trauma, especially in certain groups such as: children, women and the elderly.

This influence can also have very negative consequences on the perception of situations, during further growth, but also on the approach to problems and violence in general. Seeing that there are many victims of criminal acts of terrorism, who should then have the status of a victim, as well as the reason for them to be perceived by everyone as such.

The Office of the United Nations Organization against Drugs and Crime has given a definition according to which victims are: persons who individually or collectively have suffered harm, suffering physical or mental harm, injury and emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial damage their fundamental rights, through actions or omissions that constitute serious violations of international law and human rights, or serious violations of international humanitarian law.

And in accordance with the internal legislation, the term “victim” also includes the families and direct relatives of the victim as well as the persons who have suffered damages in the intervention to help the victims, or to prevent their victimization.

Anyone can be a victim of the criminal offense of terrorism, regardless of age, gender, religion, nationality or any other characteristic that the individual may have. Society in general finds it very difficult to compensate the victims and the losses they suffer, but what is evident especially recently is the attempt to assess the status and rights of the victims of terrorist acts in the criminal procedure through the norms of specific countries.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Victims of terrorism have a common experience: they share the same feelings and personal suffering after a terrorist attack. However, there are also different circumstances. For example, some victims are at risk of revictimization.

Some of them have managed to move forward with their lives, regardless of experience, while others have failed to do so. Furthermore, the political situation in the country or region, public opinion on the specific terrorist act, the terrorist attack itself, as well as cultural and historical circumstances may vary from case to case. The question is, how can the voice of the victims be used in favor of the fight against violent extremism?

Many victims of terrorism want to take active action to prevent what happened from happening again. Some of them organize a day of remembrance in honor of the victims of a terrorist attack, while others choose to engage with victims of other attacks or with communities¹⁵.

In order to support or collaborate with victims of terrorism and their organizations, it is essential to understand the specific circumstances and dynamics they face, whether immediately after the event or many years after it. Furthermore, governments should support victims and the creation of victims’ organizations. Facilities can be created in different forms: for example through financial support or assistance thanks to the specific expertise required.

Governments (at local, regional, national and European level) can also provide a platform through which organizations can access public communication services, and support their communication-related projects and activities. State-funded or state-funded institutions, such as schools, can be strongly encouraged to be open to giving evidence related to the fight against violent extremism¹⁶.

¹⁴ Normative Act No. 1, dated 31.1.2020 For Preventive Measures in the Framework of Strengthening the War Against Terrorism, Organized Crime, Serious Crimes and Consolidation of Public Safety Order

¹⁵ Handbook: Voices of victims of terrorism (European Union)

¹⁶ Intersectoral Strategy of the war Against of Terrorism, 2021–2025, and of the Action Plan 2021–2023

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Albania in the Arab Media – A constructivist approach

Alban RELI¹

Abstract

This paper aims to understand how Albania is perceived and portrayed in the Middle East and more specifically in Saudi Arabia. The paper adopts a structuralist approach which offers a valuable framework for analysing the underlying structures and systems that shape media representation, how information is conveyed, represented and interpreted. For doing so it is imperative to analyse the broader context in which media messages are produced and consumed. In doing so, the author takes into analyses the relations between Albania and Gulf Countries, especially Saudi Arabia as well as their relations with their strategic partners and or 'enemies' in the region and beyond. The contention is that the international system plays an imperative role in shaping the state behaviour and media is the battlefield where these behaviours are manifested, justified or condemned. The media taken into analysis is AlArabiya, which is a news television channel rated among the top pan-Arabic stations from Middle East audiences. With the help of discourse analysis, the author investigates what stories with relation to Albania are covered, what is the position of the media with regard to these stories and finally whether and how these stories are used to serve the domestic and foreign policy of Gulf Countries. The paper takes into analysis the period 2015-2022. Between the period 2015-2022 around fifty articles mention or are focused on Albania and the highest intensity belongs to the period 2021-2022. Critical junctures along the way have increased the role of Albania in the Middle East and as such its representation in the media, culminating with the cyber-attacks that Albania had in July 2022. The articles analyses Albania mainly in the light of its relationships with U.S.A., UK and Iran. Due to AlArabiya being a news-journal aimed at Middle East audiences, for analysis are taken articles written in Arabic, thus for domestic consumption, in order to understand how national interest in the Gulf Countries is constructed domestically and how foreign policy is justified. From the Albania point of view, this help to understand how the country is perceived in the region and construct its foreign policy consequently.

Key words: foreign policy, discourse analysis, Middle East, Albania, media, alliances

Introduction

This presentation is part of a broader study that, by analyzing the media representation of Albania in the Middle East (Israel, Arab Gulf Countries and Iran), aims to unfold the factors that influence the relations of Albania with these countries, and consequently, the factors that influence its foreign policy.

The aim of the paper is to explore how Albania is represented in the media of Al Arabyia, and what discursive strategies are used to construct these representations? This research question allows for a thorough analysis of the language and discourse used in articles about Albania in Al Arabyia, as well as the underlying discursive strategies that shape these representations. In this framework, the paper attempts to understand what are the dominant themes and narratives in articles about Albania, in the media of Al Arabyia and how do they shape public perceptions of the country?

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The theoretical model of the paper draws on discourse analysis as the main approach in order to reveal how language and discourse construct power relationships and shape our understanding of the world. It also draws on van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of discourse, which highlights the role of cognition, social context and language in constructing meaning (2001).

Framing theory is another media theory which analysis discourse and observes that the way an issue or event is presented (or "framed") influences the way people perceive it, interpret it, and ultimately respond to it. According to framing theory, frames are the organizing principles that shape how information is presented, and how it is interpreted and evaluated by audiences. According to Goffman, "frame analysis" was shorthand for studying "the organization of experience" (1974). Frames can be implicit or explicit, and can take many forms, such as metaphors, narratives, or images. They can also vary in their level of abstraction, from concrete details to broader conceptual frameworks. In the context of media discourse, framing theory suggests that journalists and media organizations have significant power in shaping public opinion and shaping the way people understand and respond to social issues. By selecting particular frames, emphasizing certain aspects of an issue, and downplaying others, the media can influence the way people think about and respond to social phenomena.

The thesis of this paper is that the media representation of Albania in the Arab media is contingent of the foreign policy of these countries and the role that Albania plays in the region. The paper is divided in three parts. In the first we design the analytical model based on the literature review on constructivism as one of the main theories of international relations and agenda framing. The second part focuses on the research design, methods and sampling techniques. The analysis is the last part of the paper and it analyses themes and frequency of articles and themes of the articles on Albania in the Arab media.

Literature Review and Analytical Model

International Relations Theories and Foreign Policy

The theories of International Relations (IR) address the intricacies of international relations and the underpinnings of foreign policy decisions through two or three levels of analysis: system level, state level and internal constitution of the state. *System level* discusses the overarching international system and its impact on state's foreign policy. The assertion at this level is that a state's actions are determined by what the international system allows. *State level* discusses a state's individual characteristics, its capabilities in relation to others and the state's geographical context. In this framework, a state's actions depend on its relative power and that its foreign policy is influenced by its immediate environment. The third level – *Internal constitution of the state* – analyses the internal dynamics of a state, such as the political structure, economic health, societal stability and cultural diversity and contends that a state's external actions are reflections of its internal identity.

Historically, the theoretical lens of IR has shifted based on global events. The shift has come as a result of new theories, changes in the international system, emergence of important actors other than the state and dynamics which can no longer be understood with the same lenses of the 19th and 20th century. Nowadays, in order to understand events that happen in the world and capture the full complexity of foreign policy processes, an amalgamation of multiple schools of thought, including realism, structuralism, constructivism and the like is more helpful (Rieger, 2017, p. 19-31).

At *system level (first level)*, key assumptions of this analysis include: a) the international system is fundamentally anarchic and operates as a self-help mechanism; b) states remain the predominant actors in international affairs; c) the concept of power, both soft (co-optive) and hard (coercive), underlies international relations. Power dynamics create structures of unipolarity, bipolarity, or multipolarity, which are always in flux; d) states aim for equilibrium in power dynamics but forming alliances isn't solely based on systemic pressures; e) while states are generally rational entities prioritizing their survival, this premise doesn't elucidate all foreign policy decisions.

At *state level (second level)* key assumptions are that the capacity of the state to operate in the international system is dependent on its power position with the international system which ultimately influences its foreign policy. When analysing the foreign policy of a state at this level, it is important to take into account the *International System Power Position* (number of superpowers, great powers, the polarity of the global international system) and the *Regional Power Structure* and *Regional Security Complex* (Buzan and Wæver, 2003), and external powers influencing the regional system.

The *third level, domestic level*, is also important and gives insights into the foreign policy of a state, because foreign policy isn't solely predetermined by the international system; instead, it arises from a combination of system pressures and domestic processes (Rieger, 2017, p. 27-31). Every state is unique due to factors such as population, economic conditions, political systems, ideologies, history, and relationships with national and other identity-defining concepts.

In summary, a state's foreign policy arises from international system constraints, the state's power status, and its domestic characteristics. While states generally act rationally, focusing on self-preservation, their actions are influenced by both international and domestic factors, including material and non-material power dynamics, domestic nuances, and the nature of the decision-making process (Rieger, 2017).

Hinnebusch (2014) holds the same stance when discuss the lenses through which Middle East region should be analysed. For him, traditional realist assumptions in international relations face challenges, such as lack of state cohesion, fragmentation and limited sovereignty which influence foreign policy in a way that is more likely to reflect the regime's interests rather than national ones. Furthermore, the environment in which foreign policy makers of these countries operate is more nuanced than

the simplistic model suggested by realists and foreign policies are influenced by the trans-state identities and global power hierarchy. Given these complexities, Hinnebusch (2014) suggests that in order to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the region it is necessary to draw from various theoretical frameworks such as Marxist-inspired structuralism, which places ME region in a global context, and specifically as an economic periphery dependant on the core capitalist nations; constructivism, which offers insights into the significance of identities beyond state boundaries; Historical Sociology, which does not assume the fixed nature of state formation. Instead, it views it as an evolving phenomenon, where historical variations influence how states respond to international dynamics. Hinnebusch suggests that a nuanced understanding of the MENA region's foreign policies requires a blend of multiple theoretical insights, recognizing the interplay between internal dynamics, regional factors, and global structures (2014, p.9-17).

Media Framing and Foreign Policy

Media framing plays a vital role in presenting policy definitions to the general public and policymakers. The framing highlights how journalists connect different events and policies, directing readers' attention to specific interpretations. Simply put, it is the act of emphasizing certain aspects of a narrative or story while omitting others to create a specific perspective. Like choosing where to point a camera and when to press the shutter, it dictates what elements of reality are highlighted. As per Entman (1993), framing is the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of reality in a text to promote a specific interpretation. Framing helps in simplifying the vast amount of information by highlighting specific aspects. Entman (1993) says, "the essence of framing is sizing," implying the importance of selecting what to focus on. He defines framing as creating order through "selection and salience".

Goffman (1974) considers that framing essentially structures our understanding and interpretation of the world, and this extends to professional routines and that frame analysis is a method to understand the organization of experience. The essence of framing is not just about selection but about evaluation within a given context. In the same line, Gitlin (2003) talks about frames as "principles of selection, emphasis and presentation" that determine what's important and Gamson (2001) describes a frame as an organizing principle that provides coherence to diverse symbols.

Others see it as a tool where journalists choose specific meanings to make political issues clear to the public. Readers are often unaware of the framing strategies employed by the media, making them prone to adopt the media's perspective. Yet, they assimilate these frames within their broader worldviews, which are shaped by personal experiences and various discourses. The influence of media framing must be understood within its broader socio-political and cultural context. Framing is deeply rooted in the context, affecting how information is interpreted. Context determines how we interpret information, and sometimes it can lean towards propaganda, especially when catering to specific audiences.

News is essentially a frame - a lens through which we view and interpret events. This lens is not always neutral; it comes with its own set of biases that can be influenced by various factors, including advertisers, cultural contexts, and political leanings. This doesn't mean all news is skewed, but it's essential to understand that pure, unfiltered information is rare. The essence of news is in the storytelling, and every story is presented within a certain frame. In essence, framing is a critical tool in communication, shaping how audiences perceive, interpret, and understand information. It's essential to be aware of these frames, especially in today's media-saturated world, to navigate information critically (Vultee, 2023).

With regard to the link that exists between media and policymakers, media helps bridge the knowledge gap between the public and policymakers. The level of media coverage, particularly front-page stories, is seen as a metric of its influence on policymakers.

Analytical Model

The analytical Model is built on two main theoretical perspectives: Constructivism and Agenda Framing. Constructivism offers a valuable framework for analyzing the underlying structures and systems that shape media representation and communication and how information is conveyed, represented, and interpreted (Wendt, 1992).

Agenda Framing is based on the concepts of Manufacturing of Consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) and framing. The "manufacturing of consent" literature underscores the power of government to sway the work produced by journalists. This influence encourages journalists to self-censor and to interpret global events through the cultural and political lenses that reflect the perspectives of their respective social and political elites. Based on the existing body of evidence, it has been observed that when it comes to understanding public sentiment, policy-makers and influential elite groups do not place a significant emphasis on opinion polls. These polls, while useful, are not their primary source for gauging public sentiment. Instead, they give more importance to what is known as 'perceived public opinion' (Entman, 2000:21). According to Robert Entman, 'perceived public opinion' is the collective understanding or the perceived consensus of what the public thinks about a particular issue or policy, and it often drives the actions of policymakers and elite groups. Interestingly, this 'perceived public opinion' is largely shaped and influenced by the media. News stories, editorials, social media trends, and even the comments section in online news platforms can all contribute to this perceived public opinion. Therefore, media is used to channel government's point of view to the public.

Following this line of reasoning, framing could be used to analyse how articles in Al Arabyia construct and shape the public perception of Albania and its people. According to Vulee (2023), framing is “where you point the camera and when you press the shutter determine which elements of the “blooming, bussing confusion” of life make up the particular truth you seek to convey on that particular day. According to Goffman, frame analysis is shorthand for studying “the organization of experience”. Thus, media may use different frames to portray Albania as a place of conflict, as a tourist destination, or as a site of cultural richness. By examining the frames used in the articles, researchers can gain insights into the way the media constructs and shapes public understanding of Albania and its people.

Political Factors Influencing the Framing

There are two critical moments that have diverted the course of media representation of Albania in the Gulf countries’ media, represented in this article by Al Arabyia. These two critical moments are the hosting of MEK in Albania in 2013 and the interruption of the diplomatic relations between Albania and Iran after the cyber-attack on Albania in summer 2022. In 2013, the Albanian government agreed to temporarily host members of the People’s Mujahidin of Iran, known as MEK (Mujahedin-e Khalq), at the request of the U.S. government. MEK is considered to be the Iranian opposition group. It is a political – militant organization that advocates for the overthrow of the Islamic Republic of Iran leadership and the installation of its own government. The group has had a controversial history, and its activities have led to it being labelled a terrorist organization by various countries and organizations over time, although some have since delisted it.

Even though at the beginning the hosting of MEK was considered to be temporarily, latter, what was initially a temporary agreement turned into a longer-term arrangement. The MEK members relocated to Albania from Iraq, where they had been targeted by pro-Iranian forces. Albania’s continued hosting of MEK members has caused tensions with Iran, which views the MEK as a serious threat. Albania expelled the Iranian ambassador and another diplomat in 2018 for allegedly “damaging its national security”. This move, likely linked to the presence of the MEK, has further complicated Albania-Iran relations. Therefore, the Albanian-Iranian issue can dominate the media landscape due to its high stakes’ nature and international implications. From the Arab media perspective, this issue could be particularly salient given Iran’s role in the region and its own relationships with various Arab countries. Therefore, the portrayal of Albania could be influenced by the media’s stance towards Iran and the MEK. However, due to it being a media funded by Gulf Countries, it is very likely that its content is shaped by the broader geopolitical dynamics, such as Arab-Iranian relations and the influence of the U.S. in the region. Thus, the political alignment of the Gulf countries has greatly impacted the way Albania is represented in the Arab media. Economic, socio-cultural and religious factors are of less importance and have not influenced the media representation of Albania.

Geopolitics of Arab Gulf countries in the Middle East

The Gulf countries, consisting of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman, are all members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), established on May 25, 1981. Among these nations, Saudi Arabia holds a significant position due to its expansive territory, abundant oil reserves, sizable population, and hosting of Islam’s Holy Sites. Saudi Arabia leverages its role as a leader in the Muslim world to promote its foreign policy objectives. During the 1960s, in its struggle against Nassirist pan-Arabism, alongside other Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia insisted that Islam should be the key principle guiding regional politics. It played a central role in initiating the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The nation’s view of Islamic leadership aligns with its strong alliance with the United States and does not disrupt the established international order. However, Saudi Arabia’s leadership position creates tension in its relationship with Iran. Ever since Iran’s Islamic revolution in 1979, it has contested Saudi Arabia’s authority to delineate the proper interface between Islam and international politics.

At a macro level, the elements influencing agenda setting include: a) the ascension of Iranian power since 2003, post-Iraq period, posing both a traditional balance-of-power challenge and a cross-border ideological threat to Gulf Countries. With Iraq’s inability to maintain its previous counterbalancing role against Iran, Iranian influence in the region has grown; b) Iranian backing for Shiite allies in Iraq and Lebanon has sparked fears of potential fresh attempts by Iran to directly interfere in Gulf states’ politics via connections to Shiite communities. In response to this situation, the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, have counteracted the Iranian challenge by supporting opposition to Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad (Iran’s primary Arab state ally), backing forces in Iraq and Lebanon that have contested pro-Iranian factions in these nations. They have also attempted to foster Palestinian unity and promote the Palestinian-Israeli peace process with the goal of depriving Iran of the ability to harness anti-Israeli sentiment within the Arab world (Gause III, 2014:191-198)

The U.S. has played a significant role in the ongoing tensions between Albania and Iran, primarily because it was the U.S. that requested Albania to host members of the MEK. The U.S. government has maintained a longstanding adversarial relationship with Iran, and it has supported the MEK as a part of its larger foreign policy strategy in the Middle East. From a U.S. standpoint, the MEK serves as a counterweight to the Iranian government, despite the group’s controversial history. The U.S. removal of the MEK from its list of foreign terrorist organizations in 2012 was a significant turning point in the group’s international legitimacy. By agreeing to host the MEK, Albania strengthened its ties with the U.S. and signaled its alignment with U.S. policy towards Iran. However, this move has put Albania at odds with Iran and potentially affected its relationship with other countries in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia, along with its partners like the United Arab Emirates, maintains a strained and conflict-ridden relationship with Iran, which is largely attributed to geopolitical struggles and sectarian differences. Over recent decades, this friction has escalated, primarily as a result of disputes in Syria and Yemen, where Saudi Arabia and Iran have each backed opposing factions. Given these dynamics, Saudi Arabia and its allies might view Albania's hosting of the MEK favorably, as it is seen as a move against Iran. However, these countries may also weigh the benefits and drawbacks of overtly supporting such a move, given the complex and volatile regional dynamics. In the media, Saudi Arabia and its allies might portray Albania in a positive light due to its tensions with Iran. However, this would also depend on other factors like Albania's relationship with these countries and their broader foreign policy objectives.

Research Methods

The Research Method is Discourse Analysis which analysis of amount and form (via framing analysis) of media coverage with the focus upon how Albania is represented and the tone of coverage toward official policy. Discourse analysis is in line with constructivism and agenda framing. As ... contend "it is not to be used as a method of analysis detached from its theoretical and methodological foundations. Each approach to discourse analysis that we present is not just a method for data analyses, but a theoretical and methodological whole- a complete package...In discourse analyses, theory and method are intertwined and researchers must accept the basic philosophical premises in order to use discourse analysis as their method of empirical study" (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002:3-4). Discourse analysis is one of the constructionist approaches and the most used approach.

The study covers the period 2015 – 2022. By conducting a content analysis, it identifies the key themes, narratives and frames used in the representation of Albania. Then, it analyses the frequency and prominence of these themes to understand their relative importance in the media coverage. It then follows with discourse analysis techniques which help to examine the language, rhetoric and discursive strategies used in the articles and identify the dominant discourses that shape the representation of Albania. The contention is that power dynamics and ideologies are reflected in the discourse and they influence the portrayal of Albania.

In order to understand the factors that influence the discursive strategies, the paper draws on the constructivism which helps to understand what factors in terms of political interests and regional dynamics, influence the portrayal of Albania in terms of power dynamics, regional politics and/or economic interests. The contention is that the representation of Albania in Al Arabyia is influenced by the relation of Albania with other Gulf countries, the role that Albania plays in the region and the relationship of the Gulf countries and Albania with United States.

The media taken into analysis is print media. Compared to other media forms, newspapers provide more depth and analysis, offering journalists greater scope to set the agenda. Quality print media has the potential to shape official rhetoric and policies (Cohen, 1993; Koopmans and Statham, 2010; Trenz, 2007, p. 89). Media ownership is an important element when choosing in the process of articles sampling. Owners often have an influence on the editorial direction and can colour the depiction of certain countries. Al Arabyia is selected because it is an international Arabic news television channel, launched in 2003 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. It is rated among the top pan-Arab stations by Middle East audiences. It is part of the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) and is funded by investors from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Arab Gulf Countries. Therefore, its framing of events is influenced by the stance of the governments of the states that fund it. By understanding the frames used to depict Albania, at the same time we can understand the stance that the government of these countries have towards Albania.

Analysis

In the following we analyse how Albania is framed in the articles written for it in Al Arabyia. According to Goffman (1974), "frame analysis" is a shorthand for studying the "organization of experience", which in our contexts, by identifying the number of articles and the topics these articles cover for Albania, we come to understand how Arab media 'organizes the experience of Albania in the international relations realm' for then understanding to what frames this organization of experience refers to. Furthermore, in line with Entman (1993) due to the fact that framing creates order through "selection and salience" we will investigate as well the intensity of the articles and the positioning of the Gulf countries towards events happening in Albania and in relation to it.

During the period 2015-2022 there are 50 articles dedicated to Albania. The following table summarizes the findings:

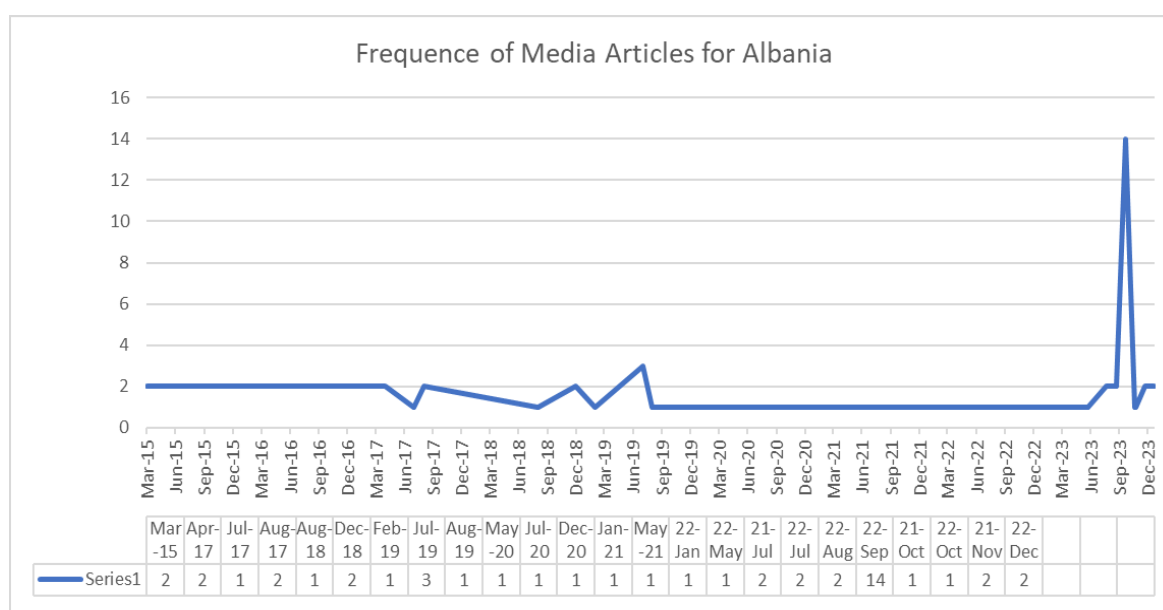
TABLE 1: Summary of topics around Albania in Al Arabyia during 2015-2022

Focused on	No. of articles	Theme
Iran – Albania	37/50	Iran as a threat to both Albania and Israel
		Iranian hackers and Iranian cyberattacks on Albania
		US sanctions against Iran for the cyberattack on Albania
		Albania cuts diplomatic relations with Iran after the cyber attack
		Iranian opposition conference in Albania and MEK
		Albania: International figures support Iranians to topple regime
		Trump thanks Albanian PM for expelling Iranian diplomats
		John McCain visits MEK in Albania and Iran protests John McCain's meeting with MEK leaders
		The Massacre of 1988 in Iran: Nuri trial moved to Albania for two weeks.
Russia related	3/50	EU seeks closer ties with Balkans against Moscow
		Albania arrests Russians – Ukrainian spies
		Zelenski zoom speech to the Albanian parliament
Saudi Arabia Related		Saudi Arabia condemns terrorists cyber-attacks on Albania
		Saudi Arabia's public Investment Fund discusses USD 300 million investment opportunities in Albania
Different topics/no pattern		tourism; Donald Trump at an Art Galery in Tirana, Dua Lipa etc.

Based on the distribution and content of these articles, it appears that Al Arabyia's coverage of Albania is framed primarily around its relationship with Iran. The prominence of Iran-related topics suggests that this is the main lens through which Al Arabyia is presenting Albania to its readers. This agenda framing could be influenced by the media outlet's geopolitical interests and the wider regional dynamics in the Middle East. In Tuchman words (1978) the news focused mainly on Iran, are the window on Albania, through which people learn about it.

The significant number of articles related to Iran implies a focused interest in Albania's interactions with Iran. The topics discussed, including Iran's cyberattacks on Albania, the expulsion of Iranian diplomats, and the hosting of the MEK, frame Albania as a significant player in the geopolitical contest against Iran. This could reflect Al Arabyia's own stance against Iran, given the outlet's Saudi ownership and the contentious Saudi-Iranian relationship. Furthermore, the articles related to Russia, though fewer in number, indicate an interest in Albania's role in the wider geopolitical landscape, particularly in relation to the balance of power between the EU and Russia. The articles do also show the stance of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Albania. The articles highlighting Saudi Arabia's support for Albania after the cyberattack and potential investment opportunities frame Saudi Arabia as a supportive ally of Albania. This aligns with Saudi Arabia's interests in building alliances against Iran and increasing its influence in different regions.

The frequency of the articles is another important information we have to evaluate for understanding representation of Albania in the media of Gulf countries. The following chart shows the distribution of the articles over time:

CHART 1: Frequency of Media Articles for Albania

The peak of frequency is reached in summer-autumn 2023 with the MEK conference and cyberattacks. The language used in the media is that of support for Albania which is in line with the foreign policy of the Gulf Countries (outlined above). The findings confirm the initial conviction that media representation of Albania is framed by global events and represent the political prisms of Gulf countries political elites. As Carey (1989) comments "What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information but a portrayal of the contending forces in the world... The model here is not that of information acquisition, though acquisition occurs, but of dramatic action in which the reader joins a world of contending forces as an observer at a play." Therefore, the intensity of the articles on Albania and their content is largely influenced by the foreign policy of the countries, their alliances and strategies which decide what window will the reader open to see Albania.

Conclusion

The overall analysis provides an insightful look into how geopolitical factors and events can shape media coverage. It highlights how media narratives are not just reflections of the countries they cover but also reflect the political dynamics and agendas of the countries where the media outlets are based. The portrayal of Albania in the Arab media is dependent on the foreign policy of these countries, the relationship with their allies and enemies and the role that Albania plays in the region. From the analysis we found that the articles reached their peak in the summer autumn 2022 which corresponds with notable events, particularly with the MEK conference and the cyberattacks on Albania. The other finding is that we may discern a supportive language in these articles. This aligns with the foreign policies of these countries. The media coverage of Albania is suggested to represent the viewpoints of the political elites in the Gulf Countries. Media outlets, particularly in regions where there is a strong state influence over the press, often reflect the political agendas of those in power. This might explain the supportive language towards Albania given its role in regional geopolitics, specifically its stand against Iran, which aligns with the foreign policies of these Gulf Countries.

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Media freedom as part of cluster one of Albania's EU accession negotiations.

Legal analysis from the perspective of the New EU'S Media Freedom Act

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Abstract

After 16 years from the signing of the Stabilization-Association Agreement in 2006, in July 2022 the negotiations between Albania and the EU were formally opened. The membership negotiations mark the key moment in the integration process of Albania in the EU. In the annual report for Albania of 2022, the European Commission, when reporting on freedom of expression, as part of fundamental rights (Cluster 1), underlined that Albania is moderately prepared in the field of freedom of expression and media independence. Quality of journalism is harmed by the intersection of business and political interests, the concentration and lack of transparency of media funding. The lack of independence of the regulatory authority undermine the freedom of the media in the country and a policy of zero tolerance towards threats to the media should be adopted, ensuring alignment with European standards on transparency and limitation of media ownership, state advertisements, etc. Meanwhile, the European Commission adopted in September 2022 a European Media Freedom Act, a novel set of rules to protect media pluralism and independence in the EU. The proposed Regulation address the issue of media concentrations and it puts a focus on the independence and stable funding of public service media as well as on the transparency of media ownership and of the allocation of state advertising. It also sets out measures to protect independence of editors and disclose conflicts of interest.

This article aims to provide an in-depth analysis of these aspects in the Albanian media market and provide recommendations for legal intervention from the perspective of the EU Media Freedom Act.

Key words: media, freedom, pluralism, ownership

Introduction

Freedom of expression is a cornerstone in the conception and functioning of democratic societies based on respect for human rights and among its main elements is the freedom of the individual to receive information, the freedom to give information and the freedom of the media to receive and provide information. The “privileged” position of the media in a democratic state is guaranteed because it is exactly what makes the state power more tangible for the people, more controllable and more transparent, as well as to control and judge how public authority is exercised and how public funds

are managed. Article 22 of the Constitution of the Republic of Albania is devoted to freedom of expression, guaranteeing the freedom of the press, radio and television. Point 3 of this article sanctions the prohibition of prior censorship of means of communication. In point 4 of the article, it is also provided that the law may require the granting of authorization for the operation of radio or television stations. Even Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights provides that the freedom of expression guaranteed by the article does not prevent States from requiring television licensing.

While there have been no restrictions on the written press in Albania, some legal efforts have been made to regulate the audiovisual media market. After several legal and institutional efforts, 26 years after the first media law, the audiovisual media market in our country, even after the switch-over process, continues to be dominated by informality, non-enforcement of the law and a monopoly situation. The factors of such a situation are many, but the subsequent clientelistic connection of televisions with political parties, a weak regulatory authority and often under strong political pressures and from the operators, are some of them.

After 16 years from the signing of the Stabilization-Association Agreement in 2006, in July 2022 the negotiations between Albania and the EU were formally opened. The membership negotiations mark the key moment in the integration process of Albania in the EU. In the annual Report for Albania of 2022, the European Commission, when reporting on freedom of expression, as part of fundamental rights (Cluster 1), underlined that Albania is moderately prepared in the field of freedom of expression and media independence. Quality of journalism is considered harmed by the intersection of business and political interests, the concentration and lack of transparency of media funding. The lack of independence of the regulatory authority undermine the freedom of the media in the country and a policy of zero tolerance towards threats to the media should be adopted, ensuring alignment with European standards on transparency and limitation of media ownership, state advertisements, etc. In addressing the persisting shortcomings, according to the Report, Albania should:

a) adopt a policy of zero tolerance for intimidation and attacks against journalists, as well as for threats against the media, including in political discourse and in the margins of demonstrations;

b) ensure that the legal requirements for transparency of media ownership and financing, and its limitations thereto, as well as requirements on public advertising, are aligned to international standards;

c) implement the Labour Code and strengthen the protection of Albanian journalists' employment and social rights.

Albania still needs to introduce legislation to strengthen transparency in public advertising, according to this report. High-profile business group have increased their economic penetration in the media market during the reporting period. Media organizations and activists have continued to raise concerns about the use of media channels to promote owners' economic interests and political agendas. Market and audience concentration and lack of transparency of media funding continue to remain issues of concern as regards media freedom in the country. Tax evading practices by media owners have been denounced by media freedom organisations.

Pluralism and media ownership in Albania.

Albanian law on media ownership

Media pluralism is a broad concept. The jurisprudence of the ECHR itself is clear when it states that "Article 10 of the Convention does not only refer to the individual right to freedom of the media, but also imposes the obligation to guarantee pluralism of opinions and cultural diversity in the interest of the proper functioning of the democratic system and freedom of information for everyone,.....and moreover, pluralism is a general rule of European media policy"

The Council of Europe's 1999 Recommendation n.R (99) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on measures to promote pluralism in the media provided some useful elements to define the concept. In particular, in the explanatory Memorandum, it is clarified that "Pluralism in the media" is understood as the existence of many means of communication, understood as a plurality of autonomous and independent media (structural pluralism), as a plurality of types of communication and content (thoughts, opinions) that become known to the public. In political terms, pluralism in the media includes the need for a wide range of political opinions to be represented in the media to guarantee democracy and avoid the creation of a dominant opinion.

In the European Union, the notion of pluralism, as a basic principle, is provided for in the Treaty of Lisbon, as one of the basic values of the EU. But, it is missing as a definition in the specific application in the communication sector. Pluralism in the media is "trusted" to the regulation of the Member States.

There is a clear connection between the concept of media pluralism and competition. This connection gives rise to great debates and misunderstandings. The main misunderstanding lies in the contrast between ex ante intervention and ex post intervention, between regulation and competition. Regulatory interventions often protect competition, and by protecting competition, the market is regulated. This protection of competition aims to avoid concentration in the audiovisual sector.

Ownership restrictions in audiovisual media have always been accompanied by fierce debates in Albania as well. Law 97/2013 "On audiovisual media in the Republic of Albania", approved with the consensus of all political parties in terms of content, at the time of approval, had simple and clear rules in this regard.

This law, in relation to the previous legal regulations, presents improvements in terms of media ownership, arranging the shortcomings observed by the practical implementation of previous laws. But the Constitutional Court's decision no. 56/2016

complicated even more, not only from a legal point of view, the situation of media ownership in the audiovisual media-Albanian market, reopening again the legal debate on the issue.

This regulation, at the time of approval, was foreseen in Article 62 of the law. Specifically:

“1. The national license for audio and audiovisual broadcasting is granted only to joint-stock companies registered in Republic of Albania, which have audiovisual activity as their exclusive object.

2. No natural or legal person, local or foreign, can have more than 40% of the total capital of the joint stock company, which owns a national license.

3. A natural or legal person, who has shares in a company that has a national license, cannot have more than 20 percent of the total capital in a second company that has a national license. For analog audio broadcasts, participation of up to 10% in a third national company is allowed.

4. Such a person is not allowed to obtain a local or regional audio broadcasting license or a local or regional audiovisual broadcasting license.”

National licenses for the program service are also subject to the above conditions

With regard to audiovisual broadcasts, the law distinguishes between two types of licenses: broadcast license which includes a license for the network and as a program operator and a license for the audiovisual program service.

Point 10 of Article 62 regulates the “fictivity” encountered in practice from previous legal regulations. In the sense of this article, a shareholder is considered the holder of the shares and the persons related to him up to the second degree. In order not to leave room for multiple interpretations, I think that the most accurate wording would have been “.....and the spouse, the cohabitant and the persons related to him by gender or relationship up to the second degree”. However, this wording clearly expresses the intention of the legislator: a shareholder will be considered the holder of the shares and family members close to him up to the second degree, and the restriction affects the entire circle of these persons taken together.¹

Point 12 of the article contains another important limitation. No holder of national broadcasting licenses can broadcast more than 30 percent of advertisements in the audiovisual broadcasting market.

Another aspect that guarantees pluralism and fair competition is the legal definition on the use of the multiplex, provided by Article 63 of the law.

Article 62 and 63 of the law clearly and simply regulated the issue of limiting ownership in audiovisual media and issues that are directly related to the broad concept of media pluralism.

Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA), on April 16, 2015, announced the decision “On the opening of the procedure for granting 5 (five) private national licenses for digital audiovisual broadcasting according to the “Beauty Contest”. In the “beauty contest” procedure, historical national analog operators and existing operators with experience in digital broadcasting were invited to participate, according to the law. The “privilege” of these operators not to be subjected to an open competition is provided for in the transitional provisions of the law for the entire transition period of the transition from analog to digital transmissions until June 17, 2015.²

The AMA’s decision had several legal violations, but in terms of ownership restrictions, 4 of the 5 entities invited to obtain a national broadcasting license were in violation of the legal provisions of Article 62 of the law. If such a licensing were to be imposed by the AMA, we would be facing a flagrant violation of the law and the creation of a pure monopoly, in complete opposition to the principle of pluralism in the media. The licensing decision at the AMA was not reached due to the lack of the necessary legal quorum (5/7 members of the AMA) and the subjects went to the administrative court. With a legally questionable decision, the Administrative Court of First Instance of Tirana in February 2016 granted the subjects a national broadcasting license. The court, in this decision, which was not appealed by AMA did not comment on the issue of ownership restrictions, but only on the procedural aspects of the subjects’ application.

At the same time, the Albanian Electronic Media Association (AEMA) in April 2016 submitted a request to the Constitutional Court with the object “Declaration as incompatible with the Constitution of paragraph 3 of article 62 of law no. 97/2013, dated 03.04.2013 “On audiovisual media in Republic of Albania”.

Decision no.56, date 27.7.2016 of Albanian Constitutional Court

The Albanian Electronic Media Association requested the repeal of paragraph 3 of article 62 of law no. 97/2013, dated 03.04.2013 “On audiovisual media in the Republic of Albania”, with the following content:

“No natural or legal person, local or foreign, may have more than 40 percent of the total capital of the joint stock company that owns a national audio broadcasting license or a national audiovisual broadcasting license.”

The petitioner has argued that: *“The public interest is protected not through restriction, but through alternative forms, such as mixed ownership or restrictions based on real market data, as is being done within the European Community through the acquis communautaire.*

The restriction sanctioned in paragraph 3 of Article 62 of the law is not found in any of the European and regional legislation, with the exception of France, as such it is a counter-tendency to the alignment of the legislation with the European framework.

¹ Bushati, E, Leskoviku, M, “Kufizimet e pronësisë nw median audiovizive” Jus&Justicia 13/2016, ISSN 2223-8654

² Articles 138-139 Law 97/2013

Such a restriction is not found in any of the areas of strong public interest, such as: education, health, security and pharmaceuticals. The application of the restrictive mechanism on ownership automatically puts in a different position the citizens who decide to dedicate themselves to a media activity, in relation to the citizens who choose to dedicate themselves to any other legal economic activity. “

The interested entity, AMA, summarized these arguments:

“The limiting criterion established in paragraph 3 of article 62 of the law on media for the percentage of share participation is not in coherence with the changes in the media market.

The restriction subject to judgment had as a necessity of existence the guarantee of variety in the audio and audiovisual market, which is actually guaranteed with a number of other mechanisms, such as limiting the number of licenses that a commercial entity can own, limiting the number of programs, in depending on the type of license it has, for an entity equipped with a license for digital broadcasts or for the provision of audio or audiovisual program service, as well as the limitation of the percentage of advertisements.”

The Constitutional Court has assessed, on the claim for infringement of the freedom of economic activity as a result of the lack of public interest and the disproportionate intervention of the legislator, bringing back the standards of economic freedom broken down in its jurisprudence. In view of its jurisprudence, the Court assesses that the exercise of activity in the field of media by natural or legal persons is an economic activity of general/public interest, which is protected by Articles 11 and 17 of the Constitution. Consequently, paragraph 3 of Article 62 of the law under review, which limits the percentage of shares owned by natural or legal persons in the capital of joint-stock companies, holders of national licenses for audio or audiovisual broadcasts, constitutes a restriction of economic freedom.

On the claim for the violation of the principle of proportionality, the petitioner has claimed that the limitation on the ownership of shareholders is harsh, exceeds the legislator's goal of variety of information and does not respond to this goal, bringing unwanted consequences in terms of the violation in a way directly of the right of ownership of shares, the violation of the freedom of entrepreneurship, the deformation of the regular way of functioning of the relevant companies in terms of decision-making, as well as the distribution of shares of media companies.

The interested entity, the Assembly, maintains that the state's intervention in economic freedom, through the provision subject to judgment, is dictated by the situation in which the freedom of the press is located in the country, assessed as “partially free” according to authoritative reports in this direction over the years. The Assembly has acted within the scope of its evaluation regarding the selection of the means of restriction, as necessary and suitable for the Albanian context. The interference is proportionate, as it does not affect all media, but only those that possess a national license for audio or audiovisual broadcasts, which by virtue of this position and their power to convey the message through sound and image, make the effect of their more immediate, stronger and more powerful than print media.

The interested entity, AMA, submits that the law has provided for other measures, which guarantee the public interest that this restriction aims at, which is the avoidance of monopoly and concentrations, therefore it is unnecessary.

In the present case, the Court notes that *“the interests of AEMA, which protect and represent interests related to economic freedom, the right to information and freedom of expression, are confronted, as interests that are protected by the legislator. From the point of view of the balance of interests, the three parameters of the intervening legislative mechanism: (i) need; (ii) necessity, (iii) appropriateness, impose on the legislator to evidence the real need to intervene in the limitation of shares in the general capital for natural or legal persons, shareholders in companies holding national audiovisual broadcasting licenses, as interference in economic freedom. Necessity forces the legislator to prove that the goal cannot be achieved by other means and that he has used the least harmful means for subjects whose economic freedom is limited. Whereas, adequacy forces the legislator to argue that the intervention tool is efficient and has brought the expected and desired effects in practice.”*

In view of the above, according to the Court, AMA, as a monitoring and law-enforcing body, has extensive powers related to guaranteeing the variety of information and the lack of concentration of shares and the media market, as well as having tools and instruments for the exercise with effectiveness of these legal powers.

The argument given by the representative of the Assembly in the plenary session about the lack of control capacities of the AMA and the efficiency of this monitoring institution cannot be a sufficient reason for limiting the economic freedom of AEMA. The court appreciates that even if the situation in practice is like this, the argument of non-application of the law cannot be a reason for limiting the applicant's economic freedom. On the contrary, the Court assesses that strengthening the monitoring and punitive powers of this institution and finding different ways and instruments of an administrative nature, would be a more effective approach to guaranteeing the variety of information, as the final goal of the legislator with the realized limitation in paragraph 3 of article 62 of the law.

In view of the entire provision that regulates ownership in terrestrial audio and audiovisual transmissions, the Court considers that *“the entirety of Article 62 of the law, even without the limitation of paragraph 3, the subject of the trial, meets the constitutional interests of the legislator to avoid monopolies and concentrations in the media market”*.

The court has assessed that: *“By choosing the harshest tool, that of limitation by law, the legislator shows, as in some other cases, where this court had to abolish legal norms, due to non-respect of the principle of proportionality, that the selection of the restrictive tool does not come as a result of an analysis based on data, statistics, studies of a factual, economic, political, sociological and legal nature, depending on the situation, as well as arguments of the executive/lawmaker as to why he chose the tool relevant compared to another and how many choice alternatives there were and what positive effect the effectively implemented tool brought in practice, the post factum test”*.

The court emphasizes that the goal sought to be achieved by the provisions subject to judgment is a legal goal, but regardless of this, the legislator has the obligation to balance the interests, objectively evaluate them, avoid conflict through the selection of the appropriate means for realization theirs and choose the restrictive means necessary to achieve the goal, according to the national context.

Even in a comparative view, the Court finds that *“the restrictive model selected by the Albanian legislator is not found in any of the European regional legislations, as such it is a counter-tendency to the alignment of the legislation with the European legal framework”*.

The court appreciates that *“regardless of the importance of the legislator’s objective and the presence of public interest in a media system fundamentally based on the variety of information, based on the constitutional requirement for proportional legislative intervention, in this particular case the envisaged restrictive measure does not serve the legislator to effectively fulfill the defined objective and in this sense it is an inappropriate and unnecessary tool”*.

As a conclusion, the Court has appreciated that *“the means selected by the legislator for limiting the ownership shares of companies operating in the media field, does not have a reasonable and proportional connection with the legitimate goal of the legislator for variety of information. Consequently, the Court assesses that the legislator’s intervention is not in accordance with the principle of proportionality, therefore paragraph 3 of Article 62 of the Media Law should be repealed.”*

It is interesting to underline the opinion of the minority in this Decision³, which underlines that *“the constitutional principle of proportionality, in cases of restriction of human rights, imposes on the legislator the obligation to determine the legal goal and the means to achieve it, while the Court controls the limiting device and severity measure. This control is done in terms of compatibility with the goal and legitimate interest that the legislator seeks to achieve and whether or not the measure “significantly” exceeds this goal, as a coercive measure. The court does not check whether the measure is opportune or not. This is within the discretion and scope of the legislator’s assessment. In the present case, the legislator’s interest in the transparency of the media and the plurality of information has been important enough to intervene in Article 62 of the law on the media through paragraph 3 subject to judgment. Even the majority has accepted that the goal sought to be achieved by the provisions subject to judgment is a legal goal [prg. 47 of the decision]. Disagreeing with this conclusion, we estimate that the applicant did not present sufficient arguments to support the position that there were other less harsh means to achieve the required goal, which would lead the Court to the conclusion that this restriction is unnecessary.*

Contrary to what the majority argues, the limitation established by paragraph 3 of article 62 of the law cannot be separated and separated from the limitations provided by paragraph 4 of this article. The abrogation of paragraph 3 of the law brings as a direct and immediate consequence the possibility of doubling the ownership in the media that own a national license for audio or audiovisual transmissions, from 40% + 20% of the capital that is allowed today in different companies, to 100%+20% of their capital, making the ownership in these media even more concentrated. Therefore, even in this perspective, the comparative approach between paragraph 3 and paragraph 4 of Article 62 should have led the majority to the conclusion of the necessity of this restriction and not the other way around.

Based on the above analysis and arguments, we estimate that the position of the majority, which has concluded that the restriction is unnecessary and useless, rather than on constitutional arguments, is based on assessments related to the adequacy and opportunity of the restriction, which belong to the space and discretion of the legislator. In the same line, a position has been taken in several other similar cases, where it has been emphasized: *“The Constitutional Court does not have the competence to assess whether the legal regulation is the fairest or the most suitable for achieving the goal expressed by the legislator. The duty of the Constitutional Court is to assess whether the outer limits of the legislator’s evaluation space have been exceeded or not”*.

EU Media Freedom Act

“Media companies cannot be treated as just another business. Their independence is essential. Europe needs a law that safeguards this independence – and the Commission will deliver a Media Freedom Act in the next year.” declared Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, in her State of the Union address, 15 September 2021

The European Commission adopted on 16 September 2022 proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and Council establishing a common framework for media services in the internal market (the ‘European Media Freedom Act’).⁴ The proposed Regulation includes, among others, safeguards against political interference in editorial decisions and against surveillance. It puts a focus on the independence and stable funding of public service media as well as on the transparency of media ownership and of the allocation of state advertising. It also sets out measures to protect independence of editors and disclose conflicts of interest. Finally, the Act will address the issue of media concentrations and create a new independent European Board for Media Services, comprised of national media authorities. The Commission also adopted a complementary Recommendation to encourage internal safeguards for editorial independence.

Vice-President for Values and Transparency, Věra Jourová, said: *“We have seen over the past years various forms of pressure on the media. It is high time to act. We need to establish clear principles: no journalist should be spied on because of their*

³ Bushati, E. “Audiovisual media ownership in Albania. Decision no.56/2016 of the Constitutional Court, Central and Eastern European legal Studies, EPLO 2/2017, ISSN:2310-2705.

⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52022PC0457>

job; no public media should be turned into propaganda channel. This is what we are proposing today for the first time ever: common safeguards to protect media freedom and pluralism in the EU”.

Thierry Breton, Commissioner for the Internal Market, added: “The EU is the world’s largest democratic single market. Media companies play a vital role but are confronted with falling revenues, threats to media freedom and pluralism, the emergence of very large online platforms, and a patchwork of different national rules. The European Media Freedom Act provides common safeguards at EU level to guarantee a plurality of voices and that our media are able to operate without any interference, be it private or public. A new European watchdog will promote the effective application of these new media freedom rules and screen media concentrations so they do not hamper plurality.”

The European Media Freedom Act was announced by President von der Leyen in her 2021 State of the Union Address. It builds on the Commission’s rule of law reports and the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive, which provides for EU-wide coordination of national legislation for audiovisual media. The act also builds on the Digital Services Act (DSA) and Digital Markets Act (DMA), as well as the new Code of Practice on Disinformation. It is part of the EU’s efforts in promoting democratic participation, addressing disinformation and supporting media freedom and pluralism, as set out under the European Democracy Action Plan.

This proposal complements the recently adopted Recommendation on the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists and the Directive to protect journalists and rights defenders from abusive litigation (anti-SLAPP package). The Media Freedom Act also works in tandem with initiatives related to viability, resilience and digital transformation of the media sector adopted under the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan and revised copyright rules.

The Regulation provides many solutions to many issues. Among other things, the Regulation will require Member States to respect the effective editorial freedom of media service providers and improve the protection of journalistic sources. In addition, media service providers will have to ensure transparency of ownership by publicly disclosing such information and take measures with a view to guaranteeing the independence of individual editorial decisions.⁵

The Media Freedom Act includes strong safeguards against the use of spyware against media, journalists and their families.

The funding of public media service provided should be adequate and stable, in order to ensure editorial independence. The head and the governing board of public service media will have to be appointed in a transparent, open and non-discriminatory manner. Public service media providers shall provide a plurality of information and opinions, in an impartial manner, in accordance with their public service mission.

The Media Freedom Act requires Member States to assess the impact of media market concentrations on media pluralism and editorial independence. It also requires that any legislative, regulatory or administrative measure taken by a Member State that could affect the media is duly justified and proportionate.⁶

The Media Freedom Act will establish new requirements for the allocation of state advertising to media, so that it is transparent and non-discriminatory. The Act will also enhance the transparency and objectivity of audience measurement systems, which have an impact on media advertising revenues, in particular online.

The Commission proposes to set up a new independent European Board for Media Services comprised of national media authorities. The Board will promote the effective and consistent application of the EU media law framework, in particular by assisting the Commission in preparing guidelines on media regulatory matters. It will also be able to issue opinions on national measures and decisions affecting media markets and media market concentrations. The Board will also coordinate national regulatory measures regarding non-EU media that present a risk to public security to ensure that those media do not circumvent the applicable rules in the EU. The Board will also organise a structured dialogue between very large online platforms and the media sector to promote access to diverse media offers and to monitor platforms’ compliance with self-regulatory initiatives, such as the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation.⁷

It is now for the European Parliament and the Member States to discuss the Commission’s proposal for a Regulation under the ordinary legislative procedure. Once adopted, it will be directly applicable across the European Union.

Conclusions

Decision 56/2016 of the Constitutional Court declaring paragraph 3 of Article 62 of the Media Law as incompatible further complicated the situation in the Albanian audiovisual media market. This decision, in my opinion, is not only very confusing from the point of view of legal-constitutional analysis, but it has also exceeded the competences of the Constitutional Court itself, infringing on the discretion of the legislator in establishing the rules that he considers useful to prevent the concentration of the media. This decision, in no part of it, did not take into account that the economic freedom of the subjects in the examined case is developed on a public asset, such as frequency, which is a finite natural resource. As such, imposing restrictions on the exercise of such activity, not only in terms of media freedom and expression, but also having a limited band of frequencies intended for the audiovisual media market, is completely legitimate. In the decision, the Recommendation of the Council of Europe, Recommendation No. R (99) 1 of the Committee of Ministers for Member States on measures to promote pluralism in the media, January 19, 1999, is not taken into account at all, which provides

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_5504

⁶ Lucie Rohrbacherová (EPD), Eva Simon (Liberties) “Transparency of media ownership within the EMFA Proposal” <https://epd.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/media-ownership-within-the-emfa.pdf>

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_5504

that, within the framework of receiving administrative-legal measures to guarantee the non-concentration of the media, member states can also impose restrictions on the shares of companies that exercise media-audiovisual activity. The Constitutional Court did not take into account any of the recommendations of the EU, OSCE and CoE given for Article 62, in the case when this article was proposed by a member of the Albanian Parliament to be abolished completely. In none of the arguments given by the court, the editorial independence of the media operators, which is guaranteed through ownership restrictions within the commercial company that holds the audiovisual license, is not taken into account. It is precisely the principle of editorial independence that guarantees freedom of expression and media, diversity of opinions and thoughts in the audiovisual media market.

In addition to the above, the decision declaring paragraph 3 of Article 62 as unconstitutional, and not interpreting Article 62 in its entirety, has caused a distorted situation in the media-audiovisual market, bringing an even greater concentration, already allowed in this market, and precisely by creating the undesirable effect of the concentration of the media in a few subjects, and further infringing the freedom of the media in the country, these problems are evidenced during every Annual Report of the European Commission for Albania. Since 2016, no initiative has been undertaken by the Assembly of Albania to complete Article 62, after the repeal of its paragraph 3 by the Constitutional Court. The lack of will to address this issue is proof of the influence of large media groups on the Albanian legislator.

In July 2022 the negotiations between Albania and the EU were formally opened. The membership negotiations mark the key moment in the integration process of Albania in the EU. In the annual report for Albania of 2022, the European Commission, when reporting on freedom of expression, as part of fundamental rights (Cluster 1), underlined that Albania is moderately prepared in the field of freedom of expression and media independence.

Now, with the start of the membership talks, the solution to this problem becomes binding for the Albanian state. Following now the steps defined by the EU Media Freedom Act which will be adopted soon by the Member States, would be a proper way to solve a number of problems of the Albanian audiovisual media market and also it will accelerate the accession of Albania in the European Union.

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The awakening of the Berlin Process. Legal analysis of the three agreements on mobility and comparison to free movement in the European Union

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Abstract

In times when the European integration process is becoming lengthier for the Western Balkan Six countries and the Open Balkan initiative inflicts more polemics than successful stories, surprisingly occurred the awakening of the Berlin Process which delivered new agreements for the integration of the WB in itself. The agreements are in the area of Free Movement, with ID cards, recognition of academic qualifications, and professional qualifications. The Process came to a halt in 2021 when former Chancellor Angela Merkel handed over her post, which resulted in lowering the enthusiasm for enlargement and enforcing parallel, partial, and hybrid initiatives like that of Open Balkan. To this day, the Berlin Process has not been able to fully mirror the EU's core principle of regional integration, that of four fundamental freedoms of the Single Market (of goods, people, services, and capital). The signing of these agreements marked a breakthrough achievement with a concrete impact on the citizens of WB countries, as they seek to minimize stumbling blocks to the free movement of people. These agreements are the counterpart of Chapters 2 and 3 of the EU acquis, and in light of this, the paper will try to analyse the legal aspects of these three agreements, in comparison to the European Union's regulations and directives of the Single Market, as its principal economic rationale.

Keywords: Berlin Process, free movement of people, mutual recognition of professional qualifications, Open Balkan.

Introduction

German Chancellor Angela Merkel launched the Berlin Process (BP) on August 28, 2014. It coincided with the outbreak of the First World War (1914) and the 10th anniversary of the last 'Big Bang Enlargement' of 10 countries. It might look strange that the conference occurred shortly after Juncker's speech announcing a five-year halt on enlargement while the process was not advancing. However, it is precisely such a challenge to the enlargement policy that gave way to the Berlin Process as a new initiative to make up for the 'break' created in the EU perspective of the Western Balkans Six (WB6).

A process mainly of a political character, with an economic and social dimension, brings together a number of areas and issues of regional cooperation, bilateral issues and other issues related to transport, energy, good governance, youth, migration, trade, ecology and finally the rule of law. Initiated with the aim of maintaining the pace of preparation of the countries of the region to meet the membership conditions, this process seems very complex and multidimensional. The Berlin Process is, in essence, a reformulation of existing approaches, advertised in various ways (Mozali, 2022, p. 264).

Launched as a conference of WB6 (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia), from a summit to a summit, it built upon a large number of agendas and initiatives until 2021, when the mandate of

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Chancellor Merkel ended. Under her legacy, the following summits were held in Vienna (2015), Paris (2016), Trieste (2017), London (2018), Poznan (2019), and virtual summits organised by Bulgaria and North Macedonia in 2020 and by Germany in 2021.

Eight years after its launch, the Berlin Process returned in 2022 to the place where it was initiated. The November 3rd, 2022 summit was held in Berlin again. Chancellor Olaf Scholz thus reaffirmed Germany's commitment to the Western Balkan states and their intention of joining the EU. After two years of intense negotiations, the six countries reached agreements on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards, on Recognition of Academic Qualifications, and on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctors of Medicine, Dentists, and Architects. An agreement on Freedom of Movement of Third-Party Citizens within the Western Balkans is still pending. The agreements were signed in the framework of the Common Regional Market (CRM) 2021-2024 Action Plan, which was endorsed at the Berlin Process Summit held on 10 November 2020 in Sofia. The Common Regional Market Action Plan is an integral part of the region's EU accession process (RCC, 2020). As of March 2023, only Albania and Kosovo have ratified all three agreements, Montenegro and Serbia have approved and sent the agreements to Parliament for ratification, and in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina the three mobility agreements are in the Governmental approval process.

Free movement of people and right of establishment and freedom to provide services are two of the four freedoms of the EU single market, reflected in Cluster 2 of EU negotiations, primarily in Chapters 2 and 3 of the *acquis communautaire*. The agreement on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards is done in the framework of the free movement of people principle and the agreements on Recognition of Academic Qualifications, and on Recognition of Professional Qualifications are the counterpart of the right of establishment and freedom to provide services. It is a significant step forward in removing barriers to the mobility of people in the region, enabling approximately 18 million people to move freely within the region, and also removing barriers to the mobility of professionals, students, researchers and professors (RCC, 2022).

Literature Review

The Berlin Process emerged as an innovative and promising project with distinct characteristics and ambitious objectives. The Berlin Process arose as a unique and advantageous effort with distinctive characteristics and difficult goals. Since its inception, this initiative has generated interest and has been reviewed in publications from think tanks, assessments from different study institutes, and NGOs. Yet, there isn't much information in the academic literature. The relevant information for this paper was collected from different studies and reports analysing the Berlin Process dynamics and the EU enlargement from a general perspective.

Based on the literature, one can note that the Berlin Process has been referenced, interpreted, and assessed as a promising account of the EU's and WB's commitment and performance in this process. For Skara (2023), the Berlin Process does not replace or undermine the EU enlargement policy. Instead, the Berlin Process seeks to supplement and revitalise the EU enlargement policy after the infamous declaration of the former President of the Commission Jean-Claude Juncker to halt the enlargement process until 2020. Also, for Mozali (2022), this initiative, in addition to the support and attention it gives to the countries of the region, at a time when this support was needed, at the same time supports the credibility of the EU, which had declared the impossibility of another expansion with the countries of the region. According to Vulović (2022), it differs from other EU initiatives in that international financial and EU institutions are involved alongside individual EU states, such as Germany as the format's initiator, and it primarily addresses issues of economic and regional cooperation.

The other part of the literature presents a blurry image of a variety of issues including how the process will affect the Western Balkans' complicated setting, its limitations and risks, and how well-equipped the region will be to face obstacles within a set of inactive and withdrawn EU institutions. Thus, for BPRG (2022), the Berlin Process lacked continuity between and across agenda priorities and issues. With no monitoring and administering mechanism, its agendas became overpacked and exhausted. It was not resilient to time and political changes. The initiative was strongly associated with the legacy of its founder.

As far as the legal aspects of the paper are concerned, they are based on the Albanian official version of the agreements, which are in the form of laws for the ratification of the agreements and in the form of Decisions of the Council of Ministers (DCM) for the approval of the agreements. Other forms of legal acts used in the paper are the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and a number of directives. As a form of a summary of the three agreements on mobility came the factsheet of the Regional Cooperation Council.

Methodology

The study is an overview of the three recent agreements signed at the Berlin Process Summit on 3 November 2022 between the WB countries. This study employs legal research as a research method. It uses statutory research to examine and analyse the three Berlin Process agreements on mobility to understand the legal requirements and obligations that individuals, organizations, and governments must adhere to in order to achieve the implementation and enforcement of these agreements. Statutory research is also used when addressing the homologous bilateral agreements between the

WB countries, and the Open Balkan agreements on mobility in order to gain a better understanding of their scope and applicability. The study uses comparative research to explain the differences between the three Berlin Process agreements with homologous existing bilateral agreements and the Open Balkan trilateral agreements. Its aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the different types of legal acts and to identify the best elements of each of them. The general analysis is based on desk research. The version of the three agreements on mobility, where the study is based, is taken from the official Albanian translation of the agreements, approved by the Council of Ministers and reflected in the Official Journal of Albania.

Results and Discussion

Agreement on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards

The Agreement on Freedom of Movement facilitates travel conditions and good relations by simplifying the administrative procedure for entry, transit, and short stay using only ID cards within the Western Balkans ensuring equal treatment of all citizens in the whole region (RCC, 2022). The Agreement has all six WB countries as signatory parties (Decision, 644/2022). The Agreement is composed of 15 articles. It applies to the entry, transit, exit, and short stay of natural persons/ID card holders within the WB. Article 4 provides the conditions and restrictions under which the movement of people with ID cards is applied. Article 8 provides for the establishment of a commission that will be in charge of organizing, coordinating, and monitoring activities related to the implementation and enforcement of this Agreement. The formation and the procedures of the commission are regulated in the following articles 9 and 10. The commission in itself is a structure that will secure the implementation of the Agreement. It is a guarantee that the Agreement won't exist only in a preliminary state.

Anyway, there are some existing bilateral agreements within WB countries. In the case of Albania's viewpoint, citizens of Albania and North Macedonia could travel to each other's countries with ID cards since 2012, due to an agreement between the two countries. The citizens of Albania may enter, pass through and stay in Montenegro for up to 30 days with a valid biometric ID card. This is according to an agreement between the Government of Montenegro and the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania on mutual travel of citizens, signed on 6 November 2009. Also, since 2021, citizens of Albania and Serbia can travel to each country only with ID cards (Decision, 1016/2022). The agreement is a revised version of an older agreement between the two countries (Law, 10474/2011). The same thing cannot be said in the case of Kosovo, which lacks cooperation with other countries of the region in many areas.

In comparison to the bilateral agreements mentioned above, the recent Agreement offers clauses that contain guarantees regarding its implementation. So, the implementation of the Agreement would not be impacted by the variability of the political will of the signatory countries.

The recent Agreement is of very importance to the region. In a time when the WB countries are not part of the EU, meaning the borders of the neighbouring countries are not as invisible as those in the EU. Many of the countries of the region are lacking bilateral agreements with each other and when it does the implementation is missing. So, this multilateral Agreement on Freedom of Movement with ID cards, fills this gap created between some of the countries and offers guarantees for the successful implementation of it.

Regarding the free movement of people in the EU, it is one of the four fundamental freedoms of EU law, along with the free movement of goods, services, and capital. Citizens of EU member states are automatically citizens of the European Union. This implies that individuals have the freedom to travel and the right to reside among the EU member states if certain requirements are met. Article 45 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) grants free movement to workers. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 created EU citizenship and widened the scope of free movement. Article 45 represents an application, in the specific context of workers, of the general principle in Article 18 TFEU prohibiting discrimination on grounds of nationality. Article 46 TFEU provides for the European Parliament and the Council to adopt secondary legislation to bring about the freedoms set out in Article 45. A series of directives and regulations were adopted under this provision to regulate the conditions of entry, stay, and treatment of EU workers and their families.

EU Directive 2004/38/EC on the right of citizens of the Union and their family members to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States, also known as the Citizens Rights Directive sets out rules that member states must follow, including the conditions governing the exercise of the right of free movement, residence, and permanent residence within the territory of the Member States by Union citizens and their family members and the limits placed on those rights set out on the grounds of public policy, public security or public health. Article 6 of the Directive initially grants the right of entry and stay of up to three months to all EU citizens and their families without any conditions other than the presentation of an identity card or passport. An important innovation in Directive 2004/38/EC is the inclusion of the right of permanent residence for EU citizens and their families, including non-citizens, who have resided legally for a continuous period of five years in the host state. Articles 16-18 indicate the conditions under which EU citizens can enjoy this right.

Agreement on Recognition of Academic Qualifications

The Agreement, which has as signatory parties all the WB countries, establishes common rules and procedures for the recognition of academic qualifications (Decision, 18/2023). It enables the mobility of students and academic staff in the Western Balkans based on the Lisbon Convention for Recognition, Bologna Process, and relevant EU rules.

Article 1 of the Agreement states the scope of application of the Agreement and Article 2 offers a definition of the object of the Agreement. The entire region benefits also from the regulated recognition of Doctors of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degrees. It applies to public universities as stated in Article 1, and will gradually extend to private universities if there is the will of the signatory parties to do so, based on the formulation of Article 12. The Agreement improves the procedures by shortening the recognition period from several months to a maximum of 14 days, as provided in Article 5. It establishes joint standards and procedures for the recognition of qualifications and removes the existing fees for the application of recognition of academic qualifications for students.

Moreover, the Agreement aims to establish a Joint Commission which will be in charge of organizing, coordinating, and monitoring activities related to the implementation of this Agreement. Articles 6 to 10 provide the way of the establishment, formation, and procedures that are the competence of the Commission.

As for existing bilateral agreements in the region, there is an agreement between Albania and Kosovo in 2021 on the recognition of academic qualifications and an agreement between Kosovo and Serbia in 2011 in the framework of the normalization of relations between the two countries. This agreement was amended in 2016, however, despite all the arrangements, both parties failed to materialize the recognition of the diplomas.

There is also an existing trilateral agreement from the same year between Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia in the framework of the Open Balkan Initiative which regulates the recognition of academic qualifications (Decision, 644/2022). Open Balkan is a partial regional initiative for trade cooperation, and a rebranding of its predecessor the “Mini Schengen”, after the suspension of the Berlin Process in 2021 (Balkans Policy Research Group, 2022, p. 5, 8). This agreement was signed in June 2022 and has the same scope of application as the Berlin Process agreement. Article 1 provides the aim and the definitions of the Open Balkan agreement. The agreement is applicable to university diplomas and Ph.D. degrees. Institutions responsible for the recognition of diplomas obtained abroad for each signatory country are provided in Article 2.

In comparison to the Berlin Process agreement, the Open Balkan agreement has some differences or deficiencies. Firstly, B&H, Kosovo, and Montenegro are not signatory parties of this Open Balkan agreement. Even though the agreement invites other countries of the region to be a party, it has not successfully shown credibility and inclusiveness. Secondly, it does not offer assurances for its implementation as the Berlin Process agreement does by establishing a special commission. As far as the dilemma of which one of these agreements with the same scope, will the parties implement, it will be the more advanced and useful agreement, (as of Article 1V) so the agreement signed in the framework of the Berlin Process. In conclusion, the WB has to be considered as a single region, by promoting involvement and cooperation between each of the countries, which can be perfectly achieved by the Berlin Process agreement.

In the European Union, the mutual recognition of academic qualifications receives unified treatment with mutual recognition of professional qualifications. Both these concepts are governed by Article 53 TFEU and by Directive 2005/36/EC on Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications (MRPQ). Pursuant to Article 53 of the Treaty, in order for self-employed persons and professionals to establish themselves in another Member State or offer their services there on a temporary basis, diplomas, certificates, and other documents serving as proof of professional qualifications as issued in other Member States need to be mutually recognized.

Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications

The Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications was the third of the agreements signed in November 2022 in Berlin between the WB6 (Decision, 35/2023). It covers three regulated professions (doctors of medicine, dentists, and architects) and creates the basis for the negotiations of the remaining four regulated professions (midwives, nurses, pharmacists, and veterinary surgeons) in the upcoming period. The Agreement is based on the EU Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications.

This Agreement sets out the rules for the automatic recognition of evidence of formal qualifications based on the minimum training conditions within the Parties for access to and exercise of the regulated profession, as well as the harmonized minimum training conditions in one or more other Parties, and allowing professionals pursue the same profession in a host Party other than the Party where they obtained their professional qualifications. It applies to natural persons, professionals such as doctors, dentists, and architects as provided in Article 2. The Agreement establishes the uniform application of rules and appeal procedures to create the ground for the mobility of professionals throughout the region. Pursuant to Article 14 the host Party may require the professional to have knowledge of its language where this is justified by the nature of the profession he wishes to practice. In any case, the language requirements may not exceed what is necessary for practicing the profession in question. The establishment of the Joint Working Group on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications will facilitate and oversee the implementation and enforcement of this Agreement, as stated in Article 16. A cornerstone principle of the Agreement is the administrative cooperation between the Parties. They should work closely together and provide mutual

assistance to facilitate the implementation and enforcement of this Agreement. Another important clause of the Agreement binds the Parties to adopt laws, regulations and administrative provisions necessary to comply with this Agreement no later than eighteen months after its entry into force. So, Article 19 advances the transposition of other related EU rules in the domestic legal system of the WB countries.

There are no similar multilateral agreements, that cover this aspect of cooperation, signed by the countries in the region. This makes this Agreement unique in its nature and scope of application. Perhaps this Agreement, with all the novelties and special procedures presented and the final aim of harmonizing with the EU Directive on Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications (MRPQ), is the single most important regional agreement in decades.

Concerning the mutual recognition of professional qualifications in the EU, as stated above, it is regulated specifically by Directive 2005/36/EC, it is part of Chapter 3 of the EU *acquis* and is one of the four freedoms of the Single Market. The Directive provides detailed rules on the recognition of qualifications of individuals who want to exercise a regulated profession (either permanently through establishment or temporarily through the provision of services) in a Member State different from the one where they obtained their professional qualifications. The Directive applies to EU nationals, as long as they obtained qualifications in another Member State. The EU citizens who have obtained their qualifications outside the EU, third country qualifications, can rely on the Directive whereas they have at least three years of professional experience exercising the profession in the Member State that has recognized the qualifications.

The term regulated profession covers a professional activity or group of professional activities, access to which, the pursuit of which, or one of the modes of the pursuit of which is subject, directly, or indirectly, by virtue of any kind of act (legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions) to the possession of specific professional qualifications. There is a large number of professions that are regulated in the EU, and it differs substantially per Member State. A non-exhaustive list of professions covered by the Directive is available in the database of regulated professions.

Despite the differences, there are seven professions that are regulated in all EU Member States: doctors, dentists, general care nurses, midwives, pharmacists, veterinarians, and architects, so-called sectoral professions. For these professions, the Directive envisages a separate system of recognition rules (automatic recognition based on minimum requirements or acquired rights), and the general system is applied only in cases when the conditions for the application of the automatic system are not met.

Pursuant to Article 4 of the Directive, the recognition of professional qualifications by the host Member State shall allow beneficiaries to gain access in that Member State to the same profession as that for which they are qualified in the home Member State and to pursue it in the host State under the same conditions as its nationals. The regime introduced by the Directive consists of the following types of recognition:

- Automatic recognition – for professions with harmonised minimum training conditions (nurses, midwives, doctors (including general practitioners and specialists), dental practitioners (including specialists), pharmacists, architects, and veterinary surgeons);
- Recognition on the basis of professional experience – for certain craft professional activities such as carpenters, upholsterers, beauticians;
- Common training framework - not adopted yet;
- Common training tests - adopted for ski instructors;
- General system – for all other regulated professions such as teachers, engineers, physiotherapists, and real estate agents.

Limitations

This study has a few limitations. First, the study focuses only on the three agreements on mobility and the legal analysis of other agreements in the framework of the Berlin Process falls out of the scope of this study.

Second, the ratification or approval of these agreements in some of the WB countries is pending, so the implementation has not been initiated yet. The study lacks the transparency, reports, and monitoring mechanisms that the enforcement phase of these agreements could produce. It focuses only on legal analysis and projections on how the clauses would be implemented.

I hope the findings and recommendations in this study may contribute to the insufficient academic literature and spark interest in further studies on Western Balkan integration and cooperation.

Conclusions

The foundation of the region's road toward EU integration should be regional cooperation. It should also be seen as a strategy for ultimately benefiting the citizens of the WB countries. The Berlin Process did, in part, act as a catalyst for regional and EU collaboration and convergence. Yet the awakening Berlin Process is anticipated to achieve much more. In light of the geopolitical shift brought about by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, improved regional cooperation and convergence between the region and the EU are particularly crucial right now.

The next step for the WB countries right now is the implementation of the three agreements on mobility whose direct beneficiaries are the citizens. All three agreements have a strong possibility to be fully implemented because their legal composition guarantees this success. The multilateral aspect, the superiority in relation to other homologous agreements, and the EU integration drive make these agreements essential to its signatories.

Alternatively, it would be a loss for the WB countries and their citizens if the agreements do not achieve their full potential.

The endgame of the Berlin Process should be to integrate within the EU Enlargement policy and the overall WB accession process. In turn, it should serve as a driving political initiative for the accession of the Western Balkans into the European Union.

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Populist tendencies in albanian politics

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Abstract

Populism has become one of the most used concepts in contemporary political science, but also in public discourse, although it is often contested. However, most discussion of populism has focused on elections and political party systems. We argue that populist politics can be seen in several dimensions of governance. Populism no longer represents just a trend or phenomenon; it is a fact that we face not only conceptually but also practically.

In the academic research literature on the phenomenon of populism, there is still a lack of consensus on how populism should ultimately be evaluated from a democratic perspective. In this sense, the problem of populism is related to social science. Populism tendencies have arisen around western political societies and as well the same tendencies or behavior has appeared in Albanian politics. This paper will deal with the birth of these trends and how a foreign model translates into our country and what are the tools that simplify or enable the development of such a populist model in Albanian politics.

Keywords: populism, democracy, illiberalism, ideology

Introduction

Populism no longer represents just a trend or phenomenon; it is a fact that we face not only conceptually but also practically. There is much discussion about this concept and its manifestations, which undoubtedly relate to the ambiguous relationship that populism has with democracy and the theoretical effort or necessity to understand the influence that such a relationship causes, politically and socially.

Populism has become one of the most used concepts in contemporary political science, but also in public discourse, although it is often challenged. However, much of the discussion about populism has focused on elections and political party systems. We argue that populist politics can be seen in several other dimensions of governance.

What is populism? How can we define or measure it?

In scientific research on the phenomenon of populism, there is still a lack of consensus on how populism should ultimately be assessed from a democratic point of view. The four core elements of populism according to Macedo & Manbringe (2019) are (a) the people (b) in a morally charged (c) battle against (d) the elites. As the name suggests, all populist movements claim to represent "the people." Usually in this relationship, people are seen as morally good or oppressed, while the elites are seen as corrupt, or the oppressor. This kind of relationship is antagonistic. In this point of view, authors define populism as the people in moral battle against elites. In general, populists see the common people as virtuous and the elites as corrupt. Moral arousal does not require a belief that elites are corrupt, because one can be morally aroused

against an elite that is simply culturally arrogant, haughty, disdainful, or perhaps just too rich or too remote. In practice, however, all populist movements say or imply that some segments among the elite are corrupt in comparison with the common people, and all use moral language to condemn elite domination.

Populism can be seen or interpreted as well in a different kind of perception, probably as a communication style in which a group of politicians consider themselves to represent the interests of the people, which is then contrasted with elite interests. Such approach can be misleading because it is actually never clear who the people and the elite are, and which interests they actually represent (Dwifatma, 2018).

As Canovan (1999) explained, populists have never limited themselves to suggesting practical solutions to people's problems - including in countries where they have been able to serve in government. On the contrary, they have offered nothing less than a 'redemption policy', in contrast to the 'pragmatism policy' of the establishment, which includes the promise to return power to where it belongs: the people.

Yet seen globally, populism does not always rely on cultural appeals. In practice, according to Kylie & Gultchin (2018), populism can also be based in socio-economic arguments, that try somehow to divide citizens. Populism can also be based on socio-economic arguments, which seek to divide citizens according to economic classes rather than culture, or on standard anti-establishment appeals, which emphasise purging bureaucracies of anti-regime elements.

Relying on the extensive scientific literature on populism, the report from Kylie & Gultchin (2018) identifies 46 populist leaders or political parties that have held executive office across 33 countries between 1990 and today. The rise in global populism over this period is remarkable. Between 1990 and nowadays, the number of populists in power around the world has increased fivefold, from four to twenty.

The term "populism" was first used to describe specific 19th century political movements. The first was the agrarian movement in the US in the 1890s that eventually became the People's Party. The movement was formed to oppose the demonetisation of silver and championed scepticism of railways, banks and political elites. They adopted the moniker "Populists" from the Latin *populus* (the people), and their message was to "get rid of 'the plutocrats, the aristocrats, and all the other rats', install the people in power, and all would be well" (Canovan, 1999: 12).

It was not until the 1950s that populism came into broader use. It became attached to phenomena as varied as political movements supporting charismatic leaders. Seymour Martin Lipset, a leading modernisation theorist, cited on Gultchin & Kylie (2018) explained populism as a political expression of the anxieties and anger of those wishing to return to a simpler, premodern life.

How to measure populism?

According to Hawkins, Aguilar, Castanho, Jenne, Kocijan, Rovira (2019) the oldest and best developed techniques to measure the populist rhetoric of politicians through textual analysis. Textual analysis--whether of speeches, manifestos, or other political documents--provides a direct measure of politicians' ideas as communicated to the public. In contrast to surveys, speeches and other political documents are designed with public audiences in mind, and they can be studied for earlier historical periods. Tests have shown the measures resulting from textual analysis are precise and replicable. These allow us to move beyond the impressionistic, dichotomous indicators common in the earlier scholarly literature.

Matching with the people

Populists have created their name and found their position in politics and society by trying to build themselves up as an embodiment of the true people. There are many examples of how some leaders have used slogans to match with people. As cited on Gultchin & Kylie (2018), former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, for example, used ¡Chávez es Pueblo! (Chávez is the people!) as a slogan. Alberto Fujimori, Peru's populist president from 1990 to 2000, campaigned using the slogan Fujimori, presidente como usted (Fujimori, a president like you).

As the embodiments of the true people, populists usually claim to have the full support of the people. Even though they do not win 100 per cent of the votes, they claim 100 per cent of the votes of the true, moral people—the only members of the political community that they characterise as legitimate. Using the definition 'true/moral people', could produce another essential problem. In the first hand, populists claim to bring the people altogether, and in the other hand, dividing people into groups creates some group or class segregation.

According to Krasniqi (2021) traditionally since 2006, the elements of American campaigns have been copied in Albania, even though the realities of the two countries cannot be paralleled. "The creation of an American model, under Albania's conditions, is actually an invitation to disconnect politics and to disconnect the citizen from political decision-making. We are creating the model of the young man, which we had in the 60s and 70s," he emphasizes.

Constantly, if we refer to political campaigns, we see the slogans of the main parties, which in fact make a typical populist division: us vs. them; we are the salvation, we are the change; together for change; rebirth.

Performing a Crisis

Populists usually try to use a rhetoric of crisis by capitalizing/dramatizing some social issues. The cases could vary, from immigration to crime, corruption, etc. By identifying the failures, they try to identify the culprit, mostly related to economic & political elites, who according to them failed to protect the people. By performing a crisis helps populism divide the people and put them in the position of the saviours.

Embodying the people

In the versions of populism that have this characteristic, one person—often charismatic in some way—claims to stand uniquely for the people, representing their essence in a way that their multiple and divided elected representatives cannot. This possibility requires and reinforces the concept that the people are one, with one set of values and a single will. There is no great danger to democracy in people uniting in practice by temporarily rallying around and identifying with a single individual Macedo & Mancbringe (2019). The idea of ‘one leader’ bringing people altogether is related to populism and it could be even included amount some of the characteristics of populism. Yet, according to Macedo & Mancbringe (2019) this characteristic of coordination around a single leader who channels the will of the people is not required or strongly suggested by the four core elements of our definition

Such a manifestation, of merging the image of the leader with the people or the leader as a savior, is also seen in Albanian politics, which, still in the long transition towards democratization, finds itself very attracted by the charismatic leaders, who presents themselves as saviors and promises constantly rebirth. Such a trend has a populist form. And here we can discuss whether Albanian politics suffers from democratic culture and remains nostalgic for the authoritarian models or if the populist trend is a predisposition for an autocratic model (?!).

But what is the relationship between media and populist tendencies?

The media nowadays offers a different medium and somehow blurs the lines between politics and people. Social media has changed the way politics is done. Populist politicians need the media and use social media to spread their propaganda, anti-elite ideas and ideology. Media as well, in the other hand, get their share of profits. So this could be a great symbiosis between social media and populist politicians.

Ernst, Blassning, Engesser, Bucher & Essel (2019) define populist communication as the communicative representation of the populist ideology (what is being said) and the use of populism-related stylistic elements (how something is being said) by all sorts of political actors. According to Kriesi cited on Ernst, et.al (2019) the use of these key messages is part of a political strategy that manifests itself in broader communication patterns. In his view, a populist political communication strategy is also expressed by the use of a specific communication style. Author expects this style to be characterized by elements such as “emergency rhetoric,” “emotionalization” as well as “assertive/absolutist” and “colloquial” language, among others.

In a contemporary and hybrid media system, political actors are using different kind of political and communication channels, who usually have different political messages and different communication style. When comparing the two social media platforms in relation to their potential for populist purposes, Ernst, Blassning, Engesser, Bucher & Essel (2019) find Facebook with four advantages over Twitter. First, Facebook offers more reciprocal message exchanges; second, it has higher levels of proximity and the connection between Facebook users is generally more intensive, personal, and intimate; and third, Facebook is not subject to certain character limits, which gives political actors greater opportunity to make their case effectively and elaborately.

Social media is an essential, primary component in post-industrial society, even more so than the press was in industrial society, which was a means of communication for the cultural elite of society. It's social media that has the most. fundamentally changing the character of our social life, both in the interpersonal, social and political aspects. The use of technology has changed the way politicians approach their electorate and conduct electoral campaigns. The development of modern technologies also enables citizens to use social media to participate in the political process. Facebook or Twitter has created new opportunities for political engagement, participation and mobilization of citizens.

In the Albanian context, we have discussed many times the phenomenon of the individual's being disconnected from politics; their lack of contact with the ‘political body’. The impact of new technologies on the characteristics of political participation has its own characteristics: interactive, open communication and access of almost all citizens. The network is at the same time a source of information, a means of communication and part of the public sphere. Today, most political candidates in our country communicate with people using social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Now politicians face new challenges from this way of communication. Politicians have a large social media network and they can reach a large number of people through their posts on popular networks such as Facebook. Political analysts and other types of key influencers contribute to political discourse through social media. Now a politician's ownership of a social network is a must. Owning and using the web has become a political action.

In Albanian political communication, social networks are widely used and are being considered as an alternative way to communicate the daily message or to expand the ranks of supporters.

Social media has really influenced the political scene in Albania and all political leaders and influential candidates have their personal Facebook or Twitter pages, using it as a channel to bridge the communication gap with those they support or even also to engage new people. But according to Londo (2006), despite the increased use of the Internet, Albanian voters still use television to get political information. Social media is an effective tool for providing political information to younger voters, but it is still not the most efficient method for mobilizing potential voters according to the author.

Is populism good for democracy?

The connection between populism and democracy is an essential issue. However, contrary to the negative notion of populism, democracy is associated with more positive grades. In this sense, the problem of populism is related to social science. But the dividing line between populism and legitimate democratic confrontation is simply too blurred. Populism affects democracy and vice versa. It is not easy to project an absolute dividing line between two phenomena.

Although populism is legitimate in democracy as part of freedom of expression, this approach clearly has negative consequences on society according to Dwifatma (2018). At the very least, the society becomes rigidly polarized. In many countries, the society is divided between anti-immigrants and those who accept migrants. This kind of polarization has the potential to endanger tolerance level within society and may translate in aggressive behaviors to attack those whom they think are enemy. We have this situation manifested also in the case of Albanian immigrants living in the UK. They are often described by the British Prime Minister or the Ministry of Internal Affairs as individuals who develop criminality in the United Kingdom. A discussion that has sparked controversy, in which the Albanian Prime Minister is also included. Such situations create antagonisms within societies and opportunities for division.

Macedo & Mancbringe (2019) argue that the core elements of populism, pitting the people in moral battle against elites, often benefit democracy by taking democratic politics back to its normative roots in the wants and needs of ordinary citizens and challenging, on egalitarian and justice grounds, elite political, economic, and cultural domination. On the contrary, when a large group has designated itself “the people” and has come to see itself in a moral battle against “the elites,” the members of that group have often had significant interests and values that political elites have neglected or even denigrated. At these moments, populism is democracy’s way of saying, “Listen harder.”

They further distinguish the ambivalence between populism in opposition and populism in power. Populism in opposition often revitalizes democracy when the populist ideals and moral fervor animating antagonism to entrenched elites crack through a prevailing political and discursive hegemony, bringing concerns that had been ignored or suppressed into the political arena. Yet populism in power poses risks to democracy (Macedo & Mancbringe, 2019).

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Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans as the best way to prevent transboundary pollution

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Abstract

Environmental rights are an extension of the basic human rights that mankind requires and deserves. In addition to having the right to food, clean water, suitable shelter, and education, having a safe and sustainable environment is paramount as all other rights are dependent upon it. Environment protection affects directly the human health. The development of regional cooperation is in the best interests of all the WB countries, being a key factor for establishing political stability, security and economic prosperity. Most of the agreements have a commercial character, but also aim at environmental protection, through three main objectives: To fully or partially prohibit the trade of products which come from species in risk of extinction; to limit at the utmost the interstate transfer of pollutant or harmful products (Bamaco Convention); to inform the purchasing countries regarding ecological characteristics or possible environmental damages. Some states refuse to cooperate, with the intent of evading the obligations. Thereby, if the western Balkan states would face a severe environmental catastrophe, they will hardly have the necessary capacities to confront the situation, risking to cause a total collapse. The incredible distances that pollution can spread means that it is not contained within the boundaries of any single nation. In this context these countries in order to cope with transition and EU integration process commitments, have to face important environmental challenges. This cooperation must include not only the state authorities but also the public of the interesting parties according to Aarhus Convention. This paper analyses two important influencing factors to sustainable environment, regional cooperation and environmental policies, examining the impact their correlation has on sustainable environment.

Keywords: Regional cooperation, transboundary pollution, sustainable environment, Western Balkans

Introduction

The Western Balkans countries are called “transition countries”. They have abandoned the totalitarian, centrally planned systems and are struggling to build democratic, market oriented societies. They must accomplish their objective in a peculiar moment, when the world is moving from national, to regional and global economies. This poses the need to develop common strategies which will help them overcome the transition.

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In scientific literature, the notion of transition implicates the whole development period, in which it's necessary to undertake the all inclusive processes of economic and of society's culture structure changes. (Selmanaj, 2006) Signifying a process of changes, transition in society is of different types. Transition in ex-communist countries is considered double transition, because it is related with crossing from authoritarian systems to democratic ones, but also with transition from controlled economy to market economy.

Transition process in WB countries is happening at a time, when the whole world is oriented towards sustainable development. This concept was born in the early '70 with the need to face the challenges posed by economic development without consideration for the protection of natural resources or the environment. The countries of the western Balkans have many opportunities as well as threats to achieve sustainable development. The transition process gives them possibilities to establish institutions and develop legislation that is environmentally accurate, favors decentralization in decision-making processes, and uses the emerging civil society to promote sustainable development.

Environmental law in WB countries

Traditionally, environmental pollution had been viewed as local problem in its nature, but in recent decades, it has gone beyond the local level, and now is considered to have a global dimension. This is giving rise to the development of rules to deal with International environmental responsibility, making environmental law an important part of the mainstream of international law. During the first half of the twentieth century, environmental problems are regulated at local or national level. The first international treaties became necessary when extra-territorial effects began to be felt. In the first phase, states elaborated common practices that were intended to preserve the resources of marine or terrestrial animals or to distribute equally the possibility of using a common source. Some examples are the Convention for the protection of birds needed in agriculture, the convention for protection of endangered species from extinction, being finalized with the institutionalization of international environmental law with the Stockholm Conference in 1972. The communist countries were only partially involved in international environmental norms.

During communism, the domestic environmental laws were apparently accurate and had strict standards, but they were neither enforced nor enforceable. (Moldan, 1995) They lacked of appropriate technological and economic preconditions, of adequate institutional structure and the absence of public participation. During the totalitarian systems, are identified several environmental harms. Excessive exploitation of natural resources to serve the heavy industry, and central planning economy, which aimed at transforming the environment in the service of agriculture, brought severe effects in forest cutting and increased erosive activity of the land. Due to the lack of environmental information, citizens did not pay any attention to environmental issues due to the lack of interest, the priority of economical problems but also the absence of private property.

After the establishment of democratic governments, many people hoped that the environment could be improved almost as easily as the old regime had been disassembled. Enthusiasm and high hopes were soon to be lost, and replaced by frustration. At least three reasons existed for that (Moldan, 1995): Firstly, the damages were great, and their causes were deeply rooted in the existing industrial and economic structure. Secondly, there was not enough experience and knowledge to select the most efficient methods of environmental cleanup. One of the serious mistakes committed was dealing with environmental issues in isolation and not in integration with the overall transition process. Thirdly, the initial enthusiasm was neither strong nor long enough to compete successfully with other important aspects of the transition.

Changes in the political system brought also changes in the mentality of policy-making concerning the environment. Citizens manifested "aggressive" attitude towards environment, because of the lack of appropriate environment education. However, the new spirit of laws and policies, aimed at the preservation of the balance between economic development and environment protection. Like all democracies, WB countries aspire to integrate environment policies in the other sectoral policies. The new environmental legislation positioned the citizen as the central actor of environment decision-making, requiring the engagement of the public as a fundamental condition.

The globalization of markets has influenced the harmonization of environmental policies, inducing WB countries, to assign vital resources and energy to the development of new environmental laws. Another incentive is the fact that environment is one of the priority areas for the countries that aspire EU membership. Recent reports suggest that the total cost of adopting the environmental *acquis* will range from 80 to 100 billion Euros, requiring the candidate countries to spend an average of 2-3% of their GDP to implement this *acquis*. (Carmin; Vandever 2004) Despite the endeavors, compared with the western Europe, the environmental situation in WB countries is very serious and in need of paramount attention.

Environmental law in international jurisdictions

Environmental legislation is in constant evolution and its content is formed by the contribution of several disciplines. Lawmakers base their work in the results of scientific expertise. Meanwhile the scientists must exchange knowledge in accordance with their areas of research, for example, in the area of global warming, scientists who study atmosphere are trained in metrology and chemistry and prepare different climatic models. Another group is composed of biologist and ecologist who analyze the impact of these models in biotopes and ecologic systems. Scientific expertise is requested not only for communicating the latest knowledge innovations, but also to predict and assess the risk of endangered zones.

Another feature of international environmental law is related to the fact that when a breach of obligation under international environmental law takes place, the harm caused in the majority of cases is not the injury to a legal interest proper of a party, but the injury of the community at large. (Owada, 2006) International law is created and based on the principle of reciprocity between states, a concept difficult to apply in the protection of the environment. An act with environmental consequences cannot necessarily be remedied through the traditional means of relief, such as reprisal, restitution or compensation, because in the majority of cases it is practically impossible to turn the environment in the initial state.

Irreversibility implies that environmental damage in the majority of cases causes damages which could be irreparable. Environmental rehabilitation may require many years, and in several cases can be objectively impossible, for example in the extinction of rare species. For this reason, interstate cooperation, which consists in taking precautionary measures to prevent transboundary environmental damage, becomes indispensable. The need for cooperation is necessary to avoid potential transboundary environmental damages, since, as we will show, other international means for resolving international disputes are not very efficient. On the other way it is better to avoid a dispute than to settle it and its consequences afterwards.

The main focus of this paper is the transboundary environment pollution, which is defined as “any intentional or unintentional pollution whose physical origin is subject to, and situated wholly or in part within the area under, the national jurisdiction of one State and which has effects in the area under the national jurisdiction of another State.” (OECD 1977, Recommendation, cited by Larsson) Transboundary damage does not necessarily give rise to international liability in all cases. (Hanqin, 2003) International law only deals those cases where transboundary damage has reached a certain degree of rigor.

Several international conventions like EIA devote special attention to transboundary damage. One of the most important measures to prevent such damages is the obligation of a State involved in a project which could impact the environment of a bordering country to inform the other State, which is likely to be affected by such a project. The notification must be sent to the presumed affected parties, simultaneously with the information presented to the public of the state of origin. Interested parties exchange the necessary information to ensure the effective participation of the parties in the final decision. In this way, each State will have the opportunity to determine whether the project in question is going to cause any damage. The particular process which specifies this is the **Environmental Impact Assessment**. It is known as the process of identifying, predicting, evaluating and mitigating the biophysical, social, and other relevant effects of development proposals prior to major decisions being taken and commitments made. (Gregor, 2001) An EIA is an assessment of the possible positive or negative impact that a proposed project may have on the environment, together consisting of the natural, social and economic aspects. All the interested parties are involved in this procedure.

The instruments for solving international disputes are negotiations, commissions, international courts and arbitrations. According to EIA convention, disputes regarding the interpretation or the implementation of the convention, in case are not settled through negotiation, the parties may apply before ICJ or international arbitration. Parties at the time of ratification or at any subsequent time may accept one or both authorities for the settlement of disputes. In case the parties don't agree regarding the jurisdiction that will investigate and deliberate on their case, the ICJ prevails.

The convention established a third authority, the Commission who investigates disputes of the parties regarding the EIA convention. This authority in its essence is an investigating body, which relies on scientific principles to highlight the adverse impact in a proposed activity. It investigates the transboundary impact before the implementation of the new proposed activity. In this context the commission's duty are also preventive. Its investigation is based on the analysis of acts, witnesses and experts' interrogation, in order to deliver a final report. This report represents the commission attitude regarding the environment assessment of the proposed activity, but it is not compulsory. They are simple recommendations that are not binding for the state, meaning that the state won't have sanctions in case when they act contrary to the commission's opinion.

Traditionally, a nation resorts to the I.C.J. only after diplomatic negotiations, commissions and arbitration have failed. The ICJ has the advantage that it operates at a supra-national level best suited to resolution of transnational issues. But the ICJ jurisdiction has its limitations as well. Many member states have not agreed to fully automatic ICJ jurisdiction and some have agreed only to limited jurisdiction.

After World War II, ICJ has given special interests to several cases dealing with the environment. The “first wave” of ICJ environmental jurisprudence, consists of the *Corfu Channel* case and the *Nuclear Tests* case. These cases were not in substance environmental ones, but the Court recognized some of the founding principles of international environmental law. (Esposito, 2010) 1. *Every State has obligation not to allow knowingly its territory to be used for acts contrary to the rights of other States.* 2. *The environment is not an abstraction but represents the living space, the quality of life and the very health of human beings, including generations unborn.* Despite the fact that the importance of these decisions is invaluable in giving an international dimension to environmental law, it did little in its advance beyond mere recognition.

The first international case which examined environmental problems was the arbitral case of *Trail Smelter*, 1941, between Canada and the United States. Trail Smelter is considered as the first international environmental case, from which the entire generated the entire environmental law. After much diplomatic efforts, both countries, appointed an international arbitration, to settle the dispute they had, regarding the pollution that a smelter in Canada caused in the environment and population of United States. It is remembered as the earliest articulation of two core principles of international environmental law: that states *must not use or permit the use of its territory in such a manner as to cause injury in or to the territory of another state*, this means they have the duty to prevent transboundary environmental harm, and that they *have an obligation to pay compensation for the harm they cause*. The tribunal ordered Canada to compensate the United States for the damage caused by transboundary air pollution from the smelter, and established an international “regime of control” to attempt to limit the transboundary movement and deposition of fumes. In this case international tribunals were partially effective, because they recognized the

damage and obliged Canada to compensate for it. Despite this, it took almost 15 years to solve the case, and in transboundary environmental disputes the damages for such a long time, can be irreparable.

In more recent years, the Court settled another case dealing with environmental problems. On 4 May 2006, Argentina sued Uruguay before the ICJ, concerning alleged breaches by Uruguay of obligations incumbent upon it under an international treaty, the Statute of the River Uruguay. There are opinions that ICJ's actions arouse disbelief about its efficacy in adjudicating transboundary pollution disputes. (Halloran,2009) The ICJ on April 2010 found that Uruguay had breached its international obligation to inform Argentina of its intents to build the pulp mills on the Uruguay River. However, the court denied Argentina's demand for compensation, because it provided no convincing evidence that discharge from the mills has adversely influenced the quality of the water, or the ecological balance of the river.

In the case in question, the court refused to utilize provisional measures, as form of injunctive relief. Provisional measures preserve the rights of the parties until the Court renders a final decision and to receive them, a party must demonstrate that a particular case requires "urgent" relief. The Court has indicated that a situation is sufficiently urgent when harm to the rights of the parties will result before the Court renders a final decision on the merits. (Essoff,1991) Argentina did not convince the Court that the construction of the mills presented irreparable damage to the environment. Even if the ICJ exhibited, willingness to issue provisional measures, its capacity to enforce such measures is uncertain. (Halloran,2009) Article 94 of the United Nations Charter allows recourse to the Security Council when a party ignores a final judgment of the ICJ, no such similar proceedings exist for provisional measures. A party could decline to abide to provisional measures asserted against it without penalty.

The ICJ in 1993 established a special chamber exclusively dedicated to environmental matters. This decision was based on the new developments in the field of environmental law. In its 16 years of existence, no State asked for a case to be heard by this Chamber, because all environmental disputes have been submitted to the plenary Bench. (Owada,2006) After the absence of cases submissions, the Court decided not to hold elections for an Environmental Bench. This decision was based on the State attitude to present environmental disputes before the Plenary Bench, and the need for the Court to address environmental disputes, in full Court rather than in a special Chamber, because of their importance in international law. (Owada,2006)

Regional Cooperation as the best way to prevent transboundary pollution

The development of regional cooperation is in the best interests of all the WB countries, being a key factor for establishing political stability, security and economic prosperity. (Rehn,2008) In this context these countries to cope with transition and EU integration process commitments, have to face important environment challenges. Environment protection is related closely with the protection of ecosystems, with the conservation of natural conditions, sustainable economic development, the preservation from deforestation, etc. Environment protection affects directly the human health.

The main barrier that affects the malfunction of regional agreements in the environmental field, are the different economical priorities of the WB countries. Some states refuse to cooperate, with the intent of evading the obligations. Most of the agreements have a commercial character, but also aim at environment protection, through three main objectives: To fully or partially prohibit the trade of products which come from species in risk of extinction; to limit at the utmost the interstate transfer of pollutant or harmful products (Bamaco Convention); to inform the purchasing countries regarding ecological characteristics or possible environmental damages.

Considering the inherited environmental problems, the limited size of each WB-s country and the fragmentation of the territory in the region, there is no other option but to initiate an intense regional cooperation as the only effective way forward. If the WB countries would face a severe environmental catastrophe, they will hardly have the necessary capacities to confront the situation, risking causing a total collapse.

It would not be fair to deny the importance of international courts that have processed environmental cases, but ICJ court itself has acknowledged that "the duty to co-operate is a fundamental principle in the prevention of environment pollution".

This cooperation must include not only the state authorities but also the public of the interesting parties. To guarantee an effective public participation in environmental decision-making, it is necessary to precisely implement the Aarhus Convention. The effectiveness of public participation depends largely by the disposal of complete and accurate information. The possession of this information increases the public's knowledge, helping it to become conscious of his rights and duties. In these circumstances the public is part not only in cases where it is directly involved, but it also contributes in drafting the environmental programs, policies and laws.

Several NGO-s, focus on regional cooperation for the preservation and protection of the environment. Dinaric Arch project is a five-year project (2007-2012) implemented by WWF and aims to create the enabling conditions for the successful implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity. In this context, another organization which deals with cooperation in the environmental area is the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe. It was established in 1990 by several countries and the Commission of the EC. REC is an international NGO with the mission to assist in solving environmental problems in WB countries. The organization fulfills its mission by promoting the cooperation among NGO-s, governments, businesses and other environmental decision-making actors, and by supporting the free exchange of information and the public participation. REC provides technical assistance for environmental investments, helps planning environmental management, assists the improvement of environmental legislation.

These organizations are very good examples of how environmental cooperation between WB countries, induces the rise of long term benefits and reduction of costs for all participating states. These cooperation models should serve as patterns for governments to build sustainable systems of cooperation, in governmental level, which have as their main objectives framing common development policies, securing a sustainable development in respect and compatibility with the environment, which ultimately will help these countries surpass this prolonged transition.

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Towards the Albanian Full EU Membership: the Systemic and Identity relevance of the European clauses in the Albanian Constitution

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Abstract

The contribution aims to highlight juridical links between the Albanian Constitution (henceforth AC) and the State integration process to the EU after the opening of negotiations (2022). The starting point for the analysis is the statement according which the EU membership requires ability of the State “to take on the obligations of membership including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union” (Copenhagen criteria). In the domestic perspective, this means that the State’s legal order has to present a “European clause” to legitimate the EU process and guarantee the compliance with EU law requested of a Member State (henceforth MS).

Keywords: European clause; State sovereignty; EU full membership; Albanian Constitution; legitimacy; Constitutional design.

The Albanian EU full participation: a Constitutional regulatory issue

The opening of negotiations with the EU, in 2022, opened up a complex perspective for the European Union and Albania where economy, citizenship, democratization and global Constitutionalism are interconnected issues that should not be separated. Furthermore, it is no exaggeration to say that the membership of North Macedonia and of Albania represents a pivotal event in the future of the EU to complete enlargement and curtail increasing Russian influence. Thus, considering that the current *Albanian affair* can be observed from different standpoints, the task of the present study is to investigate the current text of the AC in search of any clauses that would legitimate Albanian entry into the European legal framework.

A review of the literature on the presence of EU clauses in the State Constitutions (Albi, 2005; Albi, Bardutzky, 2019; Guazzarotti, 2019; Claes, 2005; Besselink et al., 2014) demonstrates that the clauses in words are the core-index of State sovereignty, expressing affiliation to SupraNational juridical levels and limiting procedurally and substantially the impact of external sources of law on the National legal system, avoiding the risk of potential interference. Although the clauses in words have no relevance outside the domestic legal system, they in fact contribute to establishing or testing the internal legal conditions for the Albanian process of the Internationalization of Constitutional law (Kumm, 2004).

As we can read from the “notes on the enlargement and stabilization and association process” (December 2022, p. 12, 13), dealing only with the necessary Albanian reform process is bound to be insufficient in the context of the internationalization of constitutional law. It is a matter of fact that the EU membership depends on the Constitution of the candidate State and, in turn, the effect of the internal framework of EU law sources depends on the National Constitution: only the existence of Constitutional provisions containing *European clauses* can ensure the national legitimation of the entire European process and set constitutional constraints to it. In other words, EU member *status* has to be guaranteed and constitutionally justified

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by European clauses. This is also particularly relevant in the EU's view. From the multilevel perspective (Pernice, 1999; Mayer, 2010), in fact, the EU's legitimacy comes from National Constitutions, especially in the current phase featuring the Sovereign States' strong criticism against the key-concept of Rule of law (Kochenov, 2015). As a consequence of the described framework, the Albanian EU full participation requires more or less specific Constitutional regulatory steps. The practice gained by MSs since the Maastricht Treaty alone holds.

National Constitutions and European clauses

The research starts from a basic question: what do we mean when we talk about European clauses (henceforth *EC*)? European clauses are usually contained in the original text of the Constitution of the MS mostly re-written after World War II (Italy, Art. 11; Germany, Art. 24(1)) or introduced later (Denmark, s. 20; Netherlands, Art. 92; Luxembourg, Art. 49 *bis*). An analysis of Constitutional texts reveals a wide typological variety of European clauses. Generally, when EC are expressed, they provide formulas allowing or requiring the accession to the EU, possibly setting limits and conditions to future stages of the process of European integration. Sometimes they are implicit and obtained from a material and systemic Constitutional interpretation - the main National resistance to EU law comes from implicit limits (Albi, Bardutzky, 2019) -; other times they are expressed. If European clauses are lacking, the State joining the Union has to provide a special legislative procedure to ratify European treaties (De Witte, 2001). A separate issue is the accession to EU treaties *after* the State membership status: France and Germany, for example, provide revision procedures to ratify European treaties, while Italy uses an ordinary parliamentary law. Generally, there is a connection between institutional choices made by States joining the EU and the quality of the Constitutional regulation on Supranational issues. More specifically, the constitutional range reflects a different approach to a Sovereignty problem which aims to preserve the State and its identity. Regarding regulation contents, EU constitutional clauses present a generic, large and non-specific wording and does not express European participation. Indeed, in many cases principles and limits regard the participation in International assets and organizations, with no specific mention of the European level. Both in the case of *European* clauses and in that of *International* clauses, it may be interesting to note that they mostly contain formulas on the power shift to the International legal system.

The “place” of EU clauses in the Albanian Constitution

The current text of the AC came into effect in 1998, after the fall of the communist regime. The prospect of Albania emerging from geopolitical isolation was the main boost for the State's opening to the international context. This explains why the Preamble to the AC recognizes the International legal system and emphasizes the inter-State cooperation (“In the deep conviction that justice, peace, harmony and cooperation among nations are the highest values of humanity (...”). Specifically, the Constitution emphasizes the prominence of the *European Convention on Human Rights* (ECHR) Treaty, which is also included among the Charter's Fundamental Principles (Arts. 17, II, AC) as a legal standard of Fundamental Rights. Despite this external openness, AC fails to take account of the European legal system. Indeed, no provision refers to the relationship between the domestic legal system and the European one. This gap brings the AC closer to the Italian Constitution (henceforth the *IC*), which does not expressly refer to the European clauses but only to the International ones (Arts. 10, 11, 117, 1, It. Const.) even at the time of Italy's accession to the EEC (1957). Now, following in the footsteps of the Italian Constitutional Court (dec. n. 14/1964) that considered the EU clause implicit to the formulation of Art. 11, *IC* (Cartabia, Chieffi, 2006; Martinico, Pollicino, 2012), we could wonder: can European clauses be considered implicit in the AC text, perhaps even in Arts. 5, 116, 1, *lett. b*), 117, 121-123, which set out the relationship between the Albanian legal order and International law? To answer this, we have to make some distinctions. The Albanian Constitutional openness to the International legal system is defined by: the fundamental principle of compliance with International law (Art. 5); the provision on the impact of ratified International Treaties on the domestic source of law (116-117); the ratification process (Art. 121); finally, the monism view, classifying the International conventional law as an integral part of the domestic system, with the following corollaries: *a*) the *subconstitutional* relevance of International law; *b*) direct effects (Art. 122, 1) and International law's primacy over the internal sources of law (Art. 122, 2); *c*) transfer of the competences clause to the International legal system (*principle of conferral*, Art. 123).

A possible choice of Constitutional design for the Albanian Constitution

Two points arise from the last overview: none of the AC provisions regards the European level, either implicitly or explicitly, but exclusively the International one; any adjustment of the current provisions of the AC regarding International relations in the perspective of the full EU membership legitimacy seems difficult to realize, even adapting the content of Art. 123 to the European goal. In spite of the Italian Constitution (Art. 11), in fact, Art. 123 AC lacks the framework of principles and values binding the Albanian participation in the International system, which could be useful to the European one in

a material interpretative reading. The situation shows that no permissive and no implicit formulas of the EU clauses are currently present in the AC. However, from the first day of EU accession, Albania will have to apply the EU treaties and regulation directly (ECJ Decision, 1963, *Van Gend & Loos against the Dutch Tax Administration*, Case 26/62; Bogdandy, 2003), “*maintaining at the same time its national legal system*” (Rukaj, 2015).

On the way to the full EU membership, the Albanian Constitution (AC) has to provide EU clauses to legitimate the EU process and guarantee the compliance with EU law as requested of a Member State. Thus, a possible solution to solve the latter impasse could be the addition of the EU clause in the AC through a constitutional reform or a special act, as occurred in many MSs at the moment of their full EU membership after the Maastricht Treaty (1993). In any case, the reform should consider a minimum set of Constitutional standards such as: the place of the EU clauses in the Constitutional text; the principles and limits regulating the European integration of the State; the integration model chosen, which may be monist or dualist.

Starting with the first issue, it is a matter of fact that the positioning of the European clause is able to influence the identity or not identity value of the State participation in the EU: placing the State EU-membership among the Constitutional principles means considering the European vocation (and its resulting values) as a structural State-principle.

Referring to the Constitutional framework, the EU clause might contain not only a *principle of conferral* but also substantial provisions to preserve the National identity according to the Art. 4.2, *Treaty on the European Union*. With regard to substantive principles, the Italian experience may offer useful insight into the relationship with the EU. From a decision adopted in 1988 (n. 1146), the Italian Constitutional Court maximized the relevance of Constitutional principles developing the so-called “counter-limits doctrine” (dec. n. 183/1973): a theory which points to the disapplication of the EU self-executing law in case of a potential risk for the fundamental Constitutional principles and rights on which the State’s core is based (recently see ord. n. 24/2017, about the “Taricco” case). Thus, the Italian Court has played a central role within the so-called “dialogue between Courts” that allowed it to maintain a blocking power on the over pervasiveness of external sources of law, definitively safeguarding State continuity.

Finally, as has already been noted, the Constitution should contain the choice between the two alternatives - separation or a homogenisation relationship - between the National and the EU system. The current AC text suggests that these links should take place in an integrated perspective, in the same current relation ordering the Internal Law and the International one.

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Challenges of European Integration of Albania under Chapter 22 of the EU acquis

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Abstract

The process of European integration poses significant challenges for countries aspiring to join the European Union. This article explores the challenges faced by Albania in its process of European integration, specifically in relation to Chapter 22 of the European Union acquis. Chapter 22 focuses on regional policy and coordination of structural instruments, which are crucial components of EU integration.

Despite progress made, Albania faces obstacles such as limited administrative capacity, inefficient public administration, and inadequate financial resources, which impede the effective implementation of Chapter 22 provisions. In addition, the country must address issues of corruption, weak infrastructure, and socio-economic disparities, as these factors directly influence its ability to align with the EU's regional policy framework. This article aims to analyze these challenges and propose potential strategies that Albania can adopt to overcome them and ensure successful integration into the EU.

Ultimately, the article emphasizes the need for Albania to implement the necessary reforms and enhance its overall integration efforts to achieve a successful European integration process, particularly in Chapter 22.

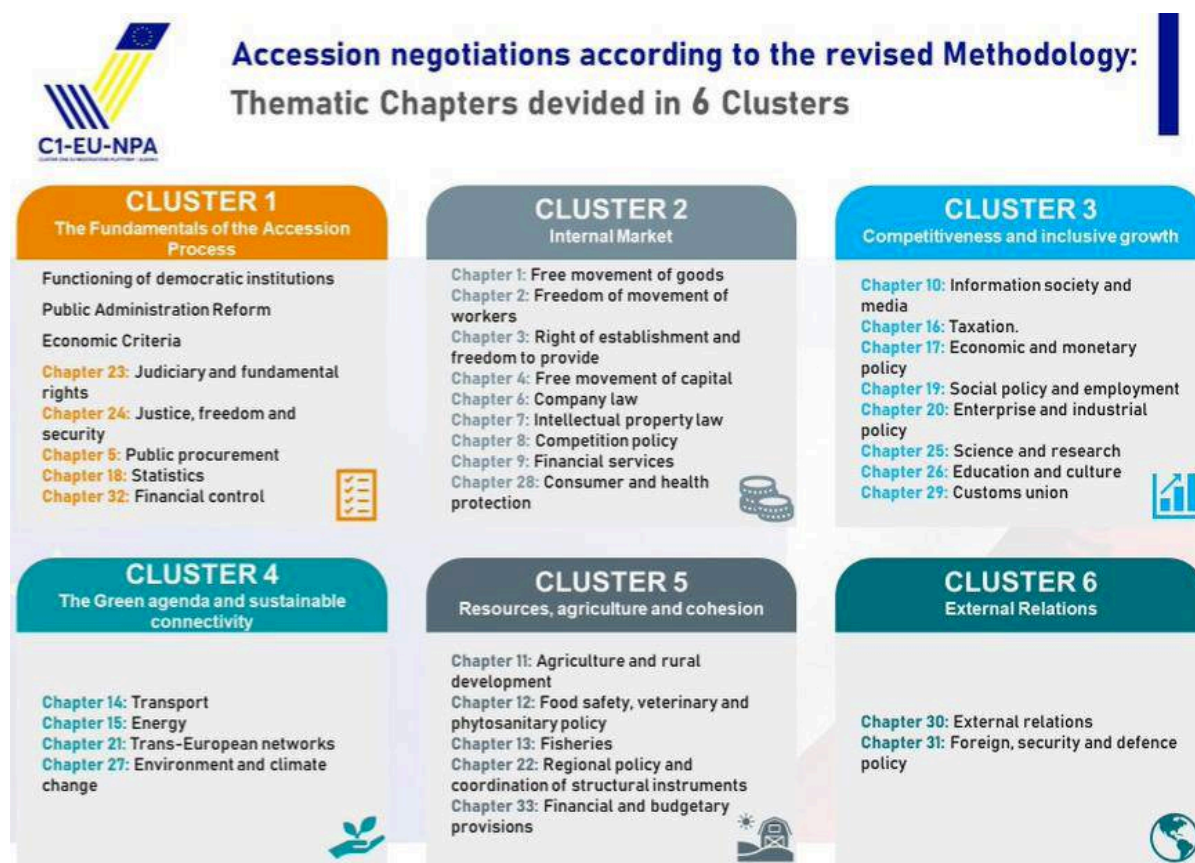
Keywords: European Integration, Albania, Accession Negotiations, Acquis Communautaire, Chapter 22

Introduction

The negotiations are related to the implementation and transfer of the European Union's body of law, which is constituted by legal acts, court decisions and accumulated legislation, known also as *acquis communautaire*. The *acquis* consists of approximately 130,000 pages of legal documents arranged into 35 chapters, which form the rules that European Union member states must follow. The chapters line up with the various areas of the *acquis* where reforms are required to meet the standards for accession negotiations. The applicant nations must modify their institutional and administrative frameworks and bring their national laws into compliance with relevant European legislation. The different chapters are examined as part of the screening process and are continually assessed until each chapter is closed.

The new methodology for the Accession Negotiations reorganized the 35 chapters into 6 thematic Clusters. The Cluster 1 - The Fundamentals of the Accession Process, is focused mainly on respecting EU fundamental rights, and on reforming the institutions. It will be opened first and closed last. Cluster 2 - Internal Market, Cluster 3 – Competitiveness and inclusive growth, Cluster 4 – The Green agenda and sustainable connectivity, Cluster 5 – Resources, Agriculture and Cohesion, in which Chapter 22: Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments in part and Cluster 6 – External Relations

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TABLE 1: Accession negotiations according to the revised Methodology

Source: Cluster One EU Negotiations Platform – Albania, <https://cluster1albania.com>

The acquis under Chapter 22: Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments consists mostly of framework and implementing regulations that define the rules for drafting, approving and implementing the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund programmes. These programmes are negotiated and agreed with the Commission, but implementation is responsibility of member-states. Member States must have established an institutional framework and adequate administrative capacity to ensure programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation in efficient and cost-effective manner from the point of view of management and financial control.

Regional Policy aims to reduce socio-economic disparities among Member States and among regions within the same country and to ensure socio-economic integration and cohesion. On the other hand, Coordination of Structural Instruments requires the establishment of institutional and administrative structures and implementation of general and specific regulations related to each Structural Fund and Cohesion Fund, which constitute the EU financial instruments for achieving set policy objectives.

Albania applied for EU membership in April 2009 and was granted EU candidate status in June 2014. The EU held its first intergovernmental conference with Albania in July 2022.

Albania's application for EU membership was submitted on 24 April 2009. On 9 November 2010, the European Commission issued its opinion on Albania's EU membership application. The Commission assessed that before accession negotiations could be formally opened, Albania still had to achieve a necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria, particularly to meet 12 key priorities identified in the opinion. These priorities included completing essential steps in the public administration reform, adopting and implementing a reform strategy for the judiciary, strengthening the fight against organized crime, developing a solid track record in the fight against corruption and reinforcing the protection of human rights. In October 2012, the European Commission recommended that Albania be granted candidate status, subject to completion of key measures in the areas of judicial and public administration reform and revision of the parliamentary rules of procedures. Albania was granted EU candidate status in June 2014. In April 2018, the European Commission issued a recommendation to open accession negotiations with Albania. In June 2018 the Council adopted conclusions, in which it agreed to respond positively to the progress made by Albania, and set out the path towards opening the accession negotiations in June 2019. The Council underlined the critical need for Albania to further consolidate progress in certain key areas, such as judicial reform and fight against corruption and organized crime. On 24 March 2020, ministers for European affairs gave their political agreement to the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. This was formally adopted by written procedure and endorsed by the European Council in the days that followed. Once accession negotiations have been opened, the negotiations take place at an intergovernmental conference between ministers and ambassadors of EU member

states and the candidate country. The negotiations look at 35 different policy fields (called chapters). These meetings can be at either ministerial level or at deputy level. On 19 July 2022, the EU held its first intergovernmental conference with Albania.²

According Albania 2022 Report by the European Commission, Albania is moderately prepared in the area of regional policy and coordination of structural instruments. Limited progress was made over the reporting period, particularly with the adoption of the implementing legislation of Law No.102/2020 on Regional Development and Cohesion, which sets out the basic principles of responsibilities and rules for regional development and cohesion in Albania.

Negotiations for Chapter 22 will be opened after following the respective decision of the EU Council of Ministers and will be closed upon the issuing of the closing report by the European Commission and approval by all member states. In any instance, until final closing of all chapters, this chapter will be considered provisionally closed.

Chapter 22: Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments

Chapter 22 of the EU acquis focuses on regional policy and coordination of structural funds. It aims to ensure that candidate countries align their policies and institutions with the principles and practices of the EU in this area. The chapter is designed to enhance regional development, reduce disparities among regions, and ensure efficient use of financial resources. Regional policy involves promoting balanced and sustainable development across different regions within a country. It aims to address regional disparities, stimulate economic growth, create jobs, and improve the quality of life in all regions. This includes supporting investments in infrastructure, innovation, education, healthcare, and other sectors that contribute to regional development.

Coordination of structural funds is a crucial aspect of regional policy. Structural funds are financial resources provided by the EU to support investment projects and initiatives aimed at promoting economic and social cohesion. These funds are allocated to regions and are intended to support their development objectives.

Maras (2022) investigates the impact of EU funding on reducing regional disparities in GDP per capita. The study shows that an increase in European funding leads to higher growth rates, contributing to the reduction of interregional disparities. This is particularly beneficial for less developed regions, as European funding is mostly targeted at these regions (Maras, 2022).

Beugelsdijk & Eijffinger (2005) focuses on the effectiveness of structural policy in reducing regional disparities within the European Union. The authors analyze the convergence of EU member states between 1995 and 2001 and identify the positive impact of structural funds on convergence. They find that poorer countries, have caught up with richer countries, indicating the effectiveness of structural funds in reducing interregional disparities (Beugelsdijk & Eijffinger, 2005).

Rodríguez-Pose & Fratesi (2007) examines the impact of EU Structural Funds on regional disparities in the southern periphery of Europe. The authors analyze the evolution of regional disparities in GDP per capita in five European countries (France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) between 1980 and 2000. They find that regional disparities have become pro-cyclical in Italy, Portugal, and Spain, indicating a change from the previous anti-cyclical pattern. This change is attributed to the emergence of less dynamic sheltered economies in peripheral regions, which are increasingly dependent on transfers, public investment, and employment (Rodríguez-Pose & Fratesi, 2007).

Under Chapter 22, candidate countries are expected to establish mechanisms and institutions to coordinate the programming, implementation, and monitoring of structural funds. This involves designing and managing operational programs that align with EU policies and priorities, ensuring effective financial control, and reporting on the use of the funds. Member States must have an institutional framework in place and adequate administrative capacity to ensure programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation in a sound and cost-effective manner from the point of view of management and financial control.³

These operational programmes are drawn up by the Member States and proposals are submitted to the Commission. Subsequently, they are appraised and adopted by the Commission in accordance with Article 32 of Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006⁴, but their implementation is the responsibility of the Member States.

A legislative framework has to be in place allowing for multi-annual programming at national and, where relevant sub-national levels and budget flexibility, enabling co-financing capacity at national and sub-national (regional/local/municipal) level and ensuring sound and efficient financial control and audit of interventions.⁵

The chapter also requires candidate countries to establish structures for regional policy coordination within their administrations. This includes implementing regional development strategies, fostering public-private partnerships, and enhancing the involvement of civil society and stakeholders in regional policy-making processes.

Overall, Chapter 22 seeks to ensure that candidate countries have the necessary capacity and structures in place to effectively manage regional policies and utilize structural funds in a way that promotes balanced regional development and contributes to social and economic cohesion.

² <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/albania/>

³ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership/chapters-acquis_en

⁴ Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006 of 11 July 2006 laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund and the Cohesion Fund and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1260/1999 [OJ L 210, 31.7.2006, p. 25].

⁵ For the Structural Funds the appropriate geographical level is at least NUTS level 2 for the Convergence objective and NUTS level 1 or NUTS level 2 for the Regional Competitiveness and Employment objective, and is NUTS level 3 for the European territorial cooperation objective (Article 35 of Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006)

Cohesion Policy

European Union regional policy, also known as Cohesion Policy, is a policy that aims to improve the economic well-being of regions within the European Union and to avoid regional disparities. More than a third of the EU budget is devoted to this policy, which is aimed at closing economic, social and territorial disparities within the EU, rebuilding declining industrial areas and declining agriculture. It aims to diversify rural areas. The EU's regional policy aims to make the region more competitive, boost economic growth and create new jobs. The policy also has a role to play in broader challenges for the future, such as climate change, energy supply and globalization.

EU regional policies cover all European regions, but regions within the EU fall into different categories, primarily based on their economic situation.

The cohesion policy aims to ensure support for EU Member States in boosting economic growth, reducing unemployment and improving competitiveness. Cohesion policies also ensure resources to eliminate risks in the development of different European regions, following the principle of solidarity. To prepare for the proper use of cohesion policy instruments, the future EU member states should start preparing early in their EU accession process. Successful administration of the Cohesion Policy depends on several factors, and there are wide disparities among EU Member States regarding their ability to use EU resources.

Coordination of structural instrument

Coordination of structural instruments includes the establishment of institutional and administrative structures and the implementation of general and specific rules relating to each of the EU's financial instruments, the Structural Fund and the Cohesion Fund. Albania benefits financial assistance under Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance IPA. The priority sectors for funding are:⁶

Democracy & governance: Strengthening democratic institutions; reforming the civil service and public service delivery; better economic governance; improving public financial management; empowering civil society (e.g. non-state, voluntary organizations).

Rule of law & fundamental rights: Independent, efficient judiciary; helping police fight organized crime; tackling corruption; respecting human rights conventions.

Environment & climate action: Alignment with EU law and standards; better treatment of waste and water; controlling air pollution.

Transport: Better infrastructure and regional connectivity; improved road safety; increased interoperability (cross-border technical compatibility).

Competitiveness & innovation: Supporting business competitiveness; greater market integration; improving the business environment; developing tourism.

Education, employment & social policies: Providing effective vocational training; better employment services and labour market policy; inclusion of vulnerable people; efficient health and social services.

Agriculture & rural development: More competitive farming and food sector; application of food safety standards; better quality of life in rural areas.

Regional & territorial cooperation: Promoting regional networks, reconciliation and good neighbourly relations; encouraging sustainable local development in border areas.

Preparation of Albania for Chapter 22

Regional policy is the EU's main tool for investing in sustainable and inclusive economic growth. EU Member States are responsible for its implementation, which requires adequate administrative capacity and sound financial management of project design and execution. The European Commission assess the progress made for each Cluster and Chapter during the reporting year. Regardless of the level of progress, the level of preparation for each of the Clusters/Chapters may remain the same as the previous year.

Albania is moderately prepared in the area of regional policy and coordination of structural instruments. Limited progress was made over the reporting period, particularly with the adoption of legislation to the Law on Regional Development and Cohesion⁷.

Parts of the 2021 suggestions are still valid. Albania should focus in particular in the coming year: ensuring that all of its instruments and funds are gradually brought into compliance with EU requirements in terms of programming and partnership principles; effectively implementing the EU acquis under chapter 22; and taking into account the requirements of the future structural and cohesion funds. The National Strategy for Development and Integration 2020–2030 should be finalized

⁶ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/albania-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en

⁷ Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2022_en

and approved, and Albania should move forward with the national strategy and plan for regional development and cohesion (2021–2027) and complete the regional development plans (2021–2024), which should foster the development potential through decentralised interventions based on local and/or regional integrated plans and strategies. Clarifying roles and responsibilities between central and local authorities in light of the decentralization progress made is necessary. Additionally, the administrative strength of central, regional, and local bodies, particularly at the central level, should be strengthened. This can be done, for example, by ensuring adequate staffing, updating the pay scale for local governments, and maintaining fiscal decentralization as a top priority. Regarding the legal framework for regional policy, five implementing acts were created, including one on identifying development regions in Albania and their prerogatives, following the passage of the Law on Regional Development and Cohesion in September 2020 and 26 consultation meetings.

The remaining acts, which are currently awaiting ratification, will establish the national committee, the regional boards, and the processes for developing the national and regional plans. They will also define the strategy for regional development and cohesion. The creation of the database and monitoring system for regional development and cohesion, as well as the formulation of by-laws for the controlling authority are proceeding. Relevant bylaws on developing a comprehensive regional development system must represent the roles and duties of all the actors engaged with regard to the institutional framework. Decisions regarding the selection of institutions and entities that will implement the EU's Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III) should be made with consideration for their potential future involvement in cohesion policy in terms of indirect administration of EU funds.

Albania must also address issues with strategic planning, implementation and monitoring of infrastructure projects financed by the economic and investment plan. In terms of administrative capacity, the training of the staff of structures related to indirect management should continue and remain a focus. There has been some improvement in administrative capacity in coordinating and monitoring sectoral reform through integrated policy management groups and sectoral steering committees. The participation of development partners, local governments and civil society organizations in the sectoral dialogue still needs improvement. Regarding programming, in the next period (2023–2027) measures are needed to develop independent programming skills. The national project pipeline of investments, including regional development, is still not fully compatible with the medium-term budget program and the planning and management of investment of the national public sector. A key factor in the success of the regional development process is increasing the ownership of public and private sectors at the national and regional level. Albania continues to gain experience in the planning and implementation of regional cooperation in regional politics by participating in cross-border cooperation and the cooperation programs between countries and regions. Albania participates in the EU Strategy for the Adriatic Sea Region (EUSAIR), which promotes cooperation and synergy between participating EU countries and non-EU countries. In terms of monitoring and evaluation, the sector monitoring committee provided action recommendations to all IPA sectors, however SASPAC should ensure adequate day-to-day monitoring of all program activities. The support offices of the National Authorizing Officer and the National IPA Coordinator have not yet developed a list of key performance indicators for performance evaluation. In terms of financial management, control and audit, the IMBC evaluation conducted as part of IPAAII found that the Audit Authority Act needs to be amended to ensure that management powers remain with the General Director and not subordinated to the Supervisory Council. The national authorizing officer must ensure that his administrative report adequately reflects the results of the monitoring and control of his administrative and control systems. The Officer's support office has yet to establish procedures to ensure that the Commission's internal controls are promptly disseminated and enforced across all institutions. Irregularities must still be fully and promptly recorded in the Irregularity Management System, and internal control deficiencies and non-conformities must be systematically reported to a dedicated register.

Key challenges

A number of issues have restricted the maximum benefit of structural funds by Albania. This is primarily related to the inefficiency of state authorities due to several legal and bureaucratic obstacles slowing the implementation of the project.⁸ Some institutions lack the necessary staff to prepare and implement projects. For example, for an institution that used to run projects on an annual basis, it is important to increase the number of staff managing projects. The problem is particularly imperative when Albanian institutions control EU funds themselves. Project sustainability is a very important factor in assessing the impact of a particular project. Since it is difficult to predict the sustainability potential of a project in the early stages of a proposal, how effective are the mechanisms put in place to ensure that the project outcome is ultimately sustainable should be focused on. Absorptive capacity to use IPA funds in a timely manner and to function efficiently and effectively. Funds are at risk of being transferred from region to other sectors or countries with best performance and timely delivery. Therefore, engaging in a timely and efficient manner remains the biggest challenge for Albania. Furthermore, raising awareness of the importance of efficient and timely services among public authorities at the central and local levels, as well as private sector actors such as businesses, organizations, etc. will help maximize returns from IPA funding. The whole process of applying for, endorsing and implementing European Union-funded projects in the country faces problems for all the institutions involved. Some of them are listed below, but the main one is joint investment. Co-financing is one of the obligations that all project beneficiaries must meet. Some activities were

⁸ http://www.eupolicyhub.eu/wpcontent/upload/2017/06/The_indirect_management_of_EU_funds_in_A.pdf

not implemented due to poor planning and cofinancing budget shortfalls, which directly impacted the implementation of the overall project. Providing permits related to infrastructure projects and land titles is also very important for project implementation. Implementation of some infrastructure projects has been problematic due to frequent changes in the legal framework for various permits before construction commences. Another common issue is value added tax (VAT). As in the case of joint ventures, the ambiguity of Albanian law is that some entities do not plan for this payment, which affects delays in the implementation of activities. Coordination between beneficiaries is an issue that arises in projects with multiple beneficiaries. Failure to clearly define the responsibilities of each beneficiary hinders the proper implementation of the project. Management capacity to plan and monitor project implementation and oversight is often seen as inadequate. This issue becomes more important after the decentralization process, in which Albanian institutions themselves are responsible for the entire management cycle.

Recommendations to address these challenges include:

Strengthening institutional capacity: Albania should invest in training and capacity-building programs for public officials involved in regional policy formulation and implementation. This includes enhancing their knowledge on EU regional policies and best practices.

Enhancing financial planning and management: Albania should improve its financial planning and management mechanisms to ensure the effective utilization of financial resources for regional development. This includes developing transparent and accountable procedures for budgeting, procurement, and project implementation.

Promoting balanced regional development: Albania needs to develop and implement targeted policies that address regional disparities and foster inclusive economic growth. This can include investing in infrastructure, improving access to social services, and promoting investments in less-developed regions.

Facilitating private sector involvement: Albania should create an enabling environment for private sector involvement in regional development initiatives. This includes simplifying administrative procedures, reducing bureaucracy, and providing incentives for private sector investments in less-developed regions.

Strengthening administrative structures: Albania should improve the functioning and coordination of administrative structures at the national and local levels. This can be achieved through training programs for public officials, enhancing intergovernmental coordination mechanisms, and promoting transparency and accountability in the public administration.

These recommendations, if effectively implemented, can help Albania address the challenges in chapter 22 of the EU acquis and advance its regional policy and coordination efforts towards EU membership.

Conclusion

Chapter 22 of the EU acquis, which deals with regional policy and coordination of structural instruments, requires candidate countries to align their policies and institutions with EU principles and practices in this area. It involves developing the capacity to design and implement regional policies effectively and to manage the financial resources involved.

Under Chapter 22, Albania has made progress toward bringing its laws and regulations into compliance with EU standards. In order to coordinate regional development policies and the allocation of structural funds, it has established institutions and mechanisms. For the purpose of addressing inequalities and fostering balanced regional growth, the nation has also developed regional development strategies and programs. However, to fully comply with Chapter 22's requirements, Albania must overcome certain obstacles and problems. These may include strengthening its institutional capacity, improving financial planning and management, addressing regional disparities, enhancing private sector involvement, and strengthening administrative structures.

According to the European Commission's Albania 2022 Report, Albania is moderately prepared in terms of regional policy and coordination of structural instruments. Limited progress was made over the reporting period, in particular with the adoption of Law No. 102/2020 on Regional Development and Cohesion, which outlines the fundamental principles of obligations and guidelines for regional development and cohesion in Albania,

Albania's ability to fully benefit from structural funds has been constrained by a number of factors. This is primarily related to the inefficiency of state authorities because the project's implementation has been slowed down by a number of legal and administrative barriers. All the institutions involved in the application, approval, and implementation of projects funded by the European Union in the nation face challenges.

One of the responsibilities that all project beneficiaries must fulfill is co-financing and Albania struggles to fulfill the obligation of this joint investments. Management capacity to plan and monitor project implementation and oversight is often seen as inadequate. After the decentralization process, in which Albanian institutions are now in charge of the entire management cycle, this issue has increased in importance.

The negotiations for Chapter 22 will begin after following the respective decision of the EU Council of Ministers, and they will end when the European Commission releases the final report and all member states have approved it. In any case, this chapter will be regarded as provisionally closed until the final closing of all chapters.

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In the dilemmas of International Law. Case study, Russia's war in Ukraine

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Abstract

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has profoundly affected the individuals, living in the affected territory and other parts of the globe. Several academics believe that the recent aggression against Ukraine and the absence of a coordinated international response indicate the failure of international law today. Concerns over such a failure prompt a re-evaluation of the tools available under international law for preventing wars or hastening their peaceful conclusion. In this paper, the author will analyze the importance of these instruments, arguing that they play a fundamental role in preventing direct threats and avoiding the use of force. At times, they go above and beyond the collective security mechanism of the United Nations Security Council. It is adequate to remember that "war is a continuation of the negotiation process that fails to find a resolution through peaceful means," as mentioned by the war and conflict theorists, Clausewitz and Thomas Schelling. Perhaps, it goes to the idea or the real purpose of several norms of international law to make the military option less attractive than the peaceful one. The case of Russian aggression in Ukraine demonstrates the limitations of international law in preventing violations and aggression but also highlights the importance of continuing to evolve and improve international legal frameworks. Despite its limitations, the author conclude that international law remains vital for promoting peace and stability in the global community and should be continually evaluated and strengthened, to address complex problems.

Kew words: International Law, Russia's war, aggression, peaceful means, UN Security Council, Ukraine.

Introduction

The Russian aggression in Ukraine continues to attract the attention of many researchers and political analysts of international law, apart from public condemnation from all sides, shaking the outlines of the international order (Research Division, 2023). International institutions and many countries worldwide have adopted resolutions condemning Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war in response to this attack. However, Russia seems unhindered by the prolongation of this armed conflict. It continues to assault intensively and inhumanely without distinction between military and civilian facilities, causing a significant number of victims and massive displacement of Ukrainian residents. The General Assembly and the Secretary-General of the UN called this crisis a "moment of danger," heading for a global massacre (Turak & Macias, 2022). Even after that, it seems impossible to prevent Russia's continuous attacks. Sanctions implemented by the Western countries on Russia have not stopped the aggression. Due to Russia's veto or China's attitude, the Security Council of the United Nations cannot unanimously adopt a resolution (Ahmadi et al., 2022). Moreover, many countries are still reluctant to join the Western sanctions not only because of their ties to Russia but also because of Vladimir Putin's threats that "anyone who would undertake to intervene in this conflict - if you think of doing such a thing, I assure you that you will face such great consequences that you have never faced before in history" (Jankowicz, 2022).

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To properly discuss the events and dynamics surrounding Russia's war in Ukraine, it is crucial to understand the fundamental principle of international law applied to wars and conflicts (Sassòli et al., 2022).

A timeline of every conflict in history, both ancient and modern, might be challenging to put together. There have been many conflicts between the states throughout the years; the one currently occurring in Ukraine is neither the first nor the last. In addition, at this point, states and the international community have made significant efforts to reduce the risk of wars, by creating legal restrictions and raising awareness of the risks and obligations of participants in conflict, in the international community.

Understanding the main principles of international law can be helpful in analyzing the current conflict in Ukraine. Whether international law has failed, along with the international institutions handling matters of peace and war, raises many concerns and dilemmas. Of course, this is such a current and troubling issue that international politicians and numerous law and war experts are still evaluating. The author will attempt to solve this dilemma that is so prevalent in today's public discourse by addressing many areas of law and war. It is crucial to address whether the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is justified by international law.

Both states at war, such as Russia and Ukraine, are part of *Protocol I* and members of the *Geneva Convention (1949)*². Numerous researchers, such as [Sean Watts](#), [Winston Williams](#), [Ronald Alcalá](#), view Russia's aggression in Ukraine as an international armed conflict that is recognized, governed, and accepted in principle by the *Geneva Convention (1949)* also based on *Protocol I (1977)*³, which aim to interpret the methods and means in which the war takes place, as well as international humanitarian laws (Watts et al, 2022). The most recent statements made by Russian emissaries about the causes and consequences of the start of this war are meant to serve as an alibi for Russia to escape its obligations under international law (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Methodology

The author uses primary and secondary sources in this paper to describe the conditions that have brought this conflict, then analyze all the details through the International Law approach. The paper is qualitative research that uses several resources and books (primary sources), also public media articles and news that reflect what is going on in Ukraine. The author also uses the legal bases of international law; articles of the UN referred to in the paper. This conflict compels the author to approach and treat the context of conflictual behavior in comparative analysis based precisely on the basic laws on war. Specifically, the concept of international humanitarian law, which is often known as the "laws of war", at its most basic level, safeguards civilians and other non-combatant groups from the perils of armed conflict. The paper is based on theoretical concepts of origin from the "just war" doctrine of the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas in the 1200s. During the 17th century, as Europeans fought prolonged wars that eventually resulted in the Peace Treaty of Westphalia (Mingst, 2010) in 1648, the notion of a just war became prominent again. Following the massive loss of life during the First and Second World Wars, the concept resurfaced and gained renewed attention (Clark, 2015). Said so, the article is based on the principle that, there are only three justifications recognized by international law for the use of armed action against a sovereign state:

1. When a country is defending itself;
2. When another country had asked a country to send troops, such as when Russia legally sent troops to Syria at the request of the Assad regime;
3. If the UN Security Council determines that the war is legal under *Article 51* of the UN Charter, in this case, we can mention, as an example, the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein, an event that led to the authorization of a multinational military response by the Security Council.

The laws of war could be categorized into two groups; one regulates whether it is legal for one state to go to war against another or *jus ad bellum*⁴. The other set demonstrates how each actor should behave amid war conflicts or *jus in Bello*⁵ (Bethlehem, 2019).

The breach on International Law

Russia's conflict with Ukraine fails to meet any criteria for a just war. The expansion of NATO and the EU did not constitute hostile actions against Russia, while Ukraine's neighbor is actively engaged in a war against it. International law recognizes Ukraine's right to self-defense and to seek outside military assistance. The obstacles have come from Russia's privileged position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. First, fading norms of sovereignty have led to some of the bloodiest moments in world history.

² One of a series of agreements concerning the treatment of prisoners of war and of the sick, wounded, and dead in battle first made at Geneva, Switzerland in 1864 and subsequently accepted in later revisions by most nations.

³ Protocol I, deals with international armed conflicts, a term that includes civil wars.

⁴ Jus ad bellum, refers to the conditions under which States may resort to war or to the use of armed force in general.

⁵ Jus in bello, regulates the conduct of parties engaged in an armed conflict.

Putin's aggressive war on Ukraine poses a significant threat, as it sets a dangerous precedent for other nations to violate principles of sovereignty and *jus ad bellum*. The disregard for these principles has implications not only for individual states but even for the global community (Howard, 2022).

Regardless of the causes of the conflict, all war parties are subject to *jus in Bello*, generally known as international humanitarian law (IHL). It does not state whether the war's cause is legitimate or not. Instead, this corpus of law protects the fundamental rights of war victims regardless of which party they represent (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2010).

The fundamental principles of IHL are the four Geneva Conventions:

1. The first convention, which dates to 1864, mandates that the wounded and sick must be equally protected and that medical facilities cannot be attacked while fighting occurs.
2. The shipwrecked are included in the first convention under the second.
3. The third mandates that all parties to a conflict must treat prisoners of war humanely and provide neutral nations or organizations access to prison camps for inspection.
4. The Fourth Convention was adopted in 1949 after World War II. It requires UN member states to act against individuals who commit crimes such as rape, forced prostitution, torture, the expulsion of illegal immigrants, and other offenses that cause significant physical harm or suffering. The convention also includes three additional protocols that extend protection to victims of internal conflicts, self-determination struggles, and actions against racist governments (Basic Rules of the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, 1949).

On February 24, 2022, when Russia occupied Ukraine, it was in breach of international law. This act was in violation of UN Charter 2(4) (UN, *Charter of the United Nations and the Statute of the International Court of Justice*, 1945), an event that consists in the indisputable prohibition of considering the armed force, to the territorial and spatial integrity of a specific country as well as the political independence of any country that is a member of the UN. There is no legal or factual basis for the justification provided by Putin and other Russian officials that it is recommended that it can go as far as the use of force, based precisely on Article 51 of the UN Charter⁶. Specifically, Article 51 says that "none of the points mentioned in this Charter puts into question the right of individual or collective self-defense, in cases where an armed attack may occur against a United Nations member country (Johnson, 2022).

There is no evidence to suggest that Ukraine has launched any military actions versus the Russian state or another UN member state, nor has it made any threats to do so. Even if Russia had any evidence to support its claims that Ukraine had attacked Russian citizens in the Luhansk and Donetsk areas of Ukraine or there were intentions to do so, any response in collective self-defense would be prohibited by Article 51. Russia's argument has no legal value because Luhansk and Donetsk are not recognized as member countries of the UN and therefore fall outside the scope of collective self-defense permitted by the article. Beyond their differentiation from Ukraine and the recognition of their independence from Russia, these territories are not recognized as states under international law (Bellinger, 2022).

Crimes committed by Russia appear to be entirely against international law. Even at a cursory glance, Russia is currently involved in three types of crimes: an aggressive war, war crimes, and genocide. Most UN General Assembly members recognized Russia as the aggressor at the start of the conflict. Furthermore, although Russia's veto authority prevents or hinders UN Security Council action, numerous states accused Russia of violating *jus ad bellum* at a Security Council meeting on September 27, 2022 (Beurret, 2022).

Based on the evidence found by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry - UN, on the Ukrainian state and population, the International Criminal Court has confirmed war crimes against civilians and the innocent population, specifically murders and sexual violence, based on a gender discriminatory mentality (Human Rights Council, 2022). Eventually, the International Court of Justice received evidence from over a dozen states accusing Russia of committing genocide in Ukraine (ICJ, 2022). All these crimes are horrible, but the crime of aggression jeopardizes the foundation of international law, which enables all states to coexist without constant border threats. Peace is only possible when international law is respected. Russia's leaders must take responsibility for their actions.

The "Special Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide," commonly referred to as the genocide convention, identifies five actions that may lead to charges of genocide, whether they occur during wartime or not. Based on the Genocide Convention, the concept of genocide⁷ is defined as '*the intention of one party to destroy (partially or entirely) a national, racial, religious, ethnic, or population group*'. Determining whether genocide has occurred primarily relies on the intent, not the total number of deaths. The convention lists several violations, including creating living conditions intending to physically destroy a group, inflicting severe physical or mental harm on group members, implementing measures to prevent group births, and forcibly removing children of the group to another group. Article 1 of the convention requires parties to punish and prevent genocide (Chetail, 2002).

⁶ Article 51 "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defence shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security."

⁷ The word "genocide" was first coined by Polish lawyer Raphaël Lemkin in 1944 in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. It consists of the Greek prefix *genos*, meaning race or tribe, and the Latin suffix *cide*, meaning killing. Genocide was first recognised as a crime under international law in 1946 by the United Nations General Assembly.

However, Putin's allegation that Ukraine committed "genocide" against Russians in Luhansk and Donetsk is an excuse to justify Russia's use of force. Nonetheless, it does not give Russia the right to attack Ukraine under any circumstances. It is important to note that Ukraine has not engaged in any activities intended to destroy an ethnic, racial, religious, or national category. No proof exists of an intention to destroy any group in eastern Ukraine entirely or in part, as defined by the Genocide Convention. The use of power to prevent genocide operations or significant human rights violations is not authorized by the Genocide Convention or the UN Charter (Joshua S. Goldstein et al, 2001), even when the Ukrainian State may have violated the human rights of Russian citizens in the east of Ukraine (Hinton, 2022).

Ukraine's quick counter-offensive has exposed even more horrible crimes committed by Russian forces on Ukrainian civilians and military troops as if to demonstrate the complete opposite. These are added to a long list of crimes against humanity uncovered in places like Bucha and Irpin (Al-Hlou, et al, 2022).

Discussion

The war in Ukraine has uncovered a range of crimes, from acts of aggression to crimes against humanity and even genocide, being consistently attributed to Russia. Examining these crimes to gain a deeper understanding of the situation and distinguish between the different categories of offenses is crucial. Moreover, reflecting on these crimes can also provide insight into their potential implications for the future of global peace. This situation may compel us to approach and treat the context of conflictual behavior in comparative analysis with the fundamental war laws. Let us consider human rights between nations, synonymous in some instances with the laws of war, at its most basic level. It safeguards civilians and other non-combatant groups from the possible consequences of an inevitable armed conflict.

If we look at the war, the ways, the means, and strategies from the perspectives of all parties involved, the most important rule is that war parties must constantly distinguish between uniformed civilians and troops. Attacks should never be directed toward civilians. Under these conditions, the two parties involved in the armed conflict are required to take the necessary measures to eliminate damage to the population and civilian property. Respecting war laws means avoiding unauthorized attacks between military forces and civilians or attacks that would significantly damage innocent civilians (UN, 2019). Undoubtedly, the Ukraine events once again highlight how ruthless and vicious the Russian army has been toward the civil population.

Mainly, based on international law, the territorial integrity of states must be respected. The last act of the Russian state, which consisted of recognizing Luhansk and Donetsk as independent countries, openly violated international law, which aimed at the sovereignty of a country and secession from a country. In no case is it legitimate for some areas of a state to declare secession from the state as part of an independence movement. Although this is a minority opinion, some international law experts argue that corrective secession from Donetsk and Luhansk could be justifiable in extreme cases where individuals have experienced severe human rights violations by their government (United Nations, 2022).

Russia's recent actions follow a similar pattern as the 2014 annexation of Crimea, which was annexed after a controversial referendum and then declared the independence from Ukraine (Milano, 2014). While many European countries and the United States reject Russia's annexation of Crimea and consider it an annexation of Ukraine, seeing Russia as an occupying power, the annexation of Donetsk and Luhansk has not occurred yet but remains a possibility in the future. Only a few UN members will likely recognize the areas as self-proclaimed independent countries, even if Russia does not seek to annex them. Most of the European countries and USA can most likely consider the above two areas as illegally appropriated by Russia, especially if Russia annexes them. South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two Georgian provinces that proclaimed independence in 2008, were previously acknowledged by Russia as independent states. Only four other UN members, Venezuela, Syria, Nicaragua, and Nauru, acknowledge the region's independence (Wolff, 2023).

Russia did not recognize Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence from Serbia, arguing that the Kosovo population did not qualify for corrective secession as they were not a distinct population. Despite this, Kosovo has gained recognition as an independent state by over one hundred UN member nations. While the US and several European nations support Kosovo's independence, they consider the case unique and not a precedent for other territorial disputes (García & Gutiérrez, 2008).

Russia has faced and is expected to continue to face further isolation and other sanctions from international bodies beyond the financially solid measures that other countries, such as the USA, have consistently decided. The actions of Russia are considered legal under international law by only a few states and legal authorities. The Council of Europe took another punitive measure by suspending and excluding Russia from participating in the EC Parliamentary Assembly and the Committee of Ministers (Council of Europe, 2022).

Also, the Security Council - UN confirmed an act resolution asking Russia to stop military operations in Ukraine immediately. Meanwhile, Russia reacted by vetoing this resolution, based on the fact that it is a permanent member of the Security Council. A non-binding resolution demanding that the Assembly of the UN hold an emergency session specifically to review Russia's activity has also been approved by the Security Council by voting 11 to 1 (with Russia voting against it and three abstentions), (Corten & Koutroulis, 2022).

The "Union for Peace resolution,"⁸ also known as the 1950 UN General Assembly Resolution 377(V), stipulated the event

⁸ On 3 November 1950, the General Assembly adopted resolution 377 A (V), which was given the title "Uniting for Peace", which states that if the Security Council, because of a lack of unanimity among its five permanent members, fails to act as required to maintain international peace and security, the General Assembly shall consider the matter immediately and may issue appropriate recommendations to UN members for collective measures, including the use of armed force when necessary, to maintain or restore international peace and security.

of an impasse in the Security Council, the General Assembly would take up the issue at once and provide recommendations of member countries in the direction of cooperative action. This resolution is under the UN General Assembly (Carswell, A. J., (2013).

In 2014 following the annexation from Russia to Crimea, General Assembly passed a resolution condemning the actions of Russia and urged countries not to recognize it as a threatening and discriminatory act for Ukraine's sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity. The resolution was passed with an overwhelming majority. The General Assembly may also demand that the UN launch an investigation into Russia's actions and recommend that Russia be subject to sanctions or that Russia be suspended or expelled from several UN bodies (Euractiv Intelligence, 2022). The International Court of Justice (ICJ) received another claim from Ukraine against Russia, claiming that Russia falsely used the Genocide Convention to extenuate its Ukraine annexation. Regarding the actions of Russia in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, the ICJ currently considers two allegations made by Ukraine in 2017 (International Court of Justice, 2017). Putin and other Russian officials might be the subject of an ICJ war crimes investigation.

Charter 2(4) of the UN⁹ does not give them the right and strictly forbids different nations to use military force and threaten other nations with war. There are two exceptions to this rule. First, Chapter VII of the Security Council may recommend the use of armed force with explicit approval, including from its permanent member countries. This phenomenon is currently impossible to happen due to Russia's veto power. Second, under Article 51 of the Charter, states may use force in self-defense only if it meets the criteria of proportionality and necessity (UN, Charter of the United Nations and Statute of International Court of Justice, 1945).

Ironically, the Russian state stated the justification of defenses, making claims that Ukraine can possess and be equipped with nuclear weapons, always with the exceptional contribution of allied countries: in other words, a situation involving preventative self-defense. It is Russia's responsibility to support its use of force with the argument that it is necessary for self-defense, yet this pretext may be unstable given that ongoing attacks do not meet the standards for necessity or proportionality (Milanovic, 2022).

The Security Council is empowered to pass resolutions that allow for actions such as economic sanctions; however, in exceptional cases, the use of armed force is allowed to prevent violations of international normative acts. For instance, in 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, the Security Council passed Resolution 678, which permitted the use of "all necessary means" to compel Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait (UN, UNIKOM, 2003).

On February 25, 2022, Albania and the US co-proposed an act-resolution for the Ukraine state that demanded that Russian military forces leave Ukraine, that the Minsk Agreements be fully implemented, and that human rights law be respected. The nations' division was also evident during the Security Council negotiations: China abstained from voting in favor of a less restrictive Chapter VI resolution, while India kept its usual neutral position. The initially proposed resolution was subsequently modified, as the focus was placed on "aiming towards a constructive dialogue" while avoiding immediate action. Russia eventually succeeded in blocking the resolution. The nations' division was also evident during the Security Council negotiations: China abstained from voting in favor of a less restrictive Chapter VI resolution, while India kept its usual neutral position.

The initially proposed resolution was subsequently modified, as the focus was placed on "aiming towards a constructive dialogue" while avoiding immediate action. Russia eventually succeeded in blocking the resolution (UN, 2022).

International legal expert Rebecca Barber, makes an insightful statement about the potential contribution of the UNGA to the implementation of the Uniting for Peace Resolution (UPR). The United Nations Peacekeeping Resolution (UPR), established in 1950 amid the Korean War, was created precisely to avoid the veto that the permanent member countries of the Security Council could impose (Barber, 2021). In cases where the Security Council fails to support international security and peace due to the call of the UPR, such as in the 2010 Kosovo Advisory Opinion, the UN has the authority to intervene and suggest collective action. It is essential to understand that the UN's opinion merely serves as a primary recommendation (ICJ, 2010).

At the same time, Ukraine took the appropriate measures by starting the appropriate procedures at the International Court of Justice (ICJ)¹⁰, precisely in January 2017 with the claim related to the "violations" provided by the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism (ICSFT) and International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD). In the event that the International Court of Justice can decide in favor of Ukraine, the UN Security Council has the duty to approve the implementation of the decision. But one should not overlook the fact that the exercise of the jurisdiction of the ICJ regarding the contentious procedures is completely dependent on the approval of the member states. This points to the fact that the jurisdiction of the ICJ does not necessarily apply to Russia. The only way is for the states to rely on a treaty that provides for the possibility of judicial settlement in the ICJ and has been ratified by both parties (Marchuk, 2017). Even though the application was submitted about five years ago, everything has stayed the same. Even if the ICJ decides to favor Ukraine, the UN Security Council must approve the decision before it can be implemented.

Additionally, on February 26, Ukraine lodged an ICJ complaint, claiming that Russia is and should be considered responsible for the genocide used against the civilian population to justify its aggressive actions. Nevertheless, achieving

⁹ Article 2 (4) of the Charter prohibits the threat or use of force and calls on all Members to respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of other States.

¹⁰ ICJ, also known as the World Court, is the main judicial organ of the UN. The Court's role is to settle, in accordance with international law, legal disputes submitted to it by States and to give advisory opinions on legal questions referred to it by authorized United Nations organs and specialized agencies.

the desired outcome seems distant. The fact that international law has been unsuccessful in preventing the encroachment of Russia highlights the Ukraine dominance that the most powerful and dominant states possess. The international community must support Ukraine if there is long-lasting peace in the region (ICJ, Application, Instituting Proceedings filed in the Registry of the Court on 26 February, 2022).

Conclusions

Understanding these factors and how they impacted the Russo-Ukrainian War is crucial to recognize the value of international law and any potential restrictions it might have. A substantial set of international norms protects territorial integrity and institutions that handle territorial conflicts when they occur; these norms no longer serve as explicit standards that forbid aggression but as barriers intended to prevent wars. From this point on, international law should offer a much broader and more complex set of instruments to encourage opponents to avoid using force to resolve their conflicts objectively.

International law may have little to offer in these circumstances, but even if it is not likely to be helpful for the time being, the needs to evolve and safeguard the main purpose might request a more thorough changes on the bodies, UN chamber articles, in order to functionally prevent the conflicts in the future.

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PANEL III

**ALBANIAN AND
EUROPEAN IDENTITIES:
NEW PERSPECTIVES IN
HUMANITIES, EDUCATION,
ARTS AND CULTURE**

Volunteering during Communism – A discourse analysis of volunteering in the Albanian literature of Socialist Realism

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Abstract

Volunteer work during communism is one of the main myths that are often reiterated in the post-communist Albanian sphere. It is often described as an unpaid work done in the public realm to implement massive projects such as construction of dams, of railroads, drainage of wetlands and construction of terraced fields which contributed to the development of the country during communism. The aim of this article is to investigate what meanings were attached to the volunteering work in the communist Albania and how it was presented in the Albanian literature. The volunteer work was managed by the communist state by means of the Party of Labor's ancillary organizations such as Youth Organization, Democratic Front Organization, Women Front Organization and Committee of Veterans. The implementation of the massive projects required large quantity of funds and immense human capital. To keep people motivated the propaganda sector played an important role. Culture and arts, including the literature of socialist realism, were used to disseminate the messages of the communist leadership to the people. The narrative of the communist leadership was full of cliches such as 'volunteer work helps to strengthen and create solidarity between the working class, the peasants and the strata of intellectuals', 'the volunteer work helps to emancipate women and girls', 'the voluntary work helps to fabricate the new man', 'the youth is the main driving force towards progress and development'. These messages were present in the speeches of Enver Hoxha, the communist leader of Albania in his meetings with youngsters, women and girls, peasants, working class people, artists and writers and the same messages were present in the Albanian literature of socialist realism. In order to analyze the role of volunteer work in Albania, how solidarity was created among people and what strategies did the Party of Labor of Albania pursued to motivate an immense high number of people in the construction of the country after the World War II, we will analyze how voluntary work was described in the works of Enver Hoxha and how this was reflected in the Albanian literature. By tracing the amount of time voluntary work occupied in people lives (in term of hours of work and as a topic of conversation), the typology of voluntary work and its spatial distribution, its interconnectedness with other aspects of cultural life, we could understand what meaning did people attach to the voluntary work and how the voluntary work itself organized peoples' life.

Keywords: *volunteer work, communism, totalitarianism, public realm, solidarity, literature, emancipation*

Introduction

Throughout the annals of history, voluntary work has been perceived as an embodiment of community spirit, philanthropy, and collective ambition. In capitalist societies, the idea is often linked to charitable endeavours and individual goodwill. Yet, in the era of communism, especially in nations that found themselves under the grip of Stalinism or its derivatives, the

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very essence of ‘voluntary work’ underwent a significant transformation, coalescing with state ideologies and becoming an instrument of political agendas. This paper delves deep into the dynamics of voluntary work during communism by placing a specific emphasis on the governance of Enver Hoxha in Albania and the narratives entrenched in socialist realism literature.

Enver Hoxha's reign in Albania is one of the most prominent and, perhaps, enigmatic examples of communism's grasp in Eastern Europe. The regime's tactics of ensuring unwavering loyalty and shaping a new socialist individual included using voluntary work as a means to consolidate state power, indoctrinate ideologies, and foster a sense of communal unity. Through Hoxha's lens, voluntary work was not only a form of labor but also a sociopolitical instrument that galvanized the masses toward a singular vision of a communist utopia.

Concurrently, socialist realism, as an artistic and literary movement, played a quintessential role in shaping perceptions and setting standards for the ‘ideal’ communist society. As a state-sanctioned form of art and literature, it propagated the ideals of the Party and painted a picture of the citizens' role in this new society. Within its pages and canvases, voluntary work is frequently depicted as a noble endeavour, where the individual's desires and ambitions are willingly and happily submerged into the greater collective good.

By juxtaposing Hoxha's practical implementations of state policies with the idealized representations in socialist realism, this study aims to understand the complexities and nuances of ‘voluntary’ labor during the communist era. Through this analysis, we hope to shed light on how voluntary work was used both as a tool for political control and as a lofty ideal in art and literature. This intricate interplay between reality and representation offers a comprehensive insight into the communist vision of labour, collective responsibility, and the forging of the ‘new man’.

In examining the nature of voluntarism in Albania, it's imperative to question the conditions under which it arose and whether the work was genuinely voluntary. The communist leadership employed various strategies to engage, obligate, and motivate individuals to partake in such endeavours. This political maneuvering significantly influenced the broader creative landscape, especially shaping the tenets of socialist realism in literature. Therefore, in this paper, we will try to answer the following questions: Under what conditions did voluntarism occur in Albania, and was it truly voluntary work? What strategies did the communist leadership use to engage/obligate/motivate people to participate in voluntary work? And how did this influence the creative world and specifically the literature of socialist realism?

To answer these questions, we have undertaken an examination of the speeches and dialogues of Enver Hoxha, documented in the “Veptra” (Selected Works) series. Central to this discourse are Hoxha's interactions with distinct groups, each playing a unique role in shaping the socio-political landscape of Albania during his regime. The young leaders, perceived as the torchbearers of the next communist generation, were often at the forefront of these communications, absorbing and relaying Hoxha's ideologies. Equally significant were his dialogues with volunteers engaged in pivotal construction endeavours, ranging from railway infrastructures to crucial agricultural projects like irrigation canals and marsh drainage. These interactions offer insights into the regime's economic and developmental ambitions. Further enriching our understanding are Hoxha's conversations with distinguished rural women, highlighting their roles and challenges in a rapidly transforming Albanian society. Complementing these specific discussions are Hoxha's public addresses, delivered to the broader populace across varied regions of Albania, which echo his political stances, aspirations, and the narrative he wished to perpetuate on multiple occasions.

The Albanian books of socialist realism analyzed in this paper are: “Këната” (1973) (The Marsh) by Fatmir Gjata; “Traseja” (1971) (The Railroad) by Ramiz Lika; “Dasma” (1968) (The Wedding) by Ismail Kadare; “Vështrim i Kthjellët” (1968) (Clear Gaze) by Viktor Koçi and “Kalamajtë e pallatit tim II” (1979) (The Children of my Block Buildings) by Bedri Dedja.

Literature Review

Voluntary work, often simply called “volunteering,” refers to activities or tasks undertaken of one's own free will without expectation of financial compensation. These activities are usually conducted in the interest of the community, charitable organizations, non-profit entities, or other social causes. Volunteering can take many forms and can be done for various reasons, including: philanthropic reasons, skill development, networking; personal satisfaction, civic duty. The literature on voluntary work is ample and given its wide-ranging implications and impacts, it has been studied and written about by scholars across disciplines. from sociology to psychology to economics and beyond. Putnam (2000) explores civic engagement in the U.S., emphasizing involvement in voluntary organizations (p. 49). He observes that individuals engaged in local voluntary work tend to exhibit higher levels of trust (p. 137), which suggests a positive link between social networks like voluntary groups and trust, implying that geographical factors might influence the extent of social trust in remote rural areas.

As a multifaceted concept, Volunteering is characterized by four primary criteria drawn from various literature sources (Voicu and Voicu 2003, Meijts et al. 2003, and others):

- *Nature of Work:* Volunteering is unpaid, though sponsorship of volunteering organizations and offsetting costs incurred during volunteering is acknowledged. Activities carried out on a mutual basis with close relations are not classified as volunteering.

- *Purpose and Beneficiaries*: Volunteering involves producing goods or services for the benefit of others, the public, or a specific cause. Activities purely for self-interest, like hobbies or sports, are excluded. Volunteering aims to assist others outside the immediate family or personal relationships.
- *Voluntariness*: Volunteering is a voluntary act, stemming from an individual's free will. Obligatory community tasks, like "forced volunteering in communist organizations," aren't considered volunteering.
- *Motivation*: The motives behind volunteering can be internal, value-driven, external, instrumental, but not directly materialistic. Volunteering isn't just an altruistic activity; it can also offer benefits to the individual volunteer.

Elaborating further, Voicu M. and Voicu B. (2003) and Wilson (2000) posit that volunteering typically happens within an organized setting, distinguishing between associational and program volunteers. Meijts et al. (2003) note that perceptions of voluntary activities hinge on the net cost of volunteering, i.e., the extent to which costs outweigh benefits.

Based on Feynes and Kiss (2011), voluntary work can be understood through four dimensions that also group their functions:

- *Social and Community*: Focuses on community building, human resource contribution, and enhancing social capital.
- *Economic*: Highlights the tangible and intangible values produced through volunteering, the costs involved, and the benefits, such as wage savings.
- *Political*: Involves participation in social entities, political value acquisition, and more.
- *Social-Psychological*: Examines motivations, socialization roles, and psychological rewards.

While this is the concept used for voluntary work in liberal democratic societies, in totalitarian and authoritarian societies, it is worth remembering that the free will as such was not available to people and as such it is hard to speak for true voluntary work. It is also worth noting that individual acts of kindness, altruism, and support undoubtedly occurred even in totalitarian systems, however, these acts were done as part of the state organization and as such lack the initiative.

In totalitarian societies, the state exercises control over nearly all aspects of public and private life. This all-encompassing influence of the state often reduces individual autonomy and freedom of choice. Historically, under such systems, what appears as "voluntary" work often has been orchestrated or heavily encouraged by the state, leaving little room for true voluntarism. In essence, the boundaries between mandatory and voluntary blur, as individuals may feel obliged to participate due to state pressures, social expectations, or fear of reprisal (Havel, 1978 (1985)). In his famous book "The power of the powerless" Havel comments that within the structure of the totalitarian system, each person is imprisoned in the intricate web of the state's regulatory mechanisms. These are justified by an all-encompassing doctrine that acts like a 'worldly faith'. Consequently, it's vital to recognize that these power dynamics manifest as a maze of control, intimidation, apprehension, and self-restraint. This system consumes everyone, at a minimum, by silencing them, dulling their spirit, and imprinting them with the biases favoured by those in power.

Communism, as practiced in the 20th century, particularly in countries like the Soviet Union, China, and Eastern Europe, often displayed characteristics of these totalitarian societies. While the ideal of communism emphasizes communal ownership and equal sharing of resources, in practice, communist states have often centralized power to an extent that limits individual freedoms. In these settings, community service or work projects promoted as "voluntary" were often extensions of state initiatives rather than genuine grassroots movements. People might have been motivated to participate not out of genuine altruism but due to social pressure, potential rewards, or fear of being labelled a dissident or enemy of the state. The work projects labelled as "voluntary" were, in many cases, virtually mandatory, and refusal to participate could result in severe consequences, both socially and from the state (Fitzpatrick, 1999).

Furthermore, the ideological foundation of communism often positioned the state as the primary actor responsible for ensuring the well-being of its citizens. In this context, the notion of voluntary work outside the framework of state-sanctioned activities became problematic. After all, if the state is the guarantor of welfare and wellbeing, grassroots initiatives might be seen as a critique or even a challenge to the state's effectiveness or legitimacy (Kornai, 1992).

In this framework, the contention of this paper is that totalitarian system in Albania, by means of propaganda provided clear instructions to the Albanian population in order to motivate it to participate in voluntary work. In the following section, we take into analyses the discourse used by the leader of the Party of Labour of Albania in terms of voluntary work.

The discourse of Enver Hoxha for the voluntary work

The study has referred to the series of publications titled "Vepra" (Selected Works) by Enver Hoxha, which is a series published between the 1960s and 1980s. Particularly it refers to Selected works 4 with is a collection of speeches. For this article, we have referred to the following titles: "From the conversation with the youth leaders after the V Plenum of the General Council of Albania's Popular Youth" (March 6, 1947) "Message addressed to the Albanian people on the occasion of May 1, 1947, delivered in front of the people of Durres and the builders of the Durres-Elbasan railway", (May 1, 1947) "Speech given at the public assembly on the occasion of the opening of the regular III session of the first legislature" (July 12, 1947), "Summary of the conversation with a group of distinguished rural women who participated

in the IV Plenum of the Union of Albanian Women” (August 15, 1947), “Summary of the conversation with a group of young people who participated in the VI Plenum of Albania’s Popular Youth” (August 20, 1947), “Speech delivered in front of the people of Fier and Myzeqe” (September 29, 1947), “Speech given at the inauguration of the irrigation canal ‘Naum Panxhi’” (October 9, 1947), “Speeches delivered in front of the people of Fier, Mallakastër, Vlorë, Selenica Mine, Drashovicë, Kurvelesh, Gjirokastër, Përmet, Berat, Kuçovë, Lushnjë, Elbasan, Pogradec, Maliq, Korçë, Vithkuq” (in the time frame from September 29 to October 14, 1947). These are speeches and discussions of Enver Hoxha with the youth leaders, volunteers involved in construction projects such as railway construction, irrigation canals, or marsh drainage, women as well as Hoxha’s public addresses to the “people” in different regions of the country on various occasions.

One of the main *cliché-s*, is that of comparing the present situation with the past, “Where we were and where we want to go” approach, that is, the “contrast between the past and the future”. This contrast is brought frequently into discussion with people and its aim was to convey the message that voluntary work was essential for the construction and reconstruction of the country and for motivating people to work. Within this context also comes the cliché of social emancipation: the emancipation of women and girls through voluntary work and participation in actions is seen as a contrast to the mindset of the clergy and the overthrown classes, as Hoxha calls them. Another thematic that appears often is that of the youth as the driving force for the construction and development of the country – in an effort to create a new generation of Hoxha’s followers.

In the ideological framework surrounding voluntarism, another recurring *cliché* portrays it as a potent mechanism to foster solidarity among various social strata, specifically the cooperative farming community, the working class, and the proletarian intellectuals. This form of collective action is not just about labour; it is conceptualized as a crucible for the formation/fabrication or “forging” of new, socially-conscious individuals. Moreover, voluntarism is heralded as an engine that fuels the creative spirit, spurring people into a form of constructive competition. It is seen as an avenue for individuals to strive for superior outcomes, driven by the incentives of emulation.

To illustrate the above, in a conversation with youth leaders after the V Plenum of the General Council of Popular Youth, Enver Hoxha said:

You successfully completed the Kukës - Peshkopi road. This showed the strength of the youth, proving that after such a great war, the young generation is capable of undertaking large-scale actions. This further reinforced my confidence when we assigned you the construction of the Durrës - Elbasan railway. The first railway in our country is being built; this is a historic event, and you understand its significance. The railway will aid the development of our economy and industry. You have taken on the responsibility to build this route, and the beginning looks promising. As of now, nearly fifty thousand young people have volunteered, and the entire youth is on their feet to accomplish this monumental task. The railway will become a grand school from which will emerge robust cadres, equipped with the will to serve the people. Thousands will learn the technique, aiding the expansion of our national railway network. Thousands will learn to write and sing; they will learn to live and work in a healthy, honest, and industrious collective. (From the discussion with youth leaders after the 5th Plenum of the General Council of the Popular Youth of Albania)

In the same vein, in a conversation at the IV Plenum of the Women’s Union, he says that there are people who prevent their daughters from going to the railway, that they beat their sisters, and that these people should not be listened to:

Some people, both in the South and in the North, prevent their daughters from going to the railway. In some cases, enemies have even killed women who wanted to go to the railway. Some have beaten their sisters or daughters, etc. We must fight against them. Such people should not be listened to. Whatever clothes they wear, those who fight against our rightful aim for the advancement of women, we are at war with them because they do not love us (Summary of the discussion held with a group of distinguished rural women who participated in the proceedings of the 4th plenum of the union of Albanian women. August 17, 1947).

Thus, the public discourse of Hoxha about volunteerism has the following characteristics:

- **Instrumentalization of Youth:** Hoxha places great emphasis on the role of the youth in major national projects, like the construction of the country’s first railway. By highlighting that nearly fifty thousand young people had voluntarily signed up, Hoxha appears to be crafting a narrative of collective enthusiasm and national commitment among the youth.
- **Historical Significance:** Hoxha frames these large-scale projects as historic and pivotal for the nation’s development. His rhetoric serves to elevate the importance of participation, casting it not merely as manual labour but as a contribution to a landmark moment in the country’s history.
- **Gender and Social Norms:** Hoxha also addresses the resistance to women’s participation in such projects. By explicitly stating that those who prevent women from contributing are to be considered enemies of progress, Hoxha positions himself as a champion of gender equality and women’s emancipation. However, it’s crucial to consider this in the context of his broader ideology and governance, which often restricted personal freedoms in the name of state-defined goals.

- **Ideological Warfare:** Hoxha's statement about being "at war" with those who obstruct the participation of women in these projects, paints opposition not just as a social issue, but almost as a form of ideological treachery. It reflects the extent to which Hoxha was willing to polarize society to achieve what he saw as critical objectives.
- **Voluntarism as State Policy:** Importantly, the "voluntary" nature of these efforts, as described by Hoxha, should be questioned. Given the context of a totalitarian state, the line between true voluntarism and state-coerced labour becomes blurred.

In summary, the texts illustrate how Enver Hoxha used the concept of voluntarism to serve multiple purposes: nation-building, ideological propagation, and social engineering. His rhetoric sought to infuse these efforts with historic gravitas, tap into the enthusiasm of the youth, and challenge traditional gender norms, all under the umbrella of what was termed "voluntarism," whose voluntary nature in the context of a totalitarian regime remains a matter of debate.

How has communist discourse influenced the literature of socialist realism?"

In a speech given at a meeting with writers and artists on July 11, 1961, Enver Hoxha outlines the narrow and rigid framework within which writers and artists should operate, treating them as agitators of Marxist-Leninist ideology, chroniclers of the construction of socialism, promoters for the education of the new man and handles of the party for the social education of the masses. Hoxha says: "The development of literature and the arts has been on the right path, as it has always been inspired by the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the working class and the interests of the people, relying on the proven method of socialist realism." In a single sentence, Enver Hoxha declares that Marxist-Leninist ideology and socialist realism are the only choices; otherwise, your work will never be published and you will face consequences. This reduces artists and writers to mere functionaries and agitators of the Party of Labour. He further adds, "Literature and arts in our country have followed step by step the construction of socialism, the education of the new man..." For him, literature serves the utilitarian function of aiding the construction of the socialist system and the formation of the new man who must be a devotee of this system and of the dictator himself. The aim is turn literature into a tool for the manipulation of the masses. He emphasizes this when he says, "The work should come out beautiful, clear, understandable, but it must also have a healthy educational core, be clear and useful for the masses."

This destroys what is essential for the artist: creative freedom. The content of Enver Hoxha's speech reveals the suffocating constraints placed on writers and artists under his regime. By defining them as "agitators" of Marxist-Leninist ideology and instruments for social education, Hoxha effectively strips them of their autonomy and reduces their work to propaganda tools for the state. This reflects a classic feature of authoritarian regimes, where art and literature are co-opted to serve the state's interests and perpetuate its ideology. Hoxha's emphasis on the 'utilitarian function' of art is particularly telling. He not only dictates the ideological foundation that the art must rest upon—Marxist-Leninism and socialist realism—but also outlines its purpose: to educate the "new man" and serve the goals of socialism. This utilitarian approach to art negates the intrinsic value of creative expression and significantly limits the scope of what could be considered 'acceptable' art or literature.

Moreover, the speech makes it clear that dissenting voices would not be tolerated; deviation from the prescribed ideological line could result in works not being published and, potentially, in punitive actions against the artists. This reveals the extent to which the regime was willing to suppress creative freedom in the pursuit of ideological purity and social control. Therefore, the text serves as a grim reminder of how authoritarian regimes can stifle artistic creativity and co-opt it for propaganda and indoctrination.

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Methodology

In the heart of socialist realism, a captivating journey unfolds, exploring the echoes of a time where literature painted tales deeply intertwined with the political ambiance of its epoch. Our quest starts with selecting the untouched works—original publications from the era, undiluted by the reinterpretations of the post-1990s era. Each book serves as a time capsule, offering a vivid glimpse into the untouched narratives of that time. The analyzed works are *The Marsh* (Kënatë) (1973) – Fatmir Gjata *The Pathway* (Traseja) (1971) – Ramiz Lika *The Wedding* (Dasma) (1968) – Ismail Kadare *Clear View* (Vështrim i Kthjellët) (1968) – Viktor Koçi *The Kids of My Building II* (Kalamajtë e pallatit tim II) (1979) – Bedri Dedja.

The analytical model benefits from the concepts of discourse theatre and obliteration of the author in a totalitarian system (Vehbiu, 2007).

In a totalitarian system the public discourse is the stage, and every word spoken by the actors echoes the scripted narrative. The audience, sometimes active and at times passive, absorbs and reflects on these dialogues, painting a picture of the era's discourse dynamics. Secondly, diving deeper into Vehbiu's tales, we're introduced to the shadowed silhouette of the author in

socialist realist literature—a mere vessel channelling a dominant discourse. Their stories, often pedagogical, bridge tales from the ivory towers of leadership to the ears of the waiting populace. In this grand theatre of words, Enver Hoxha takes centre stage, with other authors as supporting acts, reiterating the party's teachings.

Analysis

In the realm of literature, nuances often lie beneath the surface, waiting for discerning readers to excavate and illuminate them. In the context of socialist realist literature, these nuances are deeply interwoven with the prevailing political and ideological discourses of the time. As we embark on this analytical journey, we aim to untangle the intricate threads of communist discourse as manifested in selected works. Drawing from primary publications of the era we strive for an authentic, unaltered understanding of the texts as they were presented to their contemporary audience. By delving into both central and peripheral references to voluntarism across different works and ensuring the representation of diverse voices by including only one work per author, this analysis seeks to offer a comprehensive insight into the literary landscape shaped under the shadow of totalitarianism.

Keneta (Marsh)

In “Kënetë” by Fatmir Gjata, the narrative immerses readers into the world of volunteer work undertaken in the significant task of draining the Maliq marshland in 1946-47. This background sets the stage for the themes of rejuvenation, both for the youth and the older generation, as well as personal growth and emancipation. The work camp becomes a transformative space: it's where people not only acquire trades and skills but also achieve personal growth and emancipation. For instance, characters like Rina find the courage to escape abusive relationships, and love blossoms in the most unexpected places, such as between Stavri's sister and her beloved. Amidst this, there's a prevailing spirit of competition among volunteers, with the recent past's sufferings making the present hardships seem more bearable.

The portrayal of these events and emotions seamlessly aligns with the ideological narratives espoused during this period. Volunteerism, while in its nascent stage during the events depicted, is not portrayed with overwhelming passion. Instead, there's a nuanced depiction, showing volunteers' hesitations and doubts, even while underscoring their love for their nation and socialism's ideals. The camp is more than just a place of work; it's a hub of personal discovery, learning, and growth. Individuals unveil their potentials, learn new skills, and find true liberation from past constraints. All these themes resonate profoundly with the ideological directions emphasized in Enver Hoxha's speeches.

Traseja

In “Traseja” (The Pathway), we journey alongside Hana, a woman hailing from an unnamed highland village. She volunteers for a monumental task: the construction of an unspecified railway. Set against a communist backdrop, Hana's narrative is emblematic of broader societal transitions, charting a course from past's restrictive customs to the revolutionary ideals of the present. Challenging traditional confines, she frees herself from a childhood engagement, and her relationship with Sokoli, a Muslim, champions religious harmony in the face of conventional boundaries. Although characters like the progressive Nik and the steadfast Party secretary exemplify the era's transformative spirit, the narrative doesn't sidestep the resistance posed by figures such as the patriarchal Gjok Martini and a resentful ex-landowner.

More than a mere story of personal evolution, “Traseja” stands as a ‘manual’, reflecting the zeitgeist of its time. Crafted to mirror the discourse of communist leadership, it delves deep into salient themes: the interplay between urban and rural realms, as seen through urban youths learning the nuances of highland life via their railway endeavours; the stark contrast of a past dominated by chieftains with the invigorating communist period; and the transformative power of the railroad. This setting not only fosters personal and technical development but also becomes a cultural melting pot, where theatrical performances and dance nights harmoniously interweave with the rhythm of labour.

The Wedding (Dasma) by Ismail Kadare

In Ismail Kadare's novel “Dasma,” the narrative captures a pivotal period in the New City, marked by the intertwined destinies of its characters amidst an era of monumental construction. As massive projects like the “Mao Ce Dun” Paint Factory, Fier Nitrogen Plant, Caustic Soda Factory, Tractor Plant in Tirana, and the Radio Station rise, the city itself takes on the aura of a sprawling factory, punctuated by worker barracks and an unnamed railway station. Central to the story is a highland bride who breaks away from traditional constraints. She shatters her childhood engagement, finds love with a young assembler, Xheviti, whom she met during the city's construction, and volunteers for the construction of the Rogozhina-Fier railway.

However, their love story is but a microcosm in a larger socio-political landscape. The novel delves into tensions between age-old customs and revolutionary ideals. While the bride's father remains silently tethered to the past, the priest and deceitful dervishes emerge as figures resisting modernity, holding the highlanders captive with the archaic Kanun's chains. Yet, in

contrast, there's the omnipresent party secretary, a beacon of the new order, ensuring harmony and adherence to the Party's doctrines. Symbols of socialist progress, like the emulation tables, slogans, and quotes from the Fifth Congress, permeate the atmosphere, juxtaposed against evening dance events and the continuous rhythm of the train connecting one monumental project to another. This juxtaposition serves as a backdrop to the literary and journalistic documentation of an era where the revolution continuously reshapes life's very fabric.

The novella "Clear View" – Vito Koçi

Voluntary work for opening the terraces is portrayed in a manner consistent with the energy and spirit promoted by Hoxha. The youngsters work passionately and energetically, their efforts accompanied by rhythmic beats of the drum, pushing beyond their physical limits. Sweat pours freely, and amidst the hard work, relationships either bloom or are cemented, all contributing to the nation's construction.

Life during the action is portrayed idyllically. Flora (the main character) expresses a sense of nostalgia and loss at the thought of departing from the action, a testament to the transformative and binding nature of the collective effort. She extends her hand towards the hills, their faces marked by the terraces they've constructed. From a distance, these terraces resemble parallel brown waves, a lasting imprint of their toil. "I feel sorry that we will part from the action!" says Flora. "We made those! Where we shed our sweat, oranges will blossom one day." Each drop of sweat and every exerted effort is not just a contribution to the physical landscape but is symbolic of a blossoming future, where the fruits of their labor will be evident in the nation's prosperity.

The kids of my building

In Bedri Dedja's evocative tale, "The kids of my building," the essence of volunteerism, although subtle, winds its way through the narrative, casting its transformative glow upon the story's characters. As the plot unfolds, readers are drawn into the world of Sokol and Lili's mother. One evening, Aunt Liria, with her eyes gleaming with pride, announces a resolution made at the recent party meeting. All the female communists of their local chapter, sensing the urgent need of the Tirana district's highland cooperative, have committed to dedicating an entire month, extending their usual two-week stint, to assist with the looming agricultural tasks. Their spirit of service doesn't end there; they further pledge to support the Women's General Union in their mission to emancipate the village women.

The tale is rife with profound revelations. It brings to the fore the deep-seated alliance between urban and rural life, driven by volunteerism. The journey of women towards emancipation is underscored, yet the story also doesn't shy away from unveiling the latent prejudices. These biases aren't confined to the village's boundaries; they seep into the very heart of the city, manifesting in characters like Uncle Miri, who, in his vexation, cannot fathom his wife's month-long absence. But amidst these intricate layers, Aunt Liria's unwavering commitment as a communist shines bright, setting an example for all, especially the young ones.

A spirit of service is instilled even in the children, as Dedja paints a vivid picture: Young pioneers, brimming with fervor, are rallied to dedicate a few hours daily during their summer break, channeling their energies towards cooperative work. Their parents, inspired by these young souls, are called upon to unify their livestock resources. Every bead of sweat, every moment spent by these children would contribute to the community, enriching schools, enhancing sports fields, and creating memories through excursions and summer camps. And as the narrative gracefully concludes, it leaves behind an echoing anthem:

*"Today we are small,
But tomorrow we will work with enthusiasm,
We give our word of honor,
We will raise the standards even higher."*

Conclusion

In the realm of socialist realism, literature stands as a loyal actor in the discursive theater, mirroring the foundational text of the communist leadership epitomized by Enver Hoxha. Authors in this domain often faded into the background, offering no trailblazing insights, creativity, or unexpected turns. Instead, they adhered strictly to the tenets set forth by Enver Hoxha. Within these works, the volunteer is painted as a paragon, challenging familial norms for women's emancipation and staunchly defending the party line. The narratives highlighted the nefarious intent of the clergy and the ousted classes, who allegedly resisted the nation's advancement and the emancipation of women. These tales are drenched in fervor, from intense labor and pouring sweat to outdoing established plans and evenings filled with renewal. The ever-watchful Party Secretary seamlessly surfaces to mediate disputes and mend familial bonds.

As the literature unfolds, it evokes a world where public discourse is meticulously crafted, ensuring unwavering support for the system and maintaining the established order. Voluntarism, depicted in these works, elevates from mere assistance to an embodiment of socialist valor. It symbolizes an unwavering allegiance to the state and its guiding ideologies. Amidst these

tales, women champion their emancipation, shattering societal traditions, and discovering love and self-worth in the throes of their voluntary endeavors. The narratives traverse from the old world order dominated by chieftains to the radiant era of socialism, advocating the latter as the beacon of progress. However, shadows linger with figures like the omnipresent Party Secretary and religious undertones, hinting at the latent friction between clergy-driven beliefs and revolutionary communist ideologies. Through these multifaceted portrayals, emerges the archetype of the ideal communist — dedicated, selfless, and eternally bound to the goals of the community and state.

In summation, this body of literature stands as a mirror to its era, reflecting the dominant political and societal ideologies that shaped individuals, relationships, and society's fabric. Themes woven through these stories shed light on the ideals, tribulations, and inherent tensions of life under socialist governance. They serve not merely as tales but as instruments that educate, inspire, and caution — encapsulating the broader aims of socialist realism as an artistic force. Scholars such as Clark (1985), Kruks (1989), Groys (1988), Todorova (1992), Yurchak (2006), and Plamper (2012) further unravel these layers, highlighting the intersection of literature, state ideologies, and the socio-political milieu of the time.

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News portals: what are their agendas?

A policy paper on the political economy of the news portals in Albania

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Introduction

News portals are a recent media phenomenon that are receiving increasing attention both from state authorities and social institutions. This is because news portals have influence in the way we think and act in our realities. The existence and functioning of news portals are linked with information and disinformation, with democracy and its degeneration into populism, with truth and post-truth. All this attention and factoring of news portals makes it urgent to have an open and scientifically informed discussion about this recent media phenomenon, to demarcate their proper position regarding media in general, but also to pinpoint their relevance as causes of certain negative phenomena of politics and society, such as disinformation, populism, and post-truth.

This article raises important questions about news portals, treating them as one kind of media and, therefore, comparing them with other traditional media. On the other hand, we deal with the form of news portals in the Albanian reality, considering the specifics of their existence and the conditions under which they function in Albania. This way of dealing with the phenomenon relates to the methodology of Max Weber, specifically his ideal types. It has the advantage of connecting the general with the specific, the theoretical with the empirical, without sacrificing either.

First, in the following pages, we provide a context for the development of the news portals' phenomenon in Albania, which represents a significant evolution of the media landscape in the country over the last decade and well into this one. We observe that their development has brought about significant changes in the organization of media outlets and has affected information dissemination and audience engagement.

Second, the purpose of this study is to position news portals in the Albanian media landscape, regarding their generic and specific features. For this purpose, we have raised several questions that deal with typical characteristics of all media organizations that produce mass communication. These questions function as parameters for seeing the difference of news portals from other mass media phenomena.

Third, we created an updated map of the online environment related to news portals to decipher latest trends of this phenomenon. For this purpose, we used data gathered on software tools, while also making use of structured interviews in the second phase of research.

Fourth, we provide a comprehensive literature review, which reveals that this phenomenon of news portals is very much in need of further studies. We hopefully have contributed to this article in the right direction and have opened paths for further enquiry. News portals are particularly important to remain understudied or to public opinion. Government regulation of these media outlets should be informed by scientific research rather than public opinion bias.

Fifth, we discuss main problems related to online news portals in Albania, their organization structure, hidden agendas, specific regulation, self-regulation, dangers of state intervention and censorship. Then we present our main findings from the research, followed by a discussion of their relevance.

The study of the online environment becomes immensely important in a time when the Albanian government is pushing forward a regulatory agenda, trying to convince the public that in case of no-regulation, the news portals will have a freeway in further disorganizing the public opinion.

Methodology

The mapping of the news portals and the online environment in our country was made possible by data gathered on software tools. The theoretical and methodological approach is fuelled by the political economy of news media research studies. This paper relies on the statement that “political economy is the study of social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources” (Mosco, 2009, p. 2).¹ Referring to the data provided by the desk research and those provided by the software tools, we aim to have some further insights on topics such as:

- Ownership and control
- Audience and click bait.
- Number of staff and editorial line
- Capacities of self-regulation

Given the volatility of the online environment and the changing attitudes of readers towards news in the online platforms, it is important noting that the data presented on this policy brief are preliminary, and further studies may shed light on more specific issues related to ethics and future of journalism.

Literature review

Whilst the development of online media and news portals in the digital era is a slippery territory for research studies due to its pace and volatility, the literature in the field is not missing, mainly focusing on the functions and effects of the online media, especially in terms of information and journalism. However, news portals have brought to a new level the concept of “citizen journalist” and what Eric Maigret (2010) described as a new wave of information velocity, has led to an immense amplification of news, that have contributed to an unstable media environment, where fake news, trolls and click bait seem to be the common denominator². Earlier studies such as the one from James C. Foust (2005) or Paul McFedries (1998) suggested that the internet has been greatest advancement in the flow of information as the traditional way of information flow are still time consuming for the audience³. Digital Media have no boundaries in providing updating information and it is exactly this velocity and communication convergence that has made news portals one of the most valuable sources of information in today’s world.

While these studies had the chance to applaud the advance and innovation offer by these new means of news production, scholars nowadays are trying to further explore how interactivity and hyper textuality have become new tools of production and how they are reshaping the role of the reader within this new reality. In a study on the political economy of news production, Selda Bulut (2020) argues that.... “Today, the information and communication technologies used by media organizations have revealed the news production practice which has become increasingly dependent on technology. Computers, mobile phones, and the internet, which are the means of doing business in the media, constitute the means of labor in the media today. Having these tools of labor and using them effectively and efficiently has become an important part of news production”⁴. She further states that this new reality has given to “journalists.... considerable power to learn about the stories of competitors and other players [who] are working on through information and communication technologies”⁵.

On the other side, many reports are presenting data on the surge of skepticism on algorithms among readers. The Reuters Institute Digital Report for this year brings interesting data on the use of social platforms and readers’ attitude regarding the online news environment. The study shows that “Despite hopes that the internet could widen democratic debate.... fewer people are now participating in online news than in the recent past. Aggregated across markets, only around a fifth (22%) are now active participators, with around half (47%) not participating in news at all”⁶. The same study shows that “Online consumers are accessing news less frequently than in the past and are also becoming less interested. Despite the political and economic threats facing many people, fewer than half (48%) of our aggregate sample now say they are very or extremely interested in news, down from 63% in 2017.”⁷

¹ Mosco, V. (2009). *The Political Economy of Communication* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore and Washington D.C.: Sage.

² Maigret, E (2012) *Sociologjia e komunikimit dhe e medias*. Tirane: Papirus

³ Foust, James C (2005) *Online journalism: Hathaway publisher*; McFedries, P (2009) *Internet Simplified: Wiley publishing, Inc.*

⁴ Bulut, S. (2007, November 28-30) *Soğuk Savaş Dönemi Anti-Komünizm Politikaları ve Basın*, Paper presented at the meeting of, 10. Ulusal Sosyal Bilimler Kongresi. ODTÜ, Ankara, Türkiye. pp 108-109

⁵ Bulut, S. & Karlıdağ, S. (2015). *Dijital Gazetelerin Ekonomi Politikası*. Erciyes İletişim Dergisi “academia,” 4(2), 18-38.

⁶ Newman, N; Fletcher, R et.al (2023) *Digital News Report 2023: Reuter Institute* https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf

⁷ Ibid.

Problems related to online news portals in Albania

To explain the political economy of the news portals in Albania, it is important to understand the difficulties related to the media environment in general. Among many obstacles, there are three main implications that might have a direct impact on this study. The first one is the elevated level of informality in the media, which is directly influenced by what is seen as an “abusive relationship between media and politics.” In a report written by the Helsinki Committee in 2020, it is stated that “every political party coming into power, constitutes its relationship with the media firstly by controlling the ownership, secondly by taking in control the public network of information and last but not least in denigrating the media and its role in the society”⁸.

The second difficulty is related to the accessibility of reliable data on formal employment in the media and anytime data are required, it looks like that everything is covered by a veil of secrecy. In a study conducted by the Albanian Media Institute in 2018, on the Albanian Media and European Standards, it is shown that we might have data or lists on registered TV-s, journals, public agencies, but that offer limited data on their staff. The report states that there are around 6200 journalists working in the whole sector, still further confirmations are needed as these might not be the conclusive numbers”⁹

Finally, there is a lack of studies tracking recent developments on the media environment in Albania, making it difficult for researchers to gather data and elaborate detailed reports on emerging issues in our country. If we refer again to the report by the Helsinki Committee, “[it is noted] a whole shift [happening] in the newsroom structure....[with] a huge number of journalists abandoning the traditional media in favor of the online media”¹⁰ The same study says that in 2018, there were more than 750 news portals and 5 years later this number seems to be around 900 news portals operating in the media environment. In a report written by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network on the Internet Governance in Albania it is stated that:

Even though online media have become one of the main sources of information in Albania, current Albanian legislation provides no definition of online media. Nor does audio-visual media law or the e-commerce law. The amendments to the draft law “On Audio-visual Media” described online media as electronic publications with some form of editorial control. The draft amendments to Law no. 97/2013 define an “electronic publication” as editorially shaped webpages and/or web portals containing electronic versions of written media and/or information from the media that is accessible to the public and has the objective to entertain, inform, and/educate.¹¹

It is of special relevance that the same study offers a lot of technical data on how you can open or register a new portal in AKEP, still not having an updated list of all registered portals, leaving room for a lot of uncertainty and informality, who have created the right conditions for further amplifying the negative implications that we were discussing above. The research further states that:

“Albanian legislation also does not contain any specific provision for the public disclosure of the ownership of digital media outlets, both local and international ones. Most information regarding the ownership of media companies registered at the Albanian tax authority is provided in the Commercial Register of the National Business Centre. This register is publicly available, but it might be difficult for the public to identify the owners, as some media outlets may not be registered as a business. If the media outlet is registered, moreover, the company may have a different name from the online entity, further complicating efforts to investigate its ownership”¹²(pp.43)

A study conducted in 2018, by the Albanian Media Institute on the online media environment in our country concludes that:

“Online media landscape has certainly boomed in the last years, even though no one can say with certainty what is the exact number of online news media in the country. At the same time, it is not easy to identify the persons working in these online media, as well as other aspects related to these online media. Increased Internet penetration and high use of mobile telephony has also further aided and accelerated the spread of online media.”¹³

⁸ “Media ne Shqipëri, përpara pasqyres” Komiteti Shqiptar i Helsinkit (2020) ; Tirane ; https://ahc.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/MEDIA-PARA-PASQYR%C3%8BS_01.06.2018_Tip-1.pdf. pp26.

⁹ “Mapping Online Media in Albania. Survey on online media: Tirana; (Instituti Shqiptar i Medias (2018) <http://www.institutemedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Media-shqiptare-dhe-standardet-evropiane.pdf>

¹⁰ https://ahc.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/MEDIA-PARA-PASQYR%C3%8BS_01.06.2018_Tip-1.pdf.

¹¹ “Internet Governance in Albania and its role in media freedom” BIRN (2020): Tirane <https://birn.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Internet-Governance-1.pdf>. (pp.23

¹² Ibid.

¹³ https://www.osfa.al/sites/default/files/media_online_english_1.pdf (pp.81)

The same study speaks about what researchers call “a digitalization migration” where both journalists and audiences are finding in the online world better alternatives of expressions and/ or information. The research further states that the online media suffers by the same problematics as the traditional media, mostly complaining about:

- Lack of funding and incapacity for a sustainable future
- Limited staff and lack of professional training
- Lack of ethical conduct

In a latest study on the evolution of the Albanian Media, when speaking about the developments during this digital migration, Progni, a scholar and journalist, states that: “Having no experience in the media, many portals give importance only to the number of readings, or clicks, breaking every rule of traditional media and the worst, openly violating the code of ethics. Their content includes fake news, rumors, and intentional misinformation, without citing any source of information, to manipulate public opinion in favor of a certain political, economic interest, for the sole purpose of increasing the audience. The professionalism of many portals still leaves much to be desired, from the titles of the articles, where none of the basic criteria of journalism are met.”¹⁴

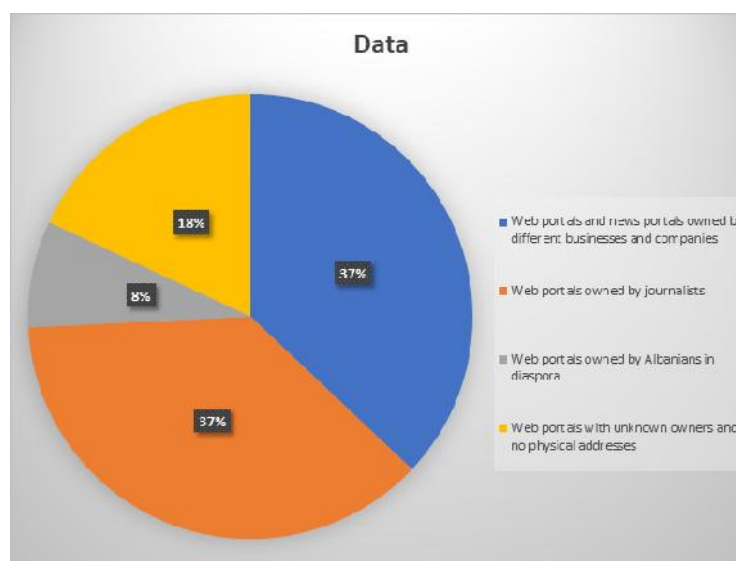
These kinds of statements are also supported by research such as the one mentioned above, which states that: “The explosion of new online media outlets has also raised concerns about professionalism, tabloidization, ethical problems, abuse of personal data and copyright issues. This is stirring debate among stakeholders on how to best regulate this new environment without restricting freedom of expression and freedom of the media on the Internet”¹⁵

Finally, it should be emphasized that the developments of news portals and their agenda are influenced by a variety of factors that shape their content and priorities. This policy brief limited itself in providing an overview of some key considerations, opening the floor for further discussions and research on issues such as editorial policy and professional integrity, political and regulatory environment, social media, and algorithmic influence among others.

Online data on web and news portals

Given that the first stage of this research aimed to create a map regarding the online news portals, data offered for discussion have been gathered by open-source data, elaborated by online platforms such as datareportal.com; similarweb.com, and alexa.com. Based on their findings results that:

Categories	Data
Web-based portals and online media	936
Web portals and news portals owned by different businesses and companies	411
Web portals owned by journalists	412
Web portals owned by Albanians in diaspora	86
Web portals with unknown owners and no physical addresses	200



¹⁴ Progni, L (2021) Media Shqiptare, rrugetimi I veshit drejt lirise. Tirane: KAS (pp.132)

¹⁵ “Internet Governance in Albania and its role in media freedom”: BIRN (2020); Tirane <https://birn.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Internet-Governance-1.pdf> (pp.13)

- 65% of the news portals remove the authors' names and the source
- In 97% of cases it is difficult to cite the source and there is no information from where the news published on these portals was obtained.
- 99.5% of published articles lack double citation, thus going against the deontology of journalism¹⁶

Some data about the most visited online pages and web portals in the country refer to the article entitled "The 50 most visited pages in Albania, according to Alexa.com"¹⁷. Even though, this webpage is no longer accessible and the data it refers to is not entirely up to date, the statistics and the study released at the time were quite significant.

"Referring to news portals, the main source of information is balkanweb.com, ranked the fourth most visited in the country, with an average of 8 minutes per user/day, spent getting informed about the latest news.

Balkanweb.com is followed by panorama.com.al, which is ranked the 5th.

In sixth place is syri.net, a news portal, which has grown continuously in recent years.

In eighth place is another news portal called gazetaexpress.com

TvKlan.al is the 10th most visited news portal in the country.

Abcnews.al is the 12th most visited site in the country, while it is ranked as the news media where users spend most of the time, with about 10 minutes per day.

After Abcnews.al, the most visited news portals are Anabelmagazine.com (14th place) and Classlifestyle.com (15th), both focused on lifestyle news.

Top Channel, which a few years ago was among the most visited sites in the country, is ranked 22nd, according to Alexa." It should be noted that the above-mentioned data are outdated and there is a lack of updated statistical data in relation to the most visited news portals in the country.

Another more up-to-date source, like pro.similarweb.com provides digital data for the number of visits and the rankings of websites all over the world. For the last three months, we can see the rankings of the most visited news portals in Albania. Below you can see a graph that shows the monthly visits from June to August 2023 of the top five news portals in the country.



*Source: similarweb.com, September 2023

Website Performance					
Engagement					
Metric	balkanweb.com	panorama.com.al	shqiptarja.com	gazetatema.net	syri.net
Monthly visits	3.072M	5.140M	4.059M	4.005M	5.543M
Monthly unique visitors	475,059	716,563	411,611	387,929	477,072
Visits / Unique visitors	6.47	7.17	9.86	10.32	11.62
Visit duration	00:08:49	00:06:28	00:04:23	00:06:49	00:05:41
Pages per visit	9.50	5.38	5.19	6.87	4.72
Bounce rate	44.77%	32.13%	52.97%	32.15%	30.99%
Page Views	29.17M	27.65M	21.06M	27.52M	26.16M

Source: similarweb.com, September 2023

¹⁶ <https://datareportal.com/>; OPINION - TV Klan, 5 April 2023

¹⁷ Published on www.monitor.al, December 31, 2021.

The second figure shows the Performance of these news portals by taking into consideration the engagement during the last three months. Syri.net has an advantage regarding the monthly visits, general visits/unique visitors and bounce rate compared to the other news portals.

Panorama.com.al has an advantage compared to the others on monthly new visitors.

Balkanweb.com takes the lead in Visit durations, pages per visit, and page views, which shows that its readers read more than one article and search through the page while visiting it.

News-organization, ownership, and regulation of the online media

Online media work in the same context as traditional media and face similar obstacles and challenges. Dependence on financial resources, understaffing and overwork, insecure working relationships and general problems with professionalism plague both traditional and online media equally. However, certain characteristics of the nature of online media seem to exacerbate the already existing problems with the professionalism of the Albanian media. The fact that there are no binding legal rules for online media compared to audiovisual media means that there are no specific boundaries defined in terms of professionalism and ethics. Anonymity, an inherent feature of the Internet and thus online media, sets a new tone and potential for media abuse.

What organizational structure and with what agendas?

While the organizational structures, funding sources, and editorial policies of different news portals in Albania vary, their importance as a crucial source of information can hardly be overstated. According to the data from the Albanian Media Institute's survey, the minimum staff size for a media is between 6 and 12 employees, while twelve is the maximum for online media. Few online media outlets employ a staff of up to twelve staff members. However, it is also asserted that certain media employ contributors while remaining outside the permanent framework¹⁸. However, it should be remembered that this study by the Albanian Media Institute was conducted in 2018 and that as of now, in 2023, changes have undoubtedly occurred. However, it provides crucial information that highlights several issues. It would be beneficial to conduct the same survey again and compare the results between 2018 and the next years.

While news portals are expected to present objective and reliable reporting, there are concerns that some portals may have hidden agendas. It is therefore important to examine the hidden agendas of news portals and the implications for public trust in journalism. Some news portals have hidden agendas that contradict their stated editorial policies and values. For example, some portals have a political bias that affects their reporting, seeking to promote or denigrate specific political figures or parties. Other portals are driven by financial interests, prioritizing content that attracts clicks, views, and advertising revenue over stories of public interest. Also, it is well known that hidden agendas in news portals can have profound ramifications for public perceptions of journalism. When people believe that news portals have hidden agendas, they begin to question the authenticity and neutrality of the news in general. This can lead to a decline in trust in journalism, reducing the value of the news and the role it plays in informing and shaping public opinion.

To address hidden agendas among news portals, it is needed a multi-pronged approach that involves collaboration between news portals, industry regulators, and the broader public. News portals should be transparent about their funding sources and editorial policies, providing audiences with clear information about any potential conflicts of interest, while this doesn't occur in the context of the online media in Albania.

It goes by the book that media outlets should also strive to uphold journalistic standards, emphasizing accuracy, objectivity, and integrity in reporting. On the other side, industry regulators should monitor the news portals for compliance with ethical standards and ensure that outlets that violate these standards face accountability. The public also has a role to play in demanding transparency and accountability from news portals and holding them accountable for any hidden agendas that might undermine the credibility of the news. By fostering transparency, upholding journalistic standards, and promoting accountability, the trust in journalism can be restored so that journalism continues to play a critical role in shaping public opinion.

The Importance of Self-Regulation

With the growth of the online media in general in recent years, the public is increasingly following news and information online, moving somewhat away from traditional media. The rapid development of new online media has greatly expanded the space of freedom of expression, but on the other hand, it has also led to the increase of cases and the hardening of language that incites hate (hate speech), violation of privacy, discriminatory comments, etc. This situation has encouraged the undertaking of several initiatives to adopt legal measures in this direction. Although these efforts have so far been unsuccessful, this is an area of great sensitivity for a large part of the public, and it is very likely that in the future it will turn into a battleground for protection of freedom of expression. At the same time, most online media seem to be

¹⁸ "Mapping Online Media in Albania. Survey on online media": Tirane Instituti Shqiptar i Medias (2018) https://www.osfa.al/sites/default/files/media_online_english_1.pdf.

taking advantage of the freedom afforded by the legislation, but rarely bother to set a good example and adopt ways that contribute to a better media environment. There is an ongoing debate about whether the regulation of news portals should be undertaken by the state or whether news portals should engage in self-regulation. We suggest in this policy paper that while state regulations and censorship have the potential to infringe media freedom, there is a need for news portals to engage in self-regulation to ensure journalistic integrity and accountability.

Self-regulation refers to the practice of news portals taking on the responsibility of monitoring their own editorial practices and adherence to ethical standards. News portals can engage in self-regulation through codes of conduct and ethics, independent audits, and whistleblowing procedures, among other measures. Self-regulation is crucial in ensuring that news portals are accountable to the public and maintain journalistic integrity.

While state regulation and censorship may seem like a means of holding news portals accountable and a solution to the problems addressed above, they can lead to media censorship and infringe on media freedom. State regulation can manifest in laws or policies that aim to control news content, restrict free speech and freedom of the press. Such laws can be used to silence critical voices, undermine public trust in journalism, and consolidate state power. The dangers of state regulation and censorship underscore the importance of finding alternative means of holding news portals accountable. Therefore, self-regulation is more beneficial in promoting transparency and accountability among news portals. Practices such as the establishment of codes of conduct and ethics, and clearer guidelines on editorial practices, can enhance public trust in journalism. Independent audits by industry associations, as well as the promotion of free and open dialogue among journalists, can create an internal culture of self-regulation and foster journalistic excellence. A culture of self-regulation can go hand in hand with state regulation and promote a more open and transparent media landscape. Thus, it is essential to promote self-regulation among news portals and advocate for policies that enhance media freedom and protection of the press.

Recommendations and further guidance

We are presenting in this paper further recommendations for how news portals can contribute to a better media landscape in Albania, a country that faces many challenges regarding the political economy of the mass media but also that of the news portals:

1. News portals should prioritize ethical journalism and ensure all content published is accurate, fair, and unbiased.
2. By promoting transparency and accountability, news portals can build trust with their audience, which is vital for a healthy media landscape.
3. News portals should advocate for press freedom and the right to free speech in the country.
4. Educate readers on media literacy, enabling them to understand how news is reported, what sources are legitimate, and how to identify fake news.
5. Ensure that underrepresented voices, including women, minorities, and marginalized communities, are amplified, and represented in news coverage.
6. Encourage diversity of staff so that the newsroom is reflective of the country's society and political fractions.
7. News portals should take an active role in combating disinformation and misinformation in the media landscape.
8. Provide platforms for public discussions to promote debate and exchange in online spaces and beyond.
9. Collaborate with traditional media can help create a diverse media ecosystem and provide opportunities for joint-investigations, cross-referencing, and fact-checking.
10. News portals should maintain their editorial independence from political influence, vested interests, and other pressures.
11. Offer independent, third-party fact-checking to policies and politicians, promoting accuracy and transparency.
12. Use collaborative investigative journalism: Collaborative investigations into issues of public concern, including corruption, fraud, abuse of power, and other critical issues.
13. Investigate and document cases of human rights abuses, including abuses of power, and provide campaigns for action based on this coverage.
14. Promote accountability, transparency, and the fight against corruption in all sectors of society
15. Innovate to increase engagement, participation, and new tools for news and information sharing, enabled by technology and communication infrastructure.

However, news portals can make better use of their potential advantages over traditional media in their organizational structure and impact, for example in terms of agility, reach, costs, engagement. We are presenting here ten advantages that may serve the purpose of a healthier media environment:

1. Digital news portals can adapt quickly to changing news stories and trends and can publish stories in real-time. They can also experiment and innovate more quickly and cheaply than traditional media.
2. News portals can reach a broader audience, if they have an internet connection, which can lead to increased exposure and influence. Traditional media, on the other hand, are typically limited to a specific geographic area.

3. Digital news portals often have lower overhead costs compared to traditional media, as they do not need printing presses, delivery trucks, or physical newsstands.
4. News portals can engage their audience in multiple ways, such as through interactive multimedia, live chats, or social media. This engagement can lead to increased loyalty, brand recognition, and impact.
5. News portals can deliver tailored content to individual users based on their interests, location, and behavior. This can lead to better engagement and a more loyal audience.
6. News portals can track user behavior and gather analytics data to better understand their audience and improve their content. This can help them to increase impact and revenue.
7. News portals have more control over their content, as they are not subject to external censorship or editorial boards, which can lead to more freedom and independence.
8. News portals can diversify their revenue streams beyond advertising, such as through subscriptions, sponsored content, or e-commerce. This can create new opportunities for growth and revenue.
9. News portals can easily collaborate with other media organizations, journalists, and experts worldwide to create multi-disciplinary productions that traditional media may not have the resources to execute.
10. Unlike with traditional printed media, news portals are accessible at any time and place. With the rise of smartphones and computers, news portals can be easily accessed on any device with an internet connection, making them a more convenient way for people to stay informed.

Finally, we provide with five recommendations about some factors that can be considered by news portals from within the political economy approach of the media:

1. Transparency: News portals should prioritize transparency. This means being clear about their funding sources, any conflicts of interest, and their editorial policies.
2. Independence: News portals should maintain their independence from political parties and pressure groups. This can be fostered through editorial policies that prioritize neutrality and objectivity.
3. Diversity: News portals should strive to provide coverage of all voices and perspectives in the political landscape. This might mean reaching out to minority groups, opposition parties, and civil society organizations.
4. Quality: News portals should prioritize delivering quality content that is well-researched, well-written, and relevant. This can help build trust with audiences and establish the portal as a reliable and respected source of information.
5. Collaboration: News portals should seek to collaborate with other media organizations, civil society groups, and academia. This can help enhance their coverage and understanding of the political economy in Albania.

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A Balkan Saga of Kazantzakis

PhD. Ermir NIKA

Abstract

The concept of Balkan climate, not only as graphical notion, but explained with its all complexity in time and in various periods, from the genesis up to nowadays, have been extended the history through the past, through the evidences and through the facts-occurring in the social and political life of the Nations, a notion which is explained in particular and in entirety as well. Regarding the social penetration and interpersonal communication, inside and beyond the individual or community to which it belongs, literature has had a major impact and continues its mission in the development of spiritual and mental approximation among peoples, as well as to explain or interpret through the art of the word. The combination of these essential elements provides the natural and pervasive nature of the spirit that permeates and connects the human fates intertwined with differences and approximations between them, not only as a past experience but also as the future destiny. Apparently at the center of this “crater”, from time to time, the subjects, the characters, the dramatic actions and their absurdities, enclose the prominent creativity and individuality of Nikos Kazantzakis’s literature, an author who portrait the concept of reality- not only as a rhapsodic one - who sings and depicts the eternity past, but also the everlasting future.

Key words: Balkan, Literature, Creativity, Novel, Dramatic, Characters, Spiritual.

Kazantzaki’s Work A Balkan Saga

The Balkan climate not only as a notion or geographical coordinate, with all its complexity in different times and periods, from its genesis to the present day, history has been able to decipher to a certain extent through the past, testimonies and facts that happened in the social-political life of the nations that make up this whole, as special as it is generalizing.

Regarding the penetration into human relations, within and beyond the individual or the community to which it belongs, literature has played and continues to carry this role and mission in the spiritual and mental alignment between mutual peoples, as well as to explain or interpret through the art of speech. The intersection of these essential elements creates in a completely natural form and means the spirit that permeates and connects the intertwined destinies with the distinctions and proximities between them, not only as an experience of the past but also as a destiny of the future.

It is precisely in the epicenter of this crater that is disturbed from time to time, the subjects, characters, dramas and absurdity that clothe the literary work of Nikos Kazantzakis with outstanding creative individuality, who departs from this reality not only as a rhapsody that sings and describes the past eternal but at the same time the eternal future.

At first glance, it seems as if the whole world and literature in particular was waiting for the arrival of a missionary who would discover and then touch and outline an unknown dimension in Greek written art and this would be Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis. It was understood that he took the first steps all alone, but in the grip of his literary and life journey, he had and continues to have followers and spreaders of his word, in every corner of the globe where ideas meet principles, the past with the object reality, temporal with the eternal.

"Since its beginnings until recently, it has cultivated all possible types of literary writing; with poetry, with prose, with drama, with essays, with travel notes, with translation; but it is luck - not so much for him, as for the craft, which he served - that from the sunset of his life, he decided to devote himself, almost entirely, to long prose"¹

Nikos Kazantzakis is absolutely one of the most influential authors and philosophers in the literature and innovative thought of the 20th century, not only in Greek art but also seen and appreciated in the field of European culture. He was born on February 18, 1883 in Heraklion, Greece, at a time when Greece was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. It should be mentioned that in 1946 the Society of Greek Writers nominated him together with the other well-known writer Angelos Sikelianos for the Prize in Literature. We will have to point out that precisely in 1957, he lost the award to Albert Camus, even just by one vote. So narrow would be the border and the distance between these two authors.

To be coherent with all the stages that accompanied his activity, we must underline that he was not very well known internationally until 1964, when the director Michael Cacoyannis made the film, "Zorba, the Greek", based on his novel known "Life of Alexis Zorba". In fact, even before that, he was not so unknown, but he had not yet gained the right fame and the position he should have in world literature. Some more years later, it would be the French writer Albert Camus himself, who would express quite naturally and with much appreciation that "Kaxanazqis deserved a hundred times more" the attention and the trophy than he himself. In symbiosis with what was being talked about his literary work and the ever-greater attraction of the reader and critics towards it, Kaxanazqis himself would affirm in one of his writings that "always, throughout my life, one word has me tyrannized and whipped: the word climbing"². It would be the year 1957, that while suffering from leukemia, he undertook his last trip to China and Japan. But, when he returned, he was so burdened by his health that he was immediately sent to a hospital in Freiburg, Germany, where he died, ending his life on October 26, 1957, in Freiburg, Germany.

As a follower of the outstanding luminaries of the Greek literary tradition, he created his own path, unique up to that time, illuminating new and untouched spaces in the written art. With his work, he did not anathematize any tradition carried over from the past, but managed to bring about a re-dimensioning of the author's relationship with time, stable and temporary things. According to the criticism, "The literature of a people or a nation is not defined as major literature because there are one or two celebrated writers; no, but when it consists of a whole ensemble of dignified writers"³. Seen in this perspective, Kaxanazq's creativity clearly complements this gallery and bas-relief of Greek authors and the works that they represent in themselves and as a whole in world culture.

In his view, man has an unbroken and unchanging relationship with the reality that surrounds him. And this essentially constitutes a primary concept regarding the role of man vis-à-vis himself and nature, from the beginning to the near and distant future, which takes place in his entire literary corpus, "Almost in the entire work of Kazantzakis' we encounter this Russian ideal; life in harmony with nature. He also makes it clearer to us the connection that Kaxanazqis feel with the mythical heritage of man"⁴.

According to his theses, the most stable idea that accompanies his ultimate vision of the human being and the terrain where he exercises his activity and develops his existence, as different in the entire terrestrial and universal habitat, the author is guided by the mindset that "Since no we can change reality, let's change the way we look at it." If we analyze in its essence, all of Kazantzákis' literary creativity, we will notice that he entered and completed his mission in literature with unshakable principles, which he defended with every means, price and dedication, facing the societal mentality, not only in Greece but also in the entire Peninsula, but also with the philosophy and ideology of religion, seen both in the institutional plan but also in the spiritual heritage of civilization that represented in international culture, faith as a form and instrument of awareness and emancipation in the tradition customary of the community he belonged to. "Gift, deep and sincere concern for the fate of man, external and internal experience, spiritual lava, confessional plantain of Kazantzákis were, it seems, nothing more than branches of a river that was never exhausted"⁵

As a result, an irrefutable conclusion is reached that "Kazantzákis is a unique case in the history of world literature: it was decently offered in the literary and institutionalized opinion of its country through its international career and appreciation. Although he was fought mercilessly and for weak motives by the political extremes of the left and the right of the time, Niko Kazantzákis and his work triumphed: today it constitutes spiritual wealth for millions of readers all over the world... Kazanxaqi traveled a lot and the product of his travels are travel notes, a sui generis literary form, perhaps from his most qualitative aesthetic production, even though, at the top, they were used as writings and journalistic correspondence for the needs of the political press of the time", writes the translator in Albanian in one of his publications of Kazantzákis, Stavri J. Dajo⁶.

In the years when his creativity was marking a visible ascent and spread in other languages and cultures, as a powerful and completely original voice of Contemporary Greek Literature, "Kaxanazqis was criticized for not being closely connected with the ideals of his people, that the literature he created did not express the aspirations of his people (Kordhatos in the name of the left), while others instead criticized him for condemning superstitions and parodying Christ. But Kazantzakis, more than anyone else, became the exponent of the Greek spirit, spokesman of the national psychology, of the ideals of his homeland. Having a sense of judgment and objectivity, he stood up against nationalist, racist and chauvinistic psychoses, mentalities that

¹ Romeo Çollaku: Parathënie në Udhëtim në Malin e Shenjtë, prozë – koleksioni klasik, Shtëpia Botuese Zenit, Tiranë më 2013, f. 5.

² Niko Kazantzakis, Letër El Grekos, roman, Shtëpia Botuese Uegen, Tiranë 2001, f. 9

³ Harallamb Qesko: Parathënie në ; Krishti kryqëzohet përsëri, roman Shtëpia Botuese Albin, Tiranë 1998, f. 1.

⁴ Ardian Klosi: Parathënie në ; Kapedan Mihali, roman, Shtëpia Botuese " Naim Frashëri", Tiranë 1992, f. 15.

⁵ Romeo Çollaku: Parathënie në Udhëtim në Malin e Shenjtë, prozë – koleksioni klasik, Shtëpia Botuese Zenit, Tiranë më 2013, f. 6

⁶ Dajo, Stavri: "Niko Kazanxaqi, i madhi i letërsisë që u kandidua 14 herë për çmimin "Nobel", Gazeta "Fjala", 26. 10. 2021.

create superiority and inferiority complexes and became the expression of an entire era⁷”. However, even today, he is judged for the upheaval he caused to the human mind and for the way in which man himself should direct his gaze within the self and essence, the world and the universe, as a protagonist of dilemmas and truths that disturb and shake consciousness of everyone, wherever fate has thrown or moved it as coincidence or destiny.

People are the same with the same superstitions and dilemmas from pagan times through Christian times to today. The Balkans in general is a set of cultures and beliefs. Kazantzakis goes outside this scheme and devotes himself to the human being in the face of the universe. Niko is by no means an antichrist, but with his views on man, he makes an act of full acceptance towards other cultures. He is remembered and appreciated even today by many researchers, but especially by critics as “a figure as culminating as it is complex in all Greek literature, a spirit as debased as it is sublime, as a “very Greek” cosmopolitan, both mystical and secular, both idealistic and materialistic; Buddhist, - a spirit with the turmoil of all times; ascetic and ecstatic like no other, epicurean and jeremiad; a spirit that always wavered..., that is, a personality that gave modern Greece the most sublime meaning in his works⁸...”

The characters of Nikos Kazantzakis are always and everywhere caught in a crossroad, not only as a Christian notion but also as a direction where they find balance with sin, repentance and faith for continuity. He not infrequently managed to experience and make a self-judgement on the art he built and unfolded against his absolute conviction through his pen, the signs he left to the world as evidence of how he lived and lived his journey from birth until the last breath Kazantzákis' words are still honored today as an epitaph for what he created and offered to humanity: “My soul is a cry and all my work is the interpretation of this cry”.

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⁷ Stavri Dajo: Parathënie në Jeta dhe vepra e Aleksis Zorbas, roman, Shtëpia Botuese Albin, Tiranë 2001, f. 3 – 4.

⁸ Harallamb Qesko: Parathënie në ; Krishti kryqëzohet përsëri, roman Shtëpia Botuese Albin, Tiranë 1998, f. 2.

The occurrence of bullying in Albanian schools

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Abstract

In our society, bullying is a phenomenon that is becoming more and more disturbing for us. This phenomenon is a challenge for both mental health specialists and public health professionals at the same time. Especially in schools, it is noticed that the spread is even worse. In order to study the prevalence of bullying in Albanian schools, was organized a qualitative research. For the study, were conducted 6 focus groups and 34 in-depth interviews. The participants were 10- to 15-year-old students, with different levels of school achievement and a variety of socioeconomic, cultural and educational status of the family. The male-female division was more or less equal. The study showed that there is bullying in schools. Boys are generally bullies, directing this behavior towards other boys and as well as girls. Among the reasons why this happens, the students mentioned personality traits, but also aggressive behavior in general of these individuals. The most mentioned consequences were social isolation and psychological problems for students who were victims of bullying. It is very important to take appropriate measures to prevent bullying. Thus, one way is to provide information on when a behavior is considered bullying, how we can understand that a child is a victim, etc. On the other hand, there should be a system in the school both for the protection of the victims of bullying and for the punishment of the bullies.

Keywords: *bullying, psychological problems, prevention*

Literature review

Bullying at school

Bullying is considered the phenomenon where one/several individuals use injury as a way to damage the victim's self-esteem. Understanding who these individuals are and why they choose their victims can be the first step in preventing these behaviors. Bullying at school refers to all types of bullying that occur on school premises; between peers, from older to younger, from or against teachers. A person is involved in bullying when he/she is continuously and for a period of time exposed to negative actions, from/to one or more people. Bullying is prolonged violence, physical or psychological, by a person or group of persons, directed at a person who cannot defend himself in that situation. Bullying is that situation where a person uses force intentionally, with the intention of repeatedly hurting another; it is a conscious desire to hurt and put the other under stress.

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Forms of bullying

Bullying can manifest itself in several ways, but five of them are the most common:

Physical bullying. It includes shooting, kicking, or destroying someone's property, where a group of students attack another, but generally it is an older or stronger student who abuses a younger student. Physical bullying is not only related to the bully and the victim, but can also have an impact on witnesses. **Verbal bullying.** Includes insults, mockery, racist speech or sexual harassment. Also, the threat is included here. Victims of this type of bullying may not react immediately, but over time they may suffer.

Bullying in disguise. It usually occurs behind the victim's back and is aimed at damaging the victim's reputation. Also, it includes telling unpleasant stories, mocking facial expressions and inappropriate jokes with the victim, etc. This form is one of the most common forms of bullying, and because adults may not be aware of its existence, it is also the most difficult to control and prevent.

Electronic bullying. It can happen anywhere and anytime, thanks to the development of technology at school and at home. This type of bullying occurs via text messages or online, and is very difficult to control. "Strong" bullies are usually victims of bullying in real life and direct their frustration at the victims, hiding their privacy behind the computer or phone. Their behavior includes depersonalizing the victim online, enabling others to form a negative impression of them, spreading rumours, etc.

The exception. It happens when the "strong" encourage the friends or peers of the victim to exclude the victim during a game or organized activity. By being excluded in this way, the victim will find it difficult to form relationships and may suffer isolation in the future. It may also happen that the "strong" threaten people like the victim, that if they don't exclude him, they will also have a similar fate.

What characteristics do the "tough" have?

- They have strong self-confidence, are impulsive and aggressive.
- They have verbal intelligence and low school achievements.
- They are generally a little older than the victim.
- They are not empathetic.
- Use bullying for power and control.
- They use violence to resolve the conflict.
- They have low self-esteem and see violence as a positive force.
- May lack parental involvement at home, and have negative views of peers and the school environment.
- They are easily frustrated, anxious and have a short attention span. These children can become "strong", as they enjoy the power they generate when they annoy others.
- They do not feel empathy for the victim and may feel justified in their behavior.

What characteristics do "victims" have?

- Victims are not chosen randomly.
- They are generally anxious, insecure individuals and lack social skills.
- They are usually solitary or isolated from the group.
- They may be small or physically weak.
- They cry easily and are non-receptive.
- May have learning or physical problems.

Statistics

In the world

Bullying as a negative phenomenon has existed for a long time. Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior repeats, or has the potential to repeat, over time. So bullying can happen anywhere and anytime. Although in most cases bullying occurs in teenagers, it can also be present in adults. If we do not prevent such behavior, then it risks becoming normalized as a behavior and becoming our everyday life. Bullying exists in several forms, such as verbal, physical and social bullying.

According to Psychology Today, bullying often occurs in and around school and playgrounds, although recently the Internet is also an environment where the phenomenon of bullying has become particularly worrisome. The consequences of bullying can have short-term and long-term effects for all involved, both psychologically (including depression, anxiety, low self-

esteem, etc.), physically (such as physical injuries, etc.) but also in performance academic. Individual experiences show that in our society it can often happen that victims of bullying are not protected by others but remain alone. Consequently, there is a lack of awareness of the consequences of what bullying can cause the victim. Particularly worrying are the psychological consequences because, the loneliness created within oneself by not wanting and being afraid to express with their experiences, not even with family members, can then cause various consequences that lead to the development of anxiety and depression. Their world can turn into a dark, uninhabitable place. All this condition can also have fatal consequences. But it may happen that people do not understand what it means to be a victim of bullying and the consequences it can cause.

A study done in February of this year by the research company “Pyper”, says that bullying is mostly present in high schools and primary schools, while a smaller percentage is in universities/colleges. “Of all the educational institutions, the participants consider that the phenomenon of bullying is mostly present in high schools (58.31%) and primary schools as well as in a smaller percentage in university/college. Also, it is worth noting that of all the types of bullying present in Albania, verbal bullying is considered the most present type of bullying by the participants, leaving behind cyber and physical bullying.

According to the data, there is no single profile of a person involved in bullying. Youth who bully may be either well connected with society or marginalized, and may be bullied by others as well. Similarly, bullies sometimes bully others.

Example, simple but quite delicate cases, are the groups that are formed in classes and some minority of them are left alone with no one accepting them in their groups. Each of us has a case when at least once we felt inferior. If the question is asked how we felt or feel those moments, of course the answer is clear: worthless, unlike others, lonely and redundant among them. Then why don't we stop for a minute, knowing all the bad things that this phenomenon is causing, why don't we help the victims of bullying but stop and laugh with the bully and make them even more 'special'? If there is support, of course it will continue to cause more victims. Why don't we start to make a radical change in our cultures to eradicate this phenomenon and leave no place for it in our societies? Now the bullies are the outcasts, not the victims. We need to help them change and support the people who are victims of bullying to overcome this.

Therefore, it is important to invest in education and socialization programs from the family, school and community, because depending on how the children are educated and socialized, they will also implement those behaviors in their societies, whether at school or road. We must be careful how we treat others. Teachers and educators should also engage in the prevention of this negative phenomenon, because, among other things, they are also a mirror for students. Let's work to address bullying, because together we can fill our shortcomings because despite the fact that we are all different, we are equal.

In the UNESCO report, bullying is categorized into three main forms: physical violence, psychological violence/social exclusion and sexual violence. Bullying in schools is a worldwide phenomenon. Almost one in three students worldwide has experienced bullying in the past month. Available data from all regions show that 32% of students have been abused in one form or another by classmates in one or more days of the last month.

Some children have experienced bullying frequently. However, the prevalence of children who have experienced bullying and the frequency varies from one region to another. The percentage of students who have reported violence in the sub-Saharan African region is 48.2%, in North Africa 42.7% and in the Middle East about 41.1%.

Europe is among the regions with the lowest prevalence of students who have experienced school violence at 25%. In North America, the prevalence of students who have experienced bullying is 31.7%. Meanwhile, according to the report, it is cited that sexual violence is the second most widespread form of bullying in many regions. About 11.2% of children who have experienced bullying report that they have become the object of ridicule, sexual comments.

Among other things, the UNESCO report based on these findings gives recommendations on what should be done to end bullying in schools. First is legislation, in order to protect the rights of children and to undertake policies to stop and respond to violence in schools. Second, it should train teachers to prevent and respond to violence and bullying in schools. Thirdly, support should be provided for children to speak openly and seek protection. Also, one of the recommendations is to give priority and show more care to children who are part of vulnerable groups.

In our country

The Council of Europe and the European Union, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, published the first national study on bullying and extremism in 9-year and secondary schools. The results showed that over 20% of students are affected by bullying. The study found that 1 in 5 students from grades 4 to 12 claimed to have been affected by bullying at school. Almost half of those affected suffer from psychological bullying, about 35 percent from verbal bullying and the rest from physical bullying.

Albanian and European researchers interviewed thousands of students, teachers and parents in 141 public and private schools in all regions of the country to measure the frequency of this phenomenon and its features in the Albanian reality.

The study found that 1 in 5 students from grades 4 to 12 claimed to have been affected by bullying at school. Almost half of those affected suffer from psychological bullying, about 35 percent from verbal bullying and the rest from physical bullying. Regarding gender, the data showed that the majority of students affected by bullying are boys. Likewise, 1 in 5 students and 1 in 8 teachers use extremist terms and hate speech.

Bullying is more present in the 5th and 11th grades and the place where most such behaviors occur is the classroom, when the teacher is absent 40 percent, the school yard 40 percent, and even about 20 percent even in the presence of teachers.

The surveyed teachers think that students fall prey to bullying over 70 percent because of their appearance, obesity, the second are students with speech difficulties and the third are those who are weaker than others. Half of the teachers surveyed

claimed that there is no specific anti-bullying policy in schools, and the vast majority of them, over 70 percent, have not received any training on how to deal with this phenomenon.

In the report “Behind the numbers: Ending school violence and bullying” published by UNESCO in January 2019, the prevalence of students who have been abused in Albania is said to be 19.9%, about 22.6% among boys and 17.3% among girls.

Violence in school settings (in all its forms) is a violation of the rights of children and adolescents to education, health and well-being. No country can achieve inclusive and equal quality education if students experience violence or bullying at school, according to the report “Behind the numbers: End school violence and bullying” published by UNESCO in January 2019.

In Albania, the prevalence of students who reported being raped was 19.9%, about 22.6% among boys and 17.3% among girls. The figures are higher among 11-year-olds, where according to the report, about 23.8% have admitted that they have experienced bullying or violence at school in one of its forms, compared to 13-year-olds, where the ratio is 20%. Among students aged 15, the prevalence of victims is 16.1%.

The report “Voice of Youth in Albania, 2017” revealed that although they know their rights, young people in the country feel unheard by state institutions in decision-making. The survey surveyed 1,200 children from eight regions in Albania such as Gjirokastra, Kuçova, Mati, Dibra, Korça, Elbasan, Durres and Tirana, aged 12, 14 and 17. The main issues children were asked to think about were decision-making, education, violence, bullying, school and community safety, discrimination, exclusion, costs in schools, awareness of their rights and the future. The report found that bullying was a major problem with 1 in 3 children appearing to have fallen victim to bullying and harassment in the last school year. Girls in urban areas are twice as likely to be bullied as boys (40% of girls versus 20% of boys). In rural areas, bullying and harassment seem to affect both boys and girls (respectively 38.9% and 40.8%), albeit in worrying numbers.

Almost all Albanian children have heard about their rights according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, although in their answers they say that they want to be more involved in decision-making at school and in the community.

Data from a report by the Ministry of Education and the Council of Europe published in 2021 showed that girls are the most victims of the bullying phenomenon in the country. The findings of the study with a sample of 144 schools across Albania showed that bullying occurs more in urban private schools. In these schools, according to experts, the most common type of bullying is psychological in 45 percent of cases, followed by verbal in 37 percent of cases and physical in 33 percent. Young Albanians also appear stressed, mainly from school and the tasks that come from it. Three out of four young people are stressed about grades in school, with first-year high school students in urban areas the most stressed. On the other hand, 10 percent of the children surveyed do not feel safe at school.

The survey revealed that 58% of young people surveyed have been present at an event of physical violence in the past year, while 2 in 5 children do not know or are unsure where to turn when they feel abused or treated unfairly. The report found that the home is the place where children feel more safe, while the least safe place for them is public transport or the school bus. Emotionally, half of the children in both rural and urban areas claimed to feel sad and demoralized for a long time. Looking to the future, 85% of children have positive thoughts, although less than half of them (45%) are optimistic about finding a job after finishing school.

In its recommendations, the children’s rights organization Save the Children in Albania said that local government capacities should be strengthened through the decentralization of competences and local budget adjustments, as children expect more from the areas where they live.

Methodology

For this purpose, a qualitative study was conducted.

His aim was to understand bullying, studying the phenomenon in depth and detail.

The objectives on which the development of this paper is based are as follows:

- Review of contemporary literature to identify similar studies that will be taken into consideration or will serve as pillars of orientation in this work.
- Distribution of the questionnaire and its complete completion,
- Evaluation of three phenomena, specifically the measurement of the phenomenon of bullying, victimization and fights or physical aggression.
- Assessment of which of these phenomena is more dominant in student behavior.
- Assessment of how the learning progress affects these behaviors and vice versa, i.e. do these behaviors affect the learning progress of the interviewed students.
- Assessment of whether bullying is manifested more in women or men.
- Assessing the relationship between bullying behaviors, victimization and physical altercations, to determine how they influence each other.
- Comparison of the results of this paper with contemporary studies.
- Providing the necessary recommendations based on the findings of this paper. It was thought that the most effective way of obtaining data was through in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Thus, 6 focus groups and 34 in-depth interviews were conducted. The participants were in the age group of 10 to 15 years and varied in terms of academic achievements as well as socioeconomic, cultural and educational status of the family.

Limitations of the study

The limitation of this study is the lack of inclusion of all children, up to the age of 18. One of the limitations of this paper is the non-inclusion of schools in rural areas in the study. To have a more comprehensive study in which comparisons could be made between school types or areas.

Also, in this paper, other forms of bullying or the influencing factors in such behaviors were not evaluated, also in this questionnaire, no information is obtained on the psychological, somatic, health condition of the children, to assess whether these phenomena have affected their health.

Results and discussions

This topic is of particular importance in the context of the development of inclusive education. From the English. inclusive education, which provides for the education of children with disabilities in general education institutions. The risk of bullying increases when someone completely different from them appears near the children.

For example, a case brought by the participants:

“Sonny is a disabled boy from birth tetraplegic). The father sent him to a regular school so that his son would consider himself a normal person. But classmates made fun of Soni, who would commit suicide because of this.

Physically helpless, Soni was bullied by his classmates, but he won and overcame the difficult psychological ordeal.”

Some studies state that bullying at school is extremely dangerous. It occurs at the time of growth, self-identification, personality formation, mastery of moral norms, development of stereotypes in relations with the opposite sex, positioning oneself in a team. The protagonists of school bullying, according to them, are generally individuals with social problems. Their behavior can be “fed” by hormonal storms and, consequently, the mental instability of aggressors and victims.

Additional risks are the duration of the stressful situation, its duration in time. Plus, the child’s unwillingness to share his problems with adults, to fight for the right to leave the problematic team.

Aggression can be individual or group. And the object of bullying can be both an individual person and a group of students. A distinction is usually made between physical and psychological (emotional) bullying.

Physical bullying is not only a beating, but also a “lighter” means of influence. For example, slapping, kicking, jumping, squeezing, pushing, hair pulling, teasing or other unwanted touching.

Psychological or emotional abuse is most often manifested verbally - in statements containing mockery, irony, sarcasm.

It can be name-calling, harassment, offensive language, offensive nicknames, tagging, threats, gossip, defamation, funny untrue stories, provoking humiliating situations, systematic kidnapping or damage to things. But the means of influence can also be the complete absence of any contact: a boycott.

Children are sometimes silent about problems. They can blame themselves for everything. Suffer from feelings of guilt, fear of parents overreacting or worsening the situation due to their intervention. Beware of accusations that they are “space, informers, thieves”.

The participants mentioned as signs of bullying at school:

- bruises, scrapes, scratches, torn clothes. They should be warned about their regular occurrence, regardless of the reliability of the child’s explanation for each particular case);
- damaged, broken things (school supplies, textbooks, equipment, jewelry, clothing);
- a request for additional money that may be intended for extortionists and blackmailers;
- frequent illnesses, complaints of poor health. Headache or stomach ache, sleep problems (insomnia, anxiety);
- deterioration of academic performance, loss of interest in classes, absenteeism. Refusal to go to school for various reasons;
- bad mood after returning from school. Constant depression, anxiety, tears, or, on the contrary, irritability, aggressiveness;
- loneliness, lack of friends and school acquaintances;
- a strange way to school - a long, uncomfortable, roundabout way;
- problems with eating: excessive or lack of appetite;
- painful feelings about their appearance or other factors that make the child “different”;
- running away from home, self-harm, suicidal manifestations.

Most of the participants admit that bullying negatively affects self-esteem, provokes the development of complexes, self-awareness as a loser.

Likewise, there are not a few respondents who know that bullying can provoke nervous and mental disorders, phobias, depression, nervous diseases, tics;

Bullying can affect the breakdown of the victim's relationships with family and friends, as well as in any team;

Likewise, experiences with bullying can lead to the establishment or consolidation of negative scenarios in relationships with members of the opposite sex, or create problems in building and prevent the building of a healthy family, and even lead to loneliness for life; develop a propensity for violence in adulthood.

Some characteristics that the participants mention as being related to bullying are"

disability, physical disability, external defects. For example: weakness, pain, myopia, wounds, lameness, stuttering, enuresis, overweight, red hair, freckles;

speech and intelligence problems;

differences from ordinary people - mental retardation or, on the contrary, "very high" abilities. Consequently, poor or very good academic performance;

Race, nationality, religion, skin color, different appearance, which are not natural in a certain region;

Low level of family income and, accordingly, poorer clothes, lack of equipment;

Social and emotional immaturity, non-compliance with the norms of written and unwritten rules;

Everything that distinguishes a child from others.

From the administration of the instruments, it results that the participants in the study mention factors that, according to them, influence the promotion of bullying (bullies or victims)

- children from socially disadvantaged families, large, with one parent. Children of families with atypical behavior and lifestyle; overly supervised by parents, children who have no experience of behaving in a team. They do not know how to communicate, build relationships with peers;
- emotionally unstable, mentally unstable, fearful, anxious, withdrawn, quiet, modest, insecure children; children who do not respond adequately to jokes and non-standard situations; favorites of teachers and children who find it easier to communicate with adults;
- poorly dressed children who do not respect hygiene, with dirty hair, with an unpleasant smell;
- newcomers to class or those who have been absent for a long time (provided newcomers);
- because of the intrigues and cunning of the same age, such as envy, jealousy, suspicion, revenge. In this case, intrigue, slander, rumors are used.

Unfortunately, the participants admit that teachers are also involved in the bullying process. Sometimes they act as initiators or even aggressors. Teachers are ordinary people with their own mentality, personality traits and vices. They can also be influenced by all of the above factors.

If a teacher has a high moral authority, is respected by children and parents, his clearly articulated position is quite sufficient to stop bullying.

Two examples coming from participants:

"Every day, 10-year-old Arbi asks his mother for more lek for lunch, and meanwhile he looks as thin as a stick and even came home hungry one day. It turned out that Arbi was giving his lunch money to a boy in the 5th grade who threatened to beat him if little Seth didn't hand over the money."

"13-year-old Kaltra thought things were going well at her new school, because all the popular girls at school were paying attention to her. But later she discovered that one of them had spread a bad rumor about her. Kayla would cry at night and go to the school doctor's office every day making up a disease just to avoid these girls in class."

Unfortunately, the form of bullying faced by Arbi and Kaltra is very widespread. In surveys, most children and teenagers admit that the phenomenon of bullying occurs in their school.

A person who uses this form of bullying can turn the way to the school bus or recess into a nightmare for children and can leave emotional consequences. In extreme situations, it can include violent threats, property damage or physical violence.

If your child has fallen prey to bullying, you must act to stop it. There are several ways you can help children deal with teasing, bullying, gossip to minimize the impact it has on them. But even if this problem has not been encountered in your home so far, it is suggested that you talk to your children so that they are prepared to face it if it happens in the future.

Most of the participating children admit that they have been bullied by siblings or friends at some point in their lives, but this is usually not harmful if it is done as a game or both children are having fun. But when bullying turns into mockery through hurtful and constant comments, it crosses the red line and becomes bullying, which I need to stop.

Bullying is physical, verbal or psychological violence with intent. It can range from hitting, pushing, insulting, threatening, and stealing monetary values or property.

The participants in the study state that some children use forms of bullying by avoiding others and spreading rumors about them. Others are using social media or email to taunt or hurt others. It is very important that you treat the phenomenon of bullying seriously and not ignore it as something that the child "must go through to get stronger". The effects of bullying can be serious and affect a child's safety and self-esteem. In severe cases, bullying has contributed to tragedies such as suicide or school shootings.

Participating children state that they think that bullying as a form of influence is used for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they make fun of others because they need a victim, someone who seems emotionally or physically weaker, someone who acts

or looks different—to feel more important, popular, and in control. Although some aggressors are bigger or more powerful than the victim, this is not always the case.

Sometimes, the participants said, children bully because that's what they've been taught. They may think that this behavior is normal because in their family where everyone gets angry, shouts and makes fun of each other. Or some TV show promotes misbehaving people are eliminated, shunned or ridiculed for their appearance or lack of talent.

Conclusions

The study showed that the participants state that the specific types of bullying are:

- Physical - hitting, obstructing, kicking as well as destroying a child's property
- Verbal-teasing, bullying, inappropriate comments
- Psychological or social—spreading rumors about the child, making fun of him in public, exclusion from a group.
- Electronic-online bullying includes all electronic mediums such as email, websites, social networks, messages, videos, etc. used to threaten or hurt.

The consequences that bullying causes in children who are in the role of the victim, according to the participants in the study, are:

- Mental problems - children who have fallen prey to bullying have a higher risk of depression, anxiety, insomnia, lack of self-confidence and thoughts of self-harm up to suicide.
- Bad grades in school - they may be afraid to go to school or get good grades. They find a way to avoid leaving classes.
- Use of substances/drugs - are more vulnerable to the use of alcohol or other drugs.
- Violence-many of the children who have fallen prey show violence to others.

The participants in the study think that bullying at school is extremely dangerous. It occurs at the time of growth, self-identification, personality formation, mastery of moral norms, development of stereotypes in relations with the opposite sex, positioning oneself in a team.

The participants in the study think that the protagonists of bullying at school are individuals with social problems. Their behavior can be “fed” by hormonal storms and, consequently, the mental instability of aggressors and victims.

The participants in the study think that additional risks are the duration of the stressful situation, its duration in time. Plus, the child's unwillingness to share his problems with adults, to fight for the right to leave the problematic team.

The participants in the study think that aggression can be individual or group. And the object of bullying can be both an individual person and a group of students. A distinction is usually made between physical and psychological (emotional) bullying.

The participants in the study think that physical bullying is not only a beating, but also an “easier” means of influence. For example, slapping, kicking, jumping, squeezing, pushing, hair pulling, teasing or other unwanted touching.

They state that psychological or emotional abuse is most often manifested verbally - in statements containing mockery, irony, sarcasm. It can be harassment, offensive nicknames, tagging, threats, gossip, slander, funny untrue stories, provoking humiliating situations, systematic kidnapping or damage to things. But the means of influence can also be the complete absence of any contact: a boycott.

The participants in the study say that children are sometimes silent about problems. They can blame themselves for everything. Suffer from feelings of guilt, fear of parents overreacting or worsening the situation due to their intervention. Beware of accusations that they are “space, informers, thieves”.

Recommendations

Parents; how to recognize that your child is a victim of bullying?

Experts say that parents should be attentive to some very clear signs that show that their child is a victim of this phenomenon.

The first sign is that the child returns from school with torn clothes or books.

The second sign is that the child's body has bruises, cracks and scratches which he or she cannot explain or for which he invents useless excuses.

The third sign is that the child seems afraid of the idea of going to school. He or she may complain of a headache or stomach ache.

The fourth sign is that the child prefers to go to school by choosing a new route.

The fifth sign is that the child begins to have bad dreams and cries in his sleep.

The sixth sign is that the child gets angry and sad easily, no longer keeps company (due to fear of rejection) and withdraws more into himself.

The seventh sign is that the child starts asking for money and takes money from the parents' wallet without permission.

Other signs are related to dropping out of lessons, loss of appetite.

Parents should consider these signs as a signal to be more interested in what is happening with the child at school. They can meet

with the tutor and participate in extracurricular activities with parents and children. Above all, the child should be surrounded with a lot of love and the parent should repeat to the child that he will support him in any situation and together they will find a solution.

Likewise, if the child has fallen prey to bullying, he/she may not tell because of fear or shame. The warning signs may be subtle, but look out for these changes in mood or behavior:

- Loses or destroys clothing, personal property
- Loses friends or avoids social situations
- There are poor results in school, lack of desire to go to school
- Headache, stomach ache or other physical complaints
- Sleep problems
- Changes eating habits
- Anxiety after spending time on the Internet or on the phone without explanation
- Lack of self-esteem
- Self-destructive behavior or leaving home.

Parents say that they start to notice when the child behaves differently or seems anxious, lack of hunger, insomnia or stopping the activities he used to prefer. When children seem moody, easily touched or start to avoid certain situations (such as don't get on the school bus) these together can be a sign that they are experiencing bullying. If in doubt but the child does not show, find an opportunity to open the topic by approaching him from a distance. For example, you see a situation on a TV show, use it as a point where you can open the conversation by asking "what do you think about what you saw?" or "how do you think that person should behave?" This can lead to questions like "Have you seen this happen in real life?" "Have you ever experienced it?". We also suggest you talk about your experiences or that of another family member who may have experienced this.

Let the child know that being a victim of bullying or harassment, or seeing it happen to someone else, is very important to tell someone, be it you or another adult such as a teacher, school psychologist, sister or brother, etc.

If the child tells you that he is experiencing bullying from another, listen carefully and offer support. Children have a hard time telling adults about bullying because they feel ashamed that this is happening to them or they are worried that the parent will be angry, irritated or will act. Some children think that it is their own fault that this is happening to them, that if they looked different, this would not happen to them. Sometimes they are afraid that if the aggressor finds out that they told the situation will get worse. Others are afraid that if they tell their parents they won't believe or act. They are afraid that the parent will ask them to fight and they cannot do this.

Appreciate the child when he tells you and remind him that he or she is not alone—many children experience it in life. Emphasize that the culprit in this case is not the child but the one who is practicing bullying. Reassure the child that you will solve this problem together.

Let someone at school (principal, psychologist or teacher) know about the situation. They are in a monitoring position where they can take steps to prevent the problem.

Because the term "bullying" can be used for many situations, there is no one treatment approach. What is suggested for one situation may not be appropriate in another. Many factors such as children's age, riskiness, and specific behavior determine the best course of action to resolve.

Take it seriously if you hear that the bullying is getting worse and if the aggressor realizes that your child is telling or if he has made threats or used physical violence. Sometimes meeting with the aggressor's parents is the right thing to do. But in most cases the teachers or the psychologist should be the first contact. If you have tried these methods and want to talk to the child's parents, you should do so in a context where a representative from the school is present.

Parents can help children deal with bullying when it happens. For some parents it can be tempting to tell him to fight for himself, of course you are angry that your child is suffering and you were taught to "raise your voice for yourself" when you were little. Or you may be worried that the child will continue to suffer at the hands of the aggressor, and you think that by turning the hand you can scare the aggressor. But it is very important to advise children not to give up and even worse not to engage in bullying themselves. This escalates violently and the disc can be damaged. In this situation, he should leave, be with others and tell an adult.

Some strategies to discuss with children that help them feel better are:

- Avoid the aggressor and use the friend system. Use a different toilet if the aggressor comes near you and don't move alone all the time. Make sure you are accompanied by a friend on the bus, school corridors, recess.
- Hold your grudge. It's natural to get upset with the aggressor, but that only makes him stronger. It makes them feel more powerful. Practice not reacting, or looking upset, this takes a lot of practice but is a very good skill for the bullying to stop (since it no longer has the effects). Sometimes children find that "calm down" helps them a lot by counting to 10, taking deep breaths, or walking away. Sometimes learning to keep a calm mask helps them push the aggressor away.
- Be brave, walk away and ignore it. Clearly and loudly tell the aggressor to stop, and then walk away. Practice ignoring the taunts, act disinterested. By ignoring it, you are showing that you don't care, so the aggressor gets upset because it no longer has an effect on you.
- Tell an adult. The teacher, principal, parent, or someone else in the school can all help put an end to bullying.

- Chat. Talk to someone you trust like a psychologist, teacher, sibling or friend. They can help you with suggestions to regulate the situation. You are never alone.

The confidence of any child who faces bullying takes a hit, so to rebuild it you need to encourage your children to spend time with friends who are a positive influence on them. To participate in sports or in activities that strengthen society. Always be ready to listen but encourage him to share the good parts of the day and listen carefully. Reiterate that you have faith in them and will do everything to stop the situation the child is going through.

Facing an aggressor is difficult for any child, especially in school settings. Listen to the boy and reassure him that you understand and that any feelings he is experiencing are normal. Reassure him without making him feel like you're ignoring his feelings. When he tells you how he feels, repeat his thoughts and feelings using phrases like, "I know you're worried." When the child feels understood by you, he will be more open to accepting your help and advice.

Explain that everyone worries, even adults at different times. But there are ways for you to feel better and be less afraid. Talk about some strategies the child can use if someone makes fun of him. Ignoring the aggressor, or walking away, using humor to combat aggression can work. Aggressors give up when they see no reaction from their target.

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The effect of invalidating family environments on the development of borderline personality disorder during adolescence and young adulthood

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Abstract

The development of Borderline Personality Disorder is thought to be the result of the combination between a genetic predisposition to high emotional sensitivity and an invalidating family environment, which is described as an environment where an individual's display of emotions are constantly ignored, trivialized, punished or met with other inappropriate reactions. This paper aims to analyze the way in which the three types of invalidating family environments: chaotic families, perfect families and typical families, affect the development of borderline traits in adolescents, which then evolves into borderline personality disorder diagnosis in early adult life. This paper uses a combination of two measure instruments. Firstly, a semi-structured interview, with questions based on Marsha Linehan's biosocial theory of the development of borderline personality disorder (1993). And secondly, self-reporting using the Invalidating Childhood Environment Scale. It was found that all three types of invalidating family environments directly affected the development of borderline personality disorders and in all cases that were studied, borderline traits were present and distinguishable since adolescence and had led to a borderline personality diagnosis in early adult life. The study of chaotic family environments was of particular interest as it pertained to the major number of cases taken into account during this paper and its effects on the development of borderline personality disorder were palpable.

Key words: borderline personality disorder, invalidating family environment, personality

Introduction

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980. This disorder is characterized by unstable interpersonal relationships, self-image and affect and marked impulsivity (American Psychological Association, 2013). From the moment it was added, there has been an increased interest in studying the factors that affect this disorder in order to make diagnosis and treatment easier.

In 1993, Marsha Linehan published her book *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder*, where she brought forth the biosocial theory approach. It states that BPD is developed as a result of emotional vulnerability and invalidating family environments. This theory became the basis of the development of Dialectic Behavioral Therapy, the most effective therapy in treating BPD (May, Richardi & Barth, 2016).

An invalidating environment constantly ignores, neglects, undermines or punishes individuals for expressing their emotions and needs (Wagner & Linehan, 1997). According to Linehan (1993), the first invalidating environment that an

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individual encounters is the family environment. She notes three types of invalidating family environments: chaotic, perfect, and typical. An emotionally vulnerable child that grows up in these environments is at risk of displaying borderline traits during adolescence and later developing BPD. The **aim** of the study is to analyze how the three different types of invalidating families, chaotic, perfect, typical, affect the individual during adolescence and young adulthood in the development of borderline personality disorder. The **research question** posed is: “How do invalidating family environments affect the development of borderline personality disorder?”

Literature Review

The definition of personality and personality disorders

Personality has been a concept of great interest to humankind since ancient times. There have always been attempts to understand what creates personality, or what it is, for humans to understand their similarities and differences as well as categorize others (Pervin & John, 1999).

Freud brought forth a determinist theory and changed the way personality is studied with his theory of *id*, *ego* and *superego* (Cherry, 2022). In a simplified way these three components are explained as: *id*, a component of our personality that is with us since birth, which represent instincts and primitive behaviour, completely located in the unconscious, it is the basis of psychic energy; *ego* is developed from *id* and it makes sure that *id*'s instincts are expressed in a way that is acceptable to society, it reflects reality and works both in the unconscious and conscious; *superego* is developed from the age of 5 and includes morals and ideals internalized from society and parents (Cherry, 2020). Freud's leading theory in personality highlights both internal instincts as well as the influence of morality learned from parents and society (McLeod, 2017).

Another theory of great importance is Bowlby's and Ainsworth's theory on attachment, finalized in 1991. According to this theory, the attachment a child forms to their primary caregiver determines their future relationships. There are four types of attachment: secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant and disorganized (Bowlby, 1983).

A securely attached child feels loved and taken care of. In anxious -ambivalent attachment, there is uncertainty towards the primary caregiver, and the child seeks validation as they become afraid of abandonment. An avoidantly attached child learns that their emotional needs will not be met as the primary caregiver is negligent, physically, emotionally, or both (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Disorganized attachment happens when the relationship between the child and the primary caregiver is unstable and thus the child displays confusion between wanting to get support from the caregiver and wanting to get away from them (Main & Solomon, 1986). While attachment theory was not focused on how personality is created, it offers great insight on an important component of personality, the way a person creates relationships with others (Cozolino, Drulis & Samuelson, 2021).

According to the Encyclopedia of Psychology (Kazdin, 2000), “personality” refers to the characteristics of every individual, which include models of thinking, feeling and behaving. The study of personality is separated into two fields; the first studies personality traits, the second studies how these traits integrate into one being. The study of personality consists in organizing different traits and then observing how these traits interact and integrate with each other (Mayer, 2005).

While keeping in mind this definition, one wonders when can we measure personality? How does the stability of personality change with age (Harris, Brett, Johnson & Deary, 2016)? To answer this, we look at Erikson's stages of human development. Erikson (1993) proposes 8 phases of human development, each focusing on an internal conflict that must be resolved in order to advance: birth to 1 years old – trust vs. mistrust; 1 to 3 years old – autonomy vs. shame/doubt; 3 to 6 years old – initiative vs. guilt; 6 to 11 years old – industry vs. inferiority; 13 to 21 years old (adolescence) – identity vs. confusion; 21 to 39 years old (young adulthood) – intimacy vs. isolation; 40 to 65 years old – generativity vs. stagnation; 65 and older – integrity vs. despair.

During adolescence, the main conflict of identity vs. confusion gives way to exploration in forming one's identity. The adolescent asks themselves “Who am I?” and “Who could I be?”. During this phase, the importance of roles in society and where one fits come forth. As there is still a degree of confusion, it is more valuable to measure personality in young adulthood, where the confusion has been resolved and the individual now sees themselves in relation to other people (Orenstein & Lewis, 2021).

After defining personality, a definition for personality disorders is necessary. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V (DSM V), personality disorders are defined as:

“An enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual's culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time, and leads to distress or impairment.” (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013, pg.645).

Diagnosing Borderline Personality Disorder

According to APA (2013), borderline personality disorder (BPD) is characterized by a pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, affect, and marked impulsivity. To diagnose it, five of the following nine criteria need to be met:

1. Frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment.

2. A pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterized by alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation.
3. Identity disturbance: markedly and persistently unstable self-image or sense of self.
4. Impulsivity in at least two areas that are potentially self-damaging (e.g., spending, sex, substance abuse, reckless driving, binge eating).
5. Recurrent suicidal behavior, gestures, or threats, or self-mutilating behavior.
6. Affective instability due to a marked reactivity of mood (e.g., intense episodic dysphoria, irritability, or anxiety usually lasting a few hours and only rarely more than a few days).
7. Chronic feelings of emptiness.
8. Inappropriate, intense anger or difficulty controlling anger (e.g., frequent displays of temper, constant anger, recurrent physical fights).
9. Transient, stress-related paranoid ideation or severe dissociative symptoms.” (APA, 2013)

Prevalence of Borderline Personality Disorder

Borderline Personality Disorder is a relatively new diagnosis, first introduced in DSM III in 1980, though the term “borderline group” was first used towards the end of 1930s (Stern, 1938). As a result, there is a comparatively low number of studies done in understanding it as opposed to other disorders (Crowell, Beauchaine, Linehan, 2009).

Different studies have shown that its prevalence falls between 0.5% to 0.7% of the population (Samuels, Eaton, Bienvenu, Brown, Costa & Nestadt, 2002 ; Torgersen, Kringlen & Cramer 2001 ; Coid, Yang, Tyrer, Roberts & Ullrich, 2006.). According to the DSM V (APA, 2013), there is a possibility that this percentage can be as high as 1.6% to 5.9%. 6% in primary care settings and up to 10% in outpatient mental health clinics and about 20% in psychiatric inpatients.

In a study done in Great Britain, in a clinical setting 4-6% of individuals showing up to a primary care doctor have BPD (Moran, Jenkins, Tylee, Blizard & Mann, 2000), but at the same time, primary care doctors tend to not recommend this diagnosis (Moran, Rendu, Jenkins, Tylee & Mann, 2001). In a study done in the United States of America, the prevalence of BPD was 1.6% in the general population and 20% in people getting support for their mental health (Chapman, Jamil & Fleisher, 2022). 10% of patients diagnosed with BPD commit suicide, 50 times more than the general population (Paris & Zweig-Frank, 2001). There has been a visible increase of the prevalence of BPD in the last decades (Cloud, 2009; Rice-Oxley & Johnson, 2020).

Invalidating environments and emotional dysregulation

Biosocial Theory, from which dialectic behavioral (DBT), the most effective form of therapy for patients with BPD emerged, was originally developed by Marsha Linehan in 1993 (Moorey, Davidson, Evans & Feigenbaum, 2008; May, Richardi & Barth, 2016). It states that the development of BPD comes as a result of *emotional vulnerability* and an *invalidating family environment* (Linehan, 1993).

Linehan (1993) says that invalidating environments affect individuals with high emotional vulnerability by not allowing them to learn how to modulate and regulate their emotions and by developing emotional dysregulation. *Emotional vulnerability* is determined at birth, and it includes high sensitivity to emotional stimulus, high intensity of emotions and slow return to baseline (Linehan, 1993). Sensitivity to stimuli makes an individual react fast and have a low limit of acceptable stimuli (Pluess, Assary, Lionetti, Lester, Kathryn, Krapohl, Aron & Aron, 2018). High emotional intensity means that the reaction to events that most would consider normal is extreme for these individuals (Goleman, 1987). Slow return to base line means that it is difficult for the individual to return to a calm state. In people without BPD, an emotional experience lasts for 12 seconds in the brain, while there is proof that in people with BPD this timeframe can be up to 20% longer (Tartakovsky, 2016).

The ability to regulate emotions in children is defined as “The children’s ability to inhibit inappropriate behavior related to the strong negative or positive affect, (b) self-soothe any physiological arousal that the strong affect has induced, (c) refocus attention, and (d) organize themselves for coordinated action in the service of an external goal” (Gottman & Katz, 1989). There is evidence that speaks of a biological basis to it, but it is mainly learned in the family environment.

According to APA Dictionary of Psychology (VandenBos, 2015), “*emotional dysregulation* is an extreme or inappropriate emotional response to a situation (e.g., temper outbursts, deliberate self-harm)”. Dysregulation of affect is defined as the damaged ability to modulate negative emotions and it is connected to interpersonal trauma. Mistreatment in childhood, emotional and physical, can give us an idea on how this dysregulation is formed (Dvil, Ford, Hill & Frazier, 2015).

An *invalidating environment* regularly ignores, trivializes, or punishes the individual for expressing their emotions and their needs (Wagner & Linehan, 1997). Examples of behaviors in these environments would be emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, constant criticism, minimization of achievements, and labeling individual traits as “unacceptable to society” (Crowell et al. 2009). Other examples would be not tolerating a child’s expression of emotions or when children are not able to fulfil a certain task, instead of working with them to understand the problem, said task is simplified with no regards to personal abilities (Keng & Soh, 2018).

Invalidating family environments

The first invalidating environment that a child encounters is their family. There are 3 distinct types of invalidating families: *chaotic, perfect, and typical families* (Linehan 1993).

Chaotic invalidating families

These types of families are characterized by familiar chaos, which includes lack of routine, constant stimuli, internal and external to the household, which are then internalized into family life, unpredictability, lack of structure in familiar activity and a fast-paced lifestyle (Linehan, 1993). These characteristics create environmental confusion in a child (Marsh, Dobson & Maddison, 2020). They often include parents who deal with substance abuse, untreated mental illness and financial problems. As a result, they are not present in a child's life, emotionally and physically (Mountford, Corstorphine, Tomlinson & Waller, 2007). Thus, the child gets neglected.

Children in these families often develop an avoidant attachment style, as the primary caregivers are not present. This forces the child to create a protective system, which often includes hiding their negative feelings and creating emotional distance from their parents (Ainsworth, Bowlby, 1991). According to Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, (1978), a child that has developed this type of attachment responds to separation by showing a lack of interest in the primary caregiver's whereabouts. This response is a conflict between attachment behaviors that seek to keep the parent close and avoidant behaviors, developed as a coping mechanism because of disappointment from the lack of primary caregiving. As the child represses their emotions, they become unable to learn the process of regulating one's feelings and healthy affect, which they carry into adulthood (Gould, 2021). Another form of attachment that may develop is disorganized attachment as the relationship with the primary caregiver is uncertain and the child gets confused between seeking care and avoiding it (Main & Solomon, 1986).

Perfect invalidating families

In these types of families, parents do not tolerate displays of negative emotions from their child, which leads to the repression of emotions and an inability to regulate them. These emotions are labeled as "unwanted" by the parent for reasons such as leading a stressful lifestyle that demands a lot from them be it a stressful job or a big family, being egocentric as well as parents' own issues in regulating their negative emotions (Linehan, 1993). These families appear healthy on the outside but there is an emphasis on hiding negative feelings such as annoyance, sadness, anger or fear. Children are encouraged to suppress and hide these feelings and continue living as if nothing is wrong (Mountford et al., 2007). The child does not learn the healthy way of expressing their feelings and confronting them, so these emotions get internalized. Linehan (1993) expresses that in these families there is a superficial level of compassion towards the individual who has BPD, but family members constantly show invalidating behaviors such as being surprised as to why this individual cannot simply keep their emotions under control.

Attachment in perfect invalidating families can vary as the primary caregivers are present and do not show unstable behavior, thus the problems that are expressed in adulthood are discussed in a case-by-case basis (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Typical invalidating families

These families are common in western countries, countries that have adapted a capitalistic culture (Linehan, 1993). These societies are individualistic, emphasizing a clear border between the self and others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Cognitive control over emotions and focus on achievements are considered measures of success. These values are also put at the forefront of family relations, creating an environment that teaches the child to have full control over their emotions (Linehan, 1993). Though, countries with a more collective and interdependent culture model also emphasize "self-control", the ability to suppress emotions and "not explode" in social settings (Ford & Mauss, 2015). This approach may be beneficial to certain individuals, but not all, as not everyone's capability to face difficult situations comes from inside suggestions. By placing importance on self-control but not teaching the child the necessary mechanisms to achieve it, the child gets confused and develops emotional dysregulation. Furthermore, if an individual is not capable of having a high self – control, or lets themselves be defined not by internal feelings, but external relations, they get labeled as immature or weak, even if they are still a child learning the emotional modulation mechanisms (Linehan, 1993). Millon (1993), considers BPD a problem that is attached to modern societies and those in development, hypothesizing that these behaviors are expressed at a lower level in traditional societies.

The connection between invalidating family environments and the development of BPD

Through the years there have been numerous studies proving the relation between invalidating family environments and the development of BPD. Nickell, Waudby, & Trull, (2002) in their study of 393 18 year old participants diagnosed with BPD found that a high score in insecure attachment, especially anxious attachment and perceived negligence, especially from the mother, were associated with the display of borderline traits. As this age shows the transition between teenage and adult, this study is of great importance as it shows that borderline traits are present since an individual's teenage years.

One of the main factors of BPD is emotional dysregulation (Glenn, Klonsky, 2009). A study conducted by Buckholdt, Parra, Jobe-Shields, (2014), found that there is a significant relation between the development of emotional dysregulation and invalidating parents. It also found that it is a generational problem as parents who experienced emotional dysregulation

would invalidate their children's feeling and as a result the children would display emotional dysregulation. This dysregulation would manifest in internalized behaviors such as sadness, depression, anxiety and isolation or externalized behaviors such as impulsivity, aggressive emotional reactions and rule breaking. Adolescents would react in this way as a result of negligence and lack of parental attention.

Franssens, Abrahams, Brenning, van Leeuwen & de Clercq (2021) found that not only does parental invalidation affect the development of borderline traits, but also that as a child's reactions become more serious, parents learn to react more forcefully towards dysregulated emotions, thus increasing the level of invalidation.

Sansone & Sansone (2009) have noted the difference in perception in borderline patient in many studies towards the lack of support from parents. Mothers are often described as egocentric, using the child to fulfil their own ego, as being completely uncaring and negligent or being on the other end of the spectrum and being too involved, or grieving as they may have experienced a loss up to two years prior to the child's birth. Fathers were particularly unfavored by these patients, because of the patients' age or a history of sexual abuse from the father. In a study conducted in 2003 by Bandelow, Krause, Wedekind, Broocks, Hajak & Rüther, it was found that when compared to the control group, BPD patients had a negative perception of the family environment where they had grown up. They would describe the behavior of parents as unfavorable in every aspect as opposed to the control group.

There have been numerous studies done since the first BPD diagnosis and the theory proposed by Linehan in 1993 on invalidating family environments. All these studies prove and emphasize that invalidating family environments are a crucial factor in the development of BPD, along with biological predisposition (Gunderson, 1980; Links, Steiner, & Huxley, 1988; Goldman, D'Angelo, & DeMaso, 1993; Links, & Munroe Blum, 1990; Laporte, & Guttman, 2001; Bradley, Jenei, & Westen, 2005; Fruzzetti, Shenk & Hoffman, 2005; Giffin, 2008; Larrière, 2013; Infurna, Brunner, Holz, Parzer, Giannone, Reichl, Fischer, Resch & Kaess, 2016; Chapman, 2019; Enfael, Omidvar & Zarenejad, 2021; Hessels, van den Berg, Lucassen, Laceulle & van Aken, 2022; Shrivastava, Manjula, Vijaysagar & Thippeswamy, 2022).

Methodology

Study purpose, research questions and hypothesis

The **purpose** of this study is to analyze how invalidating family environments affect the development of borderline personality disorder.

The **aim** of the study is to analyze how the three different types of invalidating families, chaotic, perfect, typical, affect the individual during adolescence and young adulthood in the development of borderline personality disorder.

The **research question** posed is: "How do invalidating family environments affect the development of borderline personality disorder?"

Hypothesis 1: Typical invalidating family environments affect the development of borderline personality disorder and the manifestation of borderline traits during adolescence.

Hypothesis 2: Perfect invalidating family environments also affect the development of borderline personality disorder and the manifestation of borderline traits during adolescence.

Hypothesis 3: Chaotic invalidating family environments are a major factor in the development of borderline personality disorder and the manifestation of borderline traits during adolescence.

Independent variable: invalidating family environment

Dependent variable: the development of borderline personality disorder

This analysis is based on the *qualitative methodology* of research. The primary data is gathered through semi- structured interviews. Secondary data gathered from different sources such as books, studies, and articles are also used.

Participants

The participants in this study were five individuals diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. Four of them were women and one was male. The median age was 25.6 years old. The sampling was purposeful, based on two main criteria, BPD diagnosis, and being in the early adulthood stage of development.

Procedure

The sampling was done through communication with mental health specialists. The participants were then contacted by phone and were explained the subject and purpose of the study. They were informed about confidentiality. After informed consent, interviews were scheduled. Four of the interviews were conducted face to face and one was conducted online. The interviews lasted 20-25 minutes over a time frame of 14 days.

Instruments

As there is no standardized survey on BPD, participants were asked to describe which of the 9 symptoms of BPD diagnosis they exhibited when the diagnosis was obtained and which ones they exhibit now.

Invalidating Childhood Environment Scale (ICES), developed by Mountford et al. (2007) was also used. It includes 14 statements that need to be evaluated using the Likert scale. Its purpose is to describe the level of invalidating behaviors through childhood in relation to each parental figure or primary caregiver. This scale also includes 4 descriptions of validating families and the three types of invalidating families, which were not used as that information was gathered through the interview.

Semi – structured interviews were conducted to gather information. The purpose of the initial questions was to collect demographic information. Open ended questions aimed to gather information on the perceptions, emotions, and history of the participants as well as the family environment. Clarifying and filtering questions were used to redirect the interview towards gathering data that would be useful for the purpose of this study.

Limitations

This study is based on the qualitative method. As such, its purpose is to describe and not to generalize. There is a distinct lack of studies done on BPD, especially in Albania, which makes it difficult to compare its findings with other studies. The existing stigma on mental health in our society makes it very difficult to find a satisfactory number of participants to generalize its findings. Regardless of these limitations, the chosen method lands itself as the most useful to reach findings that would be in accordance with the purpose of this study.

Case studies

Case	Gender	Age	Age at diagnosis	Criteria fulfilled at diagnosis	Criteria fulfilled today	Behaviors during adolescence
Case 1	Female	23	19	8	5	Rebellion, intense anger, self-harm, eating disorder, fear of abandonment
Case 2	Female	26	21	9	9	Rebellion, impulsivity, intense emotional explosions, unstable intimate relationships, disregard of her own life
Case 3	Male	31	23	9	0	Intense sadness, depressive episodes, difficulties building friendships, isolation, physical and emotional discomfort
Case 4	Female	24	18	6	3	Self-harm, difficulties building relationships for fear of being called weak, intense emotions
Case 5	Female	24	18	7	4	Intense bouts of anger, self-harm, substance abuse, eating disorder, very intense emotions, toxic and unstable relationships

Case 1

From ICES she expressed that her father would tell her not to talk about her worries, would ignore her when she had anxiety and would get angry when she made decisions on her own and when she showed sadness. Throughout the interview she expressed that there are no negative feelings towards her father, but their relationship is superficial.

For her mother she admitted to feeling ignored when she was anxious, to her mother getting angry when she would disagree with her and to getting responses such as “I’ll give you something to cry about” when she would cry. Her mother would encourage her not to express her worries. She would not help her when faced with things she could not do straight away nor show interest when she was feeling down. Her mother was preoccupied with how others would perceive their family and would always aim to show that there were no troubles with them. When she would cry or show sadness, her mother would yell at her. She seemed to have her own issues with regulating emotions as she would often respond in anger and mood swings.

When her parents had found out about her eating disorder, they had blamed her and had said she looked better because she was skinny. When she had asked to see a mental health professional, her parents had refused until the moment she was admitted to the hospital due to malnutrition, with the condition that she did not tell anyone.

Case 2

She did not fill in the ICES for her father because he was physically present but emotionally distant and thus their relationship was inexistant.

About her mother, she showed that she would get angry at her disagreements, would tell her not to be difficult, was not

satisfied with her achievements, would make her feel guilty for not understanding something and would sometimes ignore her anxiety. At the same time, she said her mother would help her in fulfilling difficult tasks and would ask and help her when she showed sadness or concern. She stated that she could not categorize her relationship with her mother as sometimes she would be extremely supportive and other times she would ignore her.

Her parents had an ongoing cycle of abuse where her father would be harsh and emotionally abusive to her mother, followed by a period of intense love and asking for forgiveness and then some calm times. Then the cycle would start again.

Case 3

When he filled in the ICES for his father he showed that his father would answer with irony to his feelings of happiness, would get angry and call him lazy when he could not do a certain task and would make him feel bad for it, would not ask what was wrong when he was in distress. He was uncertain when it came to his father being encouraging towards his future plans and offering help when needed. He expressed that his relationship with his father was cold and that his father would physically abuse his mother. He kicked his father out when he became an adult to protect his mother.

When filling in the ICES for his mother, the responses were almost identical to those of his father. It differed in the fact that his mother would react negatively to him being upset by saying “I’ll give you something to cry about!”, and she would get mad if he made decisions without her knowing. He was closer to his mother than to his father, but their relationship was still distant. He grew up in a community where most families had similar problems, yet his family was described as “indifferent” by others.

Case 4

While filling in the ICES, her responses for both parents were very similar. Neither would ignore her anxiety. She was undecided about whether she would get help when facing difficulties, being made to feel that not understanding something was bad, her parents getting mad when she disagreed or made her own decisions. She agreed that her parents would call her stupid when she could not do something, tell her not to be too happy about achievements, would call her lazy when she could not fulfill tasks and she would get a negative reaction when she was unable to solve a problem. At the same time, they would notice and help when she was sad and encourage her future plans. However, they would tell her not to talk about her feelings as it would only make things worse.

Throughout the interview she expressed that in her family, conflict was minimal, and her parents were present in her life. But, since she was a child, they pushed her to take part in a lot of activities such as dance, painting, piano, foreign languages, and it was expected of her to be in honor’s roll. She felt she could not handle the pressure and the workload as she did not have any free time during adolescence. When she had brought these feelings up, her parents had told her to “suck it up, this is the way to success” but they would not show her any coping mechanisms besides hiding her feelings. She talked about a specific episode where her mother had called her lazy and weak as she cried over homework in high school.

Case 5

She filled in ICES for her father, mother, and stepmother.

Her responses for her father and stepmother were very similar. Both would get mad when she would disagree, ignore her anxiety, would downplay her achievements, threaten her when she was sad, tell her that talking about your feelings is bad. Her stepmother would also call her dumb when she was unable to fulfill a task. She was uncertain about all statements which purpose was to be control questions.

Speaking of her mother, she answered similarly to previous figures, adding that she would reply with irony to her happiness, and would label her as lazy, dumb, would get mad when she would make her own decisions. She felt that her mother could not tell when she was dealing with negative emotions and would not offer help. She would make her feel that not understanding things immediately is a bad thing. She would not encourage her plans for the future nor ask what was wrong when she was sad.

She said that she had lost her mother to cancer at 12 and her father had remarried. During childhood her parents were present until the age of 5-6 and later due to work and illness would often leave her alone to take care of herself. Sometimes they would leave her under the watch of neighbors or her grandma, but her mother had “given them permission” to hit her if she misbehaved. After her mother’s death, the relationship with her father became very distant. She had a tumultuous relationship with her stepmother. When she had sought professional help, her family made her feel guilty for her illness. She explained an episode during which her stepmother had pulled up the arms of her shirt by force to show her self-harm scars, had told her “Something is severely wrong with you” and had been concerned that others would find out.

Discussion

Discussion

The goal of this study is to analyze how invalidating family environments affect the development of borderline personality disorder. This goal was achieved through literature review and case studies. The research question posed is: “How do invalidating family environments affect the development of borderline personality disorder?”

Hypothesis 1: Typical invalidating family environments affect the development of borderline personality disorder and the manifestation of borderline traits during adolescence.

During this study only one of the cases fulfilled the criteria of growing up in a typical invalidating family environment, case 4. Her parents did not want her to discuss her feelings, keeping clear boundaries between her and others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Her family was focused on achievements, such as academic achievements or various activities. Furthermore, they would negatively label her when she expressed her feelings. According to Linehan (1993), in a typical invalidating family environment, there is an emphasis on cognitive control of emotions and a focus on achievements as a means to success. This definition relates to the family description in case 4. The interviewee's mother would label her as weak when she cried, which was then carried into adulthood and affected her intimate relationships as she did not open up for fear of being weak. This trait was described by Linehan (1993) as in these families, individuals with low self-control are labeled as immature and weak.

She expressed that she was engaged in different extracurriculars regularly, which would make her feel pressured, a feeling she could not express to her parents as she would face a lack of support. Ford & Mauss (2015), said that in countries where the cultural norm is independence “self-control” was of utmost importance in achieving success.

During adolescence she would self-harm to confront internal anger, she had trouble creating relationships and had a fear of abandonment. According to DSM V, these are symptoms of BPD (APA, 2013) that manifested during adolescence. The identification of borderline traits which then leads to a diagnosis is possible, as supported by Orenstein & Lewis (2021), according to whom, during adolescence an individual begins to develop their personality but deals with confusion, thus after this age personality can be measured more accurately as the confusion has been resolved.

According to Franssen et al. (2021) there is a significant positive correlation between negative parenting strategies that involve invalidating behaviors and the development of borderline traits and a negative correlation between the development of these traits and positive parenting strategies. In case 4, while some positive parenting strategies seemed to be present, the interviewee was not certain when describing them, while she affirmed a lot of the invalidating behaviors described in the ICES. Thus, this case shows the positive correlation between negative parenting strategies and the development of borderline traits.

According to Fruzzetti et al. (2005) invalidating behaviors present in the family environment, such as invalidating answers towards affect, behaviors in public, sense of identity, and minimizing a child's difficulties, leads to many consequences such as emotional dysregulation, deficits in skills related to feelings, self-invalidation. These are all behaviors seen in BPD patients. In Case 4, self-invalidation is present, as shown in her belief that others would consider her weak if she expressed emotions. Emotional dysregulation and deficits in handling feelings are also present, such as her inability to deal with internal anger. These are behaviors that have been developed as a result of invalidating responses given by her parents towards behavior she would show in public.

As shown by the information gathered by the case study, backed by the literature review, the first hypothesis is proven correct.

Hypothesis 2: Perfect invalidating family environments also affect the development of borderline personality disorder and the manifestation of borderline traits during adolescence.

Case 1 shows traits of a perfect invalidating family environment. Case 5 displays traits of both perfect and chaotic invalidating family environment.

There are two core traits of these families: intolerance towards the expression of negative “unwanted” feelings (Linehan, 1993) and the encouragement of keeping said feelings hidden and proceeding to act as if nothing has happened (Mountford et al., 2007). Both cases display these traits. Case 1 in the way the parents would get angry when she was sad and would ignore her when she was anxious, meaning they would not tolerate these feelings. In case 5, her parents and her stepmom would get angry when she disagreed and when she made decisions without asking them. In both cases the parents would push the child not to talk about her feelings. Case 5 said she was made to feel guilty for her negative feelings and described an episode of physical abuse as a response to her self-harm.

Both cases displayed borderline traits during adolescence, as described by DSM V (APA, 2013). Both cases displayed self-harming behavior, impulsivity, high anger levels, eating disorders. Case 1 had an intense fear of abandonment. Case 5 abused alcohol and had unstable and unhealthy relationships.

Both cases spoke of negative experiences they had had as a result of their parents' behaviors. These findings are also supported by Bandelow et al. (2003), individuals with BPD report unfavorable behavior by parents during childhood and adolescence, and a crucial factor in the etiology of BPD is the parenting process.

Case 1 spoke about how her mother would get angry easily and not control herself. Case 5 said the same thing about her stepmother. Both cases spoke of self-harm as a way to deal with their feelings. These four individuals show emotional dysregulation, as explained by APA Dictionary of Psychology (VandenBos, 2015) as an extreme and inappropriate emotional reaction. According to Buckholdt et al. (2014), parents who display emotional dysregulation continue to invalidate their children's feelings, which leads to the children developing emotional dysregulation and displaying internalized and externalized behaviors such as depression, impulsivity, or aggressive emotional reactions.

Both cases displayed disordered eating, and Case 1 was made to feel guilty about it. According to Chapman (2019), genetic predisposition interacts with the invalidating environment and thus eating disorders are developed, which can serve as precursors to BPD.

With the findings of these case studies, as well as previously conducted studies, the second hypothesis is proven to be true.

Hypothesis 3: Chaotic invalidating family environments are a major factor in the development of borderline personality disorder and the manifestation of borderline traits during adolescence. During this study, chaotic family environments were the most present, with 3 out of 5 cases describing them, Case 2, 3 and 5.

Case 2 expressed that her relationship with her father was nonexistent, Case 3 said that this relationship was distant and Case 5 said that after the age of 5-6, her parents were not present. Emotionally or physically distant parents are a core trait of chaotic invalidating family environments (Mountford et al., 2007).

Case 2 spoke of an unstable rapport with her mother, switching between invalidation and support. This type of relationship is in line with disorganized attachment. The unstable relationship with the primary caregiver, in this case, the mother, has created confusion between seeking support and wanting to detach, which was carried into unstable intimate relationships as an adult (Main, Solomon, 1986).

Case 3 expressed a lot of invalidating behaviors from his mother's side and a distant relationship with her, which later translated into difficulties creating friendships and a distant relationship with his partner. Case 5 also showed invalidating behaviors from her mother and her stepmother and spoke of difficulties creating relationships and being part of toxic relationships. These two cases seem to have developed an avoidant attachment style as they knew their needs would not be met (Ainsworth, Bell, 1970). This type of attachment has manifested into adult relationships.

An unstable mother, a distant father, emotional and physical violence, create an unpredictable, unsafe, and unstructured environment, are typically seen in chaotic family environments (Linehan, 1993).

All three cases had been diagnosed after the age of 18 but had displayed borderline traits in adolescence. Case 2 showed rebellion, impulsivity, strong emotional reactions, unstable interpersonal relationships as well as a negative view of her life being meaningless. Case 3 did not show rebellion or impulsivity due to the unsafe environment he grew up in but had negative feelings of discomfort with himself and his body as well as difficulties building interpersonal relationships. Case 5 showed impulsivity, self-harm, unstable relationships, and alcohol abuse. Impulsivity, unstable emotions, intense inappropriate explosions of emotions, unstable relationships are all symptom of BPD (APA, 2013). According to Buckholdt et al. (2014), an adolescent can show internalized behaviors such as depression, anxiety and being closed off, as well as externalized behaviors such as impulsivity and rule breaking as a result of being invalidated by their family, a response to negligence and a way to demand attention. As all three cases had experienced negligence, these findings apply to them.

In Case 2, maternal support was unstable, but would often not be given. In Cases 3 and 5, maternal support was minimal. Franssens et al. (2021) found that maternal support has a negative correlation with the manifestation of borderline traits, thus a lack of maternal support shows risk of developing borderline traits. In all three cases, as the maternal support was minimal or lacking, this correlation applies. To add, disorganized attachment with the mother in Case 1, which was later present in adult relationships, speak of intense unstable relationships, typical of BPD (APA, 2013). In all three cases the father was absent emotionally, and in Case 5 even physically. According to Nickell et al. (2021), there is a positive correlation between an absent father figure and the development of borderline traits.

Furthermore, Larrivé, (2013), found that borderline traits manifest during adolescence, and their etiology is connecting to negligent parenting and invalidating family environments which influence the type of attachment developed as well as methods of regulation emotions. These family traits were present in all three cases. Bandelow et al. (2003) found that the development of BPD is strongly related to unstable family environments, characterized by an unhealthy relationship between the parents, divorce, domestic violence, parenting type and lack of attention shown to the child.

Taking all this into consideration, the third hypothesis is proven true.

Conclusions

The study's purpose of analyzing how invalidating family environments affect the development of BPD was achieved. All three hypotheses were proven correct.

Hypothesis 1: Typical invalidating family environments affect the development of borderline personality disorder and the manifestation of borderline traits during adolescence.

Hypothesis 2: Perfect invalidating family environments also affect the development of borderline personality disorder and the manifestation of borderline traits during adolescence.

Hypothesis 3: Chaotic invalidating family environments are a major factor in the development of borderline personality disorder and the manifestation of borderline traits during adolescence.

It was found that *chaotic family environments* had the most effect in the development of BPD.

However, it is hard to generalize the findings of this study seeing as it uses the qualitative method. It is necessary that in the future, quantitative studies are conducted with the aim of gathering empirical data to back up these findings. It would be recommended to have studies that measure the level of invalidating family environments in the general population as well as the number of individuals that develop BPD. Furthermore, the correlation between specific borderline traits and specific types of invalidating family environments can be studied. This study still has importance as the field of BPD is still underdeveloped, especially in Albania, so it serves as a gateway to further research.

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Resilience and personality traits at elderly

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Abstract

As the global population continues to age, understanding the factors that contribute to successful aging and well-being among the elderly has become increasingly crucial. This literature review explores the relationship between resilience and personality traits in the elderly population. Resilience, the capacity to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity, is a critical determinant of overall well-being in later life. Personality traits, on the other hand, have been acknowledged as enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that may influence an individual's resilience. This review systematically examines existing research findings and theoretical frameworks to shed light on the complex interplay between personality traits and resilience among older adults. Key personality traits such as neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, openness, and agreeableness are scrutinized for their impact on an individual's ability to bounce back from life's challenges as they age. This literature review synthesizes compelling research findings, revealing robust associations between specific personality traits and levels of resilience among older adults. Overwhelmingly, studies consistently indicate that certain personality traits, such as conscientiousness and extraversion, are positively linked to higher levels of resilience, facilitating better adaptation to the challenges of aging. By synthesizing the existing body of literature on resilience and personality traits among the elderly, this review aims to contribute to a better understanding of how specific personality traits may enhance or hinder an older individual's ability to adapt to the physical, emotional, and social changes that accompany aging. The findings from this review have practical implications for interventions and strategies aimed at promoting resilience and well-being in older adults, offering insights into personalized approaches to enhance the quality of life for an aging population.

Key words: resilience; personality traits; elderly

Introduction

The number of elderly people is on the increase, what might explain the amplified interest in understanding the factors that influence and promote successful aging. The elderly face very difficult situations at this stage of life, such as trauma, loss of loved ones, pandemics, etc., which have an impact on their lives (Willey, Gagliardi et.al., 2022). In addition to stressors that are the same for every individual, old people face difficulties that are related to their age, such as chronic pain, inability to move, chronic diseases, and high levels of isolation and loneliness.

Scores of studies that have investigated into these stressors have uncovered variations among the elderly as regards their quality of life and mental health (Lowsky et. al, 2014). Some older people tend to feel highly stressed and live poor quality lives, while others lead better lives, experience higher levels of well-being and less stress, despite worsening physical conditions. One of the main factors investigated in studies on successful aging is resilience.

Resilience refers to processes in which individuals use their abilities to get past obstacles, adjust well to challenging situations while maintaining a positive outlook (McKay, Barton, Garvis & Sappa (2020). It has been widely agreed that resilience is a three-dimension construct, therefore it can be assessed as a personality trait, a dynamic process and an outcome (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Salisu & Hashim, 2017).

As a personality trait, resilience is viewed as a sustainable source to help individuals respond to adversity in a flexible manner as opposed to a rigid one (Wagnild & Young, 1993). Also, during these reactions, the individual's profile is exposed. This profile reflects the individual characteristics of a person, thoughts, feelings and behaviors which are comprised in what is commonly referred to as personality (Wagner, Lütke & Robitzsch, 2019).

When studying personality, the Five Factorial model is commonly used as a frame of reference (Costa & McCrae, 1992). It consists of five categories; neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. Personality characteristics are generally constant throughout life, however they may be subject to changes deriving from maturation and life events. According to this assertion, neuroticism and extraversion decrease with age, whereas conscientiousness and agreeableness increase. Openness to experience tends to increase in young adults and decreases when people reach late adulthood (Costa, McCrae & Löckenhoff, 2019).

A resilient personality is high on extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, while scoring low in neuroticism levels (Alessandri et al., 2014).

Given that resilience is a very important construct for the elderly to live quality lives, maintain their well-being and mental health when facing difficulties (Färber & Rosendahl, 2020), our objective is to review available studies on the association of traits and resilience in the elderly.

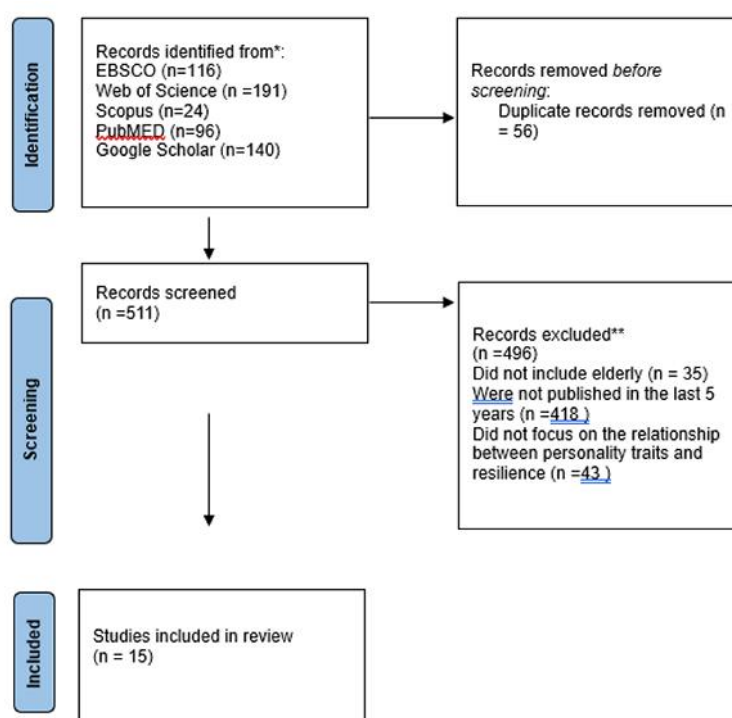
Methodology

Research strategy

For the literature review, we searched several citation databases, such as: EBSCO, Web of Science, SCOPUS, PubMed, Google Scholar using keywords such as (resilien*) AND (old* or aging or elderl*) AND (personality or Big five or personality trait*). The inclusion criteria of the studies in this literature review were as listed below:

1. Studies looking at the relationship between resilience and personality traits in elderly subjects
2. Studies including quantitative measurement of resilience and personality traits
3. Studies published in English during 2018-2023.

In order to highlight the selection of articles for this study, the PRISMA 2020 diagram was used:



RQ: What is the relationship between resilience and personality traits in elderly subjects?

Results

The table below lists the studies included in the review of literature.

No.	Author(s)	Year of publication	Methodology	Results
1	Nelson, C.L.	2023	Sample, N= Instruments, title	
2	Nieto, M., Visier, M.E., Silvestre, I.N., ... Serrano, J.P., Martínez-Vizcaino, V.	2023	Sample, N=439 participants Instruments: Beck hopelessness Scale Connor-Davidson Scale NEO-Five Factor Inventory	The findings indicated that there was an adverse connection observed between resilience and neuroticism, while a favorable link was identified with the remaining personality traits. Moreover, resilience levels were discovered to be inversely linked to feelings of hopelessness. Interestingly, even though age was not a strong predictor of resilience, the older adult group exhibited notably lower resilience levels compared to their younger counterparts. In this study, the factors of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, and hopelessness were the sole determinants of resilience.
3	Lee, S.	2023	Sample, N=10,674 adults Instruments: 1. Eurofound's European Quality of Life Survey 2. WHO-5 Well-Being Index (WHO-5) 3. Psychological distress was measured using three questionnaire items 4. Life satisfaction and happiness were measured using a single questionnaire item 5. Resilience was measured using two questionnaire items	The findings showed that resilience and optimism played a role in partially connecting adversities with psychological well-being. Resilience and optimism can serve as valuable resources for older individuals when dealing with challenging life situations and various hardships.
4	Lai, D.W.L., Li, J.	2022	Sample, N=253 older adults Instruments: 1. Big Five Inventory (BFI) 2. Connor-Davidson Scale 3. Health-related quality of life (HRQoL) (SF-8)	The results revealed that, when adjusting for potential influencing factors, neuroticism had a notable connection with HRQoL, whereas extraversion did not. Resilience played a mediating role in these relationships. Furthermore, the impact of resilience as a mediator was more noticeable among individuals living in financially disadvantaged or moderately well-off circumstances compared to those with greater financial resources
5	McElroy Heltzel et al	2022	Sample= 322 older adults Instruments: Conservation of Resources–Evaluation; Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ; Kroenke et al., 2001) Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 scale Medical Outcomes Study Social Support Survey (MOS-SS; Moser et al., 2012) Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008) Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier et al., 1994)	Trait optimism and resilience seemed to provide a degree of safeguarding against deteriorations in mental well-being amid the pandemic. This suggests that individuals dealing with chronic illnesses were able to tap into their inherent strengths and inclinations to manage their challenges to some extent. People who believe in their capacity to overcome adversity and adapt (referred to as trait resilience) may find it easier to place their current situations in a broader context.
6	Pauly, C., Ribeiro, F., Schröder, V.E., ... Krüger, R., Leist, A.K.	2021	Sample, N= 1,828 adults Instruments: 1. Big Five Inventory 10 (BFI-10) 2. Brief Resilience Scale 3. Center for Epidemiologic 4. Three-item Loneliness Scale 5. Generalized Anxiety Disorder Assessment 6. Perceived Stress Scale-4 item Version	They discovered that greater resilience was linked to reduced levels of depression, stress, anxiety, and loneliness, aligning with prior research findings. Additional analyses revealed that resilience played a moderating role in certain personality-mental health relationships, consistently mitigating the negative links between neuroticism and stress, depression, and anxiety in individuals with heightened resilience. Moreover, elevated conscientiousness was correlated with increased stress levels in those with enhanced resilience. One plausible explanation for this could be that both high conscientiousness and high resilience might be linked to a strong sense of control over one's circumstances, potentially leading to heightened stress due to the need for rigorous preparation and precautionary measures to maintain that sense of control.

7	Graham, E.K., James, B.D., Jackson, K.L., ... Bennett, D.A., Mroczek, D.K.	2021	Sample, N= 1,375 older adults Instruments: Big Five personality inventory (NEO-FFI) The Rush Memory and Aging Project (MAP)	Increased levels of neuroticism were linked to a heightened susceptibility to pathology. Findings from preliminary investigations indicate that greater conscientiousness was associated with a reduced cognitive decline when compared to the extent of pathology, implying greater resilience.
8	Taylor, M. G., & Carr, D.	2021	Sample=11.050 Instruments: Hopelessness was measured based on responses to four items. Optimism was measured based on responses to six items. Mastery was measured based on responses to five items. Psychological resilience was captured with the SRS, developed by Manning, Carr, and Kail in 2016 from available items in the HRS	Psychological resilience consistently showed strong connections with health transitions and pathways, and notably, its impact in combined models was generally 4-10 times more substantial than that of mastery, optimism, and hopelessness.
9	da Rosa, GD; Martin, P; Kim, J; Russell, D; Abraham, WT; Gondo, Y; Hirose, N; Masui, Y; Poon, LW	2021	Sample, N= 511 older adults Instruments: NEO-Five Factor Inventory	In both sets of data, two distinct personality profiles emerged: one characterized as "resilient" and the other as "nonresilient." The "resilient" category exhibited elevated levels of favorable personality traits, specifically scoring higher in agreeableness and extraversion while scoring lower in neuroticism, conscientiousness, and openness. Conversely, the "nonresilient" group displayed heightened neuroticism scores and lower scores in extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness.
10	Demetriou L., Drakontaides M., Demetris H	2021	Sample, N= 205 adults Instruments: Conner-Davidson Resilience Scale Adult-Hope-Scale (AHS) (Snyder, 1996) Covid19-Adaptation-Questionnaire (CAQ) (Demetriou; Drakontaides, Demetris)	The results revealed that strong hope scores were indicative of greater psychological resilience and adaptability in dealing with challenges. Furthermore, there was a noteworthy positive correlation between age and educational attainment, with older individuals and those with higher levels of education demonstrating heightened psychological resilience and adaptability compared to their younger and less educated counterparts.
11	Hawkey, L; Wroblewski, K; Cagney, KA; Waite, LJ	2021	Sample= 4,604 adults (born from 1920-1965) Instruments: Existing validated resilience measurement tools were used and subjected to a pretest to identify a concise selection of items that could be used to create a dependable scale (Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor & Davidson, 2003); Short Grit Scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009); Ego Resilience Scale (Block & Kremen, 1996); Resilience Scale (Wagnild & Young, 1993); and the Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008). The assessments of social support-giving involved a set of questions pertaining to three different relationships: spouse, family, and friends. These questions mirrored those used to inquire about receiving social support, as established by Walen and Lachman in 2000. 11-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale; UCLA Loneliness Scale; Perceived Stress Scale	Personality traits exhibit correlations with the trait of resilience. Even when controlling for personality traits, the correlations between resilience and their outcomes decreased by at least 50%, yet they remained statistically significant.
12	Farber, F; Rosendahl, J	2020	Sample= 13,444 adults 27 studies (Meta-analysis) Instruments: Resilience Scale by Wagnild and Young	The stronger the trait resilience observed in elderly individuals, the more positively they assessed their mental well-being. The variability in research outcomes was considerable, but all studies uncovered noteworthy, positive connections between trait resilience and mental health, with significance evident in all but one study.

13	Hao, R; Dong, H; Zhang, RL; Li, P; Zhang, P; Zhang, M; Hu, J	2019	Sample N= 160 older adults Instruments: Conner-Davidson Resilience Scale General Well-Being Schedule (GWBS) Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised Short Scale for Chinese (EPQ-RSC)	The research revealed that when there is a mismatch in neuroticism between older adults and their primary caregivers, it can have a positive impact on the overall well-being of older adults. This effect is, in part, explained by the presence of psychological resilience.
14	Scelzo, A; Di Somma, S; Antonini, P; Montross, LP; Schork, N; Brenner, D; Jeste, DV	2018	Sample N= 29 older adults 51 family members of the older adults Instruments: 1. Medical Outcome Study (MOS) SF-12 (Short Form - 12) 2. Connor Davidson Resilience Scale 3. Life Orientation Test – Revised for optimism 4. Perceived Stress Scale 5. Brief Symptom Inventory (Boulet and Boss, 1991; Derogatis, 1993) 6. Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) (Kroenke et al., 2001)	
15	Oshio, A., Taku, K., Hirano, M., & Gul Sa	2018	Sample N=15,609 30 studies review	When examining the distinctions between the two forms of resilience, ego-resiliency displayed a more pronounced inverse connection with Neuroticism and a more robust positive association with Openness and Agreeableness in comparison to trait resilience.

Discussion

The evidence that the Five-Factor sub-dimensions are related to psychological well-being is mostly consistent in the pre-pandemic period. It has been demonstrated that increased levels of extraversion and reduced neuroticism score in individuals is associated with psychological well-being and the ability to cope with strong emotions (Larsen & Eid, 2008). Steel et al. (2008) discovered that agreeableness, responsibility, and openness to experience are all associated to psychological well-being, even though the correlation found was weaker.

Resilience is nowadays viewed as a multifaceted construct comprising inherent characteristics and abilities that help in weathering life's challenges. It is noteworthy to mention that a resilient personality scores low in neuroticism levels while scoring high in the other characteristics.

Among the personality traits, two, namely extraversion and neuroticism are those that have received the greatest attention in the research on personality and health. Neuroticism is characterized by a propensity to react inappropriately and excessively in instances of stress. It is typically accompanied by adverse reactions such as feeling anxious, irritable, helpless, or that the world is an unsafe, ominous place, which are not matched by the self's ability to deal with such hardships. Extraversion, on the other hand, is characterized by optimistic thoughts and emotions, low levels of self-doubt when faced with issues, and a greater level of sociality.

Sahni et al. (2021) observed that individuals experiencing increased levels of neuroticism, openness to experience, and responsibility subdimensions exhibited more heterogeneity in their resilience levels.

The interaction of a person's personality and environment affects their level of resilience. The findings of the Nieto et al., (2023) study showed a substantial relationship between personality factors and levels of resilience. Resilience was specifically inversely correlated to neuroticism, supporting the idea that this trait is characterized by a susceptibility to stress. High scores of neuroticism are also likely to be associated with lower levels of resilience, indicating potential mental health issues. Additionally, we discovered that extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are all directly related to resilience. Similar results have been found by other research (Färber & Rosendahl, 2020; Oshio et al., 2018), underscoring the implication that resilience is a powerful tool to overcome adversity (Oshio et al., 2018). Data from these studies speak for a negative correlation between hopelessness and resilience, with hopelessness serving as a reliable indicator of lower levels of resilience. The chance of feeling hopeless is also increased by neurotic and introverted characteristics.

According to a meta-analysis that looked at data from 15,609 participants from 30 studies on the topic (Oshio et al., 2018), the neuroticism sub-dimension is adversely related to resilience, but the extraversion, agreeableness, responsibility, and openness to experience sub-dimensions are positively related to resilience. All the sub-dimensions had only a moderate impact on resilience.

In their study, Lai and Li (2022), looked at 253 elderly Chinese from Hong Kong to determine how neuroticism and extraversion affect HRQoL. They found that HRQoL had a negative correlation with neuroticism. Resilience had a role in

mediating this relationship. Furthermore, the facilitating effect of resilience was felt strongly in elderly individuals who were less advantaged than their more affluent counterparts.

The mitigating effect of resilience on the association between personality and mental health was explored even in other research. Based on the positive correlation of resilience with personality traits, participants' resilience increased as their agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extroversion scores increased. And the negative association between resilience and neuroticism, explains why higher levels of neuroticism is accompanied by decreased levels of resilience (Pauly et al., 2021).

In yet another study, the mediating role of psychological resilience was explored in order to assess the impact of the neuroticism fit between older individuals and main care providers on older adults' general well-being (Hao et al. 2019). According to the findings, older people's general well-being was greater when older adults and their primary care providers neuroticism fits were incongruent as opposed to congruent ($p < 0.01$). In situations where there was an incongruence, older people's GWB was only stronger if their neuroticism was lower than that of their primary care givers ($p < 0.01$). In situations where there was congruence, older adults' GWB was stronger when both sides scored lower levels of neuroticism ($p < 0.01$). Psychological resilience had a role in mediating the association between older individuals' GWB and neuroticism incongruence (indirect effect = 0.14, $p < 0.01$).

Normal age-related brain cell death, which is frequent in the elderly, does not result in an impairment of the capacity to carry out daily tasks. However, when structural and chemical irregularities caused by cell death are severe, there is a substantial decline in mental and physical abilities. In the study conducted by Graham et al. (2021), the researchers looked at whether personality factors that have been repeatedly linked to cognitive skills are also linked to cognitive resilience or cognitive/pathology discordance. According to the findings, increased levels of conscientiousness were linked to stronger resilience or less cognitive deterioration in relation to the degree of disease.

In addition to being influenced by the person, other elements including family, community, and culture also have a part in in developing resilience. Wang and Ramsden (2018) adopted a person-centered approach to undertake a cross-cultural examination of centenarians' personalities in order to establish whether there is a "resilient" personality profile that is universal across cultures. Information for proxy reports was submitted by family members and close friends of 239 American centenarians from the Georgia Centenarians Study and 272 Japanese centenarians from the Tokyo Centenarian Study. Latent profile analysis was carried out to determine personality types in Japanese and American centenarians.

Both samples contained two distinct personality types: a "resilient" personality type and a "nonresilient" personality type. The "resilient" group had greater levels of agreeableness and extraversion and lower levels of neuroticism, conscientiousness, and openness to experience, indicating a higher level of positive personality traits. Extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were lower in the "nonresilient" group, contrary to neuroticism which was greater. 50% of Americans and 65% of Japanese centenarians entered the "resilient" category.

Resilience and optimism

A largely studied psychological concept known as dispositional optimism has been shown to support resilience and serve as a positive adaptation to aging. According to Scheier and Carved's (1985) original theory of optimism, individuals' behaviors vary depending on whether they have positive or negative expectations. Positive expectations will result in conduct that is motivated and committed to achieving the objective; in contrast, negative expectations will result in behavior that is less motivated and committed. As a result, optimistic individuals are more likely to utilize coping mechanisms to solve issues; in contrast, pessimistic people gradually stop trying to tackle problems because they believe they are insuperable.

Lee (2023) looked at how optimism and resiliency helped older people in Europe deal with their worsening financial status resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The study discovered that psychological well-being is positively correlated with resilience and optimism among the elderly. The findings show that the association between adversity and wellbeing was in part mediated by both resilience and optimism. They also disclosed that the two psychological resource dimensions, resilience and optimism, were negatively correlated with hardships arising during the pandemic. The results were consistent with what McElroy-Heltzel et al. (2022) found in their study; resilience and trait optimism seem to provide some protection against deteriorating mental health during the pandemic. This suggests that individuals with chronic illnesses were to some extent able to use their unique attributes to cope with their current situation.

Optimism, considered as one of the two sides of life orientation alongside pessimism, has been proposed as a factor in a person's capacity for psychological adaptation. The results from Sardella et al. (2021) seem to be consistent with earlier research that have examined the effects of dispositional optimism on physical health and wellbeing in the elderly. Their findings further demonstrate the positive impact of a disposition to optimism on the HRQoL of senior individuals that have significantly been afflicted physically and psychologically by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this study, flexibility was also taken into account. Expressive flexibility is seen as another important quality that might foster resilience since it helps people to keep a steady balance after being exposed to stressful events and promotes greater personal adaptability. While confirming the documented beneficial influence on mental health following unfavorable experiences, findings further imply that flexible regulation of emotions could potentially encourage elderly individuals to have a more positive perception of HRQoL during the pandemic. Optimism and expressive adaptability are crucial for fostering resilience.

Following the above studies, Martin and Kasser (2021) in their investigation suggested that control, perseverance, positive attitude, optimism, and flexibility were crucial in boosting resilience processes and allowing older adults with multiple sclerosis who had sustained a fall to stay physically active.

According to the results of another study by Taylor and Carr (2021), which compares psychological resilience and later life health to other internalized resources, in general optimism helps older adults maintain positive perceptions and attitudes, and resilience tends to play a role in coping with current challenges or difficulties.

During the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, Demetriou et al. (2021) conducted a study with the goal of examining psychological adaptability and resilience in connection to the positive feeling of hope. According to the study, there is a strong relationship between adaptation, resilience, and hope. It seems that prior experiences dealing with adversity, through which one discovers the inner resources and strength not just to cope but also to rebound, trigger the positive sensation of hope more readily.

Another study looked at the psychological qualities of a group of Italian individuals aged 90 to 101 living in rural areas, as well as their offspring or other family members. Despite worsening physical conditions, participants above the age of 90 were mentally healthier than the younger members of the family. In both groups, mental well-being was in negative correlation with depression and anxiety. The primary themes that surfaced from the interviews and that seemed to be distinguishing traits of this population were positivism, resilience, and optimism, hard labor, emotional ties with family and religion, affection for, as well as a need for dominance over the land (Scelzo et al, 2018).

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PANEL IV

**TECHNOLOGY
AND INNOVATION IN ECONOMY**

The Application Potentials of Big Data Analytics in the Economy: A literature review

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Abstract

Mass digitization in an array of real life and the spread of social media has resulted in the creation of large amounts (Big Data) of information. This information mainly comprises unstructured bulk data. Nowadays, Big Data represents a real revolution in information technology. This technology has a multidimensional approach that relies on its five main characteristics: volume, speed, authenticity, value, and variety. Recently, Big Data has become a research topic of great interest, allowing better measurement of effects and results and enabling new research designs for many topics. The globalization of the economy has increased the flow of information and the need to process it in the function of decision-making policies. Over time, this data will likely influence the questions that economists raise. This will enable more focus on analyzing a more comprehensive range of economic activities. Big Data Analytics refers to analyzing large data sets to discover patterns and trends that can be useful in making predictions or decisions about future events or activities. It usually involves machine learning techniques such as clustering and classification algorithms for extracting useful information from unstructured or semi-structured data sources. In this aspect, this study analyzes the Big Data literature and its application in economics. In this study, publications published from 2019 - 2022 were studied. The CiteSpace program was employed to evaluate the articles.

Keywords: Big Data, Data Analytics, business value, bibliometric mapping

Introduction

The millennium we live in can be easily named a “technologic era”. Information technologies and engineering developments have fabricated new services and applications that are easily tangible by people and companies. New technologies are rising to support the high demand for these services. In this circuit of new emerging technologies and services, massive data is created, broadly named Big Data.

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Academics and experts highly research Big Data regarding the need for extracting meaningful data and transforming it into helpful information for effective decision-making, competitiveness, increased performance, and economic growth. A literature review research is necessary for evaluating if Big Data is a field of interest and if the research covers all possible search areas, hence providing information if there is any gap in research in Big Data.

This study aims to analyze the impact of Big Data in business and economy by conducting a qualitative literature review to define the impact of Big Data and science mapping methods to analyze the evolution of academic research on the topic and find possible gaps that may lead to possible issues.

Methodology

This study aims to give answers to the following research questions:

1. How can Big Data be beneficial for business and the economy?
2. What are the main research topics on Big Data?
3. Is there a need for more research on a specific topic regarding Big Data?

This study uses a literature review with a qualitative review approach and a bibliometric mapping methodology. The literature review methodology helps research, analyze, and finally reach conclusions regarding the study's objective.

Literature review

Big Data definition

The business environment is facing significant developments opting for new technologies and their massive usage by customers. This change began in '90 when computers were introduced as a household device, and companies were introduced to new ways of doing business. In their book, Laudon and Laudon state that some factors reflected essential changes in business as globalization, the transformation of industrial economies, the transformation of the business environment, beginning of digital firms (Laudon et al., 2006). The authors state that companies use more information to make effective decisions. Also, more companies are connecting digitally with their employees and consumers, thus emphasizing the importance of information technology as the primary management tool. Things have changed tremendously within a few years. As the authors state, there are three interrelated changes in the technology area: the emerging mobile digital platform, the growing business use of "big data," and the growth in "cloud computing," where more and more business software runs over the Internet (Laudon et al., 2014).

Big data typically refers to the following types of data: Traditional enterprise data – which includes customer information from CRM systems, transactional ERP data, web store transactions, and general ledger data. Machine-generated /sensor data – includes Call Detail Records ("CDR"), weblogs, smart meters, manufacturing sensors, equipment logs (often referred to as digital exhaust), and trading systems data. Social data – includes customer feedback streams, micro-blogging sites like Twitter, and social media platforms like Facebook (Dijcks, 2013).

In a study by De Mauro, Greco, and Grimaldi, the definition of "Big Data" might be classified according to four groups, depending on where the focus has been put in describing the phenomenon: I. Attributes of Data, II. Technology needs, III. Overcoming of Thresholds, IV Social Impact. The authors came up with a new definition of Big Data as the Information asset with properties such as Variety, Volume and Velocity that need specific technologies and methods to be transformed into usefull value (De Mauro et al., 2016).

Another study concluded that Big Data includes any kind of data, structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, that cannot be managed by a traditional system. Special tools will be needed to manage Bigdata which have unique properties named as 5V's. (Alwan et al., 2020).

Regarding Big Data definition, we think that researchers must have a tacit agreement for its definition as a "high quantity of data created by technology use, that increases exponentially with time, have similar attributes and need technology to be managed and transformed into useful information."

Big Data Statistics

The amount of data created, captured, copied, and consumed globally to increase rapidly, reaching 64.2 zettabytes by 2020, while by 2025, it is prognosed to increase up to 180 zettabytes. An Increase it is projected to happen to IoT devices to almost triple to more than 29 billion in 2030. In 2027 the global AaaS market value is projected to 59 billion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2022).

The big data analytics market is expected to grow with a five-year **CAGR of 13%**. (International Data Cooperation). The global big data market is expected to grow at a **CAGR of 22%** from 2017 to 2030. (Goldstein Research). Most growth is

expected to be in the healthcare sector (**36% CAGR**), followed by manufacturing (**30% CAGR**) and financial services (**26% CAGR**) between 2018-25. (Seagate).

Using big data, Netflix saved **\$1 billion** a year in value from customer retention. (Inside Big Data). Companies experienced an increase in revenues by **8%** and a decrease in costs by **10%** by using big data (Forbes).

Statistics show that the use of Big Data will increase in the forthcoming years. Market of Data analytics will face significant growth as well. Thus, it is important to continue researching the topic to provide the best solutions and improve the actual methodologies and technologies.

Big Data and Analytics

Collecting, organizing, and analyzing massive amounts of data to get meaningful insights and information of high importance to decision-making is nominated as Big Data Analytics. Extensive data analysis needs new tools, methods, and technologies for collecting, warehousing, transforming, finding patterns, and visualizing data. Several studies have different definitions of Big Data Analytics. In a study, it is defined as techniques that make use of big data sets to change and improve operational actions (Elgendy et al., 2014). It is a modern method that applies several technologies for taking meaningful value from data (Corea, 2019).

Analytics is a set of statistical and mathematical methods used for analyzing data for inferential and predictive statistics. Information technology plays a vital role in big data analytics. Analyzing Big data needs implementing large data warehouses that facilitate the storage and access to data. Also, data mining, data analysis, and visualization tools are necessities for retrieving meaningful insights. Big data analytics have a crucial role in the development of big data and artificial intelligence the latter the more develop the more big data analytics improve, thus creating a circle of high changes and improvements due to each other.

Big Data management technologies

Several technologies and tools are necessary for managing and analyzing Big Data. We have captured some of them in this chapter to introduce some of the most used ones.

- Apache Hadoop is an open-source software platform that manages big data in a distributed system.
- MongoDB is a NoSQL database that can store large volumes of data.
- Apache Kafka is a popular streaming platform. Netflix, Spotify, Twitter, Yahoo, LinkedIn, etc. make use of this platform
- Apache Spark is highly effective for speeding the operational processes
- Splunk is a big data analytics tool for deriving insights from large datasets.
- R-Language: R is a language used in statistical programmes and graphics
- Blockchain: Blockchain is a specific type of database based on Python, C++, and JavaScript.

Big Data management and Analytics impact on business and economy

Driven by big data, enterprises collect consumer-related consumption data, use big data technology to tap consumers' potential or implicit consumption demand, and stimulate consumers to consume. It provides behavior and trend support for enterprise business development, promotes the forward-looking effect of business activities, makes knowledge-driven decisions, excavates unknown enterprises' problems, meets enterprises' actual needs, and realizes the innovation and value creation of business models (Li, 2023). Big Data is highly used to predict market demand, redefine business models and to find new markets. Business value is created based on Big Data technologies listing optimization of operations, enrichment of operations, enhancement of Customer Experience, innovation of business model, and creation of knowledge and insights (Cato et al., 2015). Big Data has its benefits in organizational behavior as well by creating a new labour culture by focusing in data policies and managing changes. The performance of manufacturing companies in the Asian Economy during the Coronavirus disease 2019, studied by another study examining the impact of big data management capabilities, concluded that a large organization's structure could be reshaped with organizational BDA capabilities. The study also found that from a big dataset it is possible to find market opportunities by using infrastructures, processes and the right skills. (Zhang et al., 2022).

Several studies show that by managing Big Data companies can have better consumer insights. Companies can understand individual needs better and offer goods and services that fulfill their demands. In a study conducted by Binjaku, some models are given of how media and entertainment companies can profit from big data analytics. In particular, such companies can predict customer behavior, thus offering a differentiated and personalized package, creating new marketing policies based on customer fidelity, creating new distribution channels, better market segmentation, and improving product quality (Binjaku, 2015). Also, potential consumers are easily approachable by using social media; thus, companies can do efficient audience targeting or recommendations. Based on the behavior of other consumers, algorithms can be used to predict what a potential consumer can buy; hence companies can address the right offer to the latter. Statistics play an essential role in forecasting the future, and Big Data can also be used to predict the forthcoming behavior of consumers. Big Data can develop products and services by using the data that every individual shares on social media. By knowing the preferences of individuals, companies

can offer different packages to fulfill the segmented markets. Customer Experience will be improved by using Data as a methodology and process for gathering feedback from consumers and creating a connection with them. People now share every expectation and feedback on what they purchase, so gathering and managing this kind of data is highly important for a company to improve its products and how they are delivered. Big Data will improve in-house processes and operations as well. By making use of Big Data companies increase operations efficiency by making better plans, efficient in inventory planifications, reduce costs, better workforce and reducing waste (Alsghaier et al., 2017). By using data, companies can be more efficient in cutting unnecessary expenses, predicting what will happen in the future, and taking suitable measures. Several studies conclude the impact of Big Data analytics in economics, in its broad definition, as the branch that studies resources management and productivity. Big data has created a new supply and demand pattern thus giving a great opportunity to consumers, for having new and improved products, and supply chain by optimizing the processes and finding new ways to deliver.

Research Methodology

This study uses the quantitative literature review method by analyzing the paper's citation indexes and co-citations with bibliometric mapping. Bibliometric mapping is a visualization tool that indicates the relationship between studies. The co-citation method is used as a pattern of linkages among key papers that establish a structure or a map for the specialty, which may then be observed to change over time (Small, 1973). This study uses CiteSpace software as a tool for science mapping analysis.

CiteSpace is a software used to visualize the knowledge map, research hotspots, and emerging trends of bibliometric data (Chen, 2017; Chen et al., 2012). CiteSpace can generate different visualization graphs to represent the relationship between different nodes by the edges. The nodes include author, institution, country, term, keyword, source, category, reference, cited author, journal, article, and grant (Chen, 2017; Chen et al., 2012; LiChen & Xiong, 2019).

Several software use different bibliometric measures and indicators for measuring the performance analysis, such as the g-index, hg-index, h-index and q²-index as metrics for measuring the quality, significance of items within a map for instance clusters.

One of the most recent and successful indicators was proposed by Hirsch (2005), called *h-index*. Some of the main advantages of the h-index are that it is simple to compute and takes into account both the quantity and the impact of the researcher's publications (Alonso et al., 2009). Hirsch proposes a single number, the "*h index*," as a straightforward and helpful way to characterize a researcher's scientific output. According to Hirsch, a scientist owns the H index, if *h*, of his or her, *N_p* papers have at least H citations, each and the other (*N_p* - *h*) papers have ≤*h* citations each (Hirsch, 2005).

In 2005 Egghe introduced the g-index with the definition as "A set of papers has a g-index *g* if *g* is the highest rank such that the top *g* papers have, together, at least *g*² citations. This also means that the top *g* + 1 papers have less than (*g* + 1)² papers (Egghe, 2005).

q²-index is presented to characterize the scientific output of researchers, which is based on the geometric mean of an index describing the number of papers (quantitative dimension of a researcher's productive core), namely, the h-index and an index depicting the impact of the papers (qualitative dimension of a researcher's productive core) specifically the m-index (Cabrerizo et al., 2010).

Hg-index was presented in 2009 and tried to fuse all the benefits of h-index and g-index measures and try to minimize the drawbacks that each one presented. Its definition is "The hg-index of a researcher is computed as the geometric mean of his h- and g-indices, that is (Alonso et al., 2009):

$$hg = \sqrt{h \times g}$$

Data sourcing and filtering

Scopus is a database that includes academic papers' abstracts and citations. It covers a wide range of authors, journals and sciences thus ranking it among the best ones for archiving high quality researches. In this paper, we used the Science Citation Index.

To obtain comprehensive data for this study, the published documents containing "big data" or "big-data" and "business" or "econom*" in the title, or keywords or abstract sections were filtered and extracted, for the time period from January 1st, 2019 to December 1st, 2022. Then articles from disciplines that were not related with big data in economy were removed by having a final list of publications that we used to continue our research.

The abstract of this list were checked again and articles that only mentioned "big data" or "big-data" in the abstract but did not focus on business or economic systems were removed. A total of 184 papers were reviewed in this study.

In our study, we used CiteSpace to do the bibliometric research by analyzing co-authorship, co-citation, and keywords co-occurrence networks to understand the evolution and links between articles that study big data and economy. The CiteSpace first parameters settings are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Citespace bibliometric parameters.**CiteSpace bibliometric parameters settings.**

No.	Parameters	Definition
1	Time slicing	Time interval of study (2019 –2022), Time Slice (one year)
2	Term source	Abstract, title, keywords, author, and keywords plus
3	Node type	Country, institution, author, keyword, reference, cited authors, and cited journal
4	Links	Default
5	Selection Criteria	Top 10%
6	Pruning	Pathfinder and pruning sliced networks
7	Visualization	Static cluster view and merged network

Results

In Citespace, g-index is used for the selection criteria, and the node types are selected the followings:

- Author
- Institution
- Country
- Keyword
- Reference
- Cited author

TABLE 2. Analysis of nodes and links generated from CiteSpace

1-year slices	criteria	space	nodes	links / all
Pruning configuration:				
2019	g=13, k=25	2607	116	348 / 3406
2020	g=12, k=25	2848	115	345 / 3235
2021	g=11, k=25	2840	103	309 / 2180
2022	g=11, k=25	3055	104	312 / 2443
Document Types				
184	Article			
572	Review			
28	Review; Early Access			
Merged network: Nodes=263, Links=1258				

Citespace uses non-overlapping clusters for the co-citation network, and the silhouette metric can be used to analyze their labelings. The silhouette metric measures the if a cluster is separated from the others. Cluster's silhouette value, ranges from -1 up to 1, indicating the uncertainty to be considered when understanding the cluster's nature. A value of 1 measures a that a cluster is separated from the others. In our analysis, Silhouette metric=0.83; thus, the clusters are well-defined.

The extent to which a network can be decomposed into multiple components or modules is accomplished by the Network Modularity. This metric measures the overall clarity of a given network. Suppose a network's Modularity is close to 1.00, this means that the network is compounded by groups that are distinged from each other. In our case, Modularity is 0.55, meaning that the network is not divided into distinct groups. In our case, seven co-citation authors clusters were identified.

FIGURE 1. Clusters visualization from CiteSpace

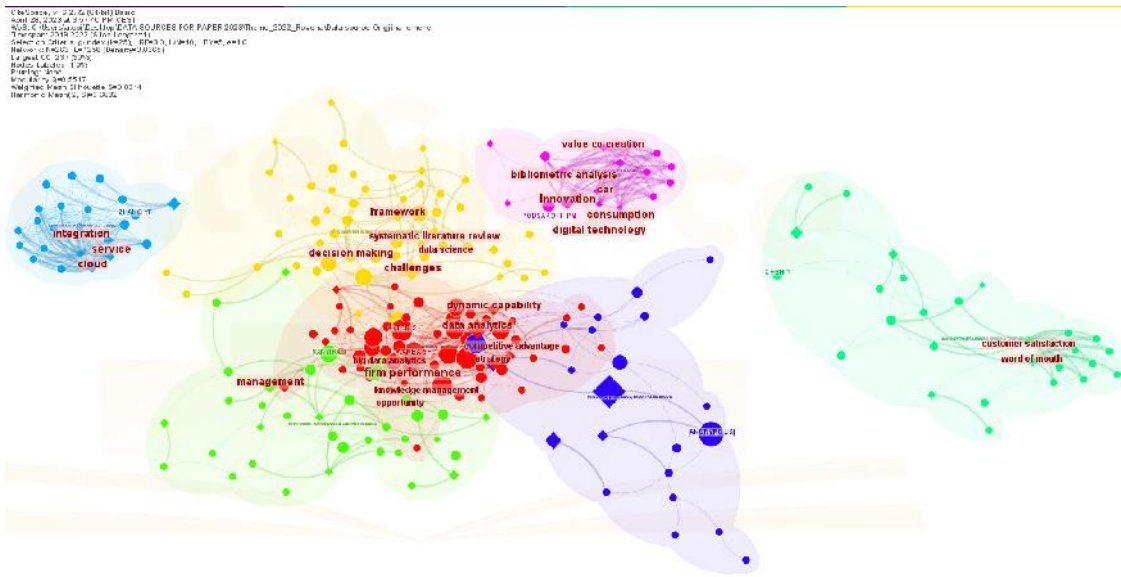
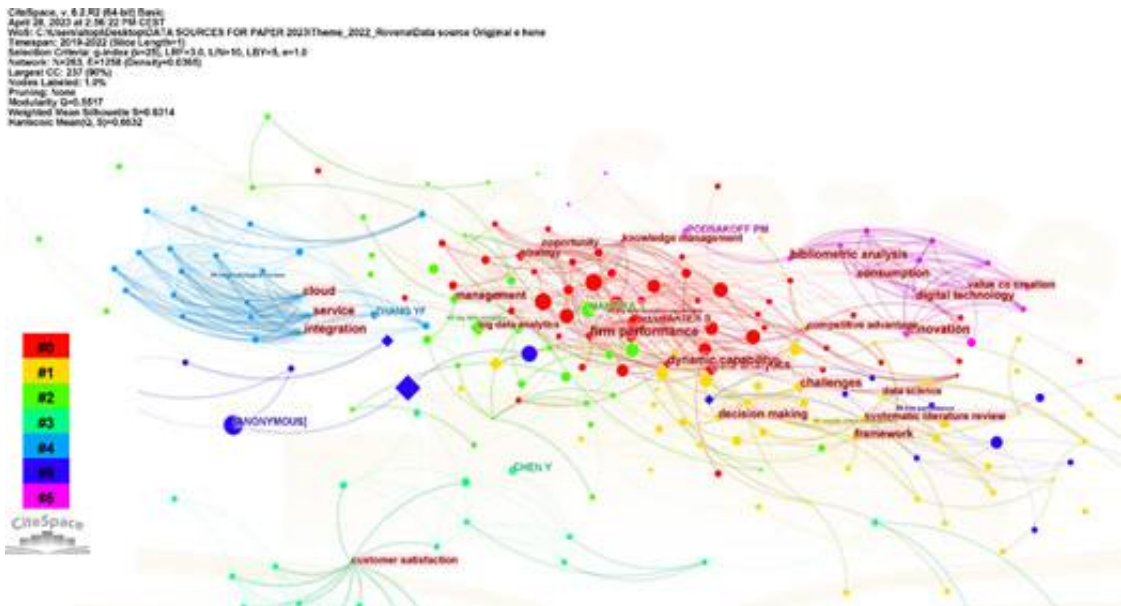


TABLE 3. Clusters information analyzed by CiteSpace

Clusters				
Select	Cluster ID	Size	Silhouette	mean(Year)
☐	3	27	0.947	2019
☐	5	22	0.841	2019
☐	4	23	0.945	2019
☒	2	36	0.702	2019
☐	1	53	0.753	2020
☐	6	17	0.904	2020
☐	0	59	0.859	2019

Each snapshot made by CiteSpace is a network. A network is a set of connected entities that are known as nodes or vertices. These connections are links or edges and these can be undirected or directed. The network visualization gives essential information regarding the links between entities and clusters.

FIGURE 2. Clusters network generated by CiteSpace



A critical report is the most cited author for each cluster. The following table gives information for the most cited papers for cluster no.0.

TABLE X. Most cited papers for Cluster 0 analyzed by CiteSpace.

Coverage	GCS	LCS	Bibliography
38	85	0	Rialti, R (2019.0) Big data and dynamic capabilities: a bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review . MANAGEMENT DECISION, V57, P17 DOI 10.1108/MD-07-2018-0821
34	4	0	Wu, X (2022.0) How big data alters value creation: through the lens of big data competency . MANAGEMENT DECISION, V60, P28 DOI 10.1108/MD-09-2021-1199
29	12	0	De, mauro A (2019.0) Understanding big data through a systematic literature review: the itmi model . INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY & DECISION MAKING, V18, P29 DOI 10.1142/S0219622019300040
28	35	0	Maroufkhani, P (2019.0) Big data analytics and firm performance: a systematic review . INFORMATION DOI 10.3390/info10070226
28	98	0	Ghasemaghaei, M (2020.0) Assessing the impact of big data on firm innovation performance: big data is not always better data . JOURNAL OF BUSINESS RESEARCH, V108, P16 DOI 10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.09.062
25	0	0	Reddy, RC (2022.0) A systematic literature review towards a conceptual framework for enablers and barriers of an enterprise data science strategy . INFORMATION SYSTEMS AND E-BUSINESS MANAGEMENT, V20, P33 DOI 10.1007/s10257-022-00550-x
25	8	0	Aljumah, AI (2021.0) Organizational performance and capabilities to analyze big data: do the ambidexterity and business value of big data analytics matter? . BUSINESS PROCESS MANAGEMENT JOURNAL, V27, P20 DOI 10.1108/BPMJ-07-2020-0335

Clusters can be rearranged by the users of the published papers or their abstracts only. 6 Users identified clusters on the same academic field: 0. Information & library science 1. Engineering, multidisciplinary, 2. Hospitality, leisure, sport & Tourism, 3. Industrial relations and labor, 4. Operations research & management science, 5. Mathematics, Applied. Thus, interested researchers in Big Data can contribute to areas that have yet to be so much studied, such as marketing or finance.

FIGURE 3. User-defined clustered label generated from CiteSpace

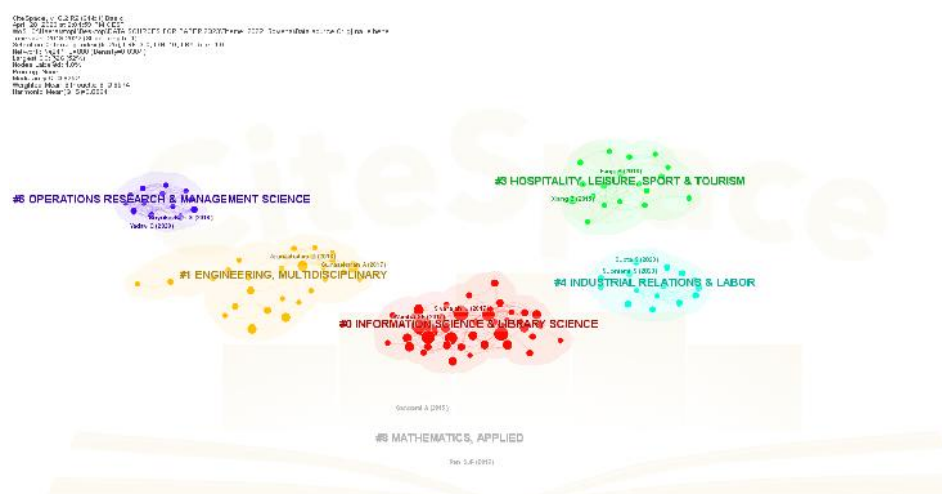
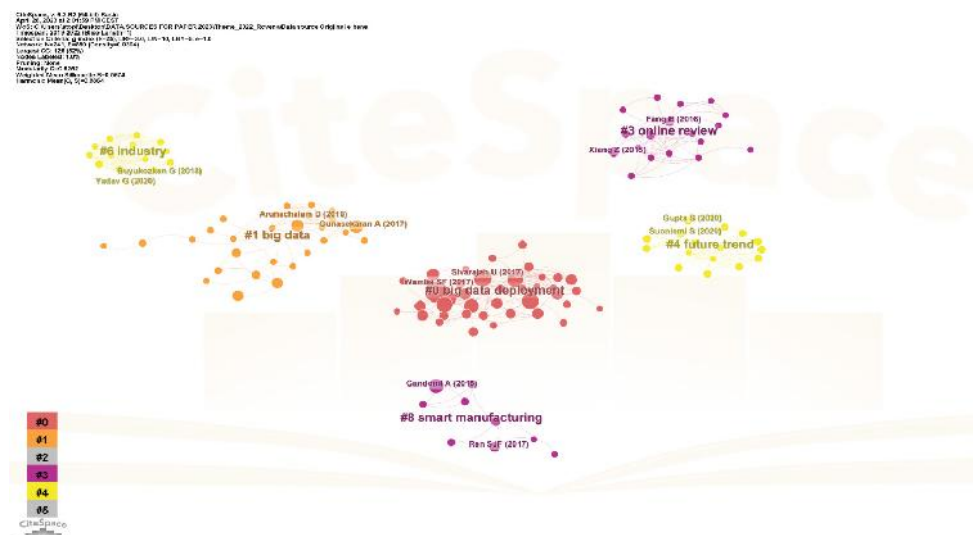


FIGURE 4. User-defined cluster labels based on the abstract text generated from CiteSpace



Meaningful visualizations can be retrieved by using a keyword. In the following figure, we have analyzed the keywords “firm performance” and “supply chain” to track the citations and relations with other disciplines. After the observation, they interact within their clusters, and big data in the “supply chain” is less researched as a topic.

FIGURE 5. Network of citations with the keyword “firm performance” generated by CiteSpace

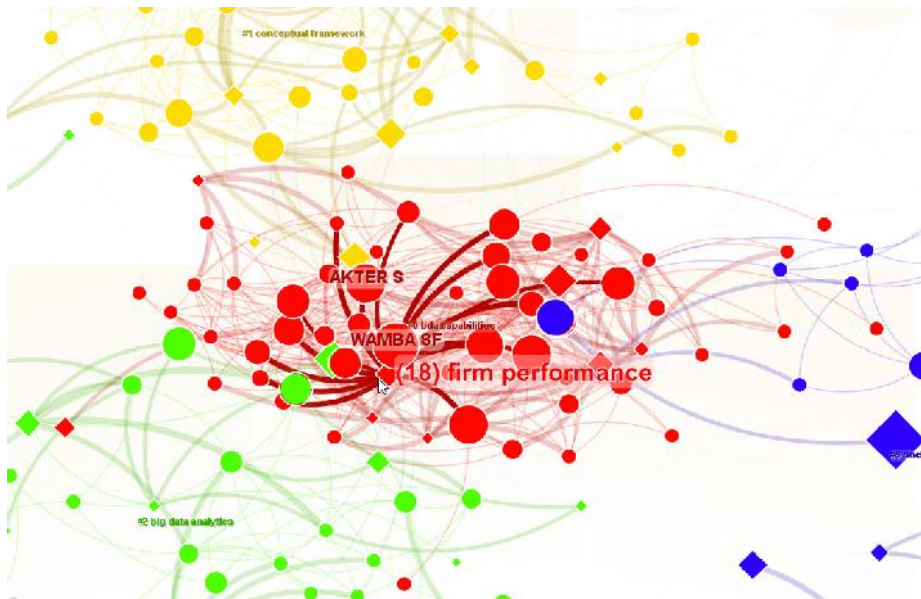
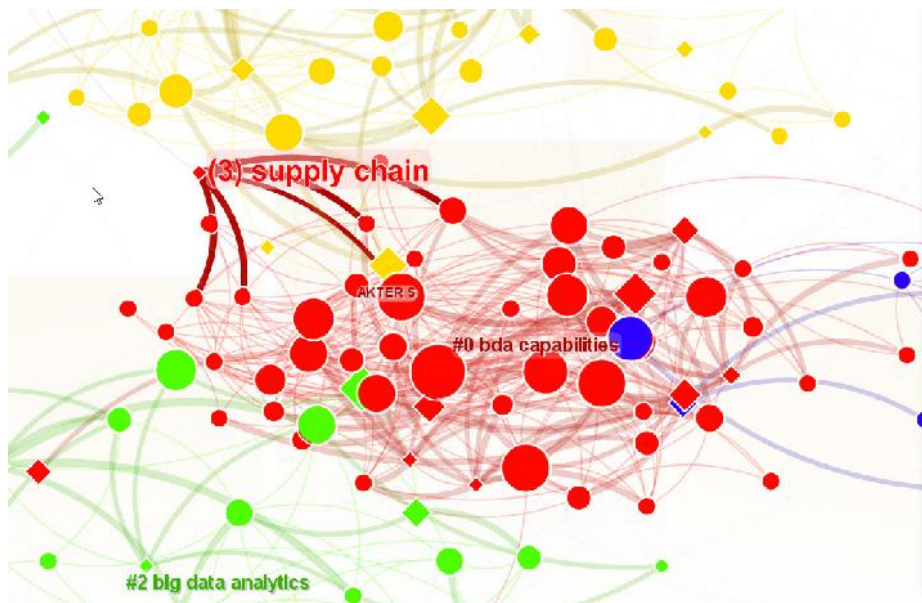
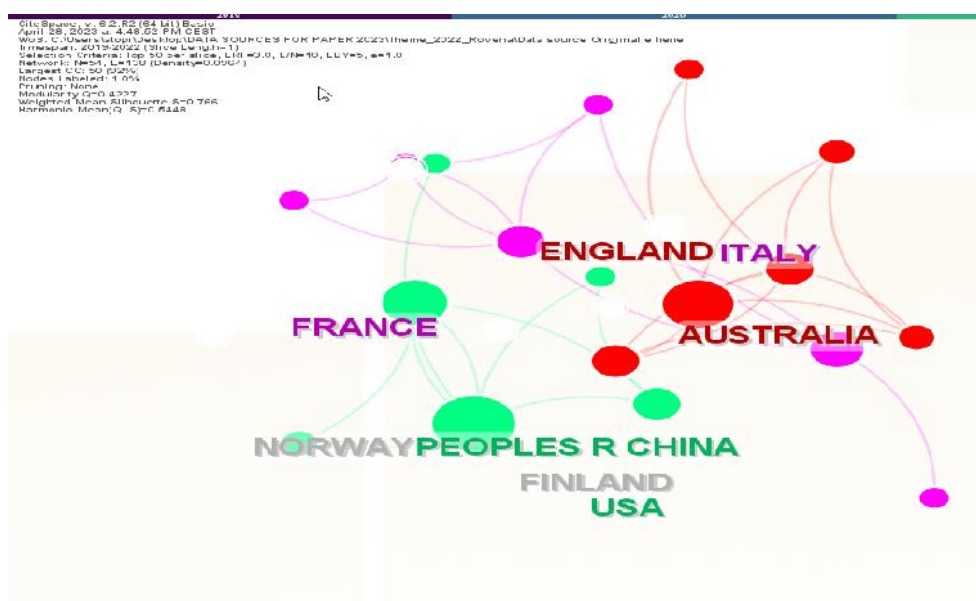


FIGURE 6. Network of citations with keyword “supply chain” generated by CiteSpace



Lastly, information regarding the most cited countries can be analyzed. As seen, Australia, England, Norway, France, and China take the lead as the most cited papers in this field.

FIGURE 7. Visualization for the most cited countries generated by CiteSpace.

Conclusions

In this paper, we study and analyze the importance of big data analytics in the economy using the literature review methodology.

Also, co-citation bibliometric analysis is accomplished by making use of CiteSpace software. Several papers are filtered and analyzed by the software to have meaningful information regarding academic research on big data. Insights regarding academic research on the topic will help future researchers to contribute to the field in those areas that lack studying. Also, this methodology helps researchers by directing them to the most cited published papers for higher quality on the subject.

In addition to the gaps seen in the visualizations above, there is a lack of published studies regarding the use of Big data in Albanian enterprises. This will be the continuation of our research in perspective of how Big data technologies can be used by enterprises in Albania to help them make important decisions regarding products, services, and competition in the market.

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The EU Digital Agenda Implementation in Albania – The role of higher education

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Abstract

This paper aims to share lessons learned and best practices from a project focused on EU studies, EU integration, and the EU agenda in non-EU related fields of study. Through practical experience, the paper provides valuable insights for practitioners and professionals in the field, offering guidance for future projects and initiatives. While scientific research is essential, practical knowledge gained from experience is equally important, and can inform future research and policy decisions. The author hope that this paper will contribute to a better understanding of effective strategies for teaching EU-related topics in diverse educational settings. It paper examines the digital transformation process in Albania, which has been identified as a national priority objective for the whole society, and the role of higher education institutions in this process. The EU launched the Digital Agenda for Western Balkans in spring 2018, which aims to support the transition of the region into a digital economy and bring the benefits of the digital transformation, such as faster economic growth, more jobs, and better services. While the government of Albania has committed to this agenda, a broad coalition of stakeholders from government, business, academia, civil society, and media is needed for the full implementation of the digital agenda. This paper is based on the findings of a three-year implementation of the Jean Monnet Module on EU digital agenda implementation in Albania. The paper argues that higher education institutions need to take a proactive role to better prepare and equip future generations with the necessary skills to succeed in the digital economy and society. As more daily tasks are carried out online, everyone needs enhanced digital skills to participate fully in society and the economy. Additionally, Albania needs to streamline its actions with the EU framework, and the digital agenda is one of them. Therefore, higher education institutions must work closely with stakeholders from government, business, academia, civil society, and media to ensure the successful implementation of the digital transformation process in Albania. The paper concludes by calling for urgent action to build up the digital skills of young generations, which is of paramount importance given the speed of digital transformation.

Key words: digital agenda, digital transformation, digital skills, higher education, economic impact, disruption, students, youth

Introduction

Digital transformation has disrupted society and the economy profoundly, affecting issues such as jobs, wages, inequality, health, resource efficiency, and security. It has created new roles, types of organizations, and even new sectors of the economy such as digital security and data science. Digital technologies fundamentally transform organizations, and the pace of technological change exacerbates the challenge. Therefore, education institutions can support the digital economy and society by developing new skills and capacities of professionals and workers to fit the digital transformation.

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This paper is based on the experiences and lessons learned during the implementation of the Jean Monnet Module “Embracing EU Digital Agenda: Challenges and Opportunities of Digital Transformation in Albania” (EDA) at the Professional College of Tirana. The paper presents an analysis of the challenges and opportunities encountered during the implementation of the project and provides insights into the strategies employed to overcome these challenges. This approach is suitable for and an added value to the ASD scientific conference as it provides a practical and real-world perspective on the implementation of a project in the field of digital transformation. By sharing our experiences and lessons learned, we hope to contribute to the wider discourse on the importance of digital skills development and the challenges of implementing digital transformation initiatives in non-EU countries. The insights presented in this paper will be of interest to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners working in the field of digital transformation and EU integration in the Western Balkans region.

About Jean Monnet Module

The Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Module “Embracing EU Digital Agenda: Challenges and Opportunities of Digital Transformation in Albania” / (EDA) was implemented at the Professional College of Tirana (KPT) between 2020 and 2023. The project aimed to develop knowledge and competences among students on the EU Digital Agenda, related challenges, and opportunities of digital transformation processes in Albania.

The project had three specific courses: Fundamentals of European Union Institutions and Policies, Digitalisation in Public Sector: Online Service Delivery in Albania and EU, and Digitalisation in Private Sector: A comparison between EU and Albania SMEs profiles. These courses were designed to introduce an innovative module curriculum on EU Digital Agenda and the related challenges and opportunities for Albania among non-EU related students’ communities.

The main objective of the project was to foster a meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable dialogue between academia and young professionals in the public and private sector, civil society, and media, with a focus on topics related to the EU and Western Balkans Digital Agenda, digital transformation, and digital single market.

During the implementation of the project, the team at KPT expanded the knowledge and competences of EU-related fields of study, such as information and communication technology, electronics, database and web design, office administration, etc. The team organized Open Platforms in Tirana, Shkodra, and Korça with actors from the public and private sector, civil society, and other interested stakeholders. The purpose of these events was to take the debate on digital transformation at the national level and bring it to the attention of a larger audience.

Additionally, the project established a teaching and knowledge hub on Digital Transformation and the European Perspective that served as a focal point for researchers and PhD aspirants working with the EU and digitalization. The hub aimed to contribute to the sustainability of the project by providing a platform for ongoing research and collaboration on the topics covered in the project.

The Professional College of Tirana did not have any courses on the European Union before the implementation of the Jean Monnet Module. With this project, the college was able to combine its expertise in digital transformation and ICTs with its vision to prepare young professionals who can succeed in the market economy in Albania, the Western Balkans region, and the EU.

Methods: Merits and Limitations

This paper draws on a variety of methods to explore the experiences and lessons learned from the implementation of the Jean Monnet Module “Embracing EU Digital Agenda: Challenges and Opportunities of Digital Transformation in Albania” (EDA) at the Professional College of Tirana (KPT). These methods include the analysis of project documents and reports, as well as the feedback obtained from various public forums, such as the “Inclusive Digitalisation as a tool for building post COVID-19 resilient Albania: The role of Vocational and Education Training” in April 2021, “Empowering the next generation through digital skills and mobility: Erasmus + Opportunities” in October 2021, “Digitalisation of public services: Opportunities and gaps for local services in Albania” in March 2022, “Digital Transformation of Businesses and the role of Academia” in September 2022, and the final activity of the Jean Monnet Module, the “From Books to Bytes: Exploring the Digital Transformation of Higher Education in Albania” Forum in Shkodra in May 2023.

In addition, the paper also draws on the feedback and evaluation obtained from teaching the three specific courses included in the Jean Monnet Module over three years, as well as the feedback received from staff and students involved in the project. The combination of these various methods provides a comprehensive and detailed account of the experiences and lessons learned from the project implementation and highlights the impact and effectiveness of the Jean Monnet Module in enhancing knowledge and competences among students on the EU Digital Agenda and the challenges and opportunities of digital transformation processes in Albania.

However, it is important to note that there are limitations to the methods used in this paper. While the feedback obtained from public forums and stakeholders provides valuable insights, they are limited in terms of representativeness and generalizability. In addition, the feedback and evaluation obtained from teaching the three specific courses are limited to the experiences of the staff and students involved in the project, and may not reflect the experiences and perspectives of the

wider student community at the Professional College of Tirana. Despite these limitations, the combination of methods used in this paper provides a rich and detailed account of the experiences and lessons learned from the implementation of the Jean Monnet Module.

This paper presents a practitioner's perspective on the challenges and opportunities of digital transformation in Albania, as it brings insights and qualitative data from the point of view of practitioners in the field. By using project documents and reports, as well as feedback from public forums and stakeholder engagements, the paper offers a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the digitalization process in Albania. Furthermore, the paper provides valuable insights into the experiences and lessons learned from the implementation of three-year teaching modules on digital transformation at the Professional College of Tirana.

The paper's emphasis on practical experiences and feedback from stakeholders makes it a valuable contribution to the existing literature on digital transformation in Albania. It offers a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by practitioners in the field and provides useful recommendations for policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders. The paper's focus on qualitative data and real-world experiences ensures that its findings are grounded in the practical realities of digital transformation, which adds to its overall merit.

The knowledge and insights shared in this paper can be of benefit to various stakeholders in Albania, including policymakers, government officials, educators, students, and the wider public. Policymakers and government officials can benefit from a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities of digital transformation in higher education and the broader society, and use this knowledge to inform policy decisions and strategic planning. Educators and students can benefit from the insights and experiences shared in the paper to enhance their understanding of digital transformation and develop the necessary skills and capacities to succeed in the digital economy and society. The wider public can benefit from the increased awareness and understanding of digital transformation and its potential impact on society and the economy. Overall, the insights shared in this paper can help to promote a more inclusive and comprehensive digital transformation process in Albania and contribute to the country's broader socio-economic development goals.

Digital transformation in Albania and EU Agenda

Digital transformation is the integration of digital technologies into all aspects of society, including the economy, government, education, and healthcare. In Albania, as in many other countries, digital transformation is seen as a key driver of economic growth and development. However, Albania faces significant challenges in terms of digital infrastructure, digital skills, and digital literacy, which can hinder the country's ability to fully embrace the opportunities of digital transformation (European Commission Report, 2022).

To address these challenges, Albania has committed to the EU Digital Agenda for Western Balkans, which aims to promote the adoption of digital technologies in the region and bring the benefits of digital transformation to citizens and businesses. The agenda includes initiatives related to broadband connectivity, digital skills and education, e-government, and digital entrepreneurship. By aligning with the EU Digital Agenda, Albania aims to improve its digital infrastructure, develop its digital skills base, and increase the competitiveness of its economy in the global digital market (European Commission, 2020).

The EU Digital Agenda for Western Balkans is part of the EU's broader Digital Single Market strategy, which aims to create a single market for digital goods and services within the EU. The strategy includes initiatives related to cross-border e-commerce, digital innovation, and the promotion of digital skills and education. The Digital Single Market strategy and the EU Digital Agenda for Western Balkans both recognize the importance of digital transformation in promoting economic growth and development, and in improving the quality of life for citizens (European Commission, 2021).

Digital transformation in Albania and Higher Education

Digital transformation of higher education in Albania is a complex process that faces various challenges. While the digitalisation of higher education is seen as a necessary step towards preparing young generations for the digital economy and society, several factors limit the success of this transformation. The lack of infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, and the limited access to technology and high-speed internet, hinder the development of digital skills and competences among both teachers and students. This digital divide further exacerbates existing inequalities, making it more challenging to create a level playing field for all students.

Another major challenge is the lack of digital content and learning materials in Albanian language. Although some efforts have been made to translate materials, the majority of digital resources are still in English. This lack of digital content not only limits access but also hampers the development of innovative teaching methods and curricula. Furthermore, it affects the development of digital skills and competences, particularly for students who are not proficient in English, and limits their ability to participate fully in the digital economy and society.

Moreover, the lack of digital skills among teachers is also a challenge in the digitalisation of higher education in Albania. Many teachers lack the necessary competences to effectively integrate digital tools and resources into their teaching practice. This affects the quality of education and the development of digital competences among students. In addition, the lack of

digital skills among teachers hampers the development of innovative teaching methods, which are essential for effective digitalisation of higher education.

Challenges of teaching about EU digital agenda

Teaching about the EU Digital Agenda poses several challenges that need to be addressed to ensure effective digital transformation in Albania's higher education system. The rapid pace of technological advancements is one of the significant challenges, as it requires continuous updating of the curriculum to keep up with emerging trends and applications. Failure to adapt to these changes can result in graduates with outdated skills that do not meet the demands of the job market.

Adapting the curriculum to the specific needs of the Albanian context while also aligning with the EU Digital Agenda is another challenge. Albania's unique socio-economic and political context demands an approach that is tailored to the local needs and aspirations while at the same time aligning with the broader EU objectives. This requires a delicate balance that ensures the curriculum is relevant and responsive to the local context while also ensuring compliance with EU standards.

Inadequate infrastructure and resources, such as high-speed internet and up-to-date equipment, also pose a challenge to effective teaching about the EU Digital Agenda. Access to digital technologies and infrastructure is essential for effective learning and teaching in the digital age. However, the lack of sufficient infrastructure and resources can hinder students and teachers from realizing the full potential of digital technologies and their applications.

The availability of qualified teaching staff with the necessary digital skills and expertise is also a challenge. There is a need for more qualified teachers and instructors with the necessary skills and expertise to teach digital technologies and their applications effectively. The limited availability of such staff can result in sub-optimal learning experiences for students, leading to a mismatch between the skills of graduates and the needs of the job market.

Ensuring inclusivity and accessibility is another challenge that needs to be addressed. Disadvantaged groups, such as low-income families, may lack access to digital technologies or digital literacy skills. Ensuring inclusivity and accessibility requires a concerted effort to close the digital divide and provide equal opportunities for all students to acquire the necessary digital skills and knowledge. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative approach that involves higher education institutions, government, businesses, and civil society. Developing effective strategies and solutions requires the input and expertise of all stakeholders, working together to create a holistic approach to digital transformation in Albania's higher education system. By addressing these challenges, Albania can ensure that its graduates are equipped with the necessary digital skills and knowledge to contribute to the country's economic growth and development.

Lessons learned for digitalisation of higher education from project experience

The Jean Monnet Module program has provided valuable lessons for the digitalization of higher education. These modules, funded by the European Union, aim to promote teaching and research on European integration in higher education institutions around the world. The modules are designed to help students gain a deeper understanding of the EU, its policies, and its institutions, while also fostering critical thinking and analytical skills.

One of the key lessons learned from the Jean Monnet Module experience is the importance of collaboration and engagement between faculty and students. The modules often involve interactive and participatory teaching methods, such as group work, case studies, and simulations, which encourage students to engage with the material and with each other. This approach helps to foster a sense of community and collaboration among students, which is crucial for effective digital teaching and learning.

Another lesson is the need for flexibility and adaptability in digital teaching. The modules have been successful in using a range of digital tools and platforms to deliver content and engage with students, including online lectures, virtual meetings, and discussion forums. However, these tools must be used in a way that is flexible and adaptable to the needs of different students and contexts. For example, some students may have limited access to technology or may require different formats of content delivery. The Jean Monnet Module experience also highlights the importance of pedagogical training and support for faculty to effectively integrate digital tools and platforms into their teaching. Faculty need to be able to design and deliver digital content in a way that is engaging, interactive, and effective for student learning. This requires ongoing training and support, both from the institution and from external sources such as professional development opportunities.

The Jean Monnet Module experience underscores the importance of evaluating and assessing the effectiveness of digital teaching and learning. This includes not only assessing student learning outcomes, but also evaluating the effectiveness of digital tools and platforms and making necessary adjustments to improve the overall quality of digital teaching and learning.

Lessons learned about teaching EU to non-EU related fields of studies

Teaching about the European Union, integration, digital agenda and EU policies in general can be a challenging task, especially when the subject matter is not directly related to EU studies. One lesson that can be learned is the importance of framing EU integration in a way that is relevant and meaningful to students' interests and career paths. This can be

achieved by incorporating real-world examples and case studies that illustrate the practical implications of EU integration for various fields of study. For instance, students studying business could benefit from learning about the EU's common market and its impact on trade and commerce.

Another lesson is the importance of highlighting the benefits and challenges of EU integration. In addition to the economic benefits of the single market and the opportunities for cross-border collaboration, it is essential to acknowledge and discuss the challenges of EU membership, such as the loss of national sovereignty and the tension between EU institutions and member states.

Furthermore, it is important to provide students with a nuanced understanding of the EU's policies and institutions. This requires a focus on the complexities of EU decision-making processes, the role of various EU institutions, and the interaction between EU policies and national policies. Additionally, it is crucial to address the criticisms and debates surrounding the EU, such as concerns about democratic deficits and the need for reform.

Lessons learned:

1. Frame EU integration in a way that is relevant and meaningful to students' interests and career paths.
2. Highlight the benefits and challenges of EU integration and acknowledge the tension between EU institutions and member states.
3. Provide students with a nuanced understanding of the EU's policies and institutions, including the complexities of EU decision-making processes and the interaction between EU and national policies.
4. Address criticisms and debates surrounding the EU, such as concerns about democratic deficits and the need for reform.

Teaching about the EU and its integration to non-EU related fields of study requires a multidisciplinary and nuanced approach that takes into account the diverse interests and perspectives of students. By incorporating real-world examples, addressing criticisms and debates, and providing students with a nuanced understanding of the EU's policies and institutions, educators can equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the complexities of the global arena.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has presented several key insights and lessons learned from the implementation of a three-year project aimed at promoting EU studies, integration, and agenda in non-EU related fields of study. The project highlighted the importance of collaboration and interdisciplinary approaches in achieving success in promoting EU studies and integration in non-EU related fields. The use of technology and blended learning methods was also found to be effective in engaging students and enhancing their learning experience.

Additionally, the paper has shown that teaching about the EU in non-EU related fields of study requires a flexible and adaptable curriculum that addresses the specific needs and interests of students while also aligning with EU policies and agendas. It also requires the development of digital literacy and critical thinking skills, particularly in the context of the growing importance of digital technologies in education and society.

The practical knowledge gained from this project can provide valuable insights and guidance for future projects and initiatives related to EU studies and integration in non-EU related fields of study. While scientific research is important, practical experience and knowledge gained from implementation can also inform research and policy decisions. Through collaboration, innovative teaching methods, and a commitment to ongoing professional development, the promotion of EU studies and integration can be achieved in diverse and meaningful ways.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis and lessons learned, the following recommendations can be made for teaching about the European Union to non-EU fields of study:

- **Develop customized curricula:** When designing curricula, it is important to consider the specific needs and interests of non-EU fields of study. Customized curricula can make the EU more relevant and accessible to students from diverse academic backgrounds.
- **Foster interdisciplinary collaboration:** Encourage collaboration between EU studies and non-EU fields of study to promote interdisciplinary learning. This can provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of the EU's impact on various fields.
- **Incorporate hands-on learning:** Providing students with practical experiences can help them better understand how the EU works in practice. Internships, simulations, and case studies are just a few examples of hands-on learning activities that can be incorporated into EU-related courses.
- **Make use of technology:** Technology can be used to enhance learning experiences and make EU-related content more

engaging and accessible to students. Virtual simulations, online databases, and video resources are some examples of technology that can be used to teach about the EU.

- Foster critical thinking: Encourage students to think critically about the EU and its policies. Students should be encouraged to consider multiple perspectives and engage in open and respectful discussions with their peers.
- Provide professional development opportunities: Faculty and staff involved in teaching about the EU should be provided with ongoing professional development opportunities to stay up-to-date with the latest developments and best practices in the field.

Top of Form

Based on the analysis presented earlier, here are some recommendations for digitalization of higher education in Albania:

- Develop a comprehensive national strategy: It is important to develop a national strategy that outlines a clear vision and objectives for digitalization of higher education in Albania. This strategy should involve collaboration between higher education institutions, government, businesses, and civil society to ensure that it aligns with the needs of the economy and society.
- Invest in infrastructure and resources: Adequate infrastructure and resources are essential for effective digitalization of higher education. This includes high-speed internet, up-to-date equipment, and digital platforms and tools for teaching and learning.
- Foster a culture of innovation and collaboration: Higher education institutions should foster a culture of innovation and collaboration among students, faculty, and industry partners to drive the digitalization of higher education. This can be achieved through initiatives such as hackathons, innovation labs, and collaborative research projects.
- Develop digital skills of faculty and staff: It is essential to invest in the development of digital skills of faculty and staff in higher education institutions to ensure that they are equipped to teach and support students in a digital learning environment.
- Ensure inclusivity and accessibility: Higher education institutions should ensure that digitalization efforts are inclusive and accessible to all students, regardless of their background or level of digital literacy. This can be achieved through initiatives such as providing digital literacy training, ensuring accessibility of digital platforms and tools, and offering flexible learning options.
- Regularly assess and evaluate progress: Regular assessment and evaluation of digitalization efforts are essential to ensure that they are effective and aligned with the needs of students, faculty, and society. This can involve gathering feedback from stakeholders, monitoring performance metrics, and conducting research on the impact of digitalization on higher education.

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Characteristics of urbanization of Albania in the communist regime: “nationalization” of an applied knowledge, planning at different urban scales

Dr. Gentian KAPRATA

Abstract

The urban planning of the years 1945-1989 was determined by Albania's alignment with the countries of the “Socialist Camp” and the ever more tense relationship with the Western countries, and after the 60s also with the countries of the socialist camp. The country's urbanization was conditioned by two main pillars, (i) a centralized economy, and (ii) functionalist and minimalist architecture and urbanism. It developed in two main phases of urbanization: the first phase 1945-1960s; and the second phase 1961-1990s. The first phase includes efforts to; (i) cope with housing emergencies; and (ii) urbanization as a consequence of industrialization. External migration was criminalized, while internal migration was largely controlled. This was accompanied by the drafting of regulatory plans of existing and new cities, which were made possible by the first specialists created in the foreign schools of Eastern Europe. The second phase was also a period of complete restriction of foreign immigration, which remained criminalized; and internal immigration, which was completely controlled by legal requirements and other barriers. The Albanian authorities adopted the policy of ‘rural protection’ and ‘minimization of urbanization’ and: (i) created several national project institutions; (ii) drew up plans for all cities and residential centers (including villages); (iii) established “Offices of Architects”; and (iv) drafted the National Plan for the Protection of Natural Environments. Three were the basic characteristics of the urbanization of this period: (i) the aim to create a balance between the extent of natural and territorial resources, human resources and the works of the productive industry, which did not succeed completely; (ii) the strategy for the creation of new cities with 5,000-20,000 inhabitants, from which 67 new cities were developed; and the hierarchical and concentric structure of Albanian cities.

Key-words: urbanization, the role of the state in urban affairs, external emigration, internal emigration, urban planning institutions, housing stock, centralized planning economy, functionalist architecture and urbanism

Presentation

This paper aims to present and analyze the urban-spatial structure of Albania during the communist regime. It tries to put together all the information collected by other researchers regarding demography, housing stock, distribution of population and residential centers across the National territory. The paper aims to analyze these data, to understand and present the level of urbanization of the country, the characteristics of the urban-spatial structure and the influence of the state in the creation of the urban development model of the country and cities, in the period studied.

It begins with the presentation of the ideological transition and the formation of a political framework for urban planning, which was determined by Albania's alignment with the countries of the “Socialist Camp” and the ever-more strained relationship with Western countries after the 60s. even with the countries of the socialist camp. The urbanization of the country was conditioned by two main pillars, (i) firstly, the implementation of a centralized economy and closed to the international economy, and (ii) secondly, the implementation of functionalist architecture and urbanism solutions.

Urbanization developed and took shape in the context of the country's industrialization and institutional design, which was shaped by legislation and some state enterprises of architectural and urban planning. During this period we distinguish two main phases of urbanization: the first phase 1945-1960s; and the second phase 1961-1990s.

Further, the paper presents the characteristics and features of the first phase (1945-1960), which started with the first urbanization efforts; (i) emergency housing affordability; and (ii) urbanization as a consequence of industrialization. External migration was criminalized, while internal migration was totally controlled and general in the service of industrialization. This was accompanied by the drafting of regulatory plans for existing cities and the first industrial cities, which were made possible by the first specialists in the field of construction created in the foreign schools of Eastern Europe.

Next, the paper enters the second phase (1961-1990), which was also a period of complete restriction of foreign immigration, which remained criminalized; and internal immigration, which was limited by legal requirements and other barriers. However, this period was also affected by rural-urban migration, which: (i) was informal, or (ii) through marriages. The Albanian authorities adopted the policy of 'rural protection' and 'minimization of urbanization', which in 1990 resulted in the urban population in Albania being much lower than the European average (36% v. 73%).

In this period, several national design institutions were created, and all major cities and each inhabited center including villages, were equipped with a Plan and "Office of Architects" and the National Plan for the Protection of Natural Environments were drawn up. In accordance with these plans, new residential areas were built in many cities of the country.

Further, the paper deals with the three characteristics of urbanization in socialist Albania. They were: (i) the aim of creating a balance between the extent of natural and territorial resources, human resources and the works of the productive industry, which did not succeed completely; (ii) the strategy for the creation of new cities with 5,000-20,000 inhabitants, from which 67 new cities were developed; and (iii) the hierarchical and concentric structure of Albanian cities, which was a previous characteristic. Cities such as Korça, Shkodra and Gjirokastra, which were the main cities before the Second World War, were replaced by Tirana and Durrës, Fieri, Vlora and Elbasan.

After presenting a brief summary of the dynamics of the urbanization of Albania in the years of the communist regime, according to official censuses; the paper closes with the presentation of the findings and conclusions reached, as well as some modest recommendations.

The purpose and methodology of the work

The first goal of this paper is to collect data about the population level (demography), the housing stock, internal demographic movements, and the level of urbanization during the different phases of the period 1945-1990 (from the establishment of the communist regime in Albania until the birth of pluralism). The study first aims to contribute to the expansion of knowledge on these demographic and territorial aspects, which is also its first contribution.

The purpose of the paper is to analyze these data to understand the way of development of the country, throughout the period under study, in the aspects of: (i) the urban-rural ratio; (ii) the way of development and growth of residential centers, focusing on the city as the essence of urbanization; (iii) the characteristics of the Albanian city in comparison with the cities of Western countries; (iv) of the urban-spatial structure of the country and its characteristics. The conclusions of this analysis, within the scope of this paper, will contribute to a wider understanding of the urban phenomena of the period under study and the contextual reasons of the subsequent urban-territorial development.

The paper, in particular, aims to bring information and analyze and synthesize it, regarding the role and concrete action of the state in the processes of urban development of cities and territorial of the urban-spatial structure of the country, for the time period taken in the study. In the concrete case, this coincides with the state's complete control over the planning, design and development processes of the national space and cities. This model would be accompanied by (i) the birth of many state institutions in this field, (ii) full control of internal demographic movements, as the biggest impactor of the territorial and urban development model, (iii) full state ownership on the ground.

The methodology of this paper is based on the analytical one, which is seen as the most suitable in this work, as it explains in a systematic and detailed way the phenomenon taken in the study, throughout the time that the study includes.

The methods used in this paper are qualitative. This paper theoretically evaluates demography, the level of urbanization, the urban-spatial structure, the characteristics of the urban-spatial structure of the country, and the characteristics of the Albanian city in the period under study. It also presents the context of the "nationalization" of applied planning knowledge and planning on a large scale and at different levels, in this period. This is done by using secondary sources of Albanian authors who have spoken on these topics.

Formation of a political framework for urban planning and development

After the end of the Second World War, a group of communists took over the power released by the German military forces and thus political Albania aligned itself with the countries of the "Socialist Camp" (Biberaj, 2000; Fuga, 2001, 2003; Gjura, 2015; Krasniqi, 2008, 2009). With the establishment of communism in power, political Albania took the path of socialism and in this sense, economic and social Albania were also defined (Biberaj, 2000; Gjura, 2015).

Architecture and urban development throughout the 46-year period was led by the socialist state and was inspired by the principles of the socialist realism method in urban planning, which, as Faja would postulate, was “national in form and socialist in content” (Faja, 2008: 15). The essence of Albanian architecture and urban planning of the communist period was that they were treated as a political and ideological method to oppose foreign influences or examples coming from capitalist countries (Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017).

The relationship with the western countries was always the most irritated, but after the 60s the irritation would be visible even with the countries of the socialist camp (Biberaj, 2000; Fuga, 2001, 2003; Gjuraj, 2015; Krasniqi, 2008, 2009). This specificity, reflected in the urbanism model of the socialist period, was also distinguished by Misja and Misja, while underlining that “due to the closure with the outside world and the ideology of the regime, the solutions of modern architecture and urbanism guided the practice and the university [the academic dimension.” (Misja and Misja, 2004).

The urbanization of the country was conditioned by two main pillars, firstly the implementation of a centralized economy and closed to the international economy, and secondly the implementation of functionalist architecture and urbanism solutions in the conditions of centralized planning. This would gradually lead to the lack of sufficient investments to maintain and add new housing and especially the structural units of the city (Misja and Misja, 2004; IHS Alumni, et., al., 1998; Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017).

The urbanization of the period 1945-1990 developed and took shape thanks to a certain school of architecture and urbanism that developed in the country in the context of the industrialization and urbanization of the country and deep self-isolation with the outside world (Faja, 2008).

Ideologically, construction was based on the motto “to build quickly, well and cheaply”, while urbanism would add to the socialist and collectivist dominance a nationalist approach “national in form and socialist in content” (Kolevica, 2004).

These would be the aspects that would influence the different dynamics of urbanization during the communist period (Imami et al, 2008). The construction design and urban planning system, during the period 1945-1990, has been centralized and fully state-owned, like all sectors of social and national development (Faja, 2008).

The communist government gave special importance to previously planned development as a characteristic of the system that relied on centralized planning, and urban planning as an administration technique, also because of its collectivist specificity (Misja and Misja, 2004; Imami et al., 2008; Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017). Kotmilo and Kotmilo would underline in 2017 “Territorial planning started a new path, where the state had all the rights in determining the functions and services in the territory” (Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017).

Legislation and initial urban planning institutions and institutional design

The legislation of the time consisted of “Laws, decrees and regulations of the parliament and the Council of Ministers”, which “defined the dependence, rights and duties of these institutions for the design and approval of various urban and architectural projects” (Faja, 2008: 15).

The legislation that most influenced the communist period was Decree no. 5747, dated 29.6.1978, ‘On the drafting, approval and implementation of regulatory plans of cities and villages’, and its accompanying regulation, which we will have to touch on further in this paper (PL, 1979; Official Gazette, No. 3, 1978).

In 1947, the first state-owned enterprise of architectural and urban planning, “Enterprise Project”, was established; in 1965, the “State Institute of Designs” was established; and in 1973, the “Institute of Studies and Designs of Urbanism and Architecture” was established. Since this year, an “Urban Planning and Design” office was established in every city (Faja, 2008).

The development of residential centers after the Second World War was influenced by the policies of urbanization and industrialization of the country, followed by the Albanian state as well as by the school of urban planning and architecture of the time, which were implemented under the conditions of state property and centralized planning. (Misja and Misja, 2004; Imami et al., 2008).

Dhamo, in this context, would underline that “Their characteristic [of urban developments] was the indifference to the context that appeared through a “socialist rationalism” (Imami et al., 2008: 37). In territorial planning, the urbanism of the social period was guided by the principle of division of functions: residential, industry, leisure, transport and the principle of the hierarchical transport system according to the flow of car traffic, although the use of private cars was prohibited by the state (Imami et al., 2008: 63-67).

The planning of each area was based on the forecast of population growth which was controlled by the state and the densities previously determined by urban planners (Faja and Alimehmeti, 1983; Faja, 2008).

The development of the building materials industry allowed the standardization of buildings and their repetition, despite the climatic conditions, tradition and culture of the country, in accordance with the socialist principle “we build quickly, well, and cheaply” (Faja, 2008; Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017).

Similar schemes were repeated in all the cities of the country, and work was also done to standardize the rural dwelling. Although the models of centralized planning and urban and architectural design in some aspects were similar to the Western models that arose at the beginning of the last century and developed until the 60s (Misja and Misja, 2004; IHS Alumni, et., al., 1998), the lack of a market economy, a centralized state economy, a totalitarian political system and isolation, caused these concepts to be applied in a different way in Albania (Kolevica, 2004).

The framing ideology and the first attempts of urbanization (First phase: 1945-1960)

During this period we distinguish two main phases of urbanization: the first phase 1945-1960s; and the second phase 1961-1990s (Misja and Misja, 2004; Kolevica, 2004; Vullnetari, 2012). The first phase is characterized by the intention of the communist government to develop certain sectors of the industry, which is why the construction industry took a special role (Vullnetari, 2012; Faja, 2008).

Kotmilo and Kotmilo would divide this phase into two subphases, which were related to the “Great Friendships” of the Albanian state of this period. The first sub-phase was what Kotmilo and Kotmilo would call “The Great Friendship with Yugoslavia 1944-1948” and Albania would embark on the path of urbanized development of the country under total state control. Among the biggest contributions of this subphase, we can mention infrastructural planning, which started with the Tirana-Durrës railway, and its construction with credit (Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017).

In the ideological sense, as Faja would underline, “Until the 1960s, the method of socialist realism imported from Soviet architecture dominated, which was clearly and visibly reflected in Albanian architecture” (Faja, 2008: 15). Similarly, Misja and Misja would underline “The most durable buildings of this period belong to the Russian neoclassical school, which developed after Stalin came to power” (Misja and Misja, 2004).

While Kotmilo and Kotmilo would consider the period 1948-1961 as “Even greater Friendship with BS”, to emphasize the difference with “Great Friendship with Yugoslavia”. In this sub-phase, the main aim in the urbanization of the country was the definition of Land Use Territories to protect the ‘bread land’, which Kotmilo and Kotmilo would consider “as it is rightly named [for the importance it should have]” (Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017).

Initially, the Albanian state had to cope with the housing crisis, a consequence of the destruction caused by the war and the demand for new arrivals in the cities. He begins efforts to rebuild 62,000 houses destroyed by the war, as well as to build new housing, to cope with the rapid population growth. Thus, in 1970, 185,000 new apartments and houses were built, which were realized by voluntary contribution with building blocks and provisional materials to solve the needs of the moment (Misja and Misja, 2004; IHS Alumni, et., al., 1998).

In the same philosophy, the socialist state dealt with one of the most delicate problems, specifically the housing of the population, excluding self-housing, or housing in the private market that no longer existed. This brought housing into a desperate and long-term condition and never settled for a minimum level of well-being (Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017). With generous aid, long-term loans and facilitation from the Kremlin, an intensive housing construction process began across the country. But it should be noted that this was only for the cities, and excluded the rural population, namely 75-80% of the country (Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017).

Demographic movements, level and the main feature of urbanization (First phase: 1945-1960)

During this period, external migration was totally prohibited and punishable by law (Idrizi, et., al, 2018; Hoxha, 2017; King and Vullnetari, 2003), while internal migration from rural areas to urban areas was allowed but controlled by the state (INSTAT, 2014; Vullnetari, 2007, 2012; Hoxha, 2017).

In the first five-year period, 1945-1950, probably due to the agrarian reform, internal migration was rural-rural (Vullnetari, 2007: 23), which did not affect the level of urbanization in the country. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s, due to the needs of the country’s industrialization, in certain areas and provinces there were cases of the implementation of an encouraging state migration policy. Workers for factories, plants and other industrial enterprises were recruited from rural areas, which would bring about a rapid increase in the level of urbanization of the country. The urban population during this 10-year period, 1950-1960, grew at an annual rate of 6.7% (INSTAT, 2014).

Vullnetari would present this urbanization dynamic: “the urban population during 1950-1960 increased by more than half [50%], while the rural population did not even increase by 4%” (Vullnetari, 2012: 62- 63). Observed in dynamics, the level of urbanization increased from 20% in 1950, 27% in 1955 (Vullnetari, 2007: 23) and to nearly 30% in 1960, this level is similar to some Balkan countries, such as: Yugoslavia 28%, Turkey 30%, Bulgaria 38%, the world average 34% and the least developed countries 22% (Misja and Misja, 2004).

From the last country in the Balkans for the level of urbanization, Albania was aligned with the average countries of the region, significantly distanced from the less developed countries. Even the World Bank would note this intense development when it estimated that “Between 1950 and 1955, the country registered an astonishing 7 percent annual increase in the urban population” (BB, 2007: 5). And Hoxha in 2017 would note that in the period 1950-1960 the residential structure of the population changed by about 10% (Hoxha, 2017: 87). This was mostly a consequence of rural-urban migration, which in this period included about 130 thousand migrants (Vullnetari, 2007).

A very important urban phenomenon of this period was the increase in the number of urban centers from 24 that were in 1945 to 37 in 1955, which according to Vullnetari came from reasons of rural-urban migration and changes in the administrative structure (Vullnetari, 2007). The number of urban centers increased to 41 in 1960, while the level of urbanization went to 30% (Bërxfholi, 2000: 32).

The first planning products and the birth of a profession (First phase: 1945-1960)

In this philosophy, in 1946 the regulatory plan of the city of Përmet and, in 1957 the regulatory plan of the cities of Durrës and Elbasan were drafted. In 1958, the regulatory plan of the city of Tirana was drawn up, and in 1961, the regulatory plan of the cities of Berat, Korçë, etc. In addition to the regulatory plans of the existing cities during the years after the Second World War, the regulatory plans of the first industrial cities such as Maliqi, Cërriku, Bulqiza, Memalia, Prenjasi, etc. were drawn up. (Faja and Alimehmeti, 1983).

Kotmilo and Kotmilo would distinguish another characteristic of the urbanization of the time, that of the similarities of some Albanian cities with “Russian Kolkhoz and Sovkhoz”. According to them, this was because the construction of residential centers and new cities near powerful industrial clusters such as Maliq, Kurbnesh, Cërrik, etc., was based on planning and “The local plans of these urban centers were entrusted to foreign designers” (Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017).

During this period, and specifically during the years 1950-1960, the first specialists in the field of construction were trained in foreign schools of Eastern Europe (Misja and Misja, 2004). This fact would also be presented by Kotmilo and Kotmilo, who underlined “First, the preparation of the technical-engineering personnel began” (Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017).

Until the 1960s, a number of prominent professionals were trained, among them very few were architects and even fewer urban planners and designers, for the simple fact that these professions were not yet recognized or appreciated. These brought the spirit of modern architecture, which was expressed in the construction of functional spaces, such as the development of service nodes, ground floor environments for shared community services, as well as the creation of rational forms that can be standardized and repeated by reduced construction costs (Faja and Alimehmeti, 1983).

The switching to another “planning” and the first products (Second phase: 1961-1990)

This would pave the way for another phase of urbanization, different from the Soviet inspiration that followed until this time. The second phase, 1961-1990, was also a period of complete restriction of external immigration but also characterized by a strong effort by the state to stop internal migration (Vullnetari, 2007, 2012; INSTAT, 2014).

The World Bank, for this phase of the socialist development of cities, would underline “from 1961 to 1990, the government built the policy and began to forcefully limit urbanization (BB, 2007: 5). It represents the time of complete disconnection from all external flows, which would have its own products both in the economy and in urbanization (Misja and Misja, 2004; Vullnetari, 2007, 2012).

This political turn and the arrival of a large group of architects who had studied abroad, would bring a new era in Albanian construction and urbanism. This phenomenon would be presented by Faja in 2003, who would underline that:

“After the 60s, with the evolution of the Albanian thought for a contemporary culture, literature, art, the conditions were created for the creation of an architecture based on the principles of art, culture and modern architecture [modernist style], more economical, more rational, simpler and more functional than that of the architectural models of the socialist realist style” (Faja, 2008: 16).

Similarly, Kolevica would also make this division, where he presented “We have reached this in 1965. The separation from Russian architecture had become a fact in time. Romanian, Czech, and Bulgarian architecture magazines had begun to appear, where modern architecture was widely applied” (Kolevica, 2004: 132).

Kotmilo and Kotmilo would underline that “The Chinese government offered the Albanian government and its people urgent assistance. The first round of aid came for the continuation of suspended construction works throughout the country” (Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017).

This financial assistance created institutions such as: Institute of Studies and Design No. 1 (Architecture, Urban Planning and Design); Institute of Studies and Design for Roads and Bridges No. 2; Institute of Studies and Design for Hydropower Plants No. 3; Institute of Studies and Design for the Construction of Large Industries No. 4; Enterprise of Geology and Geodesy. It also boosted the economy and especially the construction sector, where the construction of the hydropower plant on the Drin River and the construction of housing to cope with the population growth, now about 2 million inhabitants, should be singled out (Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017).

The decline of the economic power of the regime as a reason for the conditioning of the residence (Second phase: 1961-1990)

In the absence of a market economy, the concepts of modern physical planning that came from the rationalist and functionalist school of the first half of the 20th century, presented in the ‘Charter of Athens’ (Faja, 2008), were concretized in several city plans and villages. All major cities were completed with a revision of Local Plans, enabling each residential center including villages to be equipped with a Plan and the “Office of Architects” (Faja and Alimehmeti, 1983).

Kolevica, unlike Faja, would emphasize that modernism was not a choice accepted as a holistic style with all its elements, by the communist regime. It was accepted only in its functional and minimizing aspects, and in Albania it was presented as an effort of talented architects to improve the condition of Albanian cities and as a patriotic and professional inspiration. In contrast, the regime persecuted architects who displayed modernist tendencies in their projects (Kolevica, 2004).

At this time, a legislative act was recommended in the Urban Planning Regulation, so that every town, inhabited center or village would be almost and practically limited by the 'Yellow Line'. This was one of the acts that ensure the preservation of agricultural land without a separate decision from the central and local governments. Violation of this act led to the punishment of several mayors and became the norm for all people (Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017).

The development of small towns became a priority and large cities were forced to develop within the 'yellow lines' – the city limits established by the Master Plans [General Regulatory Panel] (BB, 2007: 5).

In cooperation with other institutions, the National Plan for the Protection of Natural Environments, especially forests and pastures, was drawn up (Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017). Faja in 2008 would emphasize "After 1978 [the year when the sectoral law was approved], all cities and many villages of Albania have had their own regulatory plans" (Faja, 2008: 16).

In accordance with these plans, new residential areas were built in many cities of the country. Thus, only during the period 1961-1990 in the city of Tirana belong to 9,933 residential buildings, mainly multi-family, while in the countryside 12,350 residential buildings, mainly individual. 4,631 urban buildings and 7,573 rural buildings belong to the same period in Durrës, 4,133 urban buildings and 16,879 rural buildings in Elbasan (Misja and Misja, 2004).

Referring to these figures the difference between the number of apartments in multi-family buildings in urban areas and individual ones in rural areas is distinguished, in favor of urban areas. This is because the economic failure would be the reason that after the 1960s the rates of urbanization declined, because the internal migration from the village to the city was stopped (Vullnetari, 2007), attempting to move the population from the city to the village (Faja, 2008).

Internal migration and its impact on urban planning (Second phase: 1961-1990)

This was the reason why the Albanian authorities undertook the policy of 'rural protection' and 'minimization of urbanization', in the service of which they drew up legislation to curb rural migration in 1958 (Vullnetari, 2007). Vullnetari, referred to Sjöberg in 1994, would introduce the three legal conditions to migrate to the city, such as 'permit to move', 'residence permit' and 'passport', but also other barriers such as employment, housing and food ration (Vullnetari, 2007: 24).

This political approach would also be distinguished by Hoxha in 2017, when he would emphasize that "In 1974, the Political Bureau ordered that the "existing ratio" be preserved in the settlement of the population according to residence [rural-urban]" (Hoxha, 2017: 87).

However, this period was also affected by rural-urban migration, which was generally informal. It was also expressed through marriages, which was for migratory reasons. This was distinguished by the older age of women than men, which was not a tradition (Vullnetari, 2012; Hoxha, 2017). Even Bëxholi, in an analysis between the 1979 and 1989 censuses, would notice a change in the ratio of men to women in favor of women, which he explained with a level of female rural-urban migration for reasons of marriage (Bëxholi, 2000).

This phenomenon would also be presented by Hoxha, who noted that "At the meeting of the Collegium of the Plan Commission, September 12, 1977, the fact that in some cities many boys were marrying girls from the countryside was raised as a concern and as a phenomenon that it had to be prevented" (Hoxha, 2017: 87).

Both of these forms of rural-urban migration aimed at cities, especially Tirana (Vullnetari, 2012: 65), while rural-rural migration had no restrictions, but this did not affect the level of urbanization of the country. Also in this second phase, especially during the Cultural Revolution in the mid-70s, there was an increase in urban-rural migration, which was forced by the state (Vullnetari, 2012).

According to Hoxha, in 20 years, the rural-urban population structure changed by only 2.5%. For the period 1960-69 the population of the city increased by 1.4% and in the period 1969-79 it increased by 1.1 percent, which was realized through rural-urban migration of an average of 6800 people per year, and raised the level of urbanization to "29.7%, but there were also cities where it increased by 57.5%." (Hoxha, 2017: 87).

As a result of this restrictive policy for rural-urban migration, in 1990, in Albania the urban population reached 36% of the national population, while in Yugoslavia it was 56%, Turkey 61%, Bulgaria 68%, the world average 45%, the European average 73% and the average of less developed countries 37% (Misja and Misja, 2004). In this way, Albania was clearly distanced from the Balkan countries in its backwardness, also in terms of the level of urbanization.

Although urban growth during these 30 years was low, the number of centers categorized as urban increased from 41 in 1960 to 67 in 1989 (Bëxholi, 2000; Misja and Misja, 2004).

In the last years (1978 – 1990, "based on our strength"), the construction sector was the first to feel the decrease in growth, the lack of raw materials and construction materials, and a drastic reduction began of new constructions. In order to secure an apartment, citizens had to work in construction themselves, under the direction of the institution where they worked. This led to an unplanned housing development, and came as a result of the intention to avoid the construction of housing blocks that required land expropriation (Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017; Misja and Misja, 2004).

The balanced distribution of demographics across the national territory as a characteristic of the communist regime

One of the most important characteristics of urbanization in the communist settlement was the creation of a balance between natural and territorial resources, human resources and the works of the manufacturing industry (Faja, 2008). During the 40-year period, 1950-1990, the country established urban policies with the aim of a balanced population change in the national territory (Aliaj, 2008; Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017).

This aspect would also be distinguished by Misja and Misja, when they underlined that “The country’s industrialization and urbanization policy was based on the principle of equal and progressive development of the territories and branches of the economy” (Misja and Misja, 2004). But, although the goal of economic policy was the equal distribution of population, development and urbanization, this was done unevenly. The growth rate of urbanization in the southern and central areas was higher compared to the northern and northeastern areas, as the natural conditions for the development of cities were more suitable (Misja and Misja, 2004).

This dynamic would also be distinguished by Vullnetari, who while referring to Sjoberg in 1992, according to which some southern regions would continue to experience rural-urban migration even after the 1960s (Vullnetari, 2007), what would contribute to this imbalance urbanization.

As a result, while the increase in the overall national urbanization level was 15.6%, in the southern and central districts of the country such as Skrapari, Tepelena, Kolonja, Vlora, Kruja, Fieri, the increase in the level of urbanization was 21-37%, i.e. more higher than the national average. Whereas in the northern and northeastern districts such as Shkodra, Lezha, Puka, Mirdita, Dibra, Kuksi, the growth of urbanization fluctuates from 3.9-13.7%, i.e. lower than the average level of the country (Misja and Misja, 2004).

In addition to the difference between the northern region and the southern region, changes in the rates of urbanization are also distinguished in relation to the two phases of urban developments presented above. During the 1950s-1960s, when rates of rapid industrialization of the country appeared, the level of urbanization of some districts such as Mat, Berat, Durrës, Fier, Kukës, Sarandë, Tepelën, Tirana, Vlorë increased significantly (Faja, 2008), but after the 1960s this rate dropped.

The creation of new cities as a characteristic of the communist regime

Another characteristic of the urbanism of the socialist period was the strategy for the creation of new cities. Urbanization decentralization policies tended to increase the number of cities with 5,000-20,000 inhabitants, which in 1989 constituted 40.9% of the total number of cities (Misja and Misja, 2004). According to Misja and Misja, during the period 1950-1990, 39 new cities were created, which were generally small towns ranging from 500 inhabitants, such as Kasta, to 18,000 inhabitants, such as Stalin City (Misja and Misja, 2004).

While the Volunteer would underline that “During the years 1945-1989, 43 new cities were created located throughout the national territory, half of which are related to the extraction of metals [mining] and energy sources; while the other half was related to agriculture, industry, education and administration” (Vullnetari, 2007: 26).

The same economic sectors, with which the new cities were connected, are also presented by Misja and Misja. This fact would also be identified by Faja, who would underline that “created as a requirement of the socialist industrialization of the economy and the territorial division of Albania (Kukësi i Ri, Laçi, Cëriku, Çorovoda, etc.)” (Faja, 2008: 16).

The fault would also underline the effects of this characteristic of the urbanization of the socialist period, when it would be stated that “By applying the law to build the village as the city, many elements of urban architecture were artificially created in villages [which turned into cities new] damaging the landscape and their natural urban character” (Faja, 2008).

Kolevica held the same position on this phenomenon in his book “Architecture and Politics”, in 2004. Most of these cities could not cope with the economic changes that occurred after the 1990s, as a result of the one-sided economic base and backward technology (Mexi, 1992, 1997, 2015), which would turn them into the first urban centers that were abandoned by the population after 1990 (Vullnetari, 2007: 26).

This phenomenon would also be recognized by Faja in 2003, when he underlined that “The lack of regional scientific studies built new cities that are geographically incorrect, non-functional, non-economic, such as Laçi, Kukësi i ri, Çërrik, etc.” (Faja, 2008: 16).

Hierarchical ranking according to importance and monocentrism as a characteristic of the communist regime

In addition to the reformation of the urban structure of the country, as a result of the goals to balance urban centers with the branches of economic development and the creation of new cities, urbanism during the socialist regime also affected the hierarchical structure of Albanian cities (Faja, 2008).

Cities such as Korça, Shkodra and Gjirokastra, which before the Second World War, were the main cities (Faja and Alimehmeti, 1983; Konica, 1993; Faja, 2008), during socialist industrialization did not have high rates of urbanization growth. They remain large and important cities of the country due to their past, but not due to urban policies during this period (Faja, 2008).

After the Second World War, the hierarchy of big cities changed, with a visible distancing of the city of Tirana. Cities that had flourished such as Shkodra, Korça, Gjirokastra, fall and other cities such as Durrës, Tirana, Fieri, Vlora, Elbasan rise in the hierarchy (Misja and Misja, 2004).

Throughout this period, a visible distancing of the city of Tirana is noticeable, not only from the main cities but also from the general population of the country. Misja and Misja in 2004 would underline that “while in 1938 [in Tirana] 2.8% of the country’s population was concentrated, in 1990 [its population] reached 7.5% [of the national population]” (Misja and Misja, 2004).

This fact would also be proven in the reality of the age structure of Tirana’s buildings in the first years of transition, where more than half of the housing stock would belong to this period of urbanization. This phenomenon would also be distinguished by IHS Alumni et al., in 1998 when they would underline that “53% of the apartments in Tirana are residential apartments, standardized and low-cost, built in the period 1945-1990” (IHS Alumni, et al., 1998).

To present the dynamics of the increase in the level of urbanization in Albania during the years of the communist regime, according to official censuses, we can say that this ratio in 1945 was 78.7% rural and 21.3% urban, in 1950 it was 79.5% rural and 20.5% urban, in 1955 it was 72.5% rural and 27.5% urban, in 1960 it was 69.1% rural and 30.9% urban, in 1969 it was 67.7% rural and 22.3% urban, in 1979 it was 66.5% rural and 33.5% urban and in 1989, 64.5% rural and 25.5% urban (King and Vullnetari, 2003).

Although the level of urbanization increased relatively significantly, Albanian cities in the socialist period remain in the framework of monocentrism, in terms of their formative structure. The rapid industrial and urban development in the first phase (1945-1960) could not overcome this characteristic inherited from the urbanization before the Second World War (Faja, 2008: 16; BB, 2007: 5; Kotmilo and Kotmilo, 2017). However, before the Second World War, this was also a characteristic of the cities of Western countries (Parker, et., al., 1984; Hoyt, 1962).

Even the development of new cities did not have a positive effect in this direction. The urban renewal of existing or new cities, in the second phase (1961-1989), also, did not change the concentric way of growth of Albanian cities (Muça, 2013; Imami, 2008; Aliaj, 2003, 2008). This would differentiate the Albanian city from the western cities, which had been structured polycentrically for decades (Harris, et., al., 1945; Davoudi, 2003, 2008; Gottmann, 1961).

Findings and conclusions

After the end of the Second World War, political Albania aligned itself with the countries of the “Socialist Camp”. The relationship with the Western countries was always the most irritated, but after the 60s the irritation would be visible even with the countries of the socialist camp.

Architecture and urban development were guided by the socialist state and inspired by the principles of the socialist realism method in urban planning. The urbanization of the country was conditioned by two main pillars, (i) firstly, the implementation of a centralized economy and closed to the international economy, and (ii) secondly, the implementation of functionalist architecture and urbanism solutions. It was developed and took shape in the context of the industrialization of the country.

The legislation of the time consisted of laws, decrees and regulations, which determined the dependence, rights and duties of institutions for the design and approval of various urban and architectural projects. The legislation that had the most impact was Decree no. 5747, dated 29.6.1978, ‘On the drafting, approval and implementation of regulatory plans of cities and villages’, and its accompanying regulation.

In the context of state institutions, in 1947 the first state enterprise of architectural and urban planning was created, ‘Enterprise Project’, in 1965, the ‘State Institute of Designs’ was created, and in 1973, the ‘Institute of Studies and Designs of Urbanism and Architecture’. Since this year, the Office of Urbanism and Design was created in every city.

The development of the building materials industry allowed the standardization of buildings and their repetition, despite the climatic conditions, tradition and culture of the country. Similar schemes were repeated in all the cities of the country, and work was also done to standardize the rural dwelling.

During this period we distinguish two main phases of urbanization: the first phase 1945-1960s; and the second phase 1961-1990s. The first phase is characterized by the communist government’s intention to industrialize the country. In terms of housing, the Albanian state in the first years built 62,000 houses and in 1970, there were about 185,000 new apartments and flats.

In the years 1950-1960, external migration was totally prohibited and criminalized, while internal migration was allowed but controlled by the state. Industrial workers were recruited from rural areas, which would bring about a rapid increase in the level of urbanization at an annual rate of 6.7%, or 50% in total. This was comparable to Western countries.

In the context of planning, in the years 1946-1961, regulatory plans were drawn up for existing cities, such as Përmeti, Durres, Elbasani, Tirana, Berat, Korçë, etc. and the first industrial cities such as Maliqi, Cërriku, Bulqiza, Memalia, Prenjasi, etc.

In the field of professional expertise, during the years 1950-1960, the first specialists in the field of construction were trained in foreign schools of Eastern Europe, who brought the spirit of modern architecture, which was expressed in the construction of spaces.

The second phase, 1961-1990, was also a period of complete restriction of external immigration but also to stop internal migration. Several institutions were created such as: Institute of Studies and Design No. 1; Institute of Studies and Design for Roads and Bridges No. 2; Institute of Studies and Design for Hydropower Plants No. 3; Institute of Studies and Design for the Construction of Large Industries No. 4; Enterprise of Geology and Geodesy.

All the main cities and every inhabited center including the villages were provided with a Plan and "Office of Architects". The National Plan for the Protection of Natural Environments was drawn up and the development of small towns became a priority, while large towns were forced to develop within the "yellow lines".

In accordance with these plans, new residential areas were built in many cities of the country. Thus, only during the period 1961-1990 in the city of Tirana belong to 9,933 residential buildings, mainly multi-family, while in the countryside 12,350 residential buildings, mainly individual. 4,631 urban buildings and 7,573 rural buildings belong to the same period in Durrës, 4,133 urban buildings and 16,879 rural buildings in Elbasan.

The Albanian authorities adopted the policy of 'rural protection' and 'minimization of urbanization'. There were three legal conditions to migrate to the city, such as 'relocation permit', 'residence permit' and 'passport', but also other barriers such as employment, housing and food ration. However, this period was also affected by rural-urban migration that (i) was informal, or (ii) through marriages only for the purpose of migration, and targeted the cities, especially Tirana.

In 20 years, the rural-urban population structure changed only by 2.5%. For the period 1960-69 the population of the city increased by 1.4% and in the period 1969-79 it increased by 1.1%. As a result of this restrictive policy, in 1990, in Albania the urban population reached 36% of the national population, while in Yugoslavia it was 56%, Turkey 61%, Bulgaria 68%, the world average 45%, the European average 73% and the average of less developed countries 37%.

One of the most important characteristics of urbanization in the communist regime was the creation of a balance between the extent of natural and territorial resources, human resources and the works of manufacturing industry, although this was done unevenly. While the increase in the overall national urbanization level has been 15.6%, in the southern and central districts of the country it has been 21-37%, while in the northern and northeastern districts the increase in urbanization fluctuates from 3.9-13.7%.

Another feature of the urbanism of the socialist period was the strategy for the creation of new cities. Urbanization decentralization policies tended to increase the number of cities with 5,000-20,000 inhabitants, which in 1989 constituted 40.9% of the total number of cities. 39-43 new cities were created, which were generally small towns ranging from 500 to 18 thousand inhabitants. This phenomenon was expressed by the increase of the total number from 24 that were in 1945 to 37 in 1955, to 41 in 1960, and to 67 in 1989.

Urbanism during the socialist regime also affected the hierarchical structure of Albanian cities, which was a previous characteristic. Cities like Korça, Shkodra and Gjirokastra, which were the main cities before the Second World War; they were replaced by Tirana and Durres, Fier, Vlora and Elbasan.

The dynamics of the urbanization of Albania in the years of the communist regime, according to the official censuses, was expressed according to the report: in 1945 it was 78.7% rural and 21.3% urban; in 1950 it was 79.5% rural and 20.5% urban; in 1955 it was 72.5% rural and 27.5% urban; in 1960 it was 69.1% rural and 30.9% urban; in 1969 it was 67.7% rural and 22.3% urban, in 1979 it was 66.5% rural and 33.5% urban and in 1989 64.5% rural and 25.5% urban.

Although the level of urbanization increased relatively significantly, Albanian cities in the socialist period remain in the framework of monocentrism, in terms of their formative structure. The rapid industrial and urban development in the first phase (1945-1960) could not overcome this characteristic inherited from the urbanization before the Second World War. However, before the Second World War, this was also a characteristic of the cities of Western countries.

Recommendations

The paper modestly recommends making more in-depth studies on the topics of the demographic situation, the level of urbanization, the rural-urban relationship, the characteristics of the spatial-urban structure, the characteristics of the city and the governmental efforts to control the spatial, territorial and urban developments of the country in order to the same time period.

He also recommends the drafting of similar works, also in other stages of the development of the Albanian state, for example during the country's communist regime and the Albanian post-communist transition.

A final recommendation of this paper is related to the undertaking of comparative studies on the same topics, at different times of the country's development.

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The covid-19 pandemic and it's specific methodological challenges regarding the urban form of the cities. Case study: Albania

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Abstract

The pandemic has brought a lot of changes in the way that we have designed and used our cities. As we know now, many cities have increased their focus on pedestrian and bike infrastructure to encourage social distancing and reduce dependence on public transportation. The pandemic has highlighted the need for cities to be resilient, adaptable, equitable and sustainable urban designs. It has revealed existing inequities in access to essential services, green spaces, and housing, and has underscored the importance of accessible and safe public spaces. COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on society and the way we live our lives. Urbanism play a critical role in the response to the pandemic and the recovery from its effects.

Living with a pandemic has transformed the everyday lives of all of us. In this article we highlight the specific methodological challenges and address how we try to work around possible comparative failures and requests.

For this, we see an increased demand for outdoor spaces and green areas to promote public health and the need for cities to prioritize public health and safety in the design of public spaces, transportation systems, and buildings. This has led to an increased focus on creating more walkable and bike-friendly cities, enhancing access to green spaces and parks, and promoting social distancing measures in public spaces. Also prompted a reconsideration of the use of urban land and the design of commercial spaces.

This research explores the ways in which urban planning and design can be used to address these challenges and create more resilient, equitable, and livable cities. By reviewing existing literature and case studies, this study aims to provide insights into how urban planners and designers can create cities that are better prepared for future pandemics, natural disasters, and other disruptive events. This research, also contributes to debates about the value and practicalities of a comparative urban agenda, and the methodological questions that reflect a re-thinking of our relationships with sites and place, and our approach to comparative urban studies in the future.

The pandemic has served as a catalyst for cities to rethink their urban planning and design priorities to better serve the changing needs and demands of their citizens.

Key-words: cities, pandemic, infrastructure, urbanism, challenges, society.

Introduction

The design and management of cities have been challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic. As urban centers grapple to mitigate the spread of the virus, they face methodological hurdles that necessitate innovative solutions.

The pandemic brought about a challenge that demands the urban form of cities to be reevaluated. City design significantly influences the spread of the virus, urging urban planners and policymakers to consider it when deciding on city layout and structure.

The transmission of the virus has been linked to urban density. High-density areas are more susceptible to community spread, posing a challenge in controlling the virus's reach.

The pandemic has presented a new *challenge for cities and their urban form*. Lockdowns and social distancing measures have strongly reduced the utilization of public spaces, such as parks, shopping malls, and public transport hubs due to working from home and avoiding crowded places. As a result, businesses and services are struggling to adapt to this unprecedented situation. These drastic changes had a profound effect on city landscapes that require attention.

Urban planners and policymakers facing contemporary challenges must implement innovative solutions. These may involve using technology to streamline public transportation systems, creating new green spaces that support social distancing efforts, or adjusting zoning regulations to address changing land use patterns.

The COVID-19 pandemic has opened a new opportunity to reconsider the methods of designing and managing our cities. By overcoming challenges posed by the pandemic, we can create urban environments that are resilient, sustainable, and livable, all while being better equipped for future crises.

Methods

This research approach has been developed through a desk and research of the current literature on urban strategies for the COVID-19 pandemic; qualitative content analysis was used for a conceptual design.

What this article adds

The objective of this study was to develop a framework for resilient urbanization according to DRM response, mitigation, and rehabilitation phases at 3 spatial scales of habitat, community/urban space, and city.

Historical Pandemics and the Transformation of City's Shape

Historical epidemics have had a profound effect on the shape changes of the city throughout history. For example, the bubonic plague in 14th century Europe introduced the idea of quarantine and established urban ordinances aimed at preventing the spread of disease (Rosen, W. (2007) the mid 19th century cholera epidemic led to improvements in public health measures such as sanitation and housing conditions in cities as interpersonal access and outdoor public space designed to promote safe gatherings (Koutitas, G. (2021). This historical epidemic not only shaped the physical landscape of cities but also influenced urban spaces, social and political structures.

The Spanish Flu pandemic, which occurred in 1918, had a significant impact on the forms of cities around the world. One of the key changes that emerged was the recognition of the importance of urban planning and public health measures in controlling the spread of infectious diseases (Reid, D. G. 2018). In response to the pandemic, many cities implemented measures such as social distancing, the use of masks, and the closure of public gathering spaces (Honigsbaum, M. 2019). These measures led to a transformation of urban spaces, with the creation of new public health facilities, the expansion of transportation systems, and the development of new zoning laws that prioritized public health (Oliver, T. 2010).

Moreover, the Spanish Flu pandemic also spurred the development of new architectural designs that aimed to promote public health. For example, many buildings constructed after the pandemic incorporated features such as wider hallways and staircases, more extensive ventilation systems, and greater use of natural light, all of which were believed to improve public health (Hays, K. M. 1998).

The Spanish flu epidemic had a lasting impact on cities, and reforms emphasized the importance of public health in urban design and planning. Many measures used during the pandemic laid the foundation for society future health care initiatives, lessons learned shape various municipalities to this day. In addition, the outbreak has also highlighted the need to address the impact of lockdown and social distancing measures on the urban environment in the city.

Many businesses and businesses in Tirana have struggled to adapt to such new circumstances, and have had to find innovative solutions that would allow them to continue operating while promoting social distance.

In order to address these challenges, albanian urban planners and vendors should adopt strategies tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the city. This may include the use of technology to provide public transport improved policies, creating new green spaces to promote social spacing, or more flexible implementation of zoning regulations.

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to rethink the way Albania is designed and managed, to create a resilient, sustainable and liveable urban environment for its inhabitants. By addressing the strategic challenges posed by the pandemic, Tirana f/ex. could emerge from this crisis as a city better equipped to meet the challenges of the future and for its citizens has achieved a higher standard of living.

Streets and Sidewalks Design

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many cities around the world have changed their street design to prioritize pedestrian and cyclist safety while promoting social distance (Rogers, K. 2020). A common approach is to use temporary pedestrian bicycle lanes, which allow individuals to move around the city while maintaining social distance (Shaheen, S.,

Cohen, A. P., & Seinfeld, J. H. 2020). For example, cities such as Bogota, Berlin and Milan has implemented temporary bike lanes to promote active travel during the pandemic (Gulliver, K. 2020).



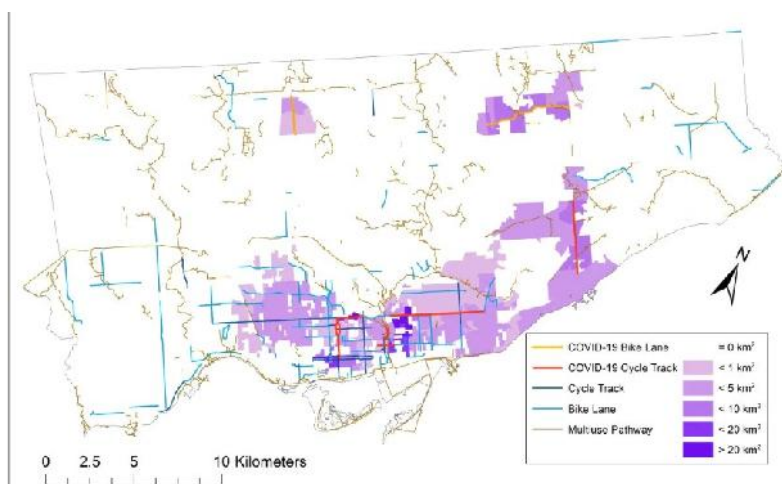
Temporary bike lanes in Bogota, Colombia. Photo by Martin Tobin/Reuters



'Superblocks' were introduced by the mayor of Barcelona to calm traffic and create community space. Photograph: Josep Lago/AFP/Getty Images



Authorities across Europe are seeking to reimagine the city for the post-coronavirus age. © Lucovic, Martin/AP/Getty



New cycling lanes have made it easier to reach more areas of Toronto by bike. (Timothy Chan/University of Toronto)

In addition to temporary bike lanes, many cities have also implemented “slow lanes” or “free lanes” programs to restrict vehicular traffic on certain roadways and to prioritize pedestrian and bicycle traffic (Stopka, O., Nikitas, A., & Milakis, D. 2020). These systems have been implemented in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco loves outdoor activities (Waxman, O. B. 2020).

Finally, cities have also implemented changes to their street designs to promote outdoor dining and commerce, allowing businesses to operate while maintaining social distancing guidelines. Cities like Paris, New York, and Melbourne have all implemented programs that allow restaurants and cafes to expand their outdoor seating areas onto sidewalks and streets (Kassam, A. (2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted cities to implement innovative street design changes to prioritize the safety of their residents while promoting active transportation, outdoor activity, and commerce.

But , with respect to Albania and Tirana specifically, there are no significant changes in street and pedestrian patterns in Tirana from 2019 to 2023. However, it should be noted that Tirana has implemented various urban transport and public space systems in this 3 years, such at the “parku rinia” pedestrian and bike-friendly zones “Tirana 2030” masterplan, which aims to transform the city into a more livable and sustainable urban center.

The City as well has initiated projects to improve pedestrian safety, including the installation of crosswalks and traffic lights.

Also, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Tirana's street design has undergone some changes to give priority to pedestrian and bicycle traffic and incorporate social distance. In 2019, the City of Tirana launched the "Parku Rinia" program, which transformed a large parking lot into a pedestrian and cycle path, as part of the city's extensive efforts to create an attractive and sustainable urban environment filled with green spaces and recreational areas.

In 2020, the Albanian Ministry of Tourism and Environment launched the "Green Albania" project, which aims to increase the number of green spaces and parks in Albania's cities (Albanian Ministry of Tourism and Environment. 2020). The project involves the planting of thousands of trees and the creation of new parks and green areas in urban centers.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic may have prompted some changes in public space design to promote social distancing and prioritize pedestrian and bicycle traffic. For example, in Tirana, some streets were temporarily closed to vehicular traffic to allow for outdoor dining and walking during the pandemic.

In the promenade by the sea of Vlora, for example, many possibilities for public spaces have been offered. Especially during covid 19, providing multiple outdoor spaces, encouraging social distancing by widening paths and seating areas and limiting the number of people who can gather in specific areas. This has also helped local businesses, which, although in specific conditions during the pandemic, were still able to survive by using the outdoor space available to them.

Second, the boardwalk is designed to encourage physical activity and outdoor recreation, which have been shown to promote physical and mental health. This includes bike lanes, walking paths and exercise stations along the promenade.

Third, the promenade is designed to support local businesses, which have been hit hard by the pandemic. This includes providing spaces for street vendors, food trucks and pop-up shops, as well as creating opportunities for cultural events and performances that showcase the local community.

Overall, the design of the boardwalk prioritizes the health and well-being of visitors while also supporting the local economy and creating a vibrant public space for people to enjoy.

FIGURE 1. Seaside promenade of Vlora, Shkodra & Tirana [Source: Web photos]

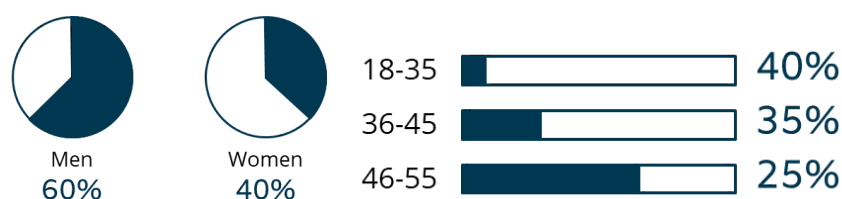


However, in Vlora, the reconstruction of the old historic center, even though with minimal green spaces, formed another important pole for pedestrians, adding public space dedicated to them. This helped that, even though during periods with limited hours during the pandemic, the residents could stay in open air, away from traffic and maintaining distances.

During our research in the main big cities of Albania, even though there may be an increase in public spaces, mainly in the city centers, there is a significant lack of green elements.

During the proposed implementation of these projects, the greenery is minimal, limiting the use during the sunny hours of the summer.

We have also , make a poll in three large cities , Tirana, Vlora and Durrës. The age groups was 18-35 - ,36-44, 46-55. 60 % of all people was mens, and 40% womens.



In our methodology, neither the economic situation nor the social affiliation was taken into consideration.

Cities Density

City and urban design may need to be revised from a population density point of view, which is one of the most basic factors affecting the spread of an epidemic; In other words, the greater the population density, the greater the risk of infection (Gandy, M 1999).

According to World Health Organization's regulations that advise against crowding and recommend closing places of assembly [World Health Organization; 2020], many countries have taken action by shutting down cafes, restaurants, theatres, shopping malls, green spaces, and schools to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Precautionary measures for the use of transportation have also been implemented as they are active places and points where the virus can easily spread [Wang J, Du G,2020]. Although these measures have proven to be effective, especially in cities that reacted early [Pellegrini P, Nocito FFS, Nante N, Castaldi S,2021], implementing them has been particularly challenging for countries like Albania , where complete lockdowns may not be feasible due to economic and social reasons . In such cases, decision-makers need to explore alternative solutions, such as promoting the development of less dense cities, rather than having people living in overcrowded areas like Tirana center . This approach will not only ensure that social distancing guidelines are maintained but also help to prevent the spread of infectious diseases in the long run. But also , according other studys, low-income neighbourhoods may also have less public outdoor space, which compounds the issue of overcrowding – the risk of coronavirus infection may be up to 20 times higher when indoors than outdoors. There's also a compelling link between outdoor exercise and a strong immune system. (Adlakha,Sallis,2020) So for residents in cramped housing in Albania without private outdoor space, local parks could offer respite and decrease exposure to infectious diseases. Where parks are not available, allocating more road space for walking and cycling would be important. Some cities are already implementing temporary measures to make streets safer for pedestrians and cyclists, such as reallocating road space away from motor vehicles and lowering speed limits.

Generally, long-term visioning and appropriate plans for mitigation, absorption, recovery, and adaptation, are key factors determining urban resilience to any disruptive events, including pandemics (Santos et al, 2020).

These allow cities to learn from past experiences and proactively design strategies to minimize the impacts of future disruptive events. For Albania we give some recommendations which we suggest to be implemented during the planning of the territory and the design of outdoor and indoor spaces, taking as a reference the tables with measures and guidelines proposed in the article COVID-19 and City Space:

Impact and Perspectives by Olivera Lekić Glavan 1, Nenad Nikolić 1, Branislav Folić 1, Biljana Vitošević 2 ORCID, Aleksandra Mitrović 1 and Saja Kosanović 1,* Received: 29 December 2021 / Revised: 23 January 2022 / Accepted: 31 January 2022 / Published: 7 February 2022

TABLE. Design guidelines for post-pandemic non-residential buildings

Measures	Guidelines
Open space	Plan yards for smaller number of users. Introduce atria, balconies, terraces and other (semi)open spaces into building layouts. Enable utilization of roof space. Plan outdoor activities, such as office work, meetings, and socializing.
Spatial organization	Design spaces for smaller number of users. Reconsider the use of the open plan office systems. Design flexible office space and plan mobile partition walls. Secure sufficient distancing between the users.
Indoor communications	Consider increased entrance area, corridor width, size of staircases and the number of elevators. Direct users' movement, e.g., by separating entrance and exit points at station buildings.

Space flexibility and transformability	Design spaces that can be converted to other purposes . Design multifunctional spaces.
Indoor air quality	Integrate UV light within ventilation systems . Increase ventilation rates and keep the ventilations systems on all the time. Establish a maximum number of users in specific ventilation zones. Clean ventilation systems and replace filters frequently. Reconsider air recycling vs. fresh air intake. Regularly monitor air humidity and conditioning water-based systems. Allow for natural ventilation.
Nature-based solutions	Introduce living systems into buildings, from green gardens and walls, to desk terrariums. Design green building envelope. Provide accessibility and at least visual contact with the greenery.
Daylight	Maximize natural light in indoor space: enlarge window openings, plan atria, reduce the use of solar control elements, etc. Increase the penetration of direct sunlight.
Materialization and hygiene	Provide sanitary barrier at the entrance of the building . Apply natural materials to promote biophilic attributes . Use materials that represent a less stable surface for pathogen growth, and are easy to sanitize and maintain. Pay particular attention to high-contact areas and surfaces.
Furniture	Plan modular furniture allowing for easy spatial transformation. Plan furniture that allows for physical distancing. Plan furniture that can be easily sanitized.

COVID-19 and City Space: Impact and Perspectivesby Olivera Lekić Glavan 1, Nenad Nikolić 1,Branislav Folić 1,Biljana Vitošević 2ORCID,Aleksandra Mitrović 1 andSaja Kosanović 1,* Received: 29 December 2021 / Revised: 23 January 2022 / Accepted: 31 January 2022 / Published: 7 February 2022

Housing Inequality and Building/urban Design

While different urban form and design factors can influence the dynamics of pandemics, existing literature has mainly focused on factors related to the density, and other factors are not well explored.

Housing inequality is a major issue in many countries, with some people living in substandard housing conditions while others live in luxury homes. This inequality can be attributed to various factors such as income, race, and social status. Moreover, building design can also play a significant role in exacerbating housing inequality. Poorly designed buildings can contribute to overcrowding, lack of privacy, and other living conditions that may negatively impact the quality of life of residents. On the other hand, well-designed buildings can provide affordable, efficient, and comfortable housing for all. It is therefore essential to prioritize housing design that promotes equality and ensures that everyone has access to decent housing.

The pandemic of COVID-19 in Albania has revealed a variety of methodological obstacles that must be resolved to improve the city's layout. Transmission of the virus was mainly spread in the city center, posing a challenge due to the density of the area. Therefore, it is crucial to reconsider the urban design of the city, resulting in dispersed, lower density urban forms that are better equipped to manage the spread of the virus. Due to the requirement of working from home, research on social behavior indicates that city dwellers spend a significant portion of their time indoors in our modern era. This makes their health more dependent on their living environment, and subpar housing design can cause detrimental effects on public well-being (Ruiz-Mallén, I., & Font, A. (2020). The pandemic of COVID-19 and the consequent lockdowns have changed the traditional definition of home, transforming it into a location not only for leisure and recreation but also for employment.

To address these changing living conditions, regulations should be examined and revised to reflect recommended social distancing guidelines. Additionally, interior design should focus on spatial organization to accommodate new functions practiced at home. For example, a private room with suitable furniture can serve as a fully organized workspace. These ideas should not be limited to residential buildings; public buildings of all kinds, such as schools and waiting rooms, should also be designed with flexible spaces in mind (Wu, P., Jiang, X., Wu, X., Chen, Y., & Zhou, Q. (2021).

In conclusion, the impact of housing design on public health has become increasingly significant, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure healthy living conditions, regulations and interior design should adapt to new living conditions and prioritize flexible spaces that accommodate changing needs.

We , already know that high-rise apartment buildings' shared entrance, indoor areas, stairs, and elevators can pose a high risk for epidemic transmission due to the density of residents and shared spaces. However, regular cleaning and sanitizing routines can help mitigate the risk of transmission.

But , in the future, the design of low-rise buildings with separated ground floor access and pedestrian ways could reduce the contagion risk. In Tirana , when this number of high rising buildings is increase in these 3 years, this may be a potential for

high risk, this could potentially limit the number of shared spaces and reduce the number of individuals coming into contact with each other, which could in turn reduce the risk of transmission.

Additionally, the design of buildings could also include features such as touchless entry systems and improved air ventilation systems, which could help reduce the risk of transmission even further. It is important to consider these factors when designing and maintaining buildings in order to protect the health and safety of occupants.

Conclusion

Existing urban design strategies must be reassessed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic to prioritize the health and safety of citizens. This urgent need has been thrust into the spotlight, prompting cities and designers to adopt new approaches. As cities around the world begin planning for recovery, it is essential to anticipate global trends and transformations and create a more resilient, sustainable, and comprehensive urban environment that can withstand future crises. The pandemic presents an opportunity to rethink the design of cities and to prioritize three main pillars: smartness, sustainability, and comprehensiveness, while taking into account societal design.

Through effective collaboration between designers, planners, and public health officials, cities can be built to be healthier and better prepared to face future challenges. Future studies on improving disease prevention theory through good design of contemporary cities and researching health design strategies are essential to building a more resilient urban environment. Buildings should be built to be the right solution in the face of infectious diseases, and it is critical to prioritize this aspect of urban design in the post-pandemic world.

Overall, literature shows that top-down and multi-level governance approaches should be combined with strong, democratic, and integrated city-level governance to enable effective and nimble response to pandemics. Such integrated approaches facilitate developing appropriate long-term development visions and emergency plans, help avoid sectoral conflicts, and maximize benefits that can be accrued from stakeholder engagement. As will be discussed in the following section, smart city solutions can contribute to promoting integrated urban management.

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The permanent structure health monitoring as main tool to prolong the life of the architectural heritage. The Zogu Bridge in Albania

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Abstract

Monuments, historical buildings, old built structures on the territory are part of so called “cultural heritage”, since belong to the traditions of the people and are considered to be transferred to the next generations. In this context and wishing to conserve and preserve the built for the future it is necessary to take all the possible action in order to prolong the life of our historical constructions. Also old bridges has the character of monument, sometimes, and the behaviour toward it should be the same as toward historical building. In Albania several old bridges, built in the middle of last century, now are approaching the critical point of the age, and often it is difficult to judge the structural health or even to assess the safety level for possible partial rehabilitation and re-use. The Zogu bridge is one of most emblematic old structure which can considered part of the Cultural Heritage of the Albania and deserve to be protected in order to make other people in the future enjoy its view.

The paper introduces the structural problem connected to this bridge, taken as case study, and tries to suggest some permanent monitoring plan as part of the active action by the National Albanian Conservation and Preservation office for the protection of the bridge.

Keywords: Permanent Monitoring, Infrastructures, structural health monitoring, IoT for structures, Albanian bridge

Introduction

Large part of cultural architectural heritage in several countries increases in number since including buildings and other construction built 50 or 70 years before. The age of the construction depends on the details of the law in the different countries, but the approach is similar, considering worthy of attention built environment which, in some way, reached a level of historical landmark in the urban landscape. Then bridges and buildings built in the middle of last century, mostly made by reinforced concrete, need to have attention from the citizen and from the authority, and deserve specific treatment, as maintenance, if they are in good condition or require conservation intervention inside the framework of the typical approach that we give to the cultural heritage architectures.

This approach sometime is forgotten by the local authorities, which neglecting the cultural and historical value of the bridges and buildings, classify as “old stuff” the valuable construction, witness of a period of the life of the country. The object we are going to introduce is the Zogu bridge, built to help a main local road to cross the Mat river. When the bridge became old and damaged, it was not decided to demolish it, but a new bridge was built a little bit far from the original one, waiting for final decision about the conservation and rehabilitation.

FIG.1 – The Mat river (Albania), with several road crossing the river with bridges.



The history of the Zogu Bridge, Albania

In 1927, after a temporary bridge, a first permanent bridge was established across the river Mat. The bridge with five large concrete arches on concrete piers spans 480 meters. As one of the largest construction of the former Albania it was called, in honor of the King Zog, Zogu Bridge.

The “bow arch” bridges were very common in the 1930’ and 1940’ years in Italy, Albania and in many other country of the Mediterranean area. The reinforced concrete was considered one of the most convenient and affordable material to build bridges with a span larger than what a simple supported bridge could do at that time. One of the most difficult part for the construction of the bridges inside the river, like happen for the Zogu Bridge, was the construction of the pier and the foundation, due to the need of piling to be realized under the foundation blocks. The deck works as main horizontal beam, but also as chain-beam for the whole arch, in order to absorb the thrust of the bow arch.

FIG. 2 Picture of the Zogu Bridge, 2011



Seems that the Zogu bridge was still working till last decade, as it is shown in fig. 2, since the traffic across the Mat river gave importance to the road. In the 1940's the bridge represented the "gate" from the northern region (near Montenegro), including Scutari, Puka, Tropoja, to enter in Albania. The design of the bridge is still discussed, attributing the responsibility of the project to an Italian engineer, mentioning even the Italian as constructor team. Other sources mention a german and a swiss engineer as the two main designers, while the Albanian engineer Gjovalin Gjadri was the main site engineer, using material imported from Italy.

FIG.3 – Zogu bridge. A view showing the arches and the hangers suspending the deck.



FIG. 4 The Zogu bridge, 2020- Some flooding caused erosion on the foundation piling, producing settlement



FIG. 5 – The first three spans of the Zogu bridge now showing the exposed piling and some additional supporting scaffolding

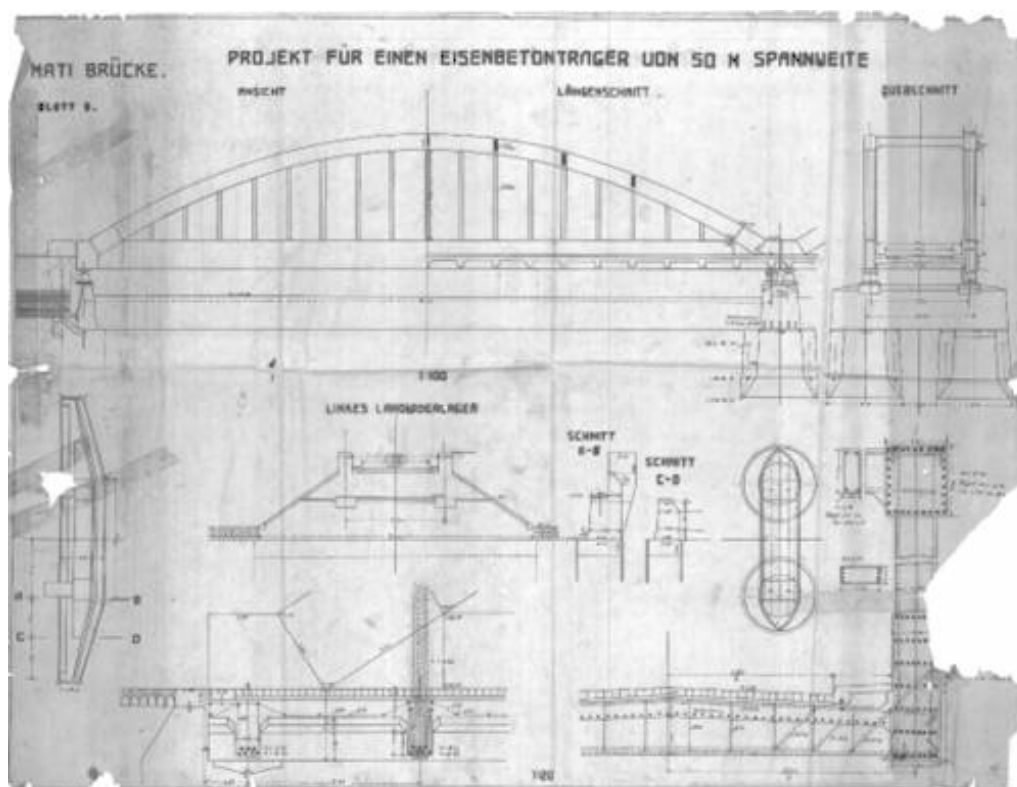


The bridge at the moment is very much damaged, and it seems to require important intervention in order keep its original architecture. The Zogu bridge has been considered one of the 7 most endangered heritage sites in Europe. Since 1999 the Zogu bridge has been considered at the level of National Architectural Heritage, and this give the idea of the national importance, for Albanian people, of the bridge. The Committee which declared the bridge as First category Heritage Architecture wanted to emphasize the fact that the bridge is not only a patrimony of the Albania, but of the all Balkan area. But despite this positive appreciation of the historical value of the bridge, the Zogu bridge has been abandoned until now.

FIG.6 – Detail of the damage suffered by the first two spans of the Zogu bridge.
Piling in danger and additional supporting scaffolding for the second span beams



FIG.7 – Original drawing of the design of the bridge



Other old bridges in Albania

Of course there are several other important old bridges in Albania, which deserve also to be considered and reminded as needing attention and maintenance. A short list has been shown in Tab.1. As it can be seen, most of them are classified inside the National Cultural Heritage patrimony, and even at higher international level, at UNESCO list of the Cultural Heritage in the world. By talking about the Zogu bridge, we cannot forget that many other old and historical bridges in Albania are in danger and need to be considered with high attention.

TAB. 1- Other historical bridges in Albania (World Heritage List, UNESCO official site)

	Name	Classification	Length	Type	Use	Date
	Kasabashit Bridge	Cultural Monument	26 m	Masonry 1 pointed arch	Footbridge Vlosh	1640
	Kamares Bridge	Cultural Monument	40 m	Masonry 2 segmental arches	Footbridge Shkumbin	1715
	Mesi Bridge	Span : 21.5 m Cultural Monument	130 m	Masonry 13 semi-circular arches	Footbridge Kir (river)	1768
	Gorica Bridge	Historic Centre of Berat World Heritage Site Cultural Monument	129 m	Masonry 7 semi-circular arches	Former road bridge Osum	1780
	Kadiu Bridge	Cultural Monument	30 m	Masonry 1 pointed arch	Footbridge Lengaricë	18th century
	Tanners Bridge	Cultural Monument		Masonry 2 semi-circular arches	Footbridge Former Lanë	18th century

Other bow bridges in the rest of the world

To show how common is this typology of bridge, some examples are shown in the fig. 7, from Wushan bridge (China), (460m of span, 2005), fig. 8, Lupu bridge, Shanghai (China), (550m for the main span, 2003) and fig. 9, Calatrava bridge, Reggio Emilia (Italy), (200m of span, 2007). All of these bridges, and we should say most of the bridges built in the last 30

years, are made by steel, since the steel offer greater resistance in compression and in traction, while the masonry and the concrete can offer only resistance to the compression.

FIG.7 - Wushan bridge (China),460m of span,2005)



FIG.8 - Lupu bridge , Shanghai (China), 550m for the man span, 2003



FIG.9 – Calatrava bridge, Reggio Emilia (Italy), (200m of span, 2007)



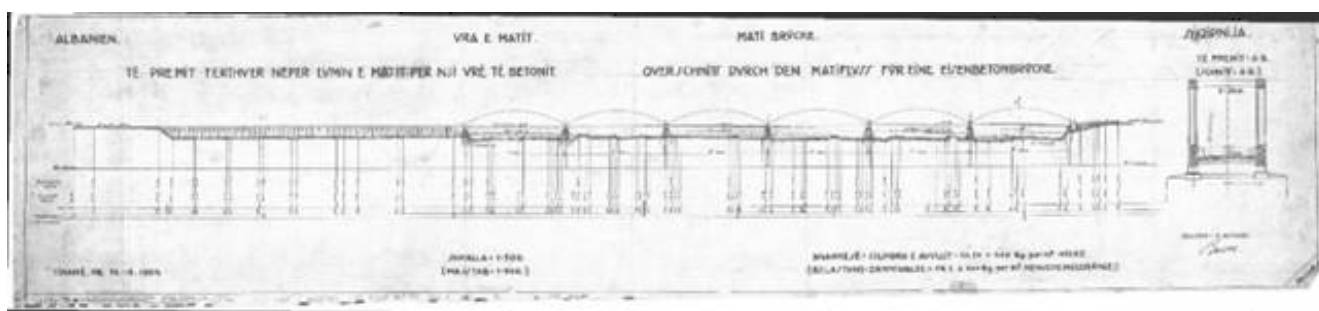
This modern bridges are new, and for the moment they do not need of special repairing activity, but just control and maintenance.

On the other hand, there other bridges that has been retrofitted and rehabilitated in the correct way, like the Hadley Bow Bridge, built in 1885, a Saratoga City, NY (Fig.9). The Hadley Bow Bridge has half-through lenticular truss, 60m of span, and it has been rehabilitated on 2006. As the picture shows (Fig.9), the result of the rehabilitation is very good, and the bridge is ready for a new life, after substituted main damaged structural elements.

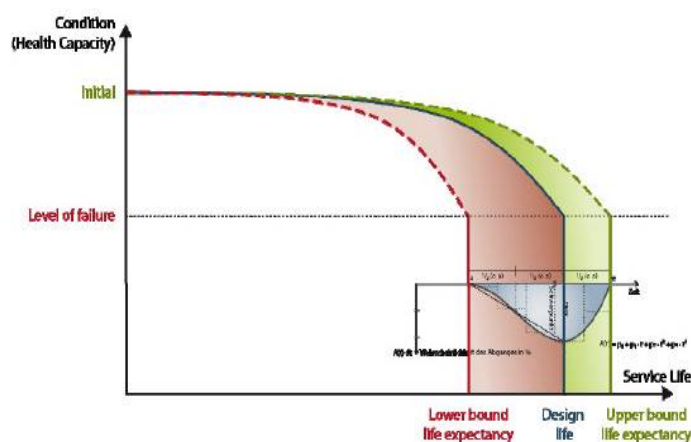
Then the final conclusion is to pay attention to the Zogu bridge as sson as possible, in order to recover the function as road and bridge, and offer again the original aspect of about one hundred years ago.In the meanwhile it seems reasonable to spend much less time with some diagnostic and monitoring campaign, in order to control the structures of the bridge from more scientific point of view.

FIG. 10 –Hadley Bow Bridge, Saratoga County, New York, U.S. (1885)

It is possible to proceed with a permanent, or long term, monitoring campaign in order to control the decay of the structure, and prevent suddenly collapse situations. The installation of the control system should be prepared with a clear design of the work. Looking at the original drawing of the cross section of the bridge, we can imagine what kind of sensor will be installed and in which position.

FIG.11 - Original drawing of the design of the bridge (longitudinal cross section)

In fact the typical curve of the decay for a structure (Fig. 13), but easily can be applied also to a bridge, shows that during the life the structure tends to deteriorate, and the safety factor reduces. If we periodically perform the correct maintenance of the material and of the structural element, the safety factor increases again, until the required value. Then if we can have a continuous structural control of the bridge, with a permanent monitoring system, the maintenance will be more efficient and saving money.

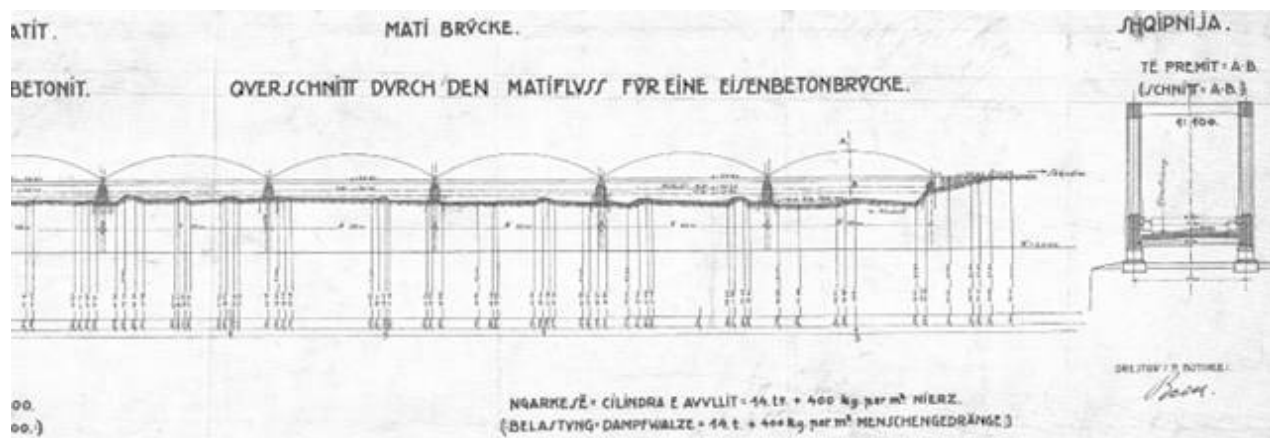
FIG .12 -Typical curve of decay for bridges (revised from UNI EN 16991:2018)

Also, it is possible to proceed with a permanent, or long term, monitoring campaign in order to control the decay of the structure, and prevent suddenly collapse situations. The installation of the control system should be prepared with a clear design of the work. Looking at the original drawing of the cross section of the bridge, we can imagine what kind of sensor will be installed and in which position.

The tentative list of the sensor to be installed on the bridge is as the following:

- inclinometers, in order to control the progress of the deformation;
 - laser system, in order to control the deformation and the direction of the displacement;
 - sensors embedded inside some emblematic structural element in order to control the development of the corrosion.
- The above sensors will be installed with a suitable threshold for each parameter to measure in order to give alarm for acceleration of the decay and of the already existing fracture of crack.

FIG.13 - Example of installation of permanent health structural control system on the bridge



Conclusions

Old bridges of the last century often can be considered as belonging to the cultural architecture heritage, and deserve to be protected. The Zogu Bridge at Milot in Albania is an old bridge about 100 years old, and needs some urgent intervention since it is suffering some damage from previous flooding. Despite the fact that other bridges have been built in the surroundings, in order to keep the communication from one side to the other of the river Mat, the bridge has some historical character that deserves to be kept for the memory of the country by preserving the existing building. Particularly attention should be paid in preparing the rehabilitation design, mainly avoiding to use aggressive structural solution which will contaminate and then reduce the historical value of the bridge. In the meanwhile the rehabilitation project will be designed it is suggested to install as soon as possible a long term affordable monitoring system, in order to control the structure, even with some threshold to give alert in case of unusual acceleration of the decay

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The Impact of Information Technology (IT) on Human Resource Management (HRM). Case Study: Evidence from the Municipality of Tirana

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Abstract

Technology is having profound effects on labor markets and the business environment is changing rapidly. Referring to 2022 data, 40% of the productive work time is spent on changing tasks. This process costs 450 billion USD per year to the global economy. According to the World Economic Forum 2016, \$100 trillion will be added to the world economy through digital transformation by 2025. In the field of Human Resource Management, Information and Communication Technology helps organizations in presenting the organizational structure of the company and its vacancies, employee data, work contracts, salary structure, bonuses and overtime, the management of leaves according to the labor code, presence in the workplace, periodic performance evaluations, generation of payrolls and sending them directly to employees etc. It is important to remember though that people are essential to the HRM domain. A lot depends on the experience and empathy of an HR specialist. However, the deployment of technology can significantly improve their work performance and quality. The Municipality of Tirana is widely using information technology to enhance the management of human resources efficiency. More specifically in: the recruitment of new employees, their management, the various trainings offered to them, to save time & minimize costs, as well as to facilitate access to the resources needed for employees to perform at their optimum. In this paper, we have presented the manner in which the General Directorate of Human Resources uses ICT to manage the relevant activities and processes in the field of human resources in adherence to law and transparency.

Key words: Information and Communication Technology, Human Resource Management, Digitalization; tasks, Performance.

Introduction

The use of Information and communication technology helps businesses and organizations to achieve their goals and to optimize work processes. Nowadays, business process automation, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) are top investments and also main challenges for organizations.

According to Research and Markets study 2020, the global digital transformation market is expected to grow from USD 469.8 Billion in 2020 to USD 1,009.8 Billion by 2025, at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 16.5% during the forecast period.

Regarding HRM, IT has revolutionized the manner HR functions are performed by providing new techniques and tools to assist HR practices. Advanced Human Resource software platforms are designed to automate all HR functions with the aim of increasing efficiency and productivity of the work of the human resource department. Referring to Data Bridge Market Research study 2022, the global core HR software market was valued at USD 17.18 billion in 2021 and is expected to reach USD 37.40 billion by 2029, registering a CAGR of 10.21% during the forecast period of 2022-2029.

Research aim and objectives

The main purpose of this paper is to study the impact of IT on HRM. Objectives:

- to emphasize the role of HRM and the HR department in an organization;
- to emphasize the role of HR software in HRM;
- to present how the Municipality of Tirana has implemented IT in HRM as a case study.

Research methodology

This study has a descriptive nature, and its main contribution is the presentation of the Municipality of Tirana case study as an example of how organizations in Albania are using IT in HRM.

The role of ICT in the activities of the HR department in an organization

Automation and digital advances are shifting labor demand away from routine low- to middle-level skills to higher-level and more sophisticated analytical, technical, and managerial skills. Also, many jobs are being disrupted with the rise of industrial robots and other automated machinery (Graetz and Michaels 2018; Acemoglu and Restrepo 2018).

However, digital transformation can't be effective and bring impactful change without the right people to implement the technologies.

In this context, the Human Resource Management in an organization is a key factor determining the probability of success.

The Human Resource Department is responsible for processes such as: recruiting, training, developing and rewarding people in an organization. Is it possible for a human resource specialist to hire the right people with the right qualities to secure the best fit and congruence with the necessities of an organization?

Other aspects of HRM are also becoming very stressful to manage because of the complexity of the situations. With the help of technology, the work of the human resource department can be facilitated, starting from the recruiting process to the retiring phase. Also, there are many other processes in which technology can be incorporated, such as: planning the training session for employees, evaluating their performance, measuring attendance (timekeeping), benefits and compensation planning, electronic payment, e-procurement, etc.

The use of technology not only increases the efficiency and transparency, but it also improves communication, stimulates the innovation and eliminates time and space boundaries.

Literature review

This section aims to presents some authors that have studied the impact of IT on HRM and some further implications. Technology has a deep impact on Human Resource Management processes and practices and is moving them in a completely new direction (Stone & Dulebohn, 2013). HRM has witnessed great changes in management and approach compared to the 1990s mainly due to the introduction of web-based HRM systems and the replacement of old HRM activities with these systems (Ruël, Bondarouk, & Van Der Velde, 2007).

Development, revolution and challenges

Management of talent is very important and difficult. Additionally, the acquisition of the right talent strengthens the strategy of organizations. Companies can gain a competitive advantage over their rivals, if the personnel possess specific competencies that the competitors can't imitate or recreate. Consequently, companies are focusing on creating effective systems for talent acquisition and management.

According to Appelbaum et al. (2000), the use of IT in HRM has resulted in cost savings, improved accuracy, and increased speed of processing. HRM has been revolutionized in many ways: recruitment and selection, training and development, employee engagement, etc. Similarly, e-learning techniques have made training and development more attractive and effective. The use of performance management software has facilitated the monitoring and performance evaluation of employees in real-time. Organizations use talent management as a business strategy to keep their most skilled workers and improve their performance. This encompasses finding the best individuals, educating & training them, and monitoring their performance.

IT has allowed the creation of virtual work settings. Now employees use many communication tools and work remotely. According to Roberts and Davenport (2002), virtual work arrangements have resulted in improved work-life balance for employees and increased productivity for organizations. Consequently, the way organizations manage their workforce has changed drastically and geographical boundaries are no longer an issue. According to Cao and Clarke (2013), HRIS has

brought improved employee satisfaction and better organizational performance. The massive use of innovative IT in HRM has been powered by the broad implementation of enterprise resource planning programs in co-occurrence with internet-based technology. This has caused the standardization/automation of the administrative parts of HRM functions (Marler & Parry, 2015).

Despite IT having many pros, it also poses several challenges and potential issues to organizations. The IT revolution and its impact on HRM comes with its issues and challenges. A main challenge is the necessity for HR managers to have the necessary skills to use technological tools effectively. According to Barron and Barron (2007), many HR managers lack the necessary technical skills to fully exploit the potential of IT in HRM. Another important challenge is the potential for bias in algorithms used for engagement, recruitment and performance management. The use of IT in HRM might also create a digital divide between employees who like technology and are able to learn & adapt, and those who don't and consequently create a gap in the access of important information.

Benefits and potential opportunities for HRM

A crucial opportunity for organizations is the ability to collect, analyze and get insight from large amounts of HR data. This helps in the process of informed planning and decision-making. Organizations need good analytics to identify patterns in employee behavior. By doing so, they can develop better strategies for talent acquisition and retention, planning and employee engagement. According to Shin and Kim (2016), the implementation of IT in HRM can lead to improvements in HR processes such as recruitment, selection, and training. The use of digital platforms and tools can enhance employee collaboration and communication. They also noted that the adoption of HRM technology can improve employee engagement and satisfaction.

Lee and Hong (2018) emphasized the importance of HR professionals having a good understanding of IT and analytics. In their study, they claim that this knowledge is crucial for HR professionals to make informed decisions and develop effective HR strategies. Another interesting point they made was that group creative processes can stimulate group innovation, if members engage proactively.

In a study by Hsiao and Chen (2018), the authors explored the impact of IT on talent management. They found that the use of IT tools and systems can help in many spheres. The most noticeable ones were: identifying, developing, and keeping high-potential employees.

An article by Lengnick-Hall and Moritz (2003) suggested that IT can help HR departments become more efficient and effective in their operations. They noted that the use of HR technology can streamline administrative tasks and allow HR professionals to focus on more strategic initiatives.

The last paper we analyzed focused on the usage of AI in HRM. The main result presented was that AI tools can help automate routine HR tasks such as the screening of resumes and scheduling interviews, freeing up time for HR professionals to focus on other relevant activities (Yang and Huang, 2019).

Broader view

To give some broader perspective, according to Atkinson (2015), there is undeniable evidence indicating that inequality has been significantly increasing in developed economies since the 1990s, although there are significant differences in the extent of the increase across nations. This can be considered as a major shift in secular trends in income distribution, which previously was tending steadily towards equality. The IT revolution is considered broadly as one of the main determinants of this change.

Information and Communication Technologies usage in Households, individuals and enterprises in Albania

According to INSTAT, the percentage of Albanian families that have access to the Internet is 96.5% in 2022, compared to 88.3% in 2021. On the other hand, the top three activities carried out via the Internet are: sending / receiving email (11.4 percentage points), reading online news / newspapers or magazines (11.3 percentage points) as well as participating in online consultations or voting on social or political issues (around 10.3 percentage points). Moreover, in 2022:

- 99.0% of companies used fixed Internet connection, which includes ADSL, SDSL, VDSL, fiber optic (FTTP), cable technology, etc. from 98.1% that resulted in 2021.
- 13.8% of companies sold products/services via their website
- 66.2% of companies have used procedures in order to ensure the confidentiality of data and systems.
- 5.5% of companies have used industrial or service robots to perform certain tasks automatically (robotic welding, laser cutting, supervision, cleaning, transportation, etc.).
- 26.3% of the companies have ICT specialists whose main task is to develop, operate or maintain the company's ICT systems and applications.

Regarding HRM, many private companies use the HRMIS to manage departments, their internal structures and employees. All Human Resource Units in all Public Administration Institutions operate based on Law No. 152/2013 “For the Civil Servant” amended. HRM is organized based on the law and on other decisions and instructions which are in accordance with the law. The Legal and Regulatory Framework determines mainly the: rights and obligations of the civil servant, classification and job description, recruitment, the process of evaluation of work results (performance), procedures for disciplinary cases (measures). But, how is technology used in HRM in Albanian organizations more precisely? The case of the Municipality of Tirana is presented below, as an institution which is widely using information technology for augmented efficiency in the management of human resources.

Case study

The Impact of Information Technology on Human Resource Management in the Municipality of Tirana

Tirana is the capital and largest city of Albania and as well the heart of Albania’s cultural, economic and governmental activity. Tirana is one of largest cities in the Balkan Peninsula ranking 7th with a population of 800,000 and the largest Albanian-speaking city in the world. The municipality, has a total population of 800,986. It is also the biggest Metropolitan area in Albania and the only one with a population of over 800.000. Being Albania’s primate city, has influenced the institution of Tirana Municipality to turn into an important engine for the management of social, economic, political and cultural issues and the largest employer in Albania where its constituent parts are:

- 13 General Directors who manage public, social, financial, environmental issues, public relations, etc.
- 27 administrative units of which 14 are administrative urban units and 13 are rural administrative units.
- 33 dependent units of the Municipality of Tirana that manage the maintenance of roads, schools, nurseries, maintenance of order and security such as the Municipal Police or the management of civil emergencies such as the unit of Fire Department ect
- 16 self-financed enterprises with Tirana Municipality as a shareholder.

The steps with which technology has progressed has influenced the rise of systems and the digitization of many services which before we looked only on paper and in voluminous files. The Municipality of Tirana is an institution which is widely using information technology for more efficient management of human resources by helping the institution in the recruitment of new employees, their management, the various trainings that will be offered to them, saving time and costs as well as making the staff satisfied and have more easy access to the resources needed for them to perform at their best.

To focus on the General Directorate of Human Resources this unit is responsible for drafting and monitoring of medium-term and long-term plans of Tirana Municipality, and ensures the implementation of strategies, policies and plans in the field of human resources, for the structures, programs, activities and processes that are managed by it, in relation to the principles of legality and transparency. To give an approach to how this directorate has embraced digitalization, I am listing the directorates and the systems that each of them has implemented and the role they have in human resource management in Tirana Municipality:

Directorate of Human Resources and Procedures

E-recruitment platform

In the Municipality of Tirana, you can apply online for civil service recruitment procedures. During the year 2022, work has been done towards the implementation of the new recruitment program in the civil service, in all its stages. Work has also been done in the direction of better orientation of the public regarding the correct application method and the progress of the recruitment process in all its phases. In order to improve the recruitment process and meet institutional needs, the Department of Human Resources Planning, Recruitment and Procedures, during 2022, undertook a series of measures to ensure a quality body of employees with a focus on:

- more transparency in recruitment procedures;
- ensuring a fair competition process for vacant positions in the civil service;
- The application of mechanisms that guarantee the objective evaluation of candidates;
- ensuring a body of civil servants with high performance at all levels of the administration of the Municipality of Tirana.

IMPRO and HRMIS platforms

The Human Resources Unit is responsible for the administration of files and data related to its work processes for Tirana Municipality employees in accordance with the policies, legal framework, and Decisions of the Municipal Council related to human resources. The implementation of work processes is done in cooperation with other organizational units of the Municipality, as well as with other Institutions set up for this purpose, taking into account the principle of data confidentiality.

Through these systems we have achieved:

- Creating/administering/updating personnel files with mandatory and supplementary documentation obtained during their job in the Municipality of Tirana;
- Preparation of employee data (attendance at work/ seniority/ employee education for salary categories/ retirement/ various permits/ work certificates)

Directorate of Training and Development

E-LEARNING PLATFORM

This platform is in the process of development and enrichment with professional materials that will help the employees of the institution on legal and professional knowledge to improve the process of their work position.

All Tirana Municipality employees can access this platform using their credentials, after the initial registration: first name. last name password

Since 2021, the General Directorate of Human Resources has implemented on the e-learning platform a window dedicated to the Human Resources magazine, which periodically informs the staff about new legal basis and other activities.

E-library platform

It is an informative window, there are published materials from websites such as the Council of Europe, Commentary of Administrative Procedure Code, Territorial Strategy, Sustainable Development Cooperation Program, Public Administration, Sustainable Development Strategy of Tirana Municipality 2018 - 2022, ASPA website as well as Orientation Manuals provided by ASPA, Respa and Eipa, etc.

“APPS CHALLENGE TIRANA” II

The Directorate of Training and Development implemented the Project “Apps Challenge-Tirana” Call II, which was approved by Decision no. 13 dated 02.05.2020, of the Tirana City Council drawn up according to the operational guide. The purpose of the “Apps Challenge-Tirana” project is that young people, up to the age of 25, at the beginning of their professional career, who are following or have completed Bachelor’s, Master’s level studies no more than two years ago Professional or Scientific Master will be engaged in practice and will gain a work experience for 4 months in the Municipality of Tirana. In order to carry out the internship, the young winners were selected through the competition procedure, and after the selection they will work in the Work Team, to realize and complete during the 4-month internship period, the applications, cooperating closely with the staff of the General Directorate of Technology of Information and Statistics, near the Municipality of Tirana. At the end of the practice, each Work Team will submit the mobile application and in cooperation with the Supervisory Group will make it possible to place them in the respective App store for Android and iOS applications.

Directorate of performance evaluation, administrative measures and staff motivation

Through this platform, the responsible unit evaluates the performance of the staff according to the civil service legislation.

The Performance Evaluation process, for NC of the institution, is performed periodically twice a year every 6 month. The evaluation is done after the objectives have been reflected at the beginning of each year. The objectives must be fulfilled by the responsible persons according to the hierarchy from the Mayor, General Directors, Directors of the Directorate, Sector Managers and at the specialist level. Through this platform it is guaranteed compliance for civil service law for their evaluation with meritocracy and objectivity.

Directorate of the central archive and protocol: The digitalization of the archives of Tirana Municipality

Through this project we aim to implement a system for the digitization, processing, organization and indexing of written documents as well as their reproduction by providing an identical, electronic copy of official physical documents (paper). The purpose of fulfilling this objective is:

- Conversion and storage of the institution’s documents from official format (paper) to digital format.
- Efficient management of documents. Digitized and indexed documents should be automatically transferred to the system, stored in the corresponding digital space, where their use can then be tracked, documented, managed and reproduced.
- Finding the right document in the fastest and easiest way. Documents that contain appropriate keywords in their text or that have appropriate information in their meta-data (document descriptive data) can be easily identified and found.
- Accessing documents at any time.

Conclusions

The use of technology is become a necessity for the work of every department in an organization. Especially, for HR department, the IT increases the efficiency, transparency, cost savings and communication. With the use of technology, HR departments can plan and manage training sessions for employees helping to position the labor force to take advantage of

changing demand for labor that may arise from economic growth and structural transformation, issues that are considered more broadly in the 2021 Albania Country Economic Memorandum (World Bank, 2021). But, on the other hand there are some disadvantages as: high costs on investments and maintenance, causes distraction at work, makes employees lazy also the investments on digital education of the employees (Yuvaraj & Suganthiya, 2021). In the global level, despite the tremendous digital transformation there exists inequalities that need to be addressed, for example today in the world:

- there are 2.7 billion people that do not have access to internet, and
- Even in the most advanced nations, affordable usage of mobile broadband remains a challenge.

On its way to become a member of the big European family, Albania needs to gain knowledge from EU countries to boost digitalization, innovation and research activities. Even though some achievements have been made in the field of digitization, a lot remains to be done in this direction. For example, although in Albania 95% of public services have been digitalized, a significant portion of the population still has difficulty accessing them because of the lack of basic technological knowledge.

In this context, HEI in Albania have the duty and mission to prepare specialists who will contribute to the labor market in Industry 4.0.

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PANEL V

**CHALLENGES IN CLINICAL
PRACTICE ACCORDING
TO EU STANDARDS**

The european model of health organisation and cooperation between states in new treatment strategies

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Abstract

After the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU has drawn up an increasing number of acts, including the ambitious EU4Health 2021-2027 Program, aimed at the recovery of the health systems of the member countries. The goal is to create a strong and stable European Health Union. One of the crucial points of the Program is the digital innovation of the health systems of each EU State, a necessary condition to ensure the interoperability of health data, implement and make access to medical care more equitable, reduce health costs and improve the quality of self-managed care by the patient. Useful tools are the Electronic Health Record, Telemedicine and digital therapies: these are innovations which, by allowing data and information to be moved instead of people, revolutionize the healthcare sector and the doctor-patient relationship. However, the introduction of technology brings with it some dangers: the illegitimate dispersion of sensitive data, hacker attacks, the marginalization of fragile categories, all factors that increase social inequality within each state. Therefore, the digitization process does not consist in a mere passage of procedures from the analogic to the digital format, but a profound reorganization of the healthcare structures is necessary, which will have to be able to implement the technology and make it available to the population for healthcare based on guarantees of efficacy of treatments, data security, equity in access and sustainability of costs. A synergy in the field of digital health between Albania and Italy has already begun with some projects that aim to move data, information and documents between the two countries. But more needs to be done: with a Euro-comparative approach, the key points of a structural and shared reform must be identified which, by putting an end to the current fragility and weaknesses of individual health services, can lead the health organization to be a “good”, as a right of every citizen according to the vision of the European Union (art. 41 CDFEU).

Key-words: E-Health, administrative organization, Digital services, Clinical practice, Artificial Intelligence (IA), Good Administration.

European Union rules and programs on “Digital Health”

The object of this paper³ concerns the digitization of the administrative organization, with reference to a sector, that of Health, which requires a massive renewal intervention, useful for overcoming all the fragility and weaknesses that the health

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³ The paper is the result of a shared reflection. However, Prof. Federico Valentini wrote paragraphs 1, 4 and 5; Dr. Benedetta Ciferni wrote paragraphs 2 and 3.

systems of the individual states of the European Union have demonstrated during and after the pandemic (PIOGGIA, 2020). From a clinical point of view, in fact, in the European context it is necessary to modernize the traditional model to react to deep-rooted critical issues such as the aging of the population, resistance to antibiotic treatments, the increase in chronic diseases, and to deal with any new epidemics or pandemics.

Digitization is a goal that has long been identified in the reforming ideas of the supranational legislator. In fact, there is an overabundance of regulations and programmatic documents that aim to dematerialize all public services, with the aim of making them faster and more efficient. (DUNI, 2007; MADDALENA, 2017).

However, the digital transformation process is still far from complete today. The difficulty of implementation is given by a high-speed scientific and technological progress compared to the slow pace of the regulations and the capacity of the public administration to implement the changes. In fact, there are many risks inherent in the digital transition process, such as the vulnerability of systems, inadequate protection of user privacy, the exclusion from the use of services of fragile categories, such as the elderly, the indigent, or the disabled. Hence the danger of exacerbating social (cultural, educational, economic) inequalities (PIRAS, 2022).

In the healthcare sector, the transition to digital is even more complex due to its macro-organization and the delicacy of the protected asset. However, this step is now essential in the light of the pandemic crisis in which the measures taken to contain the contagion were only physical and, therefore, difficult to manage on a large scale.

Indeed, it was in the midst of the health and economic emergency that the need was felt at European level to accelerate Digital Health (or E-Health), a term that identifies the use of information and telecommunications technologies (ICT) for the benefit of human health (WORD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, 2005) or, as it has been defined in the medical literature, the set of digital technologies in order to support and deliver health services in support of the well-being of individuals, who are not necessarily sick. (TRIFIRO, CRISAFULLI, PUGLISI, RACAGNI, PANI, 2021).

“Digital healthcare” also applies to healthcare organizational processes to achieve objectives such as the cost-quality ratio of services, reduction of differences between the various territories and improvement of the quality perceived by the citizen.

At the European level, it notes the recommendation (EU) 2019/243 with the primary purpose of introducing and enhancing digital technologies in the health sector. One passage says: *«Digital solutions connected to health applications or wearable devices, combined with a system that allows citizens to safely access their health data, could allow patients suffering from chronic diseases, such as diabetes, or cancer, to monitor their symptoms from home and share them quickly with their clinical teams. This should reduce the number of visits to health facilities for monitoring. Digital technologies can also help identify the need for change in care at an early stage, thereby reducing the number of hospital admissions due to complications. Better management of chronic diseases in the community, combined with a reduction in the duplication of health interventions (such as examinations) would not only make systems more sustainable but would also improve the overall quality of life and health care provided to citizens and reduce the costs associated with health care for individuals and families».*

An objective sculpted, most recently, in the ambitious *EU4Health Program 2021-2027*, aimed at the recovery of the health systems of the member countries. With a budget of 5.1 billion euros, this is the largest program ever implemented, funding EU countries, health organizations and NGOs to enhance the quality and safety of European citizens' health, support health services in the fight against cross-border threats and improve the EU's response capacity and resilience to possible future crises. Specifically, the European project is articulated on four crucial points: disease prevention, crisis preparation, attention paid to health systems and their personnel, digital implementation. All in compliance with the general objectives set forth in art. 3 of EU Regulation 2021/522 and with the aim of laying the foundations for a strong and solid European Health Union. The program will be largely implemented by the European Health and Digital Executive Agency - HaDEA, which went into operation on 1 April 2021.

These maneuvers bear witness to a process of centralization within the EU of health matters which today is becoming increasingly strong, giving rise to a new matter which, by combining health with information technology, takes the name of “Digital Health”.

In fact, the European Union does not require a necessary and perfect harmonization of internal health regulations for which the individual Member States remain responsible (RACCA, CAVALLO PERIN, 2011) however, since the Lisbon Treaty, health matters have been the subject of an ever-increasing number of acts, interventions, and directives, in coherence and enhancement of that Health in all policies approach engraved in the various articles of the TFEU. The One Health approach, according to the definition provided by the “National Institute of Health”, consists of *«a healthcare model based on the integration of different disciplines, based on the recognition that human health, animal health and ecosystem health are inextricably linked. It is officially recognized by the European Commission, the Italian Ministry of Health, and by all international organizations as a relevant strategy in all sectors that benefit from the collaboration between different disciplines (doctors, veterinarians, environmentalists, economists, sociologists, etc.)».* In European legislation, Health, mentioned in art. 9 TFEU, is subject to protection in many sectors: the internal market (art. 114, points 3 and 6 TFEU), the environment (art. 191, point 1 TFEU), consumer protection (art. 169 point 1 TFEU), social affairs (art. 153 point 1 letter a) TFEU).

Therefore, in the vast and complex matter of “Digital Health”, an invocation in terms of competence of health policies by the European Union seems close, relying on the principle of vertical subsidiarity pursuant to art. 5, paragraph III, of the TEU (D'ORSOGNA, 2001)

A centralization would have the advantage of creating a system capable of uniformly enhancing the use of digital technologies, the interconnection and instantaneous retrieval of data on national territories and a fruitful collaboration, both online and in terms of patient mobility, between the various health facilities.

The I.A. system in clinical practices

In healthcare, the organizational component is crucial for adequate action in terms of good performance. (NIGRO, 1996). After all, healthcare treatment is first “organization” and then “activity”, (VILLAMENA, 2019) two fundamental and inseparable moments in the protection of health: only a profitable mix between them guarantees the achievement of the institutional purpose, as a protected and constitutionally guaranteed interest.

As for healthcare organization, all public administrations are unable to keep up with technological progress, thus generating «a rift between technological innovation and administrative innovation» (CONTALDO, 2022) and so the introduction of technology has taken place very slowly: in Italy, for example, the ESF was instituted with d.l. 18 October 2012, converted with amendments into law 17 December 2012, n. 221 which, in art. 12, defines it as «the set of health and social-health digital data and documents generated by present and past clinical events, concerning the assisted person». It has long since found its way into the national regulatory framework, has not had much practical application to the point of being subject to important innovations by the emergency legislation (legislative decree n. 34/2020, converted with amendments by law n. 77/ 2020).

Among the relevant innovations, in the first place, an extension on an objective and subjective level of the documents that fall within the FSE which is now fed with data on clinical events both by doctors of the National Health Service, and by professionals in the private sector, and by the same patient autonomously according to his own will and ability to take initiative. So establishes the art. 11, paragraph I lett. c) of Legislative Decree 34/2020 which completely rewrites the third paragraph of the art. 12 of law 179/2012. In this way, a profitable connection is created, hitherto missing, between the public and private systems. Furthermore, it is envisaged that the ESF is established and fed without the consent of the interested party, which is now relevant only for the purposes of consultation for treatment purposes. This happened due to the express repeal, by the d.l. 34/2020 (art. 11, paragraph I, letter b), of paragraph 3-bis of art. 12 of the legislative decree 179/2012 which required the patient's consent to feed the electronic health record. (In doctrine, on the issue of digital health and informed consent, see MORANA, BALDUZZI, MORGANTI, 2022). This entails a considerable acceleration and implementation in the use of data, so much so that measures have also been envisaged to strengthen the National Interoperability Infrastructure (INI) for the management of the ESF index at a national level to guarantee concrete “portability” of the electronic file in cases of interregional mobility of patients.

The Ministry of Health has also intervened to improve the organizational structure of the complex health system in terms of Electronic Health Records with the publication of the Guidelines for the implementation of this digital tool. The guidelines have been established by the D.M. 20 May 2022 pursuant to art. 12, paragraph 15-bis of the legislative decree 179/2012, converted with amendments into law 221/2012. The objectives set by Italy are the use by 85% of general practitioners by 2025 and by all Italian regions by 2026. To date, the ESF implementation program seems to be proceeding quite quickly, if look at some data published by the Ministry of Health. In the Document is reported, as regards the feeding of the ESF, that in just seven months Basilicata has passed from 27% of the available documents to 95%, Campania from 1.5% to 53% and Piedmont from 50% to 80% . These data are certainly comforting, especially if related to the initial paralysis.

Basically, the intent of the Italian Legislator is to create a single and well-harmonized system in the national context in a centralizing logic of health data management capable of guaranteeing continuity in the treatment path of the individual patient and, at the same time, a simplification, dematerialization, and speed of communication based on clinical documents, with undoubted benefits in terms of health administrative appropriateness (CONTALDO, 2022).

Another tool of digital health that can be referred to the organization is Telemedicine, understood as a way of providing health care services using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in cases where the health professional and the patient are physically distant. Historically WHO said that Telemedicine is «the provision of health services, where distance is a critical factor, by all health professionals using information and communication technologies for the exchange of valuable information for the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of diseases and accidents, research and evaluation and for the continuous training of health workers, all in the interest of promoting the health of individuals and their communities». (WHO, 1997). These are techniques for the transmission of data and information of a medical nature, in the form of texts, images, sounds and anything else necessary for the prevention, diagnosis, therapeutic treatment and control of the patient.

The impact of the remote service is evident which, by making information move instead of people, revolutionizes the healthcare sector and the doctor-patient relationship. There is a strong and constant commitment on the part of the European institutions to implement the use of technologies in health. There are many EU initiatives on this point: among the most important, the Communication of the European Commission Electronic health - improving the healthcare of European citizens: action plan for a European electronic health area of 30 April 2004 ; Decision no. 1350/2007/EC establishing the second Community action program in the field of Health (2008-2013); Regulation (EU) 282/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the third Union action program in the field of Health (2014-2020); the Action Plan (2012-2020) launched by the European Commission in December 2012; to this is added, more recently, the Recommendation (EU) 2019/243 of 6 February 2019 and the EU4Health Program 2021-2027. However, the recourse to them has always been contained in Italy because it is limited to the initiative of small businesses, which have found it enormously difficult to establish itself in the health care market.

During the pandemic, remote communication techniques have proven to be an effective and safe alternative to face-to-face visits, so that the Italian Government has intervened by dictating the guidelines on the subject with the general aim of providing a single national reference for effective planning and adequate use of Telemedicine in the national context.

Furthermore, the PNRR, developed by Italy and approved by the EU, aims to create a national platform for Telemedicine services to make it a structured service within the National Health System. Specifically, the purpose of the platform is to create a fundamental level of interoperability capable of guaranteeing common standards on telemedicine services developed by the Regions. In this regard, the P.N.R.R. finances research projects on digital technologies in the field of health and assistance that focus on the provision of services and services at a distance, in line with the goal well expressed in Mission 6, Component 1, according to which the home must become the first place of treatment.

Certainly, the measures aim to overcome some critical clinical issues, such as the aging of the population or the increase in chronic diseases, but also to achieve a more financially sustainable system. Indeed, the connection between the patient's residence and the healthcare environment can bring benefits not only to health, but also to public budgets, thus becoming an advantage not only for patients, but for the whole community (About this topic, BORGHINI, PAONE, 2022).

However, to guarantee adequate telemedicine services, a valid basic strategy is needed to create an adequate organization from an economic, managerial, and organizational point of view. A valid tool to avoid strong social differentiation must be identified in management: in fact, the need to develop project management skills and invest in professional figures oriented towards this has already been recognized. Envisaging, rooting, and implementing project managers within healthcare companies is a necessary condition for improving the organization and laying concrete foundations for the implementation of digital programs in the healthcare sector (ZANGRANDI, FANELLI, 2022).

Shifting attention to the level of therapeutic action, "Digital Health" invests the theme of Artificial Intelligence (AI), defined at European level as the set of *«systems that display intelligent behavior by analyzing their environment and performing actions, with a certain degree of autonomy, to achieve specific objectives»*. The European Commission (COM 2018/237 final, Bruxelles, 2018), on AI for the benefit of health, said that : *«in Denmark, AI helps save lives by allowing emergency services to diagnose cardiac arrest or other conditions based on the caller's voice. In Austria, help radiologists detect tumors more accurately by instantly comparing radiographs with a large amount of other medical data»*.

The maximum expression of AI applied to the medical field is represented by digital therapies (DTx), defined as *«technologies that offer therapeutic interventions that are guided by high-quality software programs, based on scientific evidence obtained through methodologically rigorous and confirmatory clinical trials, to prevent, manage or treat a broad spectrum of physical, mental, and behavioral conditions»* (GUSSONI, 2021). Each digital therapy can take the form of an App downloaded on a smartphone or tablet or with devices wearable by the patient (wereable devices). As has been noted in medical doctrine, while in the classic drug the active ingredient is the chemical or biological molecule, in digital therapy the active ingredient is the algorithm, as the element responsible for both the positive and negative clinical effect (DA ROS, RECCHIA, GUSSONI, 2021).

Naturally, the crux is the clinical effectiveness of digital therapies, difficult to guarantee in the short term in a system that is complex, extremely delicate, and currently backward for a rapid adoption of the technology.

On this last aspect, in fact, therapeutic digitization requires several rigorous clinical studies that can generate solid scientific evidence in a timely manner. However, there are many obstacles that overlap such a goal and on these the individual Member States are called to act, individually and jointly, to achieve adequate regulatory and organizational standards that can guarantee a good level of health digitization.

The dangers of digital tools in healthcare

Digitization brings with it many dangers that can compromise the guarantee of social rights: one of these dangers is the dispersion of data. In this regard, it should be noted that the e-Healt tools analyzed above are based on messaging services, geolocation, bluetooth technology and, therefore, require the patient to enter personal data with the possibility of constant access by health professionals and cheap. In this system, data, and information continuously feed databases useful for scientific research, generating an unlimited volume of data on the net. The issue is complex because confidentiality is not guaranteed simply by secrecy of the information but, more in depth, by the transparency of the information possessed by public and private entities in contact with the interested party, who has the right to access and modify the data they concern him. Some studies have found a framework that, between insecure communication protocols and omissions on privacy policies by some Apps, can be considered dangerous for the security of personal data. It is therefore necessary to raise the level of protection of confidentiality on a practical level in order to avoid violations on the dissemination of personal and sensitive data (CAPILLI, 2022). That is, it is necessary to provide adequate guarantees on the protection of personal data that are not based only on rules (which remain abstract) but also on the technology itself (For this topic, CASALICCHIO, FILETTI, GRIGOLO, MANCINI, MEI, PAGNOTTA, RAVIZZA, SPOGNARDI, STEFANELLI 2022). Until this gap is filled, the same clinical effectiveness of digital tools will remain compromised, which, by their nature, require the active collaboration of the patient.

Furthermore, the vulnerability of databases also leads to a cybersecurity problem: in fact, there have already been several hacker attacks on hospitals throughout Europe. Just think about the San Giovanni Addolorata Hospital in Rome which, in September 2021, was the target of a cyber attack that compromised the smooth running of healthcare activities with the impossibility of viewing medical records, making reports, requesting laboratory tests, and other services, even if it was possible to contain the damage thanks to the computer security technicians who made it possible to continue the hospitalization, outpatient and emergency assistance and emergency services. Far more serious, however, were the cyber attacks in Great Britain where, in 2017, several hospitals reached the point of having to cancel scheduled surgeries and transfer patients from emergency departments.

The problem is serious because it involves the operational paralysis of the structures until the ransom is paid or, in any case, the regular functioning of the computer system is restored. Therefore, the technology that will be introduced must also be aimed at containing these criminal phenomena through the modernization of the current obsolete and therefore vulnerable IT systems. A further pitfall of digitization is the increase in inequality and the marginalization of fragile categories. The concrete risk is that the use of technologies in healthcare, instead of guaranteeing equity in access to care, goes in the opposite direction, exacerbating the digital divide with consequent prejudice to the effectiveness of the right to health. In Albania the social gap is very marked, and the great socio-economic inequalities have also had an impact on the health system. In fact, it has been found that critical issues in the health sector have prompted many Albanian citizens to seek treatment in Italy (BEHARI, 2018).

The commitments and programs aimed at containing the gap and social inequalities connected with the use of technology are now present in the European panorama; however, they are destined to remain a dead letter if specific digital literacy policies are not followed by individual states aimed at increasing trust in technology and, consequently, its use.

The pandemic - in the more traditional view of crisis as an opportunity - was an opportunity to resume and accelerate the digitization process. As is now known, in fact, Europe has strengthened its multiannual budget to face the economic crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic: the strategic fundamental principles of the NextGenerationEU have been implemented by Italy in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, a complex programmatic tool with dual regulatory relevance (DE LUONGO, 2022; CLARICH, 2021).

In mission 6 of the P.N.R.R. called "Health", the planned interventions concern two macro-components: the first is related to «*Proximity networks, structures and Telemedicine for territorial health assistance*»; the second pertains to «*Innovation, research and digitization of the national health service*».

The two components are intertwined in the analysis dedicated to technological tools. The investment concerns a threefold dimension: the Electronic Health Record; the strengthening of the health information system and the creation of a national platform for Telemedicine services (For an in-depth study of "Mission 6", PIOGGIA, 2022; for a overall reconstruction see also POSTERARO, (2022).

The commitment of the Member State, therefore, must be to overcome the regulatory, organizational, and cultural backwardness in terms of digitization; this objective is achieved not only with the simple use of sums of money, but also with targeted and shared reforms on some aspects dealt with in the following paragraph.

Cooperation between Italy and Albania in digital health and prospects for reforms to adapt to european standards

In terms of digital health, Italy and Albania have launched, in synergy and collaboration between the public health institutes of the two countries, some programs for the modernization of health systems: one of these is the project, funded by the European Union, which aims to strengthen the Albanian system of epidemiological surveillance of communicable diseases, in line with EU standards and international health regulations. The goal is to improve the system for the prevention and monitoring of communicable diseases and to enhance the management skills of laboratories, clinics, and public and private hospitals in Albania.

Furthermore, in 2019, the "E-learning and blockchain" project was presented on the professional updating of all medical-health personnel through Blockchain technology, choosing Albania as the reference country. The main purpose is to offer innovative and interactive training to meet the needs of healthcare professionals and support them in their profession through the simple and safe use of a specific platform (www.consulcesi.it).

Another very recent project is called "Phase" and concerns the strengthening of the telemedicine sector: in particular, a network has been established between the Puglia Region, Albania, and Montenegro for the development of cross-border telemedicine platforms relating to the treatment of heart attacks, neurodegenerative and chronic diseases. The goal is to offer the best treatment options for patients in the three countries, bridging the geographical divide created by the Adriatic Sea (www.sanita.puglia.it).

These initiatives must be considered the beginning of a process which, to be carried out successfully in terms of health and economic development, requires state interventions of regulatory and organizational reform.

There are, in fact, some challenges still open to implement the ambitious European programs: at the regulatory level, in fact, both in Italy and in Albania, there is no national legislation on digital therapies that guarantees the safety and quality of the data collected, even though at the European level there is a regulatory reference: Regulation (EU) 2017/745 which concerns medical devices. This provides that digital therapies must comply with some essential requirements to guarantee safety, efficacy and quality identified based on international standards. However, in the internal panorama there are only programmatic documents that limit themselves to mentioning in a declamatory tone the possible examples of application of AI in the healthcare sector, such as robotics in surgery, virtual nursing assistance, support for diagnostic imaging (APERIO BELLA, 2020). However, there is still no regulatory provision that could favor its introduction and diffusion. Italy is now starting this process of regulatory integration with the art. 15 of the law of 22 April 2021, n. 53, called "*Delegation to the Government for the transposition of directives and the implementation of other EU acts*", but certainly the road is still very long. The scarcity of regulatory provisions at national level precludes the effectiveness of the transition to digital in the short term. The commitment at the state level, therefore, must be oriented towards the issuing of internal regulations adequate to European standards to guarantee a more rapid introduction and a more adequate diffusion of these instruments in the national context.

Furthermore, on the organizational level, guarantees of security in access and reliability in user identification are currently lacking this means that AI tools, but also the Electronic Health Record and Telemedicine, find it difficult to find an adequate application. In this respect, it is necessary to accelerate biometric recognition and the use of Blockchain technology (CATELANI, 2022; BELLOMO, 2017; APERIO BELLA, 2020; CARULLO, 2020). In this regard, Italy, and Albania, as anticipated, have started a process of re-engineering the procedures on which, however, there is still a lot of work if we want to make clinical practices digitally effective and safe.

Furthermore, on a practical level, another difficulty in implementing AI lies in the current method of training operators which is still based on traditional models. Furthermore, specific figures to support the monitoring of the use of therapies and the solution of any technical problems that may arise are not attracted to healthcare companies. Basically, an adequate health digitization cannot do without a mixture of various professional figures within each health company: for example, it is necessary to involve technical figures with good communication skills who raise awareness and educate patients on the use of such technologies.

With this innovative spirit, the human component must not be neglected in the digitization process: in fact, machines must not replace people but be at their service. The importance of human resources lies in validating or denying the automatic decision. Therefore, it is necessary to increase the personnel in order not to make the innovations ineffective. In Italy, a trend reversal compared to the recent past is desirable to enhance the stable recruitment of doctors, nurses, and paramedical personnel, but also of new professional figures with skills that go beyond the purely healthcare field. Just to give an example, the OECD has been reporting for some time that in Italy the number of nurses is well below the European average (See the report, *Italia tra gli ultimi in Europa per il numero di infermieri*, in www.quodiansanita.it). In Albania, (but the problem is also Italian) it is necessary to intervene on the historic problem of the exodus of health professionals, which has already been recognized for some time but has been ineffectively addressed. The Albanian government is intervening with some measures to address this critical situation. (About this topic see TAYLOR, 2023), *L'Albania cerca di tamponare l'emorragia di giovani medici e infermieri*, in www.euractiv.it.

In summary, the Member States must act in awareness of the risks to overcome their inefficiencies by laying the foundations for a change which, focusing on technological innovation, leads to the fair and safe use of digital services. In this way, the relationship between citizens and the State is improved, as a precondition for "good administration", understood as a citizen's right according to the more modern and supranational vision enshrined in art. 41 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (On this topic, ZITO, 2022).

Concluding reflections on the need for shared change

In this post-pandemic historical period we rely on scientific and technological progress to create a «therapeutic alliance» functional to the effectiveness of health and the safeguarding of public accounts; that is to say, in summary, to the good performance of the public health administration. The challenge lies in making the transition from the analog state to the digital state, to allow the public administration to keep up with technological progress and, in this way, promote the protection of health in its broadest sense and, more generally, the economic and social development of the country.

The digital tool in the specific health sector can lead to a significant increase in the efficiency of the entire system: with reference to the health organization, waiting times could be reduced, data interoperability could be guaranteed, the availability of beds in the structures could be increased promoting patient turnover; moreover, the transition to digital would be useful for rationalizing the workload of healthcare professionals which, especially in the midst of the pandemic emergency, has increased a lot with consequent organizational chaos and lowering of the quality of services (*Rapport ISS Covid-19*, n. 19/2020 - *Indications for telemedicine care services during the COVID-19 health emergency*).

With reference to medical practice, digitization could improve the effectiveness of many therapies to be implemented with a minimum sacrifice on the part of patients, limited to monitoring apps, wearing devices, communicating remotely; a collaboration that is certainly simpler than the current sacrifices in terms of mobility and hospitalization which also affect the psycho-physical state of one's family members.

Finally, as stated by the WHO, digitalization represents the answer to the need to implement and make access to healthcare more equitable and to the need to reduce healthcare costs (WHO, *What do you need to know about digital health system*, 2020).

These are noble objectives, for which, however, the allocation of sums, albeit large, is not a guarantee of results because digitization is not just a matter of «*transition of current procedures into digital format*», which would amount to a mere «*change of form*» but requires «*a profound reorganization of the structures and an equally radical re-engineering of the procedures*». (TORCHIA, 2021).

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Suicidal ideation in a clinical sample of young people – correlation with depressive scores of BDI-II

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Abstract

Introduction: Suicide is worldwide the fourth most prevalent cause of death for adolescents aged 10–19 and in Eastern Europe suicide is the number one cause of death for adolescents aged 15–19. Most of suicidal intentions are due to mental illness, most commonly depression. Still, not all people who are considering suicide, especially young people, appear apparently depressed. Due to the heterogeneity of presentation in young ages and a mixing of suicidal intent and non-suicidal self-injury the relation between suicidal behavior and depression needs to be investigated.

Objective: This study aims to examine in a sample of children and youths if higher scores in depression symptoms relate to higher scores in suicide thoughts/self-harm.

Method: All children and youths 10 to 24 years old assessed to a child and adolescent private practice for different symptoms of mental health, with a score of at least 1 point in self-harm/suicide question of the Beck Depression Inventory were included in the study. The severity of self-harm/suicide ranging from 1 to 3 points was correlated with the level of depression, which was categorized by the total scores of BDI-II for depressive symptoms.

Results: A higher proportion of females reported self-harm/suicidal ideation compared to males in this sample. The mean age of youths with self-harm/suicidal ideation was 14 years old. Children 12 years old and younger represented about one fifth of the sample. The association between suicide ideation/self-harm and the level of depression becomes more prominent over the threshold of borderline depression.

Conclusion: In young people higher scores in suicide thoughts/self-harm correlate with moderate, severe and extreme symptoms of depression.

Keywords: self-harm, suicide, adolescents, children, Beck Depression Inventory, depression

Introduction

Suicide affects people of all ages. According to UNICEF 2021 analysis based on WHO Global Health Estimates, worldwide suicide is the fourth most prevalent cause of death for adolescents aged 10–19. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, suicide is the number one cause of death for adolescents aged 15–19; in North America, Western Europe and South Asia, it is the second most prevalent cause (UNICEF, 2021).

Many young people consider suicide or self-harm at some point in their lives. Self-harm is the deliberate attempt to injure oneself, regardless of intent (Posner et al., 2014). Some carry out non-suicidal acts of self-injury, while fewer make suicide attempts (Rutter et al., 2008). Self-harm puts youths at risk for repeated self-harm or suicide (Gardner et al., 2019). For every suicide it is estimated that more than 30 non-fatal episodes of self-harm occur (Harrison et al., 2018).

Deliberate self-harm (attempted suicide, parasuicide) is much commoner than completed suicide in childhood or adolescence and refers to any sort of deliberate non-fatal self-inflicted injury or poisoning, irrespective of the individual's motivation or desire to die (Goodman R. And Scott S., 2012). Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is a frequent behavior in

community samples of young people (Sadek, 2018). NSSI is a deliberate, self-inflicted destruction of body tissue without suicidal intent and for purposes not socially sanctioned. Is performed usually to relieve negative thoughts or feelings; to resolve an interpersonal problem or to cause a positive feeling or emotion. NSSI is frequently associated with borderline personality disorder. It is associated with at least one of the following: a) negative thoughts or feelings, or interpersonal problems that occur immediately prior to engaging in NSSI b) preoccupation with NSSI that is difficult to resist or c) frequent urge to engage in NSSI (APA, 2013). Distinguishing between NSSI and 'genuine' suicide attempts is not so clear-cut and even episodes of self-harm with no reported suicidal intent are related to an elevated risk of repeated self-harm and suicide compared with the general population. There are obvious difficulties in labelling behaviors as definitively non-suicidal when they greatly increase the risk of future self-inflicted death (Kapur et al, 2013).

Suicide rates increased approximately 36% between 2000-2021 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). According to National Alliance on Mental Illness nearly 20% of high school students reported serious thoughts of suicide and 9% reported a suicide attempt (NAMI, 2023). Among adolescents aged 10-19, anxiety and depression disorders make up about 40 per cent of the mental disorders (UNICEF, 2021). Thoughts of death, suicide ideation or suicide attempts are one of the diagnostic symptoms of major depressive disorder, and suicidal behavior and aggression are present in children presenting to clinics with disruptive mood dysregulation (APA 2013, DSM V). Still, not all young people who are considering suicide appear outwardly upset or depressed. Individuals who are self-reliant and consider that among their strengths may have difficulty asking for help (Fleisher C., 2023). There is a strong relationship of suicide ideation with depression and targeting depression may be as important in adolescents as in adults to reduce suicidal ideation and prevent suicidal attempts (Alsalman and Alansari, 2016).

Aim of the study

Suicidal thoughts and behaviors are the greatest predictors of suicide. Most suicidal intentions are due to mental disorders, most commonly depression. In young ages suicidal behavior is associated with different diagnosis, co-morbidity, social isolation/loneliness, adverse childhood experiences and other social factors.

Due to the heterogeneity of presentation in young ages and a mixing of suicidal intent and NSSI, the relation between suicidal behavior and depression needs to be further investigated and looking for other risk factors associated with suicidal thoughts and behaviors would better predict the risk. The aim of this study was to investigate in a sample of young people the relationship between self-harm/suicide thoughts and depression level. We hypothesized that higher scores in depression symptoms relate to higher scores in suicide ideation.

Method

Sample

The participants included 26 children and youths 10 to 24 years old, who were experiencing mental health symptoms and were assessed to a private practice for children and youth mental health. Data were obtained from the charts of a private child and adolescent psychiatric practice, where the author of this study conducted consultations and distributed questionnaires to each of these children and youths. The assessment included the use of Beck Depression Inventory to evaluate self-harm/suicide in children and youths. The sample was purposeful. Inclusion criteria in the study was that participants had shown suicide concerns with a score of at least 1 point (≥ 1) in the ninth item of the Beck Depression Inventory. All cases with a score of 0 in the ninth item reflected the absence of suicidal ideation and were excluded from the study.

Instrument

Participants had filled in Beck Depression Inventory, the second edition (BDI-II). Item 9 of BDI assesses the level of suicide through a 4-point Likert scale and the total score of 21 items of the same questionnaire assesses the level of depression. The ninth item of BDI-II related to self-harm/suicide asks the person about suicidal thoughts or wishes. This question is a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 points to 3 points, with 0 representing "I don't have any thoughts of killing myself", 1 representing "I have thoughts of killing myself, but I would not carry them out", 2 representing "I would like to kill myself" and 3 representing "I would kill myself if I had the chance". The level of depression is categorized by the total scores of BDI-II and is interpreted as normal, mild, borderline, moderate, severe, or extreme according to one's total score.

Data analysis

The level of self-harm/suicide in the range 1-3 points was matched with the level of depression (normal, mild, borderline, moderate, severe, or extreme) for each of the participants. Excel was used to correlate the scores between suicide-depression and to generate graphics.

Results

Participants included 26 children and youths 10 to 24 years old. The mean age presenting in this sample with suicidal ideation/attempts was 14 years old. 12 years old and younger were 19% of the sample. Regarding gender distribution 88% of the sample were females and 12% males. Table 1 presents demographic characteristics of children and adolescents, such as age, gender, as well as the level of depression for each patient matched with the suicide severity scale.

BDI-II scores range from 13-57 points, interpreted as mild to extreme level of depression, with an average of 31 points (severe level of depression). None of the children and youths in this sample had normal ups and downs in mood. The scores of self-harm/suicide ideation range from 1 to 3 points, with an average of 1.5 (see table 2).

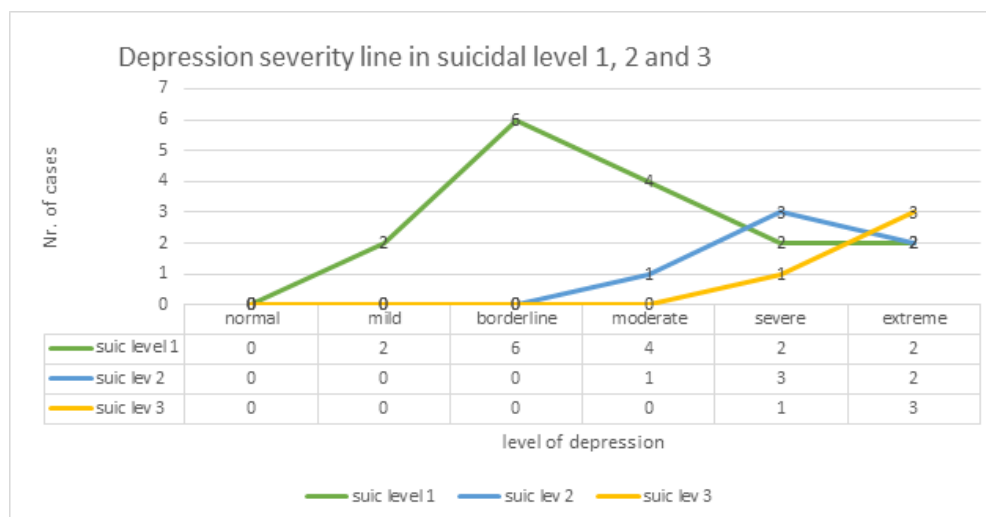
TAB 1: Database of patients with self-harm/suicide thoughts

Patient Nr.	Age	Gender	Score self-harm/suicide BDI-II	Total Score BDI-II	Depression level
1	16	f	1	17	borderline
2	11	f	3	52	extreme
3	13	f	3	45	extreme
4	13	f	3	40	severe
5	15	f	2	40	severe
6	14	f	1	19	borderline
7	12	f	2	44	extreme
8	15	f	2	28	moderate
9	16	f	1	24	moderate
10	10	f	1	23	moderate
11	16	f	1	20	borderline
12	16	f	1	44	extreme
13	13	f	1	39	extreme
14	11	f	1	13	mild
15	14	f	1	19	borderline
16	15	m	1	25	moderate
17	14	f	1	17	borderline
18	10	f	1	19	borderline
19	13	f	1	38	severe
20	22	f	3	57	extreme
21	17	m	1	13	mild
22	15	f	1	27	moderate
23	15	f	2	46	extreme
24	24	f	2	31	severe
25	15	m	2	40	severe
26	16	f	1	32	severe

TAB 2: Number of cases according to the suicide intensity

Suicide level	Cases percentage
1	62%
2	23%
3	15%

Figure 1 correlates suicidal level with the severity of depression. In suicidal level 1 the green line is a Gaussian distribution ranging from cases of mild depression to cases of extreme depression. On the other hand, patients at suicidal level 2 represented with the blue line have moderate, severe and extreme level of depression; few patients of these sample which were classified at suicidal level 3 represented with the yellow line have only severe and extreme depression. Suicidal level 2 and 3 which pose more risk correlates with moderate, severe and extreme symptoms of depression.

FIG 1: Association between suicidal level and severity of depression

Conclusion

In this sample a higher proportion of females reported self-harm and suicidal ideation compared with males. An important finding of this study is that 12 years old and younger were 19% of the sample. High depression symptomatology characterizes young people who are more at risk for suicidal behavior. The relationship between suicide ideation/self-harm becomes more prominent over the threshold of borderline depression. In this sample of young people higher scores in suicide thoughts/self-harm correlate with moderate, severe and extreme symptoms of depression.

Discussion

Children and youths included in this sample presented with suicidal ideation and attempts. Their age was 10 to 24 years old, with a mean age of 14 years old. In our study females presented with self-harm/suicidal ideation in a considerable higher figure compared to males (88% of the sample were females). This finding aligns with previous research indicating the association of female sex with suicidal ideation (Yang et al., 2023; Florez et al, 2022; Gardner et al., 2019; Bračić et al, 2019), but we should take into consideration that females are referred more than males for internalizing problems in mental health clinics. According to UNICEF analysis among adolescents aged 10-19 years old, anxiety and depression disorders make up 56.3% of the mental disorders in girls versus 31.4% of the mental disorders in boys of the same age group (UNICEF, 2021).

There is limited research on the prevalence of suicidal ideation and self-harm in children aged 12 years and under, mostly because it is presumed to be low (Mental Elf Service) and adolescence is the period in which self-harm is believed to be the most common (Whitlock et al., 2014). An important finding of this study is that 12 years old and younger were about one fifth of the sample (19%). Geoffroy and colleagues (2022) did a systematic review and meta-analysis to investigate the prevalence of self-harm behaviors and suicidal ideation in community samples of children aged 12 years and younger. They found out that the prevalence of suicidal ideation and self-harm behaviors in this population were greater than expected.

Our findings are consistent with previous research highlighting a link between suicide ideation and depression. Despite the risk in terms of suicide does not exclude the young individuals who report suicide concerns in a lower scale (1 point) compared to a higher scale (2 points and/or 3 points), higher suicide points in our study correlate with high depression symptoms, over the threshold of borderline depression. We should look for differential characteristics of the group with less severe suicide ideation compared to the characteristics of the group with severe suicide ideation. In this sample of young people higher scores in suicide thoughts/self-harm correlated with moderate, severe and extreme symptoms of depression and we should be more careful about an increased risk of suicide in this group. The finding of this study is consistent with previous research, which points out that the increasing severity of depression is associated with the increasing likelihood of suicide ideation (Allison, Roeger, Martin and Keeves, 2001).

Multiple co-occurring mental disorders are common among children and adolescents presenting with suicidal behaviors (Rutter et al., 2008). Children and youths included in this study had different diagnosis such as depression, anorexia nervosa, OCD, etc.

Early identification for children at risk of self-harm is crucial. To our knowledge there are few studies in Albania which examined suicidal ideation in young people. This study addresses a gap in the current research in Albania related to mental

health of children and adolescents and contributes to the continually growing body of knowledge surrounding suicidal ideation and attempts among young ages. We acknowledge the limitation related to the small sample. Also, the general population sample might have different characteristics compared to the clinical sample of this study. Future studies with larger samples are needed to generalize the results and explore further the relationship between risk factors such as depressive symptomatology and self-harm/suicidal ideation among young ages.

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Chronic Kidney Disease: Old challenges and New Perspectives

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Abstract

Chronic kidney disease (CKD) is a complex and heterogeneous disease that is affecting an increasingly growing portion of the general population. Its prevalence is estimated to vary between 8-16%, affecting more than 800 million people worldwide. It currently accounts for more than one million deaths, ranking as the 12th leading cause of death worldwide and the 8th leading cause of death in the Americas. Risk factors including hypertension, diabetes mellitus and obesity among an aging population.

Management of chronic kidney disease has traditionally been focused on two fronts, mitigating the renal impact and complications of underlying comorbidities, thus slowing the progression of CKD and addressing the complications related to CKD itself. Optimal management of hypertension and diabetes mellitus, to reduce cardiovascular disease, avoidance of nephrotoxins and dosing adjustments are paramount to minimize the risk of progression of CKD. Ultimately as the loss of kidney function becomes inevitable, several well-established methods of renal replacement therapy can be employed including dialysis (peritoneal or hemodialysis) and renal transplantation.

Recently, two new medications (Sodium-Glucose-cotransporter-2-SGLT2-inhibitors and non-steroidal mineralocorticoid receptor - MRA antagonists) have been approved by the Food and Drug Agency (FDA), as well as European agencies to be used in patients with chronic kidney disease and diabetes mellitus (diabetic nephropathy) after showing promising results in the delay of CKD progression and improvement of renal and cardiovascular outcomes. These renoprotective and cardioprotective properties, as well as a reduction in the progression of CKD, were also found among non-diabetic CKD patients taking SGLT2-inhibitors, prompting the authorization for chronic kidney disease patients regardless of the presence of diabetes mellitus, as well. As for non-steroidal MRA antagonists they have been approved for patients with CKD and diabetes mellitus, studies are currently under way to prove their efficacy in non-diabetic CKD patients.

Future larger studies and real-world clinical experience are necessary, but these new therapeutic agents could have the potential to revolutionize the treatment and long-term prognosis of CKD.

Keywords: Chronic Kidney Disease, SGLT2 inhibitors, Non-steroidal mineralocorticoid receptor antagonists

Introduction

Chronic kidney disease (CKD) is a complex and heterogeneous disease that is estimated to impact between 8% to 16% of the global population. [1] It has emerged as a leading cause of mortality, accounting for over one million deaths worldwide and currently stands as the 12th leading cause of death globally. [2] With an aging population and the rise of metabolic disorders, its prevalence is expected to rise as well. The main causes of CKD are diabetes mellitus, high blood pressure, obesity and an aging population.

Management of Chronic Kidney Disease

Traditionally, the focus on the management of CKD has been mainly on mitigating the complications of underlying comorbidities, thus ensuring a slower progression of CKD. [3] Optimizing blood pressure values and glucose levels has been the cornerstone of long-term CKD management. In addition, avoidance of nephrotoxic agents and appropriate dosing adjustments are imperative to minimize the risk of CKD progression.

Emerging Therapeutic Agents

Recent advances have led to the approval by regulatory agencies of two new classes of medications, namely sodium-glucose-cotransporter-2 (SGLT-2) inhibitors and non-steroidal mineralocorticoid receptor antagonists (NS-MRA), to slow down the progression of CKD. Studies have shown remarkable results in improving cardiovascular and renal outcomes, ultimately leading to a slower decline in kidney function. [4]

The renoprotective and cardioprotective benefits, as well as the improved renal outcomes, observed with these new agents were first evident in CKD patients with diabetic nephropathy and both SGLT-2 inhibitors and NS-MRAs were first approved to slow down progression of CKD in patients with diabetes mellitus. Surprisingly, studies showed that these benefits were not limited to diabetic nephropathy and recently, SGLT-2 inhibitors have been approved for use in both diabetic and non-diabetic CKD patients. Currently, studies are being conducted to investigate the efficacy of NS-MRA in non-diabetic CKD patients, as well.

Future Prospects

While the introduction of these new medications will open new avenues for CKD patients and currently, the results are very promising, it is imperative to emphasize the need for larger-scale studies and real-world data to thoroughly evaluate their efficacy and safety profiles.

In conclusion, chronic kidney disease remains a significant global health concern, associated with a rising prevalence and substantial morbidity and mortality rates. A robust management of underlying comorbidities leading to CKD and minimizing their complications is paramount in preserving kidney function. Furthermore, the introduction of new therapeutic agents, SGLT-2 inhibitors and NS-MRAs, offer new options to slow the progression of CKD, but more research and real-world data are needed to evaluate their full scope in improving renal outcomes and slowing the decline of kidney function. [6-8]

Methodology

This literature review was conducted by searching PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, to identify relevant studies and articles.

Results

SGLT2 Inhibitors in CKD

The literature review revealed consistent evidence supporting the efficacy of SGLT-2 inhibitors in the management of CKD. Key findings included:

- **Renoprotective Effects:** Multiple randomized controlled trials (RCTs) consistently showed that SGLT2 inhibitors, such as empagliflozin and dapagliflozin, were associated with a significant reduction in albuminuria and an improvement in estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR) in CKD patients with and without diabetes.
- **Cardiovascular Benefits:** Several studies reported improved cardiovascular outcomes among CKD patients treated with an SGLT-2 inhibitor, including hospitalization due to heart failure and major adverse cardiovascular events (MACE).
- **Safety Profile:** The reviewed studies consistently highlighted that SGLT-2 inhibitors have an excellent safety profile, associated with a low incidence of adverse events such as genital mycotic infections and diabetic ketoacidosis.

Non-steroidal MRAs in CKD

Non-steroidal mineralocorticoid receptor antagonist, have emerged as a promising therapeutic option in CKD management. Finerenone is the only-FDA approved medication in this class, currently available for CKD patients with diabetes mellitus. Key findings included:

- **Renal Function Improvement:** Studies evaluating the efficacy of Finerenone consistently showed a significant reduction of albuminuria and preservation of eGFR in CKD patients with diabetic kidney disease.
- **Cardioprotective Effects:** Finerenone was associated with improved cardiovascular outcomes as well, including a reduced risk of exacerbations of heart failure and other cardiovascular events, in CKD patients.
- **Safety Profile:** The safety profile of Finerenone appeared favorable, with a low incidence of hyperkalemia and other adverse events.

Discussion

Chronic kidney disease (CKD) has emerged as an important public health concern. Due to its multi-factorial and heterogeneous nature, its management presents a growing global challenge. The rising prevalence of important risk factors including high blood pressure, diabetes mellitus, obesity, in the context of an aging population has seen a rise in the prevalence of CKD, as well. [9,10] High morbidity and mortality rates associated with advanced CKD pose an important socioeconomic burden in societies worldwide, both in developed and developing countries. This discussion will examine the key points presented in the preceding sections and explore the potential impact of recent therapeutic advancements, notably SGLT-2 inhibitors and NS-MRAs, in the long-term management of CKD. [9,10]

Traditional CKD Management

The conventional approach to CKD management was primarily based on two important aspects: addressing the renal implications of underlying comorbidities and mitigating complicating arising from CKD. The goal of this approach is to reduce the decline in kidney function and minimize CKD-related complications. Optimizing the control of hypertension and diabetes mellitus is associated with improved cardiovascular outcomes, that in turn impact renal outcomes, as cardiovascular disease remains a common and challenging aspect of CKD management. Moreover, ensuring dosage adjustments according to the eGFR and avoidance of nephrotoxic agents is imperative in slowing down CKD progression. Ultimately, when loss of kidney function becomes inevitable, renal replacement therapies including dialysis and transplantation, are well-established options for end-stage kidney disease (ESKD) patients. [11,12]

Emerging Therapeutic Agents

Recent developments have led to the introduction of new therapeutic agents in the market, bringing new hope to CKD patients. SGLT-2 inhibitors and NS-MRAs, have been approved by regulatory agencies including the FDA and EMA, to slow down the progression of CKD and heart failure in patients with diabetic nephropathy. [13]

SGLT2 Inhibitors: A Paradigm Shift

The SGLT2 inhibitors have introduced a paradigm shift in the management of CKD. They improve glycemic control in patients with diabetes mellitus, as well as offer substantial renoprotective and cardioprotective benefits. These effects are evident in the consistent reduction in albuminuria, preservation of estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR), and a decreased risk of cardiovascular events observed in clinical trials. Notably, these cardioprotective and renoprotective benefits have been observed in both diabetic and non-diabetic CKD patients, leading to their authorization for CKD patients regardless of the presence of diabetes mellitus, marking an important milestone in CKD management. [14]

NS-MRAs: A Promise in CKD Management

Finerenone, a non-steroidal mineralocorticoid receptor antagonist, has also shown promise in CKD management. Studies have consistently revealed a reduction in albuminuria and preserved renal function, mainly in CKD patients with diabetes mellitus. Improved cardiovascular outcomes including a reduction in heart failure exacerbations and cardiovascular events, have also been observed, adding to their appeal in the management of CKD patients. Both SGLT-2 inhibitors and NS-MRAs show excellent safety profiles and low incidence of adverse outcomes, further supporting their potential for widespread use. [15]

Future Directions

The emergence of SGLT-2 inhibitors and NS-MRAs as new therapeutic options for early chronic kidney disease, holds great promise. Nevertheless, it is imperative to continue monitoring real-world data regarding their efficacy and safety profile. Furthermore, their cost-effectiveness and accessibility in different healthcare systems around the world, will ultimately influence their impact in the management CKD globally. [17,18]

In conclusion, CKD represents a growing public health challenge of global proportions, due to an aging population and a rising prevalence of metabolic disorders. The introduction of novel therapeutic agents in our existing arsenal, is an important step forward in the effort to slow down the progression of CKD. [19,20] The renoprotective and cardioprotective benefits of these agents, have the potential to alter the progression trajectory of CKD. [20,21] Despite the necessity for further studies, research and real-world clinical experience, the future of CKD patients looks brighter, with the potential of improved renal and cardiovascular outcomes, ultimately improved morbidity and mortality rates and a better quality of life.

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Recent trends of abortion in Albania: evidence from the 2016 -2020 Albanian abortion surveillance

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Abstract

Background: Globally, about 29% of all pregnancies and 61% of unintended pregnancies end in induced abortion, resulting in 73 million abortions each year. In Albania, abortion rates have decreased over years. Our study aims to analyze the recent trends of abortions in Albania.

Methodology: We analyzed abortion data and correlation with same factors such as, age, residence, marital status, education level, using information obtained from the national abortion registry, for a 5-year period, 2016-2020.

Results: During 2016 to 2020, the national abortion ratio has decreased, from 189.8 abortions per 1,000 live births in 2016 to 161.7 in 2020. In the same time the abortion rate (abortions per 1,000 women 15-49) decreased with 16.4%, from 7.8 in 2016 to 6.7 in 2020. The level of abortions among teenagers has decreased from 6% in 2016 to 2.9% in 2020, while for this period there is a slight increase (2.6%) in the number of abortions among single women. During this period, the highest number of abortions it is observed among women living in urban areas (68.5% of the total number of abortions in 2020) and those with low level of education (38.3%).

Conclusion: Our findings suggest that the abortion rate in Albania is approximately the same as the rate of abortions in Eastern European countries, but the level of spontaneous abortions still remains high. The abortion data varied based on the type of abortion, age, residence, education level and marital status. Detailed studies should be undertaken to explore the factors affecting in the high level of spontaneous abortions.

Keywords: Albania, abortion, spontaneous abortion, abortion rates

Introduction

Termination of pregnancy is a sensitive and controversial issue from a religious, moral, cultural and political point of view. Lack of access to safe abortion is considered a critical public health and human rights issue. In countries where contraception is available and affordable, abortion should only be performed, when necessary, but it should be accessible and safe. Abortion is considered safe when performed by health personnel who have the appropriate skills using a method recommended by the WHO, and in accordance with the woman's gestational age. Unsafe abortion is a major but preventable cause of maternal morbidity and mortality.

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Worldwide, each year more than 227 million women become pregnant, and approximately two-thirds of them give birth to live babies. The remaining third of pregnancies end in spontaneous abortion, fetal death or induced abortion (1). About 4 in 10 of all pregnancies are unwanted and more than half of them end in induced abortion (2). About 45% of all abortions performed are unsafe, of which 97% occur in developing countries.

Comprehensive abortion care is included in the list of essential health care services published by WHO in 2020. Abortion is a simple health care intervention that can be effectively managed by a wide range of health workers using medication or a surgical procedure. In the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, a medical abortion can also be safely self-managed by the pregnant person outside of a health care facility (e.g., at home), in whole or in part. This requires that the woman has access to accurate information, quality medicines and support from a trained health worker (if she needs or wants it during the process).

Still there is lack of access to safe abortion care, and the stigma associated with abortion poses risks to women's physical and mental well-being. Inaccessibility of abortion care is a violation of human rights; the right to decide freely and responsibly on the number, spacing and timing of children; and the right to be free from torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment.

Each year, 4.7–13.2% of maternal deaths can be attributed to unsafe abortion. In developed regions, it is estimated that 30 women die for every 100 000 unsafe abortions. In developing regions, that number rises to 220 deaths per 100 000 unsafe abortions (3).

New estimates published in the Lancet indicate that the induced abortion rate has declined significantly in more developed countries between 1990 and 2014, but not in developing countries. A new study, undertaken by the Guttmacher Institute and WHO, has estimated that, worldwide, during the period 2010–2014, there were 35 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15–44. This translates to over 56 million abortions per year (4).

In Europe, 30% of pregnancies end in abortion. A higher proportion of pregnancies end in abortion in Eastern Europe than in the rest of the region. In Eastern Europe, the abortion rate held steady at 43 per 1,000 women between 2003 and 2008, after a period of steep decline between the mid-90s and the early 2000s (5). Despite this decline, there is a persistent gap in rates between Eastern and Western Europe (43 vs. 18) likely reflecting lower use of effective, modern contraceptive methods in Eastern Europe.

Albania, under the communism time maintained a strict pro-natalist policy. Abortions and all forms of contraception were illegal in order to encourage population growth. However, this does not mean that abortion was not practiced at all; it was allowed on medical grounds approved by a committee, and a large number of pregnancies in the major cities would end with an abortion justified this way. As a result, nearly 50% of the maternal deaths in Albania in 1980(6) were from illegal, unsafe abortions.

In 1992, the Council of Ministers declared family planning a basic human right and started to promote policies on the rights of couples to decide on the number and spacing of children and having access to reproductive health services.

Abortion was legalized in 1991 and the law on the interruption of pregnancy which was later passed in parliament (1995) presented a set of conditions under which abortion was permissible at various gestational ages. Abortion on request may be performed up to the end of the 12th week of pregnancy for psychological and social problems, and up to 22 weeks for other health and social reasons approved by a commission of three specialists (7). The law states expressly that abortion should under no circumstances be considered a family planning method.

The Reproductive Health Survey carried out in 2002 found an abortion rate of 73 per 1000 live births, a rate 64% lower than the official data (that time abortion rate reported by our Institute of Statistics was 200 per 1,000 live births) (8). The report underlined three principal factors to affect the under-reporting of induced abortions:

- (1) Under-reporting of unwanted pregnancies that have a higher probability of being terminated by the voluntary interruption of the pregnancy
- (2) Under-reporting of clandestine abortions outside of the medical system; and
- (3) A tendency to declare induced abortion as spontaneous abortions or miscarriages.

Taking in consideration that Albania has a low fertility rate (1.67 live births per woman- ADHS (9) and a high reliance on traditional contraceptive methods, which are less effective than modern methods (use of modern methods 11% ADHS) the lack of data and the fact that the reporting was artificially lower constituted an important stimulation for monitoring.

The law foresees the provision of information on the health risks that may result from abortion, but it does not provide for any provisions for giving information on the use of the modern family planning methods, the law does not foresee free of charge health care that can cover the medical tests, the abortion procedure, or the post abortion visit (10).

Methodology

We analyzed abortion data and correlation with same variables, using information obtained from the national abortion registry, for a 5-year period 2016–2020.

The main objective was to analyze the recent trends on abortions in Albania and the specific objectives were: 1) Describe trends of abortion rate and ratio in Albania, over the period 2016–2020 and 2) Describe and compare the frequency of abortion by different characteristics of woman.

The data are based on abortion surveillance system which contains information for the following variables: type of abortion (induced or spontaneous), woman's age in years (15-49 years), residence (urban, rural), marital status (single, married, divorced, or widow), completed education (primary 4 years, primary 8 or 9 years, secondary, and university), employment status (employed, unemployed), insurance status (insured, uninsured), etc.

Three measures of abortion are presented in this report: the total number of abortions, the abortion rate (number of abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-49 years), and the abortion ratio (number of abortions per 1,000 live births).

Total abortion rates for women of reproductive age (15 – 49 years) and age-specific rates (population denominators for age-groups) are calculated using demographic data from the Institute of Statistics (INSTAT). Abortion ratios (abortion per 1,000 live births) are calculated using natality data from INSTAT. Counts, percentages, and rates are calculated using SPSS statistical software (version 15.0).

Results

The data on abortions are collected based on the abortion form (individual abortion form) through the abortion surveillance system (monitored from the Institute of Public Health- IPH). This individual form is completed by the obstetrician-gynecologist who performed the abortion (induced or spontaneous) in every hospital and contains information on the following fields: age and place of residence of the woman, marital status, educational level, health insurance, employment, type of abortion and reason for performing it, data on the history of the woman's pregnancies, age of pregnancy, main technique used, type of hospitalization and code according to ICD9. The abortion form does not contain the identity (name) of the woman in order to preserve her confidentiality (7). All the completed abortion forms are collected from persons responsible for the abortion surveillance in every district and reported to the IPH.

The following table presents the trend of births and abortions in our country, for the period 2016 - 2020, as well as the main indicators of abortion: abortion ratio (number of abortions per 1000 live births), abortion rate (number of abortions per 1000 women aged 15-49) as well as the number of spontaneous and induced abortions.

TABLE 1: Live births and main abortion indicators in Albania, for the period 2016-2020

Indicator	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Live births (no)	28429	30241	28934	28561	28075
Abortions (no.)	5396	5279	5532	5183	4540
Abortion ratio (per 1,000 LB)	189.8	174.6	191.2	181.5	161.7
Abortion rate (per 1,000 women 15-49)	7.8	7.6	8.0	7.6	6.7
Spontaneous (#)	4193	4086	4385	4346	3667
Induced abortions (no.)	1203	1193	1147	837	873
Births for one abortion	5.3: 1	5.7: 1	5.2: 1	5.5: 1	6.2: 1

The abortion ratio (per 1000 live births) helps us better understand the abortion trend and tells more about the choice of women, whether the abortion was the result of a desired pregnancy, and we can observe (table 1) a decreasing trend for the period 2016-2020.

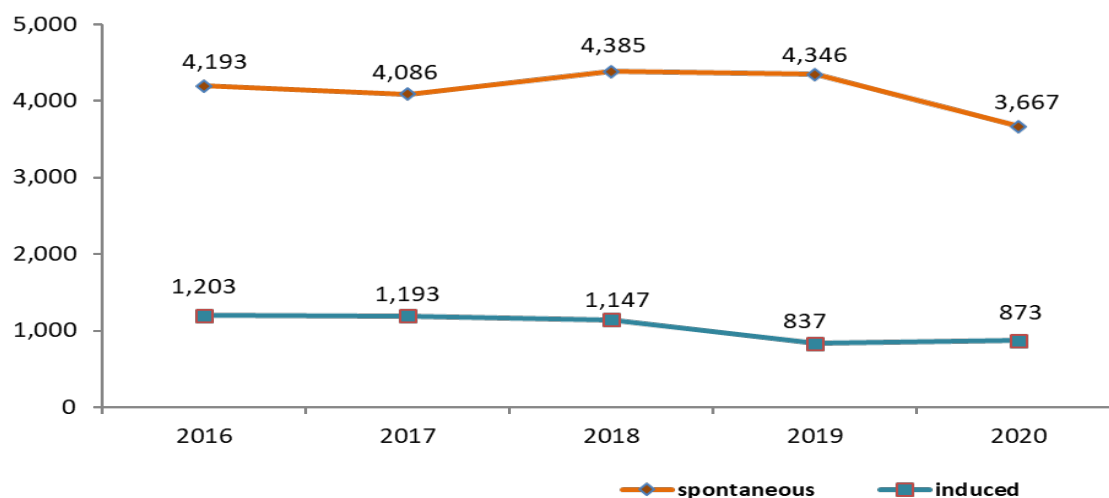
The abortion rate (per 1000 women aged 15-49) is an important indicator to evaluate family planning services, which reflects the rate of contraceptive method use, its effectiveness, as well as access to services. The increase in the effective use of contraceptive methods leads to a decrease in the number of unwanted pregnancies and therefore a decrease in the level of abortion (table 1).

From 2016 to 2020, the total number of reported abortions decreased by 15.9% (from 5396 to 4540 abortions). During the same period, the abortion rate decreased with 14.1% from 7.8 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-49 years in 2016 to 6.7 in 2020 and the abortion ratio decreased 16.7% from 189.8 abortions per 1,000 live births in 2016 to 161.7 in 2020.

We observe an increase of 16.98% in the birth/abortion ratio during this period of analysis (Table 1), from 5.3:1 in 2016 to 6.2:1 in 2020. This means that in 2020 it is performed approximately one abortion (induced or spontaneous) for every 6 live births.

Types of abortion

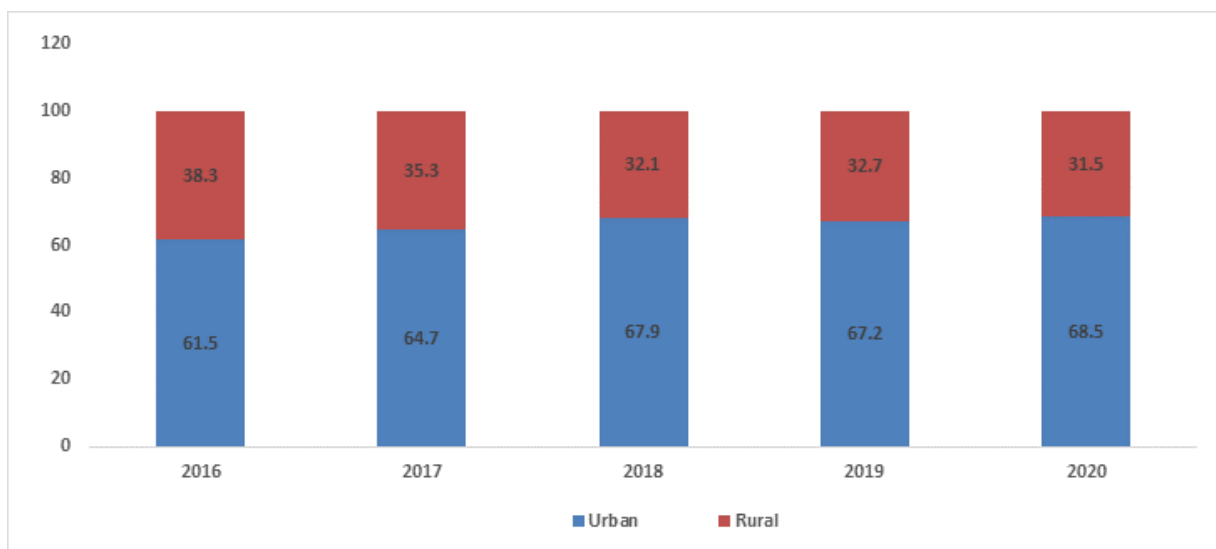
Comparing the data for the two types of abortions, during the analyzed period we observe a decreasing trend in the number of abortions for both types, spontaneous or induced abortions (at women's request).

FIGURE 1. Types of abortion (spontaneous and induced) in Albania, period 2016-2020

In 2016 the number of spontaneous abortions is 4193 and in 2020 the number is 3667 (decrease with 12.5%). Also, in the number of induced abortions is observed a decrease with 27.4%.

Women residence

Regarding place of residence, the total number of abortions is always higher among woman living in urban areas, for the whole period of analyze. The total number of abortions continues to remain higher for women living in urban areas, reflecting the country's demographic transitions from rural to urban areas.

FIGURE 2. Abortion (#) by woman's residence in Albania, period 2016-2020

The highest number of abortions it is observed among women living in urban areas (68.5% of the total number of abortions in 2020 compared to 61.5% in 2016).

Abortion rate is higher among women aged 30-34 years (10.4 abortions for 1000 women of this age-group), while the lowest abortion rates are observed among women in the age group over 40 and the adolescent women (less than 19 years). Table 2 presents the data on abortion rates according to the main age groups for the period 2016-2020.

TABLE 2: Abortion rate by age-groups in Albania, period 2016-2020

Abortion rate	Abortions per 1000 women 15-49 years				
Age in years	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
15-19	2.0	2.0	1.8	1.6	1.1
20-24	6.5	6.2	6.5	5.9	5.2
25-29	10.7	10.5	10.1	9.0	7.4
30-34	11.2	12.0	11.9	11.6	10.4
35-39	9.0	9.3	9.5	9.8	8.0
40-44	4.0	4.0	4.7	4.4	4.3
45-49	0.6	0.8	0.6	0.7	0.6
Total 15-49	7.8	7.6	8.0	7.9	6.7

Abortion rates (the number of abortions per 1,000 women in a given age group) declined for all the age groups from 2016 – 2020, except for age-group 40-49 years showing an increase of 7.5% in the abortion rate from 2016 to 2020. The greatest decrease in abortion rate during 2015-2020 was for women aged 15-19 and 25-29 years, with 45% and 30.8% respectively.

Education level

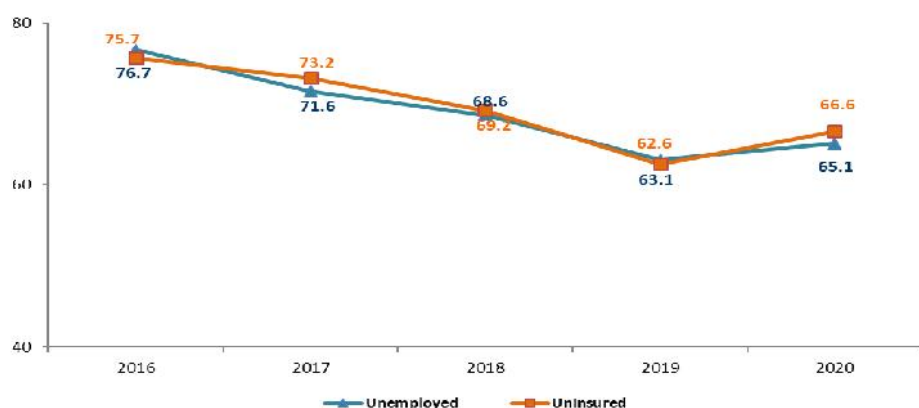
Table 3 displays the distribution of education status reported for Albanian women obtaining abortions during the period 2016-2020. The largest proportion reported a “primary - 9 years” education status in 2020 (38.3%), this is an 8.4% decrease from 2016. Approximately, 31.3% of women obtaining an abortion in 2020 completed secondary (12 years) education level and women who had attained university degree accounted for 26.1% with an increase of 41.1% compared to 2016.

TABLE 3: Abortion's (in %) by women's education level in Albania, period 2016-2020

Education level	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Primary (4 years)	3.6	3.7	3.0	2.9	3.1
Primary (9 years)	41.8	37.1	39.2	39.9	38.3
Secondary (12 years)	34.0	36.0	31.0	29.4	31.1
University	18.5	21.1	24.5	26.7	26.1

Employment and insurance status

Analyzing the data on the percentage of women receiving abortions by employment and health insurance status, we can conclude that in Albania abortions are mostly performed by women who are uninsured and unemployed (Figure 4).

FIGURE 3. Employment and insurance status of resident women receiving abortions, for the period 2016-2020

Although abortions are mainly performed by unemployed and uninsured women, in the recent years a decrease of almost 10 percentage points is observed.

Discussions and limitations

This paper provides an estimate on the abortion numbers, rate and ratio over the period 2016-2021. The information is obtained from the national abortion for a 5-year period and is analyzed for factors such as age, residence, marital status, education level, using information from the individual abortion forms. The abortion rate and ratio are important indicators to evaluate family planning services, which reflects the rate of contraceptive method use, its effectiveness, as well as access to services. The trend of abortion number, rate and ratio declined during the period 2010-2015, following the declining trend of live births in Albania. Still, we think that the number of abortions should be higher, because the prevalence of modern contraceptive methods usage in Albania is low compared to other European countries.

Conclusions and recommendations

Ongoing abortion surveillance provides an important tool in measuring the trend of the two types of abortions and we think that further studies are needed. Continuous training and regular feedback at local level are essential in order to strength the capacity and ensure the sustainability of abortion surveillance system. Focus should be on the programs to reduce unmet need for modern contraception as an effective way to prevent unwanted pregnancies and abortions, especially for specific groups (less educated women, women living in rural areas)

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Optimization of computed tomography pulmon aryangiography protocols

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Abstract

Introduction: An acute pulmonary embolism, or embolism, is a blockage of a pulmonary (lung) artery. Most often, the condition results from a blood clot that forms in the leg or another part of the body (deep vein thrombosis, or DVT) and travels to the lungs. Protocols are different, they will vary depending on the CT hardware and software, depending on the radiology department, patient factors, etc. CT Pulmonary Angio (CTPA/CTPE), has been described as the "gold standard" as a diagnostic examination that is usually performed to rule out a pulmonary embolism.

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the role of CTPA in the detection of pulmonary thromboemboli, to describe some general principles of protocol design, and to try to optimize protocols based on daily work.

Methodology: In this study, 40 CTPA examinations, with suspected TEP, were taken randomly for review, without any criteria (age, gender, symptoms, etc.). These random examinations were obtained from 3 Hospitals (American Hospitals I, II and III) in the period October 2022 - January 2023. For each patient, the images, protocol and technique were evaluated. The main criterion was maximal opacification of the pulmonary trunk. The evaluation was divided into 4 qualitative categories (Optimal, Sufficient, Not Optimal, At the Acceptance Limits). This assessment is also based on the radiologist's response.

Results: Of the 40 randomly selected examinations, 18 patients were male and 22 female. From these examinations, 8 patients were diagnosed with TEP. According to the division (above), there were: 28 examinations with optimal quality, 8 sufficient, 3 non-optimal and one at the acceptance limits. What was noticed the most was the simultaneous opacification of the pulmonary arteries and the aorta. The least was poor pulmonary artery filling or SVC artifacts.

Keywords: artifact, opacification, optimization, protocol, thromboembolism.

Background

Embolism is an unusual formation for blood, which, after entering the interior of the vascular bed, travels along until it manages to block a terminal segment of the vessel. The word embol comes from the Greek word embolon, which means piston. The quality and rhythms of life of cells and intestinal connective tissue are related to normal fluid content, blood irrigation of tissues and lymph evacuation. Each of these systems can be damaged in different circumstances and thus will lead to the disruption of the hydroelectrolytic and hemodynamic balance which will harm health and create consequences for the survival of the sick.

Disruption of the hydroelectrolytic and hemodynamic balance are manifestations of damage to the cardiovascular apparatus, responsible for the high morbidity and mortality from this pathological category. Disorders of the function of blood irrigation, disorders of hydroelectrolytic exchanges and lymph drainage, can overturn cellular and tissue homeostasis and create severe complications such as myocardial infarction and cerebral hemorrhage, which are the two main nosologies of hemodynamic disorders and the most common causes of morbidity and mortality.

An embolus can be a solid mass, a liquid or gaseous substance and can be organic or inorganic. Most emboli are of endogenous origin, that is, they arise in the human body itself, such as thrombi or fragments of thrombi, which represent 99% of all emboli. Emboli of exogenous origin are rare, these types of emboli include bacterial colonies which are more typical, besides the contents of the echinococcus cyst, as well as other substances that enter the interior of a damaged vein. Embolism is a complex process of the presence of an embolus in the circulating blood and its transport with the blood flow to an area far from the place of origin, ending with the blockage of the vessel in the narrowest place, where it cannot pass further. The word embolism also comes from a Greek word embolē which means resting on. The process of embolism is named according to the nature of the embolus based on which we have:

- Thromboembolism
- Fat embolism
- Gas embolism
- Amniotic embolism, etc.

Regardless of the nature and origin, they can stop and block different segments of the cardiovascular system, both in the small circulation and in the large blood circulation, so it follows the normal course of blood flow and this process is called orthograde embolism.

It may happen that the embolism deviates the normal course of the blood flow, or changes the direction as it happens when the embolus travels from the right heart to the right heart, through the interventricular defect, this phenomenon is called paradoxical embolism. In addition to these, we also have retrograde embolism, which occurs less often and occurs in special conditions of deep venous stasis, as a result of which we will have intrathoracic growth, which lies in the deepening of the stasis in the inferior vena cava, where in this case the thrombi will move backwards against the current and as a result of being pulled by the force of gravity fall down, until they manage to block the renal vein. The clinical picture of embolism has 3 stages:

1. Initial stage - the first 6 hours of the disease with the sudden appearance of intense diffuse pain in the abdomen, which are of the colic type and do not decrease even after the administration of analgesics. The condition worsens and the patient experiences nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.
2. The relaxation stage is in the interval 7-12 hours after the onset of the disease and is characterized by reduction of pain, loss of peristalsis, flatulence, leukocytosis.
3. The final stage after 12 hours is characterized by the development of intestinal ischemia, diffuse peritonitis and paralytic ileus. The patient is in a state of severe endotoxic shock. RTG has hydro-aerial levels.

Pulmonary embolism

Pulmonary embolism is a life-threatening condition that occurs when a blood clot or other material blocks a pulmonary artery. "Pulmonary embolism is not a disease but a complication of deep venous thrombosis". This pathology is often caused by the detachment of a thrombus, or a fragment thereof, which stops at the bifurcation or in one of the main pulmonary branches, for which the process is also called pulmonary thromboembolism.

Pulmonary embolism develops as a complication of some cardiovascular diseases, malignant neoplasms and some blood diseases, which in their natural course are accompanied by the formation of thrombus and thromboembolism. The morphological consequences of pulmonary thromboembolism depend on the dimensions of the blocked vessel, the number of thrombus, the volume and structural characteristics of the thrombus. When the thrombotic embolism is small, it is pushed by the blood flow, passes the heart valve, enters the circulation of the pulmonary artery and causes some pathological disorders. A large-sized thromboembolus blocks the lumen of the main pulmonary artery, while when the thromboembolus is medium-sized, it passes into one of the large branches of the pulmonary artery, where it immediately closes the flow of blood. When thromboembolism blocks the passage of half of the volume of blood flow in the pulmonary artery, it leads to an acute expansion of the right heart and this condition is known as cor pulmonale acute. The pulmonary consequences of thromboembolism depend on the state of the cardiovascular system. In patients with undamaged cardiovascular function, blockage of the peripheral vessels of the pulmonary artery causes only alveolar hemorrhage. In patients with impaired cardiovascular function, thrombus emboli cause pulmonary infarction, because the left heart is unable to perform revascularization of the pulmonary parenchyma with the anastomoses of the bronchial artery. Microscopically, lung infarction with coagulative necrosis of alveolar walls, intestinal tissue, bronchioles and blood vessels present in these structures, as well as with the presence of alveolar hemorrhage. Pulmonary embolism remains one of the most preventable causes of death in hospitals. The prevention of TP presents two problems. Total prevention which is done by stopping the development of thrombus in the deep veins, and second is the prevention of embolism after the thrombus has formed in the deep veins, a problem which disappears when there is an effective method of total prophylaxis. Although mechanical and drug prophylaxis of TP should be almost universal in hospitalized patients, the implementation of prophylaxis continues to be contradictory.

There are a number of diseases that predispose the patient to TP. Also any chronic disease process can cause TP. Patients at risk for thromboembolism are:

1. Traumatized patients (accidental trauma, operated patients: coxo-femoral and knee orthopedic surgery, major surgery, which lasts more than 30 minutes).
2. Patients with additional risk factors (age over 40 years, obesity, cancer diseases, previous TV/TP histories, immobilization, pregnancy and childbirth, use of oral contraceptives and hormonal therapy, large surgical incisions).
3. Patients with clinical disorders predisposed to TV (varicose veins, cardiac problems such as myocardial infarction, heart failure, stroke, nephrotic syndrome, thrombocytosis, systemic lupus erythematosus, intestinal bacterial infections).

In more than 90% of cases with TP, thrombi originate in the deep veins of the legs. Patients at risk for TV can be identified, and there are also methods of prophylaxis available to reduce complications in most of these patients. Prophylaxis is preferred over treatment (TV is difficult to diagnose; TP often occurs without warning). Death from TP often occurs within the first 24 hours of the TP episode.

TP is a serious problem (80% of it appears without signs and 2/3 of deaths occur within 30 min); it is also a general problem (1 in 100 hospitalized patients die from TP. TP can be prevented; a study with 16,000 patients showed that 1/3 of TV and 2/3 of TP can be prevented through prophylaxis).

Systemic embolism

This embolism refers to the presence and transport of emboli through the large blood stream. It is mainly the heart. Thrombi start from the left ventricle, left atrium, mitral and aortic valves damaged by bacterial and non-bacterial endocarditis, but not infrequently they originate from ulcerated atherosclerotic plaques of the aorta, while a small minority of cases from the rest of unknown origin. Thrombotic emboli in the arterial blood circulation cause heart attacks in the organs where they end their journey. The consequences of this embolism depend on the level where the artery is blocked and on the affected organ, which also determines the clinical significance of the damage. In some cases, the embolus can become decisive for the development of complications in organs, such as emboli with bacteria, when implanted in other organs, cause septic infarctions, which turn into abscesses.

Fat embolism

It is a pathological condition which defines the entry and passage with the circulating blood of a significant number of fatty masses, with the consequences of blocking the microcirculation of the affected organ. The organs most affected by fat emboli, the most serious for the patient's health and life, are the lungs, brain and kidneys. Fat embolism is formed by groups of cells originating from adipose tissue, by fragments of fat cells separated from the hemopoietic bone marrow, by free extra-cellular lipids, by blobs of lipid material shed from atherosclerotic plaques, etc. This embolism can also be verified in non-traumatic pathology, such as in chronic alcoholics, in patients with diabetes, liver steatosis, chronic pancreatitis, anaphylactoid shock, these circumstances, which have guided a review and reassessment of the pathogenesis of fat embolism syndrome.

Surgical experience has proven that fat embolism manifests itself in two variants: a. latent fat embolism, which does not provoke functional and organic disorders in blood circulation. b. lipid embolism syndrome, which creates scattered tissue damage and is expressed by alarming clinical signs. There are many theories that try to explain the mechanisms that intervene in the development of fat embolism, where among the most important we can list: The mechanical theory, which tends to interpret embolism with adipose tissue trauma with long bone fractures. In these cases, trauma causes ruptures of small blood vessels and tearing of fatty tissue, so groups of detached fat cells enter the injured vessels, where they travel with the blood. The theory of emulsion instability and the influence of stress. This theory proposes the idea that severe trauma or stress causes variations in the physical and chemical state of the blood, which promotes the fusion of chylomicrons, which ends with the formation of fatty bullae. The chemical theory is considered more comfortable to explain fat embolism in subjects without trauma. According to this theory, free fatty acids in the plasma are responsible for embolism, which cause toxic damage to endothelial cells and blockage of microcirculation.

Theory of coagulopathy. This theory is a synthesis of the mechanical hypothesis and the theory of emulsion instability. Fat embolism syndrome is characterized by pulmonary insufficiency, neurological symptoms, anemia and thrombocytopenia. This pathology is fatal in 10% of cases and it is further aggravated by the release of free acids from fat globules that cause toxic damage to the endothelium.

Macroscopically, significant organ damage, diffuse subserosal and submucosal hemorrhagic suffusions are seen at autopsy. Microscopically, the image shows the presence of fat emboli in the brain, lungs and kidneys, which are identified by histochemical techniques. In the lungs, fat embolism is complicated by atelectasis and suffocation of the alveoli with a protein-rich liquid, often associated with hyaline membranes. These damages are expressed by respiratory failure, neurological signs, anemia and thrombocytopenia. Damage to the brain is of different levels and depends on the amount of capillaries blocked by the embolus, on the gravity of the brain structures and on the patient's survival time. In the kidneys, fat embolism is identified with the afferent arterioles and capillaries of the glomerulus, especially in the impregnations with Scharlat and Sudan III.

Gas Embolism

Gas embolism is a special form of embolism, caused by the entry of air circulation inside the blood vessels. This air forms bubbles or gas bubbles which in the circulation can obstruct vascular flow almost as easily as thrombotic masses. Air can enter the circulation during obstructive procedures or as a result of damage to the chest wall. To give a clinical effect, more than 100 ml of air is needed. Clinically, there are two circumstances responsible for the development of gas embolism:

1. Accidental gas embolism and
2. Deep disease (Casson's disease)

Accidental gas embolism refers to the entry of gas into the vascular circulation, mainly after rupture of a large blood vessel. There are several forms of accidental embolism, the most popular of which are venous gas embolism and arterial gas embolism.

Venous gas embolism can occur during medical manipulations, such as in endovenous infections, intrathoracic or intracranial surgical interventions. It appears in patients with pulmonary or thoracic wall pathology that are complicated by damage to a large blood vessel as a result of which the gas will enter that vein in the form of a bubble that remains inside the vessel and is then transported to the right heart and in the lungs. Air bubbles when they enter the veins behave as physical masses and when they are small they easily join each other, forming an air bubble sufficient to block the lumen of the vessel. When the amount of air in the vessel is large, the voluminous aggregate of air remains inside the right ventricular space, blocks the pulmonary artery orifice and causes rapid aging of the patient from acute decompensation of the heart. Arterial gas embolism develops when a large mass of air enters the pulmonary veins, which sends it to the left heart and then through the aorta follows the path of the arterial system, with diffuse distribution in other organs, preferably the brain. This complication causes a state of shock and immediate death of the patient. Depth sickness is also a special form of gas embolism, encountered in persons exposed to unexpected and rapid changes in atmospheric predion, which provokes the rapid release of endogenous gases. This situation develops in cases where a swimmer-diver or diver ascends rapidly from the depth which leads to rapid decompression during which the body's gases such as oxygen, carbon dioxide and nitrogen, which are in a dissolved state in the body [are released in the form of gas bubbles that fill and block blood vessels.

Treatment of acute decompression sickness requires placing the affected individual in a compression chamber to increase the bronchometric pressure and force the gas bubbles back into solution. The subsequent slow decompression theoretically allows gradual absorption and exhalation of gases so that obstructive bubbles do not form again.

Risk factors

Anyone can suffer from thrombosis and therefore pulmonary embolism (the risk is the same in men and women), but it is possible to identify some factors that can increase the risk.

Protracted immobility

During periods of inactivity the blood tends to accumulate in the legs and flow much more slowly in the body and this considerably increases the risk of thrombus formation. This can occur for example in the case of:

Bed rest. Being bedridden for an extended period after surgery, a heart attack, a broken leg, or any other serious illness makes you much more prone to blood clots.

Long trips. Sitting in confined spaces during a long journey by car or plane slows down blood circulation and therefore promotes the formation of blood clots in the lower limbs.

Age

The risk increases with age, for every 10 years over 60 the risk doubles, therefore the elderly have a greater risk of thrombosis due to:

Valve malfunction. The tiny valves inside the veins keep the blood circulating in the right direction, but they tend to degrade over the years. If they don't work well, blood tends to stagnate and blood clots can sometimes form.

Dehydration. Older people are more at risk of dehydration, so their blood thickens more easily and blood clots can form more frequently.

Health problems. Older adults are also more likely to have health problems that make them more susceptible to independent risk factors for thrombosis; for example we can remember joint replacement operations, tumors or heart diseases.

Family background

Previous personal or family thrombosis/embolism episodes constitute a risk factor for new cardiovascular events, probably due to the presence of hereditary coagulation disorders such as, for example, thrombophilia (a genetic condition which causes a greater ease of formation blood clots) or antiphospholipid syndrome (an autoimmune disorder).

Surgical interventions

Surgery is a major cause of clotting problems, especially hip and knee joint replacement surgery. During the preparation of the bones on which the artificial joints will be grafted, tissue fragments can enter the bloodstream and contribute to the formation of a blood clot. The simple immobility during any operation, then, can cause the formation of thrombi and emboli. The risk increases as the time spent under general anesthesia increases.

Pathologies

Blood vessel damage: If a blood vessel is damaged, the blood flow can slow down, even block, and this can cause clots to form; vessels can be damaged by injuries such as broken bones or severe muscle injuries. Even during surgery, there is a risk of damaging blood vessels, and the chance of blood clots increases when surgery is performed on the lower half of the body. Conditions such as vasculitis (inflammation of a blood vessel wall) and some types of medications can also cause blood vessel damage.

Heart pathologies. High blood pressure and cardiovascular disease increase the risk of emboli formation.

Tumors. Some tumors, especially those of the pancreas, ovaries and lungs, are able to increase the amount of substances that allow blood to clot. Women with a history of breast cancer receiving tamoxifen or raloxifene are more likely to suffer from thrombosis and embolism. Chemotherapy and radiation therapy can also increase your risk.

Lifestyle and more

Smoke. For reasons that are not yet fully understood, tobacco use predisposes some people to blood clots, especially when other risk factors are present.

Overweight. Excess weight increases the risk of blood clot formation, especially among women who smoke or suffer from hypertension.

Previous episodes of thrombosis.

Taking certain medications (such as birth control pills or hormone replacement therapy).

Pregnancy: The weight of the baby weighing on the veins of the lower abdomen is able to slow down the venous circulation coming from the legs. In fact, the formation of emboli is more likely when circulation is slowed down or blood stagnates.

Symptoms

Symptoms of pulmonary embolism vary considerably depending on factors such as:

- subjective characteristics of the patient,
- degree of lung involvement,
- thrombus size,
- general state of health (especially the possible presence of concomitant pulmonary or cardiac pathologies).

Unfortunately, sometimes there are no symptoms at all, except in the more advanced stages. When present, the most common symptoms of pulmonary embolism include: Shortness of breath. This symptom can come on gradually or suddenly and can occur both during physical activity and at rest. Chest pain. In many cases it is confused with the pain caused by a heart attack. It gets worse when you breathe deeply, cough, eat, bend over, or bend over. It will most likely get worse with exercise, but it won't go away with rest. Cough. It is usually a dry cough, but can sometimes be bloody (possibly with phlegm). Other symptoms that may appear include:

- dyspnoea (asthmatic symptoms),
- anxiety or fear,
- leg swelling,
- clammy or bluish skin,

- excessive sweating,
- feeling head in the clouds,
- feeling faint,
- rapid breathing,
- rapid or irregular heartbeat,
- weak heartbeat,
- dizziness or fainting.

Sometimes the only signs and symptoms present are those related to deep vein thrombosis, which develop on the affected leg and include:

- swelling along a vein,
- ache,
- a feeling of warmth
- redness.

Diagnosis

Exams and diagnosis

The diagnosis of PE can be difficult, especially for those patients who suffer from concomitant heart or lung disease.

Chest X-ray

It is a non-invasive exam that processes images of the heart and lungs that can be viewed on a special film. A plain X-ray may appear normal even when a pulmonary embolism exists, so it is of no use in diagnosing this disorder, but it can rule out any other diseases that have symptoms similar to those of an embolism.

Examination of ventilation/perfusion

In this test, called a ventilation/perfusion test, small amounts of radioactive material are used to study the ventilation (circulation of air) and perfusion (circulation of blood) in the lungs.

During the first phase of the examination you will inhale a small amount of radioactive material, and in the meantime a kind of camera capable of highlighting the presence of radioactive substances will take several photographs of the air moving in the lungs. Next, a small amount of radioactive substance will be injected into a vein in your arm, and the same equipment will take pictures of the blood circulating in the blood vessels of your lungs. Comparing the results of the two phases of the examination helps to diagnose pulmonary embolism more accurately than the results of each phase considered individually.

Spiral CT

Regular CT scans take x-ray images from different angles and then stitch them together, to form images that show two-dimensional «slices» of a patient's internal organs.

During the spiral CAT scan, however, the scanner rotates around your body forming a spiral and is able to create three-dimensional images. This type of CT scan can find abnormalities with much greater accuracy, and it is also much faster than the normal CT scan.

Pulmonary angiography

This exam provides a very clear picture of the arterial circulation. It is the most accurate way of diagnosing pulmonary embolism, but it requires a high degree of professionalism from medical personnel and carries potentially serious risks, so it is usually done when other tests fail to provide a definitive diagnosis. This test also has another advantage: it is able to measure the pressure in the right side of the heart. Normal findings in the presence of pulmonary embolism are extremely rare.

During pulmonary angiography, a small flexible tube (catheter) is inserted into one of the largest veins in the body, usually in the groin, and from there through the heart to the pulmonary arteries. A contrast medium is then injected into the catheter which enters the circulation to reach the pulmonary arteries, and is monitored by radiographic equipment. This test may temporarily alter your heart rate; moreover, the contrast medium could cause kidney damage in patients with renal insufficiency.

Blood test (D-dimer)

D-dimer is a substance present in the blood capable of dissolving clots: if it is present in excessive quantities, it can indicate the probable presence of thrombi and emboli, but its levels can also increase for other reasons, for example because of recent underwent surgery.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)

MRIs use radio waves and a strong magnetic field to produce detailed images of internal organs. It's an expensive test, so it's usually reserved for pregnant women and patients whose kidneys may be damaged by the contrast agents used in other types of tests.

CTPA- CT Pulmonary Angio

«Golden Standard». That's what the CT Pulmonary Angio (CTPA/CTPE), a diagnostic test usually done to rule out a pulmonary embolism, is called. Each radiology department will have a slightly different method to achieve the same result, ie. adequate contrast of the pulmonary trunk and its branches. Principle: «Let's Agree to Disagree». There is no consensus on strict protocols in radiology. Protocols are different, they will vary depending on the CT hardware and software, depending on the radiology department, patient factors, etc.

Contraindications

- previous severe reactions to iodinated contrast.
- dislike (from the patient)

Purpose of the CTPA

This technique is based on the detection of filling defects in the pulmonary arterial vasculature, so timely acquisition (or imaging) is of vital importance.

When the examination is considered optimal

1. Optimal examination -It is considered when the pulmonary arteries are opacified and the aorta is not.
2. Late acquisition will make it difficult to distinguish between pulmonary arterial branches and pulmonary venous branches.

There are two main possibilities for performing a CTPA of high diagnostic quality:

1. Bolus tracking

Continuous axial slices are performed in a defined area of interest during contrast injection until the contrast threshold is reached to begin the diagnostic scan.

2. Bolus test

A small amount of contrast is injected and continuous axial slices are obtained in a given area of interest to calculate the peak contrast rise time and determine an optimal scan delay.

Protocol and Technique

1. Bolus Tracking

- Patient position - shoulder with arms above head
- Scout- from the apex to the diaphragm
- Extension- from the apex to the diaphragm
- Scan direction - caudocranial

Contrast injection considerations:

- monitoring part (region of interest) - below the carina at the level of the pulmonary trunk with the ROI placed on the pulmonary artery
- threshold- 100 HU (it depends on the type of apparatus, mainly a threshold-50 HU is used)
- volume- 60 ml of non-ionic contrast, together with NaCl 100 ml
- Speed: 4.5/5 ml/s
- scan delay - minimum (Auto)
- breathing - inspiration

2. Bolus test

- Patient position - shoulder with arms above head
- Scout- from the apex to the diaphragm
- Extension- from the apex to the diaphragm
- Scan direction - caudocranial

Contrast injection considerations:

- bolus test - contrast volume - 20 ml non-ionic contrast with NaCl 10 ml
- speed: 4.5/5 ml/s

Monitoring part (region of interest)

- below the carina at the level of the pulmonary trunk with the ROI placed in the pulmonary artery
- monitor the contrast peak (trunk) over time via a contrast time curve.

Calculating Scan Delay- A widely accepted formula for calculating scan delay is:

- Maximum contrast (contrast time) + diagnostic scan delay
- contrast volume (diagnostic scan) - 60 mL non-ionic contrast with 100 mL NaCl
- speed: 4.5/5 ml/s
- scan delay - Maximum Contrast Time (contrast time) + diagnostic scan delay
- breathing - inspiration Practical point

Practical point

- What is considered a diagnostic CTPA based on the density of the main pulmonary artery ranges from 210 to 300 HU with 250 HU a generally accepted value.
- Density can theoretically be up to 93 HU for detection of acute PE.
- Measurement should be performed with a round ROI covering at least 50% of the lumen of the main pulmonary artery.

Purpose and objectives

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the important role that Angio CT has in the detection of pulmonary thromboemboli, as well as the improvement of protocols based on daily work.

This topic also aims to describe some principles of protocols. Protocols are different, they will vary depending on the CT hardware and software, depending on the radiology department, patient factors (eg, allergy, cardiac problems, obesity) and time constraints, ect..

Methodology

In the study, 40 CTPA examinations, with suspected TEP, were taken for review, randomly, without any criteria (age, gender, symptoms, etc.) over a period of 6 months. These random examinations were obtained from 3 American Hospitals (I, II, and III). CT scanning was performed using a MDCT scan with 16 and 64 detectors, all CTs were done in the craniocaudal direction, supine position. We did not have data regarding the injection protocol, such as contrast dosing and use of bolus tracking technique and time of uptake after contrast injection. For each patient, the Image, the protocol

and the technique followed for the realization of this examination were evaluated. The basic criterion was the maximum opacification of the pulmonary trunk. The assessment was divided into 4 quality categories:

No.	Degree	Description
1.	Optimal	Excellent quality that enables excellent differentiation even of small structures (sub-segmental arteries).
2.	Sufficient	Good quality for studying most segmental arteries.
3.	Non-optimal	Moderate quality with ability to examine some of the segmental arteries (sufficient for diagnosis)
4.	In the acceptance limits.	Low quality with the ability to examine only the extension of the main pulmonary artery and the beginning of the lobar arteries to poor quality without an accurate diagnosis of embolism.

This assessment was also based on the radiologist's report

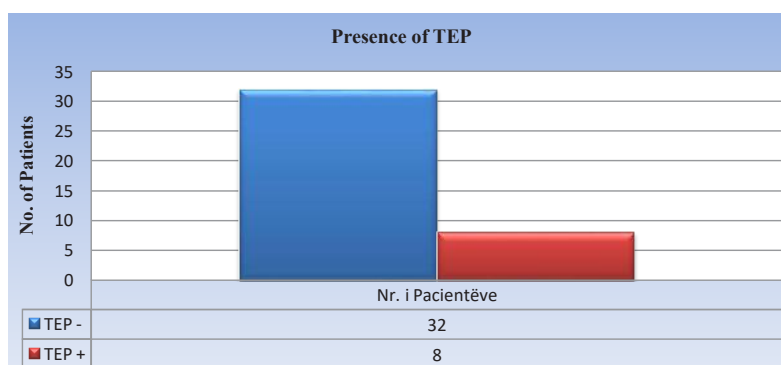
The degree of contrast of the main pulmonary artery and lobar branches was also evaluated.

Factors	Description
Time delay	Enhancement of the left atrium and aorta.
Fast time	Without enhancement of the proximal segmental pulmonary arteries.
Poor contrast	Contrast density in the main pulmonary artery less than 150 UH.

Results

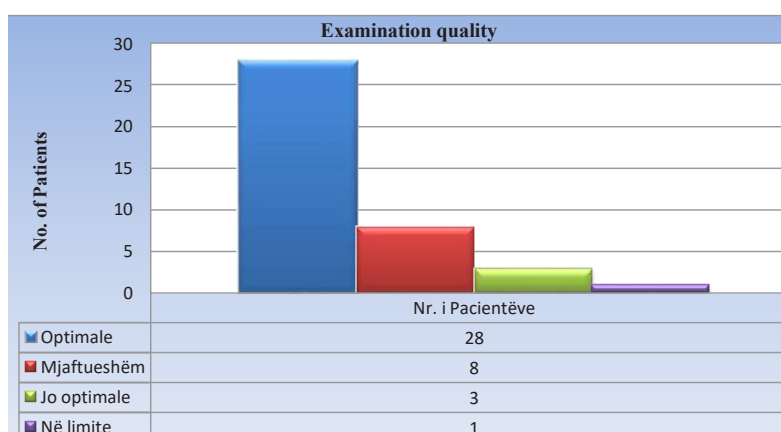
Of the 40 randomly selected examinations, 18 male and 22 female patients.

From these controls in the study, 8 patients (2%) were diagnosed with TEP, while the rest were negative for pulmonary thromboembolism, because they also had other pulmonary diseases (but not in the focus of the study).



According to the breakdown (above), out of 40 randomly selected examinations, it turned out:

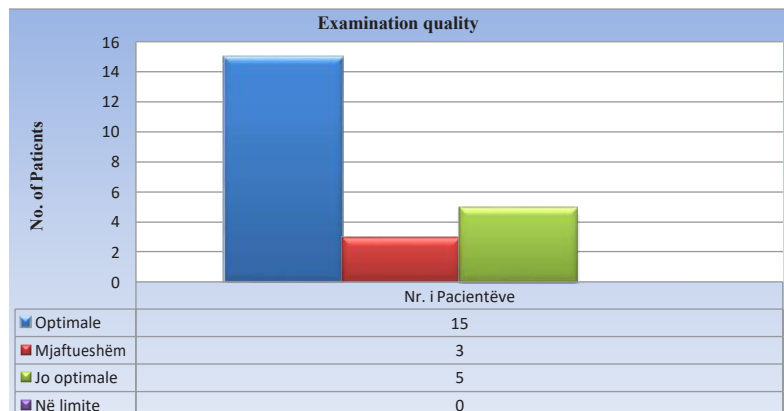
- 28 examinations with optimal quality (70%).
- 8 enough (20%)
- 3 non-optimal (7.5%)
- 1 in admission limits (2.5%)



What was noticed the most was the simultaneous opacification of the pulmonary arteries and the aorta. The least was poor pulmonary artery filling or superior vena cava artifacts.

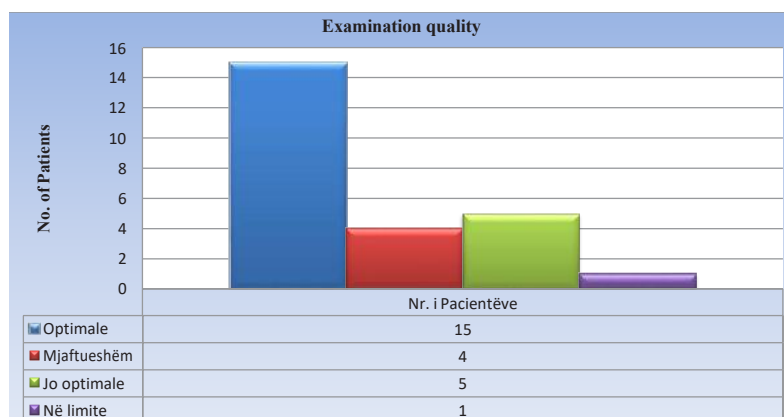
Of the 40 examinations taken in the study, 15 of them were examined with CT 16 detectors, which resulted in:

- 7 optimal (46%)
- 3 enough (20%)
- 5 suboptimal (34%)



These data are based on considering the conditions of the device. Of the 40 examinations taken in the study, 25 of them were examined with CT 64 detectors, which resulted in:

- 15 optimal (60%)
- 4 enough (16%)
- 5 suboptimal (20%)
- 1 in admission limits (4%)



The following images show the cases taken in the study.

1. Examination with Optimal quality, pulmonary thromboembolism is not observed. (Fig.1)
2. Patient diagnosed with TEP, examination with Optimal quality, but superior vena cava artifacts are observed. (Fig. 2)

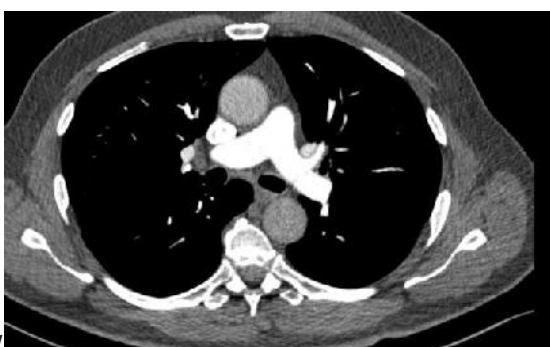
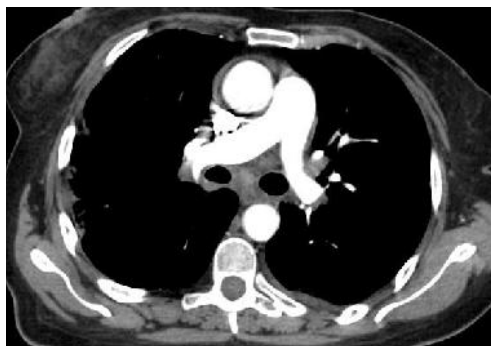


Fig.1

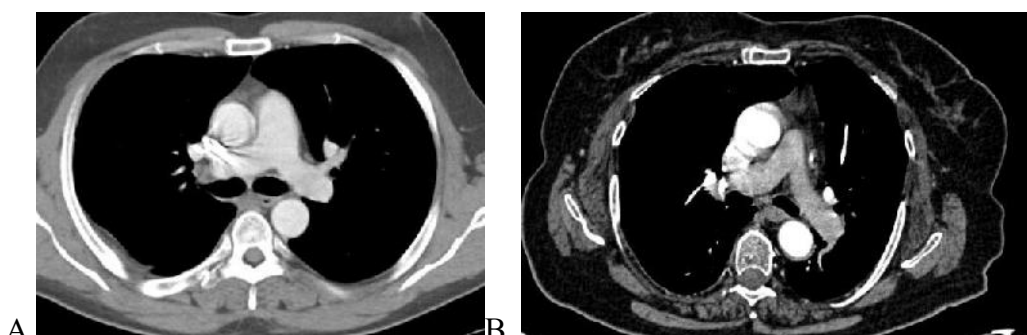


Fig.2

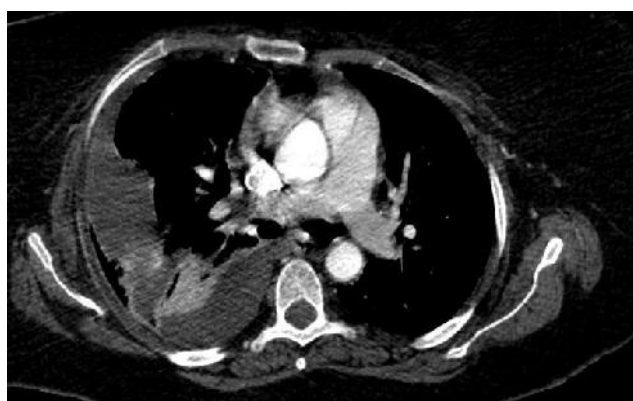
3. Patient diagnosed with minimal segmental TEP. Sufficient quality. Simultaneous contrast of the pulmonary arteries and the aorta is observed, which makes it difficult to differentiate between the pulmonary arterial branches and the pulmonary venous branches. (Fig 3).



4. Pulmonary thromboembolism is not observed. Suboptimal quality. Pulmonary trunk not sufficiently contrasted. Delay in time.



5. Not optimal, at the limits of acceptance as an examination, (based on the interpretation of the radiologist). Artifacts and inadequate filling of the pulmonary trunk. The condition of the patient or the conditions of the examination must also be taken into account. The patient does not relapse with TEP.



Conclusions

CTPA plays a vital role in the diagnosis of PTE. Adherence to the use of standardized protocols, including optimal CT acquisition time, adequate training of technologists, and focus on proper patient breathing techniques, improves the quality of CT images and this results in more accurate and safer diagnosis of PTE. Correct diagnosis significantly reduces morbidity and mortality.

1. What constitutes a diagnostic CTPA based on quality improvement varies from country to country. Some points on quality optimization based on the above examinations are:
2. Changing the direction of the scan to caudocranial has been shown to better demonstrate the lower lobes while alleviating artifact from the contrast bolus in the SVC.

3. Also using NaCl (in the amount of 100ml):
 - may increase contrast within the pulmonary vessels.
 - improves the efficiency of contrast use and may allow an overall reduction in contrast dose to the patient.
 - reduces dense contrast artifacts in the superior vena cava.
 - may also work to reduce the incidence of nephrotoxicity from contrast administration. Reduces artefacts as well as lowers contrast-induced contrast enhancement.
4. High speed up to 5ml/s, improves contrast amount.
5. The use of high-Pitch scanning in non-obese patients can provide a reduction in contrast use of up to 12 mL.
6. The use of the Valsava technique during breathing reduces the heart rate, regulation and blood circulation.

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Bone imaging in metastatic breast cancer

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Metastatic bone disease

Definition

Metastasis is called the process of transferring the disease from an organ, or part of it, to another organ, which is not directly related to it. For the metastatic diffusion of tumors, the following events must occur :

1. Separation of neoplastic cells from the primary tumor
2. Entry of separated cells into an efficient lymphatic channel or blood capillaries
3. Survival of cells during transport
4. Successful attachment of cells to the endothelium of the distal capillary bed
5. The exit of the cells from the vase to the new situs
6. Successful development of a supportive blood circulation for the cells in situs.

When tumor cells invade the bone matrix, they produce growth factors that stimulate osteoclasts and osteoblasts. Tumor cells produce factors that vary according to the type of tumor, which directly or indirectly stimulate the formation of osteoclasts and osteoblasts.

Osteolytic metastases destroy bone by the activation of osteoclasts rather than tumor cells. The tumor cells release a variety of growth factors that lead to bone resorption. Then the bone mineral matrix releases several growth factors during bone remodeling, which create a fertile microenvironment for the colonization and proliferation of tumor cells. Bone resorption by osteoclasts releases several growth factors from the bone matrix that stimulate tumor growth and further bone destruction in a vicious cycle. In cases of osteoblastic metastases, tumor cells secrete osteoblastic factors that stimulate the release of bone growth factors from the bone microenvironment to further enhance the survival and proliferation of tumor metastases.

Distribution of bone metastases

This distribution varies according to the type of primary malignant tumor. However, metastases typically involve the axial skeleton (80%), which is rich in red bone marrow. Factors favoring predominant red marrow involvement include the network large capillary, slow blood flow, and the suitability of this tissue for tumor growth.

The most frequent skeletal metastases are those in scapula, mandibule, patella, and the distal bones of the extremity (knee and elbow). Regarding the vertebral column, metastases are more frequent in the lumbar region, followed by the thoracic and cervical areas. In vertebrae, metastases are more frequent in their body followed by the posterior elements. The explanation for the low frequency of metastases in the distal portions of the extremities may be blood circulation, which is extremely limited by arterial flow and the relative lack of red bone marrow.

The origin of bone metastases

There are some types of tumors that are known as more frequent sources of bone metastases. The primary tumors that metastasize more often in the bone are those of: prostate, breast, lung, thyroid and kidney. Uterine and urinary bladder carcinomas are less frequent sources. In children, bone metastases come mainly from Neuroblastoma, Ewing's sarcoma and osteosarcoma. In men, prostate carcinoma makes up 60% of bone metastases, while in women breast cancer makes up 70% of bone metastases.

Bone metastases originating from breast cancer

Bone metastases develop in about 70% of patients with advanced breast carcinoma and cause significant morbidity and skeletal-related events (SRE). About 70% of patients with bone metastases can develop skeletal-related events. It has been reported that bone metastases develop in 17-37% of women with metastatic disease. SREs are defined as pathological fractures which need surgical intervention and palliative radiotherapy.

Bone metastases not only affect the patient's quality of life but also reduce its survival. Different studies have shown that the presence of bone metastases were strongly associated with a higher mortality rate in these women, and the association became even stronger if bone metastases were complicated by skeletal-related events or SRE.

Other factors that increase the risk of bone metastases are the condition of the lymph nodes at the time of breast cancer (number of positive lymph nodes more than 4), large tumor (>2 cm) and younger age (<35 years).

As a result we can say that the skeleton is the most frequent place for breast cancer metastasis and it is important for clinicians to have information about the clinical problems of bone metastases from breast cancer.

Scintigraphic diagnosis of bone metastases from breast cancer

The frequency with which bone metastases are detected varies according to the type of primary tumor. Bone scintigraphy is widely used and is the most practical, cost-effective technique to detect the entire skeleton in case of bone metastases. However, a degree false negativity is found in some anatomical areas, especially in the lumbar spine and bone marrow lesions.

It has been seen that the detection of vertebral metastases depends on the size of the lesion and its location. It is very difficult to detect Intramedullary Lesions with a diameter less than 2cm compared to subcortical and transcortical lesions, because in the scintigraphic examination is very important the involvement of the cortical part.

In the radiological view the tumor usually produces osteolytic or mixed osteolytic/ osteoblastic lesions. Rarely, breast cancer produces pure osteoblastic lesions. Standard radiographs are less sensitive and impractical to detect metastases compared to bone scintigraphy. Bone metastases develop faster during the first two years and for this reason at this period is recommended a scintigraphic examination every 6 months. The Initial and follow-up bone scans provide information on the prognosis by evidencing the spread of metastatic disease and evaluating the effectiveness of hormonal therapy or other breast cancer therapies.

In breast cancer patients who have metastatic bone disease, response to therapy and prognosis are closely related. Metastatic breast cancer with disease limited to bone has a better prognosis than other distant sites involved.

The expansion of metastases from the beginning of the appearance seems to have an importance for the prognosis. This is because the subgroup of patients with breast cancer, with initial involvement of the bone in one or two sites, has a longer survival compared to patients who presented in the initial scintigraphic results with more widespread metastases.

Bone scintigraphy has been reported to be false negative for vertebral metastases in patients with tumors

Introduction to the study

Purpose and objectives

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the prevalence of bone metastases in women affected by breast cancer, the age most affected and the role of scintigraphy in their identification and assessment.

Hypothesis

1. Bone metastases (evidenced through total body scan) are an accompanying pathology in most women affected by breast cancer.
2. The presence of bone metastases is more frequent among women of age 45 to 65 and decreases after this age.

Methodology

Type of study

This is a case-control study and the evaluation of cases is done during the period: September 2017-May 2019.

Methods and materials

The data of our study has been taken from the materials and records of the University Hospital 'Shefqet Ndroqi'. The study included 112 female patients (aged 25-85), all residents of Albania.

The patients were subjected to dexter, sinister or total mastectomy. From our informations was evident that the majority of the patients had a sinister mastectomy.

Most of the patients were referred by the oncologist for re-checking, while a small number of them had it as their first examination after completing the cycle of chemotherapy, radiotherapy or only surgical intervention.

The anamnesis was taken from the patients regarding the date of the surgical intervention, the type of surgical intervention (dexter or sinister mastectomy), the cycle of completed chemotherapy or possible radiotherapy, the concerns they have had and of family breast cancer history or other tumors.

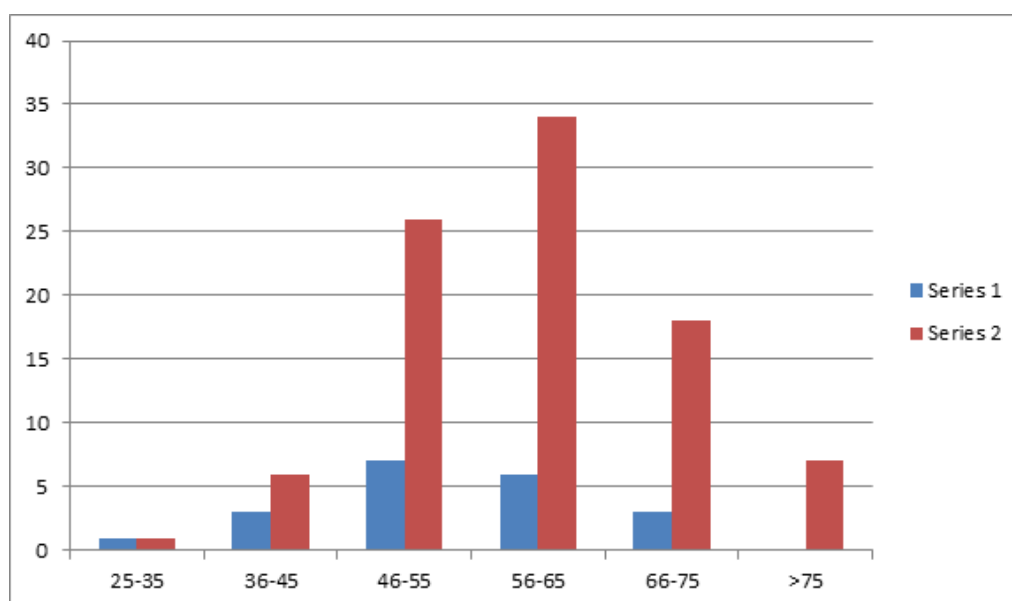
The included patients were examined with total body scintigraphy ,accompanied by partial views in anatomical areas where it was necessary. All patients were subjected to the routine examination protocols. After the injection of a dose of 20 mCi Tc-99m MDP, they waited for 3 hours before starting the examination so that the radioactivity was absorbed and concentrated in the possible pathological foci.

After 3 hours they were positioned supine on the scintigraphy bed and the images were taken from the detectors, respectively anterior and posterior views. The examination starts from the patient's head to the feet, with a duration of the scan of about 25 minutes. In those cases where different problems were observed with a lower or higher fixation of the tracker compared to the surrounding area, were taken static images of 5-minutes each, so the view would be clear.

TABLE 1 Age distribution of cases with and without bone metastases.

Age	With bone metasases	Without metastases	Total
25-35	1 (5%)	1 (1.08 %)	2 (1.78)
36-45	3 (15%)	6 (6.52 %)	9 (8.03%)
46-55	7 (35%)	26 (28.26%)	33 (29.46%)
56-65	6 (30%)	34 (36.95%)	40 (35.71 %)
66-75	3 (15%)	18 (19.56%)	21 (18.75%)
>75	0 (0%)	7 (7.6%)	7 (6.25 %)
Total (%)	20 (100%)	92 (100%)	112 (100%)

CHART 2 Age distribution of cases with bone metastases and without bone metastases.



Series 1 -Cases with bone metastases

Series 2-Cases without bone metastases

CHART 3 Age distribution of cases with bone metastases and without bone metastases.

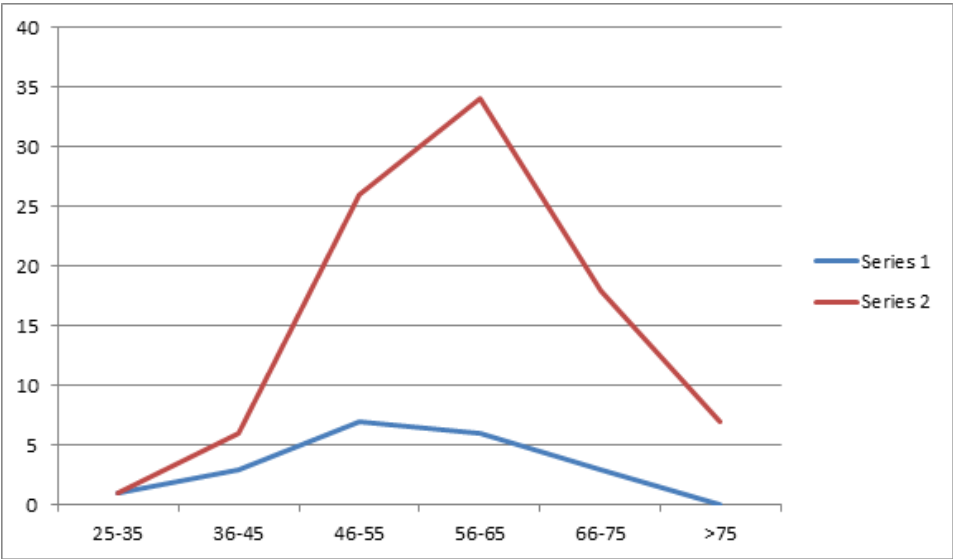


TABLE 4 Age distribution of cases with bone metastases.

Age	Bone metastases	Percentage (%)
25-35	1	5%
36-45	3	15%
46-55	7	35%
56-65	6	30%
66-75	3	15%
>75	0	0%
Total	20	100%

TABLE 5 Age distribution of cases with bone metastases.

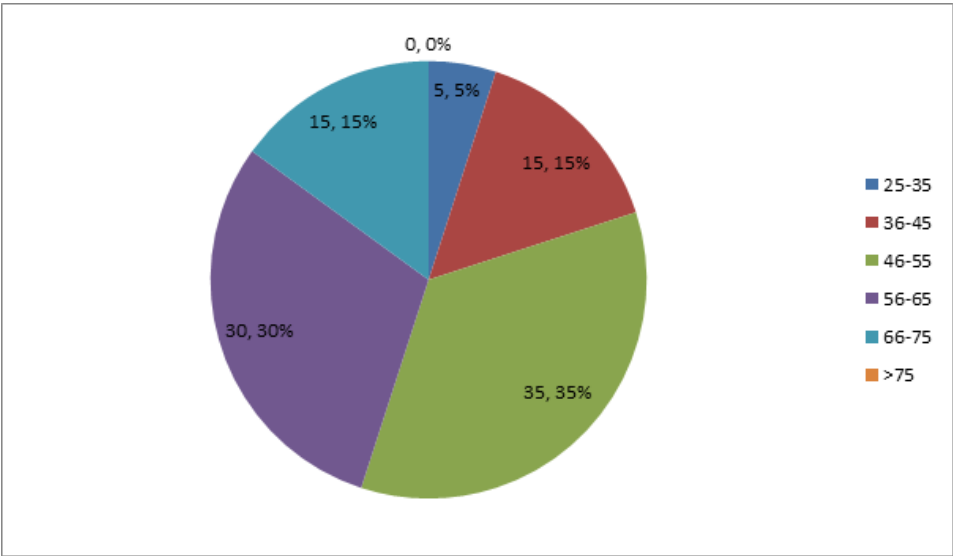
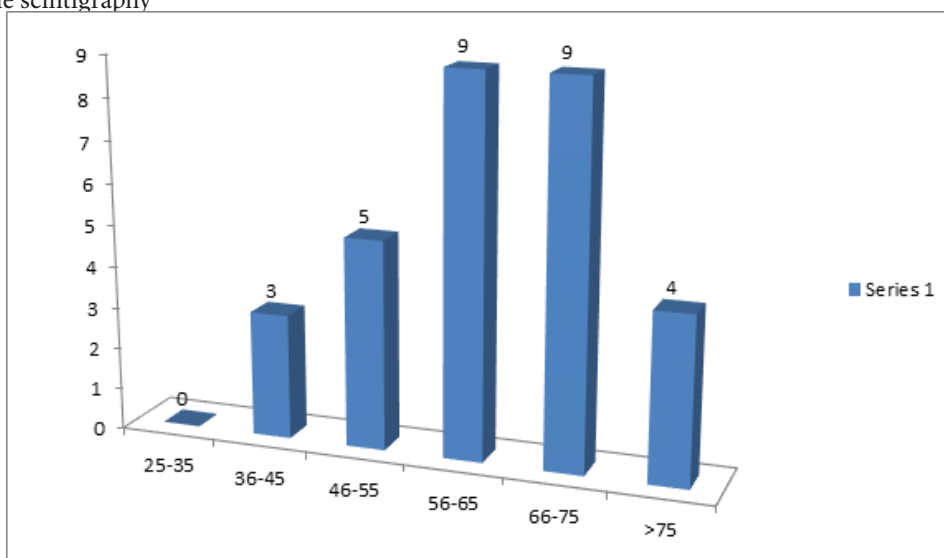
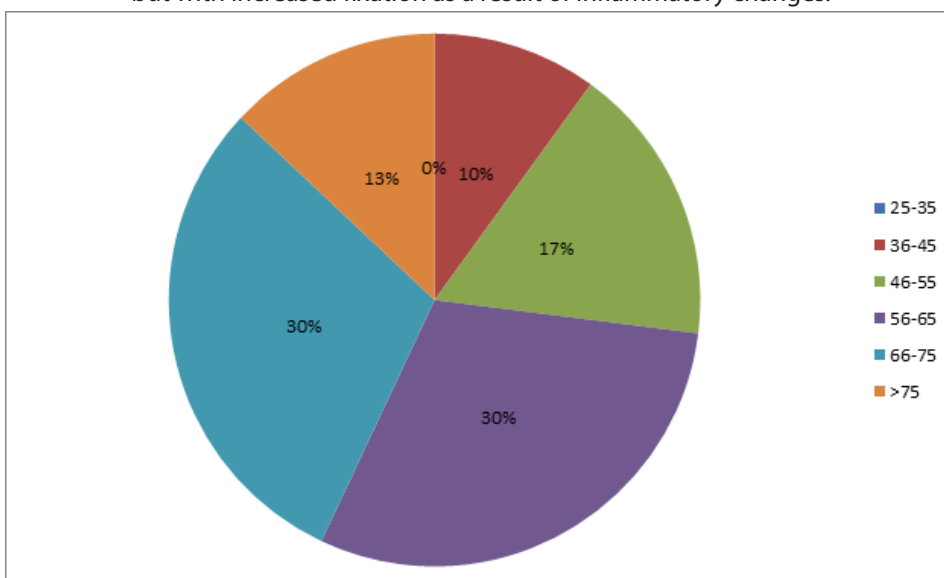


TABLE 6 Distribution of cases by age, without bone metastases but with increased fixation of the radiotracer in the skeleton, evidenced in bone scintigraphy.

Age	Cases with increased tracer fixation on the skeleton
25-35	0
36-45	3
46-55	5
56-65	9
66-75	9
>75	4

Distribution of cases by age, without bone metastases but with increased fixation of the radiotracer in the skeleton, evidenced in bone scintigraphy

**GRAPH 7-** Distribution of cases by age without bone metastases but with increased fixation as a result of inflammatory changes.

Discussions

From the study realized on 112 women aged 25-85, affected by breast cancer, through total body scintigraphy, was seen that only 20 cases had bone metastases as an accompanying pathology. The most affected area by metastases was the thoraco-lumbar part of column. In addition to bone metastases also was observed increased fixation of the trace in the vertebral column, especially in the thoracic and lumbar part.

The prevalence of cases with bone metastases (20 cases out of 112 in total) is 18%.

It was also observed that the most affected age from bone metastases was the age group of 45-65 years. After this age group the percentage of cases affected by metastases declines.

In cases with bone metastases, the most frequent anatomical levels of tracer fixation were as in the following order: the vertebral column (respectively the thoracic, lumbar, sacral part), sternum, pelvic bones, ribs, femur and skull.

The overall prevalence of patients with bone metastases in the group of 112 women was 18%, while in each age group is as follows:

P (25-35)-0.89%

P(36-45)-2.67%

P(46-55)-6.25%

P(56-65)-5.35%

P(66-75)-0.26%

P (>75)-0%

Conclusions

The presence of bone metastases was observed more in women aged 45-65 years with a prevalence of 11%, associated with marked fixation of the tracer mainly in the thoracic and lumbar part of the column. The number of patients affected by bone metastases decreases with the increasing of age.

It was also noticed that bone metastases were not detected in the vast majority of breast cancer patients, as we hypothesized at the beginning, but were detected only in 20 of them (20 out of 112 patients).

Based on various foreign studies, it was observed that the percentage of women with breast cancer affected by bone metastases, in all types of populations or ethnicities, reached its peak at the age of 45-65 years and tended to decrease with increasing of age.

Also, the results founded in our study, matched with the literature review regarding to the anatomical level at which the tracer was fixed mostly. In both cases, the vertebral column was the most affected anatomical area while skull which was the least frequent anatomical area of trace fixing.

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Public health impact of allergic diseases caused by plant pollen

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Abstract

In this scientific paper in collaboration with the co-authors, we have tried to present the impact on public health of allergic diseases caused by plant pollen grains. We have presented a current situation of the pollinosis presence, which occurs in those people who show allergy symptoms, residents of the Tirana area, for the period March - June 2022. To achieve this goal, we performed numerous allergy tests, with a prick test on 355 patients who showed signs of allergy from plant pollen. Allergic pollen mainly causes irritation of the respiratory tract in people sensitive to the allergic factor, accompanied by airway congestion. The study of the variability of allergic diseases was also carried out, based on factors such as: age, place of residence, gender, and the analyzed season. From the obtained results we come to the conclusion that: People affected by pollinosis live in the urban area (252 cases); people who suffer from allergic diseases belong to the age group of 22-36 years and mainly men are the gender most affected by seasonal pollinosis; the spring season is characterized by the largest number of people with allergic symptoms from plant pollen; and the Secale Cereale pollen (representative of the Gramineae family) is the main cause of allergic diseases (identified in 95 patients).

Key words: Public Health, Allergic Diseases, Pollen, Secale Cereale, Pollinosis, Tirana.

Introduction

Although allergic diseases have been diagnosed for centuries, nowadays various allergies have become diseases with a great impact on public health all over the world.

From the analysis of various studies on allergic people, it is found that there are significant numbers of individuals who show different forms of allergies and asthmatic symptoms, specifically about 12% of adults and about 20% of children. Inevitably, people affected by pollinosis will also have unpleasant consequences in their lifestyle, work, or studies.

The occurrence frequency of various allergic diseases has quadrupled, especially in the last two decades, turning into a disturbing phenomenon that can be considered as a new form of pandemic at the beginning of this century, in isolated cases pollinosis can lead to until the death of the individual (Lewis and Lewis, 1982; Lewis et al., 1991; Bauchau and Durham, 2004).

Among the factors that influence the appearance and aggravation of allergic diseases, we can mainly mention specific foods, plant pollens and atmospheric pollution with particles suspended in them (Ducker and Knox, 1986; Croner, 1992).

Although today's medicine has advanced a lot with innovative techniques, it is again imperative that allergists are guaranteed the right technological assistance to identify different allergic diseases, which will provide the right therapies of population (Bottelli et al., 1982).

As the object of our study, we have treated pollinosis, or one of the main allergic diseases caused by plant pollen that serves as an important aeroallergen. From the obtained results, we have concluded that pollinosis is an obvious danger and that really threatens the public health of the Tirana residents. Tirana is considered as one of the cities with the most frequent cases of allergic diseases in our country (Lekli et al., 2008; Jance et al., 2021-a).

We are of the opinion that the main cause of this evidence on allergic patients evident for Tirana is mainly the continuous environmental pollution, with an atmospheric character, because of the presence of increased amounts of suspended particles and different gases that are extremely harmful to the human body. In recent years, the air and soil pollution of Tirana has become a disturbing factor, and this pollution is mainly dedicated to the increase in the number of the population, the disappearance of natural parks, heavy traffic, and the obsolescence of cars in circulation, the activity of manufacturing activities that operate in the capital, etc. (Jance et al., 2021-a).

Obviously, the aforementioned factors of air and environmental pollution from the galloping and abusive urban development in the bull of nature, affect the increase of allergic individuals who show symptoms from plant pollen (Croner, 1992; De Swert, 1999; Galli, 2000).

Giving our contribution to the identification of allergic factors that serve as risk factors in different pollinosis, we contribute a little for the allergist mainly in the timely and accurate diagnosis of the relevant pollinosis, accompanied by the appropriate specific advice for patients. However, why not, we can make an important contribution by trying to sensitize the respective directorates and different companies, to identify the right plants that can serve as decorative objects and that do not cause allergies in the population (Knox, 1979).

As the main objectives that have served to undertake our study, are the identification of plants that serve as allergic factors, the determination of the qualitative and quantitative distribution of allergic pollen in the air of the Tirana area, the distribution of different allergies according to the gender and age of the population, also the impact that atmospheric air pollution in the Tirana area can have on the occurrence of various allergic diseases.

Materials and Methods

To correctly determine the plant, the pollen of which serves as an allergic factor causing a certain pollinosis, we use two specific methods (Moore and Webb, 1978; Pacini and Franchi, 1978; Faegri and Iversen, 1989). One has to do with the skin prick test and the other is performed by performing immunological blood tests (Pablos et al., 2016). The advantage of determining the pollen that has served as an allergenic factor for an individual, makes it possible to equip the patient with the appropriate knowledge about the time of pollination of that plant from which he is allergic, having the opportunity to take measures proper protection.

The general allergy tests focus on seven plant families that are represented by ten types of plants identified as plant allergens (Tab. 1) (Pablos et al., 2016).

TABLE 1. Allergens plants according to the relevant family that serve in allergy tests.

No.	Allergenic plants	Flowering time	Family
1	<i>Corylus avellana</i>	February - March	Corylaceae
2	<i>Parietaria officinalis</i>	May - October	Urticaceae
3	<i>Platanus orientalis</i>	April - May	Platanaceae
4	<i>Quercus sp.</i>	Aprile - May	Fagaceae
5	<i>Ambrosia artemisifolia</i>	July - September	Compositae
6	<i>Artemisia vulgaris</i>	July - October	
7	<i>Betula pendula</i>	March - April	Betulaceae
8	<i>Alnus glutinosa</i>	February - March	
9	<i>Phleum pratense</i>	May - August	Graminaceae
10	<i>Secale cereale</i>	May - July	

While the immunological analysis of blood performed on allergic patients, which consists in the accurate measurement of the concentration of antibodies, also helps in the proper determination of the allergenic factor. This method determines the concentration of antibodies based on six categories (Tab. 2), where for each category the concentration of immunoglobulin E (IgE) in the blood (kilogram unit per liter - kU/l) is given (Pablos et al., 2016).

TABLE 2. Antibodies presence (kilogram unit per liter - kU/l).

> 100	Extremely high presence
50 - 100	Very high presence
17,5 - 50	Good presence
3,5 - 17,5	Clear presence
0,7 - 3,5	Little presence
0,35 - 0,7	Negligible presence
< 0,35	No specific antibodies present

Identification of plants determined as an allergic factor

We acted by first taking the plants that grow in Tirana area, considered to be the cause of pollinosis since their pollen serves as an allergenic factor during the implementation of allergy detection methods with the skin prick test.

In order to perform the best separation of pollen grains, laboratory analyzes were carried out using the acetolysis method of Erdtman (1960), which consists in processing the material with the acetolysis mixture, consisting of Acetic Acid (glacial) (CH_3COO)₂ with concentrated Sulfuric Acid (H_2SO_4), in ratios of 9:1. After, the precipitate is mixed with glycerin and examined under an optical microscope (Erdtman, 1960; Erdtman, 1969; Jance et al., 2021-b). The photos were taken with the Motic BA310 microscope, with digital camera in body CMOS 1/2", 3MP chip - 2048x1536 pixels, with USB 2.0 output.

Identification of the respective pollinosis according to the patients

To properly identify the allergic disease manifested in individuals, we acted by analyzing the evidence provided by the Institute of Public Health for 355 patients allergic to the pollen of a certain plant. The analyzed period was the months of March-June 2022. To provide the highest quality diagnosis and to properly judge the variability of allergy symptoms, in addition to the allergy test, we took data from the medical record and communicated with the patient about: age, gender, the environment where he lives and works, place of birth and residence.

Results and Discussion

After laboratory analyses of plants pollen followed by statistical and analytical processing of evidence provided by the Institute of Public Health taken during the March-June 2022 period in the Tirana area, there is a considerable number of residents who suffer from pollinosis, and mainly these are caused by the Cereal plant pollen (*Secale cereale* - rye).

The scientific data provided for all four months (March to June) are grouped together.

Table 3 presents the number of allergic patients from the plant pollen according to the respective families. The obtained results were achieved after the allergy tests were performed with the two methods described methods. The fact that the allergen of the *Secale Cereale* plant is the dominant factor of pollinosis for patients who have performed allergy tests is easily noticeable, more specifically, it has been identified in 95 cases. Then, as an important allergenic factor, we look at the plants *Alnus glutinosa* with 56 allergic patients to its pollen, followed by *Phleum pratense* with 49 allergic individuals, and *Betula pendula* with 44 patients. Other plants can be considered as less dominant Allergens.

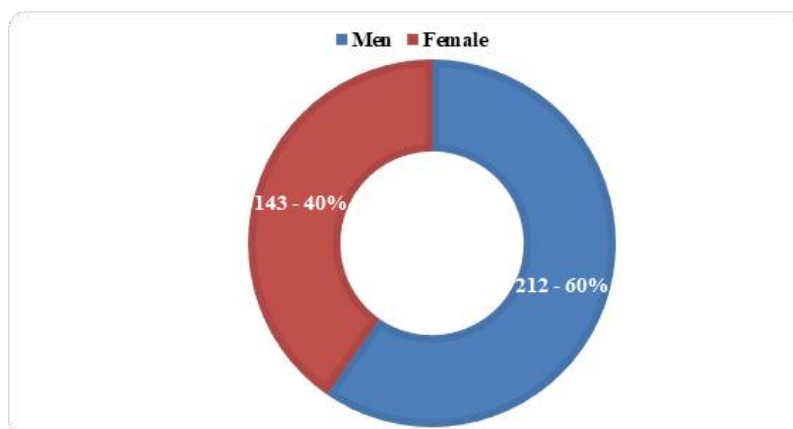
TABLE 3. Allergic patients according to the respective plant.

No.	Allergic plant	Cases ascertained
1	<i>Corylus avellana</i>	12
2	<i>Parietaria officinalis</i>	20
3	<i>Platanus orientalis</i>	9
4	<i>Quercus</i> sp.	31
5	<i>Betula pendula</i>	44
6	<i>Alnus glutinosa</i>	56
7	<i>Artemisia vulgaris</i>	21
8	<i>Ambrosia artemisifolia</i>	18
9	<i>Phleum pratense</i>	49
10	<i>Secale cereale</i>	95
Total number of allergic patients		355

Bearing in mind that the way and forms of expression of allergies depend on the allergic factor that causes them, also having it as the purpose of our study, we have also presented the variables of gender, age, and the year period that have been found in people affected by pollinosis. For this purpose, we have built the respective graphs that provide important data.

From Chart 1 we see that of the 355 patients analyzed and studied, 212 of them were men and 143 or 40% of the total were women.

CHART 1. Allergic distribution according to patients' gender.

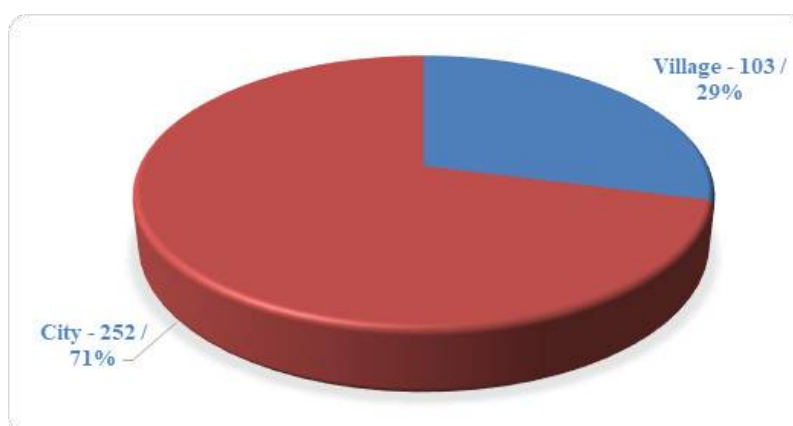


While looking at Chart 2, we see that most individuals suffering from allergic diseases live in cities, exactly 252 people, while about 30% of allergic people live in rural areas.

We think that this phenomenon occurs for two main reasons:

- the biggest and most significant pollution in Tirana, which can be considered a true metropolis with a consequent atmospheric pollution (Jance et al., 2021-a).
- greater awareness for the city's residents in performing relevant allergy tests to diagnose the type of pollinosis concerned.

CHART 2. Allergic distribution according to the patient's residence.

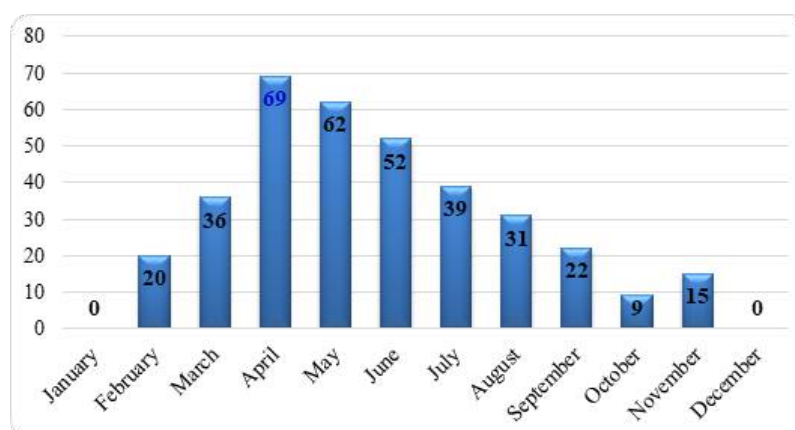


The identified cases of allergic patients according to the months of the year (July 2021 to June 2022) are presented in Chart 3. A different variability is found between the months, the April results with more cases of patients diagnosed as allergic to a specific pollinosis and specifically with 69 cases, followed by the May with 62 allergic individuals.

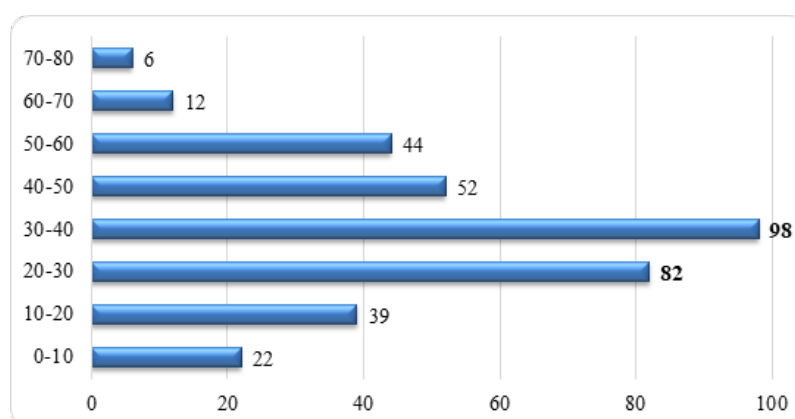
We are of the opinion that the observed phenomenon must do precisely with the fact of the flowering time of most plants precisely in these months.

This corresponds to the spring season in which most of the flowers and trees bloom. From the reviewed literature, it is determined that the plants flowering is accompanied by the presence of about 10 grains of plant pollen/m³ of air obtained every day for a week period, and approximately the amount of pollen for a week reaches more than 100 pollen grains /m³ air, being a possible source for certain allergic diseases in humans (Pfaar et al., 2017).

It has been established that when we have in the air an amount of about 12 pollen grains/m³ air, this phenomenon will always be accompanied by visits and hospitalizations in medical emergencies because of the emerging pollinosis (Becker et al., 2021).

CHART 3. Allergic patients from July 2021 - June 2022

From Chart 4 we find the distribution of allergic patients according to the respective age groups. Specifically, from the obtained results, we find that the patients most affected by pollinosis belong to the age group of 30-40 years old with 98 diagnosed cases, followed by the age group of 20-30 years old with 82 allergic patients.

CHART 4. Distribution of allergic patients according to age in years

For this observed phenomenon, we think that the main factor has to do with the fact of the dynamics of exits and movements that inevitably leads to the most frequent contact with allergic pollen for these age groups.

Another fact found that supports the above phenomenon is staying for a long time in closed rooms and bars where smoking is consumed, turning this lifestyle into an evident factor that significantly affects the appearance of various allergic diseases.

As for the most prominent allergenic factor, *Secale Cereale* (Fig. 1), we can say that it is part of the Gramineae family and is classified as an annual herb cultivated by human hands as grain, forage, and cover crop. Its use is mainly related to its consideration as a necessary element to produce flour, bread, alcoholic beverages such as beer, whiskey, and vodka, and it is widely used as animal feed. From various studies it has been determined that the pollen grains of this plant serve as an allergenic factor in various pollinosis (Lewis and Lewis, 1982; Laffer et al., 1992; D'Amato et al., 2007; Damialis and Kostantinou, 2011; Gyulai, 2014).

From the review of different studies, both by local and foreign researchers, it is found that the pollen of plant species belonging to the Gramineae family is the main allergenic factor for many pollinosis (Prieto-Baena et al., 2003; D'Amato et al., 2007; Pietzak, 2012; Gyulai, 2014).

FIG. 1. *Secale Cereale* (Rye in natural environment – Photo 1; Microscopic photo of *Secale cereale* pollen – Photo 2) (Source: Jançe, 2022).



As for the main forms of allergic diseases that come from allergic pollens, we can mainly mention the diseases that mainly affect the respiratory tract, such as bronchial asthma and allergic rhinitis and eye irritation known as rhino conjunctivitis (Croner, 1992; D'Amato et al., 1998; Chinn et al., 1999; Riedinger et al., 2002; D'Amato et al., 2007; Becker et al., 2021). Almost always, a significant burden on the lungs and the respiratory system is found (Fig. 2).

FIG. 1. Lung graph in a patient allergic to pollinose (Source: Jahiqi, 2022).



As a conclusion, we must emphasize the fact that the results obtained from our study are general and cannot be considered totally, this is because the data used in this study were obtained from the Institute of Public Health.

It should also be taken into consideration that the number of allergic patients may be much higher, since there may be many people diagnosed as allergic to pollens, after performing the relevant allergy tests at the many private clinics operating in the capital.

Conclusion

- From the results obtained from the study undertaken, there is a significant number of 355 patients who came out positive from the allergy tests performed.
- The main allergenic factor affecting the pollinosis appearance is the pollen of *Secale cereale* - Rye in 95 cases, followed by *Alnus glutinosa* (decorative tree) identified as an allergenic factor in 56 allergic people.
- Pollinosis was detected in most cases in the urban area of Tirana with 252 cases detected and less in the surrounding villages (103 allergic patients).
- The gender that suffers most from pollinosis is men with about 60% of patients (or 212 cases), while women are 40% - 143 allergic patients. While the affected age group is 22-36 years old.
- It is also established that the dominance of the frequency of allergic cases prevails during the April-June, which corresponds to the spring season, a season that coincides with the flowering time of most of the plants identified as an allergenic factor.

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Soil pollution and a hidden impact on cardiovascular health

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Abstract

In this scientific paper, scientific data is provided for the soil contaminated mainly by heavy metals, focusing on the industrial area of Elbasan city. The scientific data presented in this paper were obtained in Elbasani town.

This study was undertaken with the aim of showing the connection between heavy metal pollution that the soil may have, this phenomenon is mainly dedicated to the abusive activity of heavy industries operating in the city, and the consequences that this pollution has on human health and mainly on cardiovascular diseases. This article discusses the most important soil pollutants and their health effects.

For the realization of this work, we took soil samples during the March - May 2022 period. Elbasani region has been subject to atmospheric pollution, of a chemical and microbiological nature. Among the main causes that cause this constant pollution of the Elbasan area, we mainly mention the development of the activity of light and heavy industries, which do not respect the appropriate measures for the protection of the environment.

In conclusion, significant results have appeared related to soil pollution by heavy metals, represented only by Nickel (Ni) which is found at rates about 2.5 times above the preset parameters and dictated by the relevant Regulation of the European Union.

Key words: Heavy metals, Pollution, Health, Cardiovascular Diseases, Elbasan - Albania.

Introduction

Biodiversity of the soil - above and below it - is of vital importance to humans, mainly based on ensuring a healthy soil that will lead to quality ecosystems. Soil biodiversity has an essential role in the circulation of carbon and nutrients, it serves as a regulator in the presence of pests and various diseases, it is also the main source of various pharmaceutical medications that play an important role in human health.

Among the negative factors that affect the healthy soil quality, we mention: the soil presence of macro and microplastics, the excessive presence of pesticides, deforestation caused mainly by human hands, the over-fertilization of agricultural lands by farmers and the presence of heavy metals beyond the permitted (Jance et al., 2021).

The study of heavy metal pollution from industrial activity, industries of mineral processing and enrichment in Albania, have always served as an object for genuine scientific research by different local and foreign researchers, mainly representatives of various research centers and university academic institutions.

Heavy metals have always been a natural component and an integral part of the Earth's crust.

The same conclusion has been reached by various studies, that if heavy metals are present in the soil above the permitted rates, they will be the main causes of a destructive effect both for the soil and the agricultural crops cultivated on it, as well as for the livestock pastures and forest areas (Berglund et al., 1984; Mantovi et al., 2003; Jasson, 2004; Jance et al., 2021).

Determining heavy metals presence of above the permitted rate, such as Co, Cd, Zn, Fe, Cu, Pb, Ni, and As, in forest ecosystems and agricultural lands, in the vicinity of industrial areas, has been devastating and with serious and significant

damage to both the health of the soil and for human health (McBride, 1994; Lacatusu, 1998; Censi et al., 2006), influencing on the health and well-being of the population. Through this paper, we have tried to present the essential and direct connection between soil pollution and the impact on human health, focusing mainly on cardiovascular diseases. There is a possible link between heavy metal toxicity and cardiovascular disease (CVD). Mainly this is based on the imbalance between antioxidant defense mechanisms that are evident in oxidative stress as the main negative effect of environmental exposures. Heavy metals have a negative impact on various mechanisms, mainly DNA damage and lipid peroxidation, which cause damage to the cardiovascular system (Lara-Guzmán et al., 2018). Through this study, we have tried to present the current situation of heavy metals in the soil, for the area of Elbasan, during the March-May period of last year. By performing a qualitative analysis of the obtained results, it is easy to see the presence of heavy metals in the optimal values, which define them as non-risk factors, distinguishing only the nickel element presents at levels about 2.5 times higher than default rates. The presence of nickel is essential based on its role as an essential micronutrient mainly for higher plants (Brown et al., 1987), but present in high concentrations, it has a direct toxic effect on crops and indirectly on human health (Yong et al., 1996). We emphasize the need for further studies to accurately determine the role of contaminated soil in cardiovascular diseases. Research in the future should be deepened and combined in other risk factors such as nano and microplastics, which can also be the cause of cardiovascular diseases. Until a more accurate determination of the risk factors, from similar studies it is recommended to protect and minimize exposure to winds, to look at the possibility of using filtered water and to buy fruits and vegetables that are as organic as possible, cultivated in the soil as fertile and without toxic pollution. (Münzel et al., 2022).

Materials and Methods

The soil samples present in the study vary in weight from 150 g. After taking the soil samples, proceed with their complete drying (in a thermostat at a temperature of 40°C) followed by filtering through a sieve. After processing, it was found that about 95% of the soil samples are smaller than two millimeters in size.

The obtained soil samples, after the process described above, are subjected to a dilution process, treating them with the method known as the “dilution method with 4 acids”.

1. Initially, a sample weighing 0.1 grams of the soil is treated with nitric acid - HNO_3 (with a volume of 2.5 milliliters).
2. Then we add the hydrofluoric acid - HF (with a volume of 5 ml)
3. Continue with the addition of dilute acid HClO_4 (with a volume of 1.5 milliliters)
4. We conclude by adding the fourth and last acid, which is hydrochloric acid - HCl (with a volume of 2.5 milliliters) (Peverill et al., 1999).

To determine the soil PH, we proceeded by treating a quantity of 10 grams of soil with 25 ml of oxygenated water, followed by centrifugation for half an hour, waiting for 5 minutes to precipitate. Measurements of pH and grain size were also made and was found the average soil samples pH value of 8.2 defining the environment in alkaline (Gee and Bauder, 1986).

Results

After laboratory analyses followed by statistical and analytical processing of soil samples taken during the March-May 2022 period in the Elbasan area, are show that this city has soil contamination above the permitted levels observed only in the nickel element. The scientific data provided for all three months (March to May) are pooled. This three-month grouping was made to perceive as accurately as possible the soil trend pollution in time.

Table 1 presents the heavy metals quantity for the analyzed period, accompanied by the maximum allowed amount. Except for nickel, all other metals are below the permissible norm.

TABLE 1. Obtained value on the presence of toxic metals in the soil.

No.	Heavy metals	Maximum quantity allowed (mg/kg)	Average (mg/kg)
1	Cadmium (Cd)	3	1.1
2	Arsenic (As)	30	0.6
3	Cobalt (Co)	75	31
4	Nickel (Ni)	75	184
5	Copper (Cu)	140	44
6	Chromium (Cr)	200	56
7	Lead (Pb)	300	68
8	Zinc (Zn)	300	72

Cadmium (Cd) present in the amount of 0.1 mg/kg - the soil is classified as “normal” and present in the amount of 3-8 mg/kg - the soil is classified as “toxic”; from our study resulted in the amount of 1.1 mg/kg, considering that the amount of 3 mg/kg is also the maximum value allowed by the EU directives, its presence in the soil is in “*normal parameters*”.

Arsenic (As) present in the amount of 5 mg/kg - the soil is classified as “normal” and present in the amount of 20-40 mg/kg - the soil is classified as “toxic”; from our study resulted in the amount of 0.6 mg/kg, considering that the amount of 30 mg/kg is also the maximum value allowed by the EU regulation, its presence in the soil is in “*normal parameters*”.

Cobalt (Co) present in the amount of 10 mg/kg - the soil is classified as “normal” and present in the amount of 40 mg/kg - the soil is classified as “toxic”; from our study resulted in the amount of 31 mg/kg, considering that the amount of 75 mg/kg is also the maximum value allowed by the EU directives, its presence in the soil is in “*normal parameters*”.

Copper (Cu) present in the amount of 2 mg/kg - the soil is classified as “normal” and present in the amount of 60-125 mg/kg - the soil is classified as “toxic”; from our study resulted in the amount of 44 mg/kg, considering that the amount of 140 mg/kg is also the maximum value allowed by the EU regulation, its presence in the soil is in “*normal parameters*”.

Chromium (Cr) present in the amount of 5 mg/kg - the soil is classified as “normal” and present in the amount of 75-100 mg/kg - the soil is classified as “toxic”; from our study resulted in the amount of 56 mg/kg, considering that the amount of 200 mg/kg is also the maximum value allowed by the EU directives, its presence in the soil is in “*normal parameters*”.

Lead (Pb) present in the amount of 10 mg/kg - the soil is classified as “normal” and present in the amount of 100 mg/kg - the soil is classified as “toxic”; from our study resulted in the amount of 68 mg/kg, considering that the amount of 300 mg/kg is also the maximum value allowed by the EU regulation, its presence in the soil is in “*normal parameters*”.

Zinc (Zn), present in the amount of 10 mg/kg - the soil is classified as “normal” and present in the amount of 100 mg/kg - the soil is classified as “toxic”; from our study resulted in the amount of 72 mg/kg, considering that the amount of 300 mg/kg is also the maximum value allowed by the EU directives, its presence in the soil is in “*normal parameters*”.

Nickel (Ni) present in the soil in the amount of 10 mg/kg classifies the soil as “normal”, while if it is found in the soil in the amount of 70-400 mg/kg the soil is considered “toxic”. From the laboratory processing of soil samples, Nickel was present in the soil in an average amount of 184 mg/kg, knowing that the limit allowed by EU directives is up to 75 mg/kg, we conclude that Nickel is present in the soil about two and a half times more than the European standard allows, and in this case the soil is considered “*toxic*”.

Discussion

Different researchers, through the scientific research they have carried out over the years, have concluded that soil pollution caused by three main factors such as the presence of heavy metals above the permitted rates, as well as the excessive presence of pesticides and plastic materials, is a determining factor for human health in general and cardiovascular diseases (CVD) in particular. (Zago et al., 2020; Münzel et al., 2021; Münzel et al., 2022).

Among these cardiovascular diseases, we mention chronic ischemic heart diseases, heart attack, thrombosis in the brain and disorders of the normal heart rhythm (arrhythmia) (Vaziri, 2008; Münzel et al., 2021).

Whenever we talk about threats to human health, we always think of pathological diseases, natural disasters, and accidents. But it is undeniable that although land pollution has not been determined as a dominant factor, the statistical data obtained from various studies, give exactly a figure of nearly 9 million premature deaths for the year 2015, caused by polluted air, water or soil, where about 70% of deaths have caused by non-communicable diseases, and nearly 60% of them are caused by cardiovascular diseases (Cosselman et al., 2015; Münzel et al., 2021; Münzel et al., 2022).

The heavy metals sources in the soil-water-air environment are mainly dedicated to various industrial and technological processes such as: abusive activities of metal and hydrocarbon production, smelting and refining industries, rubber and plastic production and burning industries. Furthermore, if they are part of the environment where we live, toxic metals can easily become part of human food products, mainly by means of inhalation of polluted air, consumption of polluted drinking water, as well as food with contaminated products, whether of plant or animal origin. (Gaszo, 2001).

High levels of heavy metals in the environment result in high exposure of humans and animals to these toxic elements through the food chain, inhalation of dust or direct ingestion.

Heavy metals in general and cadmium, lead, and arsenic, when they are in the soil in quantities above the recommended rates, are the cause of the great risk of strokes (thrombosis and cerebral hemorrhage), hypertension and heart diseases (Münzel et al., 2021).

Cadmium (Cd) originates from industrial and agricultural sources, and is found as an impurity in various compositions, mainly in phosphate fertilizers, detergents, and petroleum products. Cadmium is also produced as a by-product of the Zn and often leads to the refining process. The use of agricultural compounds such as fertilizers, pesticides, wastewater, waste industry or deposition of atmospheric pollutants increases the concentration of Cd in the soil, and these factors are determining if the uptake of Cd by the plant occurs to a significant extent (Wegglar et al., 2004; Messner and Bernhard, 2010; Tellez-Plaza et al., 2015).

Different studies have concluded on the link between cadmium and cardiovascular diseases, resulting in people with higher blood cadmium levels at increased risk of stroke and hypertension (Valera et al., 2008; Messner & Bernhard, 2010).

Lead (Pb) Lead (Pb) is representative of the most widespread heavy metals and the main component of the earth's crust. Its presence is ensured by a wide range of sources, where we mainly mention the activity of mining, smelting, manufacturing, and recycling industries. It has been identified as an element with toxic properties and a high ability to accumulate through metabolism (Vaziri, 2008).

The rate of absorption from soil to plants is not the same but depends on the amount of lead contained in it. Like other heavy metals, lead is considered a stable metal and a constant pollutant in the environment because it does not degrade. This is the main reason why lead manages to settle in the environment: in soil, sea, water, fresh water, and sediments.

Lead is very stable in water and soil favored by the influence of factors such as: temperature, pH, and the presence of humus soil (Martinez and Motto, 2000; Navas-Acien et al., 2007).

From the results obtained from various scientific studies, it has been concluded that there is a significant correlation between cardiovascular diseases (CVD) and the high amount of lead element in human blood. Among the most frequently identified cardiovascular diseases are heart attack, coronary heart disease as well as ischemia and thrombosis in the brain. The people most affected by these diseases are diabetics and, in most cases, female patients. (Vaziri, 2008; Münzel et al., 2021; Münzel et al., 2022).

While, from the studies conducted, a higher risk of death caused by cardiovascular diseases influenced by another heavy metal, which is *arsenic*, has been proven (Moon et al., 2012; Münzel et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, we also mention the fact established by the results of various scientific studies, where it is easily established that the toxic pollution of the soil, caused by the presence above the basic rates of heavy metals, directly related to the occurrence of cardiovascular diseases, is mainly met in most cases in that group of people with low economic income.

This phenomenon is dedicated to the fact that the population with little financial income, due to the minimal living conditions, is more prone to be exposed to these environmental polluting factors. Meanwhile, in the future it is thought that this problem will become serious and comprehensive, mainly due to the increasing trend of the globalization process regarding the main sources of food supply, where from the daily consumption of contaminated meat, fruits, and vegetables, consequently the presence level of the toxic metals increases in the human body.

The above-mentioned phenomenon is reinforced by the fact that the origin of the average calorific consumer products for each person in the world is differentiated into 20% of food products not directly originating from the earth, and the rest of 80% of food products originating from crops grown directly in the soil. (Weggler et al., 2004).

Contamination with heavy metals, plastics, over-fertilization, and pesticides serve as the main pathophysiological factors that cause cardiovascular, neurodegenerative, and metabolic diseases, where we mainly mention oxidative stress and inflammation (Weggler et al., 2004; Münzel et al., 2022).

Over the years, Elbasan city has been considered one of the cities with the greatest environmental pollution in Albania. We are mainly of the opinion that among the main reasons for this drastic pollution can be listed the high population concentration, numerous buildings, busy traffic, infrastructure, lack of green surfaces and above all the development of heavy industrial production activity and the management of weak in relation to the technical control carried out by the Albanian state, mainly in non-compliance with the measures for environmental pollution.

We think that this excessive presence of nickel is also influenced by the lithology of the terrain and serves as a fact that nickel pollution is the result of the natural distribution of nickel in the study area (Bencko, 1983; Jance et al., 2021). Meanwhile, it is well known that nickel environmental pollution comes from traffic (McIlveen and Negusanti, 1994; Cempel, 2006; Jance et al., 2021), but mainly from emissions from refineries and industrial waste.

In conclusion: the Elbasan city soil throughout the analysis period turns out to be contaminated by nickel, which is part of the heavy metals.

Conclusion

- From the results obtained from the conducted study, we conclude that the soil of the Elbasan city consists of heavy metals elements, most of which are within the allowed parameters, except for the nickel element, which is about 2.5 times above the standards set by the Regulation of the EU.
- Considerable soil pollution of the Elbasani town with Nickel, part of heavy metals, regarding this phenomenon, we are of the opinion that the cause is the soil deposits of raw materials mainly from the production of heavy industries operating in the area.
- Soil contaminated by heavy metals increases the risk of cardiovascular diseases and other NCDs, mainly due to the pathophysiology's dedicated to:
 - the increasing level of oxidative stress that occurs in the blood vessels (*where we are usually dealing with a considerable presence of free radicals "considered bad" and a very small presence of antioxidants "considered good"*),
 - as well as causing inflammation that leads to circadian rhythm disorder.

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