



THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF DEMOCRATIC DECLINE: THE ROLE OF YOUTH EMIGRATION AND FAIRNESS OF ELECTIONS

by Gentian Elezi, PhD and Fabian Zhilla, PhD

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this position paper is to explore the major threats to Albanian democracy and formulate policy recommendations. The study considers two main components: first, the fairness of electoral processes in the country. In this regard, several shortcomings are discussed including legislative obstacles, organized crime during elections, illegal political financing, and other factors that impact voting outcomes. Second, youth mass emigration is explored, with a particular focus on understanding their impact on democracy and their perceptions. Albania is experiencing another worrying wave of emigration, as it is the top country in terms of asylum seekers in Europe.

Economic drivers of emigration are often fueled by mistrust in the political and democratic processes in the country. In 2022, Albanian asylum seekers made it to the top of the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom's asylum applications (almost half in each), being the only European country in the top ten list. This puts considerable pressure on developments in the Albanian democratic processes and political participation. With the departure of the most critical age group of the country, we notice the perpetration of a vicious cycle where corruption undermines democracy and pushes Albanians to emigrate, mass emigration weakens democratic processes, and the same corrupt practices remain.

Youth have demonstrated themselves to be a highly effective pressure group in the past and on a few occasions have blocked government intentions of wrongdoing. This was the case in 2013 when the Albanian government decided to host chemical materials/ammunition from Syria to be dismantled in the country. Another more recent example refers to the 2018 students' protests for improving education standards and its infrastructure, which forced the government to dialogue after several weeks on the streets. In addition, the role of the students and their protests in 1990 against the communist regime is considered crucial for its collapse and the establishment of a democratic system.

This paper elaborates on the mass emigration of youth in the context of the fairness of elections, considering that in the 2021 parliamentary elections only 21% of young

people who voted think that their vote was not counted correctly, while 30.9% of them did not answer the question. Similarly, only 20.2% of youth hope that the new parliament will prioritize the prevention of youth migration.¹

A variety of research methods were used to explore these factors and answer this paper's research question. Experts' interviews and youth surveys were particularly useful and enriched the findings, filling the gaps from documentation review. The findings suggest some of the main concerns are regarding democracy deterioration and confirm the magnitude of the impact of trust in a fair electoral process and the political system writ large. Youth can be considered in a very vulnerable position in this regard since they believe they do not have the necessary capacities and instruments to engage in democratic processes and influence change. Viewing emigration as a sole alternative has further weakened their trust and predisposition to participate.

Based on the findings and conclusions reached, this study provides a set of policy recommendations, grouping together several components. First, despite the conclusion that the legislative framework is not sufficient for ensuring change, there is an immediate need to undertake an in-depth review of current legislation with the aim of filling the existing gaps and addressing shortcomings. This process should set inclusivity as a priority and aim at generating a broader national consensus on the rules established. Second, transparency needs to be a key priority. For this purpose, this study proposes to revisit and update monitoring mechanisms, with a particular focus on ensuring access to all non-state actors to initiate procedures on vetting candidates.

In terms of the conviviality between politics and the criminal world, some longer-term efforts are required, including raising awareness and limiting opportunities for political parties to use such sources. Lastly, addressing the youth situation and challenges would require a special focus, due to the much bigger impact that their emigration might have. Their effective involvement in democratic processes and the need to strengthen their capacities and skills ought to be at the top of policy agendas.

1 Qëndresa Qytetare "Post-election analysis: Votes and youths", available at: [Analyze-post-zgjedhore-Vota-dhe-te-rinjte.pdf \(qq.com.al\)](https://www.iri.org/albania/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Analyze-post-zgjedhore-Vota-dhe-te-rinjte.pdf)

PROBLEM HISTORY: STRUCTURAL FACTORS IN DEMOCRATIC SHORTCOMINGS AND THEIR IMPACT

Threats to democracy can come in different forms, especially in transition countries. In this context, Albania is an interesting case. Due to its political history and strategic positioning after the fall of communism, the country presents fewer opportunities for foreign democracy threats. Although, we can count a few instances with Russian and Iranian diplomats in Tirana and a quite serious cyber-attack against e-government services platform in 2022 (from the Iranian government, according to Albanian PM), the main threats to Albanian democracy have been internal.

The first problem is related to the quality and fairness of the election process, more specifically, the ability of politicians to determine and control the voting outcome. Fair elections are one of the cornerstones of democracy and the rule of law. Equal access to the voting process is a condition which is stipulated in modern constitutions and lays down the foundation of political rights of individuals in a society. The legitimacy of the incumbent originates from the ballot box of the citizens either during local or political elections. Therefore, the level of accountability of the public servant to the public is tied to the standards of the voting process. If this relationship is hampered from undue influence, corruption, or organized crime, then the constitutional architecture of the checks and balances will not work. The votes might not reflect the will of people but are manipulated by those who control the election process.

In the case of Albania, the political elite uses a variety of methods to control the electoral outcome, undermining the democratic processes of the country and their parties. This paper will seek to understand more in-depth the impact of these components. The first component is

the lack of transparency for political financing and campaign expenditures. Political rallies and campaign events bear a substantial cost that does not match the official financial balances available to political parties. On some occasions, parties have reported only the costs of their opening and closing campaign events, considering these the only campaign costs (for events).²

This gap is filled by financial instruments emerging from corrupt money and/or organized crime income, which fuel the political machinery for reaping benefits of corruption during the political mandate. The second component is the direct or indirect involvement of criminal elements and organizations in the electoral process, by pressuring citizens or exercising their influence to favor specific candidates in the voting process. As the OSCE/ODIHR report on Albania points out, "Prior to election day, a number of OSCE/ODIHR EOM interlocutors highlighted the role of individuals with alleged ties to organized crime in the electoral process".³ This results in a transaction after elections in terms of access to public funding (procurements) and influence in decision making at public institutions and agencies.

While the legislation on elections for tackling these phenomena is continuously improved in Albania, especially under international community's pressure, issues regarding the fairness of the election process remain. Corruption and the influence of organized crime continue to break or manage the link between elected representatives and the people. This relationship then devolves into a toxic political environment which devalues the power of votes and pushes people to become cynical and either leave the country or refrain from any action to change the situation. This is not sending encouraging messages

² <https://www.reporter.al/2017/06/01/kostot-e-fushates-partite-politike-fshehin-milionat-e-shpenzuara-ne-tubime-elektorale/>

³ OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission - Final Report, p.11. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/d/346661.pdf>

to youth, who see their voices at the voting booth go unheard. As mentioned in the introduction, youth have little expectations that their rights will be upheld and represented fairly by the new parliament. Around 72.6% of youth do not expect that the new parliament will address the priority issues which affect them.⁴

Despite occasional improvements, political actors have found other ways to manipulate the election process and exert their influence via informal means. The need to capture the institutions in a corrupt environment has increased the need for informal mechanisms and financial sources, such as corrupt money and organized crime. The business community is asked to support the elections in exchange for favors and the media is often lured by advertisement money to take sides.⁵

From the legal perspective, the election process in Albania is regulated by several important laws. According to Article 9 of the Constitution, everyone is free to create a political party on the condition that they comply with democratic principles. Another important legislation is Law no. 8580, date 17.2.2000: 'On Political Parties.' Considering that the standard of behavior of political parties during the election in Albania has been a concern, this is reflected in the several subsequent amendments of this law. For instance, the Law on Political Parties has been amended five times.

Article 19 of the law stipulates a formula for the distribution of public money allocated by the government to political finance. Political parties should also provide a report to the Central Election Commission (CEC) on their annual financial activities. Another important law is the Election Code which regulates the whole election process. Political parties can benefit from public and non-public funding in support of their campaign with the condition of transparency.

One of the main aspects which is regulated by this code is the financing of political campaigns of the candidates, originating from donations and loans (Article 90.2) which mandates them to be transparent and reported to the CEC. Political parties and their candidates cannot use assets, human resources, and infrastructure of public entities (Article 91).

The main law which deals with preventing and purging political parties from individuals with criminal records is Law no. 138/2015 'On the Guarantee of Integrity of the Persons who are Elected and Appointed in Public Functions,' otherwise known as the 'Law on Decriminalization.' This law aims to impede the candidacy of individuals with criminal records in and out of Albania. The ban applies to everyone sentenced by a final court decision for an offence punishable by at least 6 months of imprisonment (Article 2/1.c). It also specifically includes persons who have been convicted by a non-final decision or expelled by the EU, USA, Canada, or Australia, or when a personal security measure has been imposed and/or an international search warrant has been issued (Article 2/2.b).

However, the right to seek the verification of the data of the self-declaration of the candidates for both parliamentary and local elections, includes only members of parliament, government, prosecution office, and political parties. When it comes to the public, the request must be submitted by at least 500 citizens with a right to vote (Article 7/2) to the General Prosecutor's office to be accepted. The law does not foresee any right or possibility for the press and civil society to monitor and request the verification of the data provided by the candidates, something that limits the monitoring of the process. The self-declaration can only become public if there is a request by the interested subjects (Article 5/5). Therefore, the only way that both civil society and the press can trigger the process is via public pressure on the government, the prosecutor's office, and political parties. It should be noted that while the legislation on elections provides some standards on verification, the issue of its enforcement remains an issue. This is seen as very problematic and, together with other factors, it discourages and negatively affects participation in the voting process. In the 2021 parliamentary elections, the number of youth votes dropped by 5.2% compared to the 2017 elections.⁶

The second interrelated threat to Albanian democracy comes from a slow but steady corrosive phenomenon, which is mass emigration, especially of youth. State capture and widespread corruption are concepts that

4 Qëndresa Qytetare "Post-election analysis: Votes and youths", available at: [Analyze-post-zgjedhore-Vota-dhe-te-rinjte.pdf \(qq.com.al\)](https://portavendore.al/2020/05/03/pushteti-dhe-financat-mbyllin-gojen-e-televizioneve-lokale/), p.8

5 <https://portavendore.al/2020/05/03/pushteti-dhe-financat-mbyllin-gojen-e-televizioneve-lokale/>

6 Qëndresa Qytetare "Post-election analysis: Votes and youths", available at: [Analyze-post-zgjedhore-Vota-dhe-te-rinjte.pdf \(qq.com.al\)](https://portavendore.al/2020/05/03/pushteti-dhe-financat-mbyllin-gojen-e-televizioneve-lokale/) p.4

the European Commission has been using to describe the Albanian context, in its annual report. Although this is also used to describe other countries in the region, several surveys and studies have shown that perception on corruption among Albanian citizens has deteriorated the most. Consequently, Albania is suffering from a rapid increase of emigration, far greater than the rest of the Western Balkan countries, where most of those emigrating are between 20 to 24 years old in the region.⁷ The loss of hope from widespread corruption has been translated into a massive number of youngsters that claim to plan to leave the country (78% of youth, in the most recent survey).

The unfriendly business climate is not helping youth either. Only 15% of 130 of the largest businesses representatives with Albanian capital in the country are younger than 42 years old, and most of them have shares inherited from their parents. A recent finding in the June 2022 Financial Journal Monitor in Albania on the factors that discourage youth to engage in business is the fact that

In addition, a new worrying activity has been increasing in these recent migration waves. Reports show that many of the youth emigrate to engage in illegal activities, mostly related to drug cultivation and trafficking. This has become a concern especially in the UK but also in other European countries. Regarding the impact on Albania, the increase of informal money flows into the domestic economy risks putting additional pressure on the already weak situation when combatting money laundering. Informal income from illegal activities is so high that it has impacted the exchange rate of the Euro in the country. This has led to the appreciation of the local currency by 12% in less than one year, due to the elevated quantity of informal cash being injected into the economy. There is a widespread concern that this financial influx of illegal money coming from Albanian migrants might be used in the upcoming election campaign to influence the voting outcome.



⁷ https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/albania-headed-for-labour-market-crisis-due-to-youth-emigration/

⁸ <https://businessmag.al/brezi-i-humbur-pse-mungojne-sipermarresit-e-rinj-te-vip-at-ne-shqiperi/>

APPROACHING AND UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT SHORTCOMINGS: RESEARCH QUESTION

The focus of this position paper is the explanation of democratic decline, due to two interlinked components: first, the undermining of fairness in the election processes, and second, the youth emigration and its potential to increase illegal income into democratic processes. The main research question is: What is the impact of electoral fairness and mass migration on the deterioration of Albanian democracy? The aim of this paper is to understand more in-depth the structural links between these components and try to formulate adequate policy recommendations.

As mentioned earlier, while the legal standards of election processes have improved, there are still problems regarding the enforcement of the law, politicization of the political process and misuse of political finances. The politicization of the public administration is one of the main concerns regarding elections in Albania. While the law is clear that public institutions and administration cannot be misused during political campaigns, there were concerns in the 2021 political elections over the

exploitation of people and assets of public institutions. Furthermore, during the partial local election held in March 2022, “Eleven cases of state resource use in the election campaign were identified by the CEC, raising concerns that administration and public assets were made available to the campaign, creating inequality in the electoral race”.

According to the findings of the Coalition for Reforms, Integration, and Consolidated Institutions (KRIIK), a civil society organization that monitors the election process, public servants were extorted for their job positions. As noted, KRIIK’s report “Public administration employees at the local level have submitted Therefore, to unpack this element further would contribute to the understanding of the impact on democracy in general.

In addition, another phenomenon which persists is vote buying. This occurs when candidates offer money and favors in exchange for votes. This phenomenon was evidenced in several election campaigns in the past 10

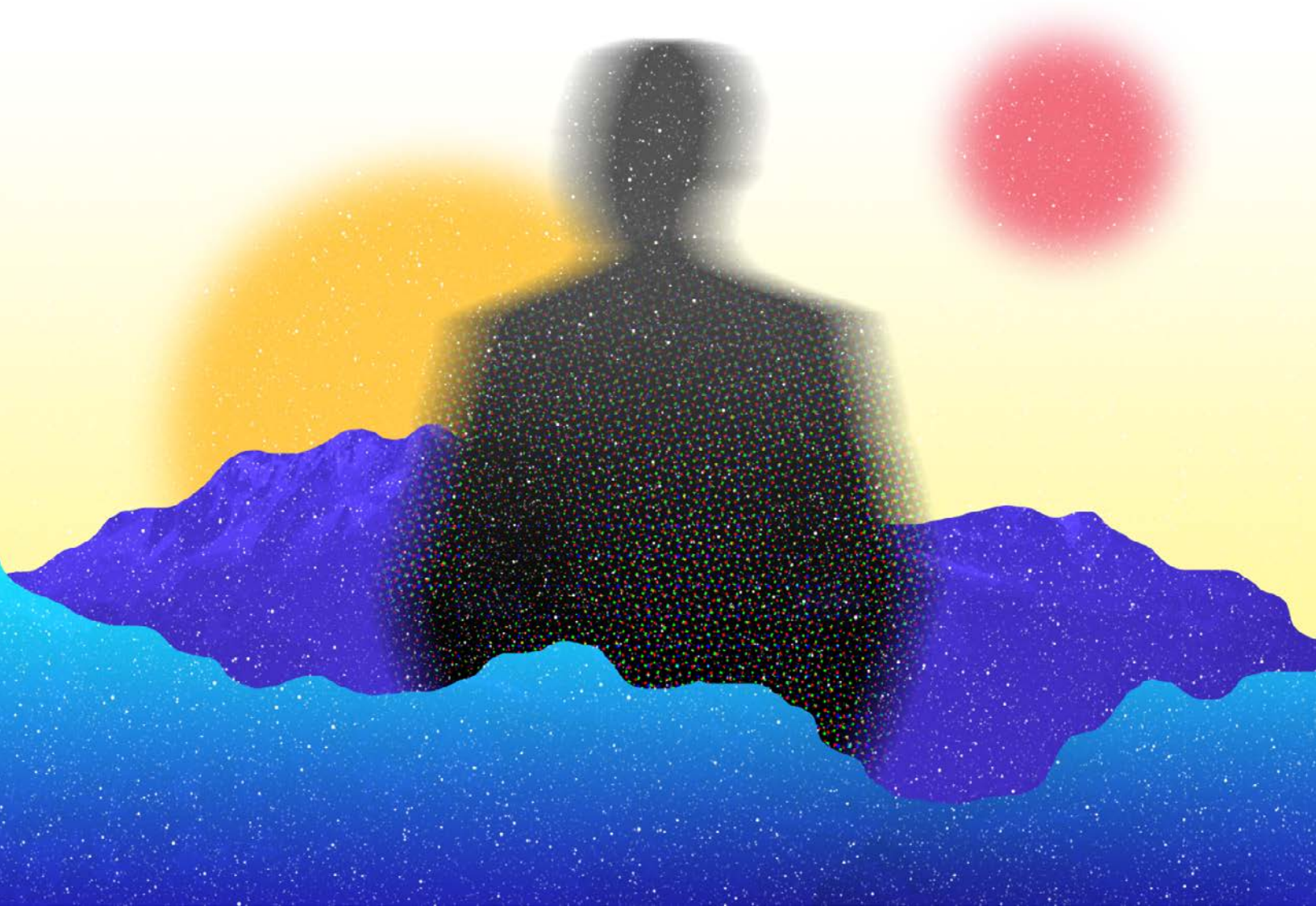


years, including the 2021 elections. Several allegations regarding the violation of the electoral law, including claims of vote buying, were filed to the Special Prosecution Office (SPAK). There were around 91 cases filed with anti-corruption prosecution bodies. Around 32 of them were accepted and their investigation continued. The number of those claims which were sent to the court was exceedingly small, only two as of 2021. This reveals how many political parties misuse the right to sue for vote buying and use it as a propaganda tool, rather than providing compelling evidence to support their cases.

The issue of the high number of individuals with a criminal past was a concern before the implementation of the 2015 law mentioned above. By 2020, around 100 candidates were forced to withdraw from the election process as the result of their criminal past. For the period between 2015 to 2021, more than 700 senior public officials, including members of parliaments, judges, prosecutors, and other administration personnel resigned or have been

dismissed due to previous criminal convictions, ever since the law was passed. However, individuals with a criminal past continue to influence electoral processes and outcomes through informal engagement in campaigns and their strong presence in the territory.

Based on the analysis above, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts on elections and democratization, including lawyers and political analysts. The aim was to try to understand more in-depth the mechanisms used by politicians to impede election fairness and discuss potential recommendations for tackling the existing challenges. The findings are presented in the next section. On the other hand, the research methodology for the youth emigration component was designed and structured through a questionnaire (164 participants) and a focus group (8 participants, aged 18 to 35). The most important findings are summarized in the following section.



FINDINGS AND EXPLANATIONS ON THREATS TO DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

It should be noted at the outset that the distortion of the voting process in Albania and the Western Balkans traces back to the political transition in the early 1990's. The diversion of the votes comes in different patterns from the actions which would establish entrenched long-term relationships between incumbents and political parties. It is also different from clientelist behavior with local business or the impact of the media and other influential actors on different government levels (local or central), in exchange for favors/rent seeking - which usually is more applicable to organized crime groups.

In the last ten years the clientelist relationship and exchange of favors between political elite and non-state actors has become sophisticated and adheres more to a business-like approach, rather than political affiliation. Political parties communicate with incumbent and non-state actors more on financial terms than political terms, and this changed the patterns of negotiations and shaped their behavior. This new business approach to informal negotiation has shifted attention to the modes of political finance and the misuses of public assets or legislation.

The new business informal trend is becoming evident during election campaigns, including in the way public assets, events, and projects are used during elections. The legal concept of election campaigns (i.e., 30 days) is not working as de facto campaign length. The campaigns begin at least 6 months before election day and the way public projects are used as marketing tools can be observed. These tools are used to attract more voters and send a message to the business community about the opportunities they may have if they support the political party.

Therefore, the main findings from the document analysis and interviews point out the misuse of political finance as an instrument, which has been used by the main political parties when the process has been distorted, has been

instrumentalized. Though improvements of the legal framework have come into play after international pressure and as a condition of EU accession, local actors have continued to influence voting outcomes and undermine the credibility of electoral processes.

The misuse of public administration for political appointments and during campaigns is seen as a major continuous factor that impacts the election result. What is of additional concern is the use of personal data of citizens gathered through public institutions to monitor voting patterns and prepare political strategies. Experts consider this recently uncovered practice and scandal as a powerful instrument which directly threatens the fairness of elections, determining a clear advantage of the majority. It was discovered that the ruling party had built a large database with citizens' sensitive data, including their voting patterns in previous elections. Members of the public administration were included in the database as they lead the monitoring of citizen data, providing feedback on their personal affiliations and voting attitude.⁹

It emerged from the experts' interviews that the engagement of individuals with criminal backgrounds appears to be less visible publicly, especially during election day. This has portrayed elections as somehow more peaceful than in the past. However, during and before electoral campaigns, their role is still crucial in some areas. Exercise of influence has taken the form of the provision of public services for local citizens, finding employment, and solving disputes, rather than direct vote buying. Their impact is particularly important in constituencies where voting patterns present a narrow margin between competing parties, as the 2021 elections showed. Though several individuals with this background have been pointed out by their counterparts, civil society, or the international community (some of them publicly designated as non grata by the US Department of State), they still maintain strong

⁹ <https://www.transparency.org/en/press/albania-alarm-over-indications-of-personal-data-breach-election-campaign-violations#>

ties with political parties and community leaders in their territories. This appears to put them in a favorable condition for ensuring certainty of specific election results, even before the election day.

In addition, a recent government proposal provides additional concern. If approved, it grants amnesty for informal capital from abroad worth up to 2 million Euros with no explanation needed. As explained, the financial support that comes from informal and illegal channels has been a crucial factor in shaping electoral behavior. This initiative would deteriorate the situation further. Albanian criminal organizations have increased their drug trafficking activities in recent years, accumulating considerable financial resources. This has incentivized money laundering schemes, injecting this capital in a few important sectors in the Albanian economy.

In addition, experts believe that part of this money is financing politics and political campaigns. The amnesty proposal has been strongly criticized by the international community, and the European Commission has pointed this out in its latest country report (2022). Furthermore, the Commission has also included Albania in the list of countries which should be monitored closely in financial reporting. Another potential threat deriving from this initiative is related to the risk of foreign actors using their financial instruments to undermine democratic consolidation in Albania. Though this risk is not as high as in some other countries in the region, creating these opportunities might endanger Albanian democracy and stability in the near future.

Another issue of particular concern among experts is the intention of the Albanian government to re-open gambling activities in March 2023. This industry was strongly attacked by the same political majority in 2014, passing legislation to make gambling illegal and closing businesses which engaged in this area. Among other reasons, the industry has been blamed for interacting heavily with the underground criminal world, especially by laundering money coming from drug trafficking. Experts claim that the sector facilitates the laundering of this capital and its use in legal activities afterwards. In addition, this can become another indirect source for financing political campaigns.

These two mechanisms are seen as instruments which may provide organized crime groups, including corrupt money to become integrated in the economy which in turn will be reinvested into politics during electoral

campaigns and election day. Both proposals have been suspended now, amidst considerable opposition from the EU and the international community in the country. However, according to experts, their impact has been considerable in attracting support for the government from illegal groups in the forthcoming local elections.

Implementation and observance of the elections' legal framework and management of the process remains the domain of political parties. In this regard, partial improvements of legislation have been subject to the negotiations of political parties which try to take advantage of any rule change, without engaging in a proper structural or inclusive reform. The consequence has been an overlapping of agendas and a continuous loss of trust in electoral processes, also found by several surveys where trust in political parties is the lowest, followed by trust in electoral processes.

Youth emigration is the other main threat to the democratic process. As explained before, the draining of the population group most prone to demanding change, and who can put the most pressure on governments (see the 2018 student protests), is slowly but steadily weakening people's power to create political change. Youth perceptions and explanations of their lack of trust in the current political and democratic system help to understand the ramifications of the vicious cycles created by their abandonment of the country.

As found by the complete questionnaire and by other previous surveys, around 68% of youth wish to leave Albania. The lack of meritocracy and opportunities are ranked as the main reasons for their answer (83% and 64%, respectively). Youth express pessimism regarding their capacity to influence political processes and the space for interaction with elected officials. Their engagement in political parties or forums is seen in mere pragmatic terms for employment opportunities, with very little effective contribution to democratic processes. Youth resignation in front of the current democratic situation and their low participation in elections and political processes indicates a low probability of political change and positive pressure for all political sides. Direct or indirect discouragement of youth in relation to politics has been quite substantial and has undermined trust in democratic institutions and a just society in general.

Current migration figures of youth and the desperate (mis)use of EU member states' asylum procedures (coming from a non-conflict zone), has further undermined the perception of the future of Albanian democracy and

opportunities for youth. In addition, this has been causing an increase in the shortage of labor and closing of several study programs in Albanian universities (due to lack of registrations).

Another important finding is that there is a need to strengthen youth capacities. They are aware that by building and improving their capacities, and understanding of policy processes and legislative frameworks, this improves their chances of increasing their role and impact in society. In this regard, they also see emigration as an instrument to improve their knowledge and skills to be able to take full advantage of opportunities, despite the restrictive domestic context. Youth believe the education system is not immensely helpful in preparing them to successfully engage with Albanian society and its political institutions. They claim that revisiting curricula and aligning education policies with current developments and threats would be useful.

A worrying fact emerging from the questionnaire is the sentiment of justification for youth who decide to engage in criminal activities, considering the lack of opportunities. The lack of trust in the rule of law and a merit-based society appears to have more acute repercussions on younger generations of Albanians, whose view of success could be distorted. The broadly publicized engagement of youth in drug cultivation in other countries is functioning as a competitive alternative. This dangerous pattern, though not accepted or supported by the majority, remains quite widespread in their stated opinions, especially in terms of connecting it with the lack of opportunities in Albania. In this regard, the rapid increase in youth leaving the country should be a point of major concern.

This study's data and findings on youth disengagement in democratic processes are validated by several other similar surveys and reports. They state that around 63% of youth manifest their desire to leave Albania and almost the same share (62%) claim to have no interest at all in Albanian political processes.¹⁰ Almost half of them are not satisfied with the level of democracy in the

country and a large majority of them (87%) believes that Albanian politics has strong ties with the criminal world.¹¹ The same applies to local governance and democracy, with 80% of youth stating that they do not feel represented by municipal councils and mayors.¹²

As already mentioned, youth abandonment of democratic life is having negative consequences on accountability in the Albanian democratic system. The constant lowering of participation rate and new emigration flows might be pushing faster the deterioration of trust in democratic processes and institutions. On the other hand, the missing pressure from youth allows political actors to pursue their own agendas and be more open to involving corruption and criminal circles in political processes. This leads to further demotivation of youth, fueling the vicious cycle of democratic decline in the



10 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung "Rinia Shqiptare 2019". Available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/15257.pdf>

11 Ibid.

12 Kongresi Rinor Kombëtar "Përfaqësimi dhe pjesëmarrja e të rinjve në zgjedhjet vendore". Available at: <https://portavendore.al/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Studimi-mbi-zgjedhjet-2019.pdf>

13 Stanojevic, D. and Petrovic, J. (2020) "The Balkan Paradox" Young People in Conventional Politics: Between Ideals and Instrumental Goals. In "Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans".

14 Lavric, M. and Bieber, F. (2020) "Shifts in Support for Authoritarianism and Democracy in the Western Balkans". Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10758216.2020.1757468>

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper showed that the many interacting factors that determine the democratic trajectory of the country have deteriorated. While the quality of legislation is important, it is not sufficient to improve the standards of democratic processes and the rule of law. As the case of Albania shows, the election process still suffers and is undermined by political parties. The misuse of public assets and involvement of individuals with links to organized crime in politics remain some of the main challenges for competitive elections. While the implementation of the decriminalization legislation brought some improvements, the influence of powerful individuals with strong connections to organized crime continues. The state apparatus continues to be misused by the governing political parties, while the level of pressure and politicization from public administration is disturbing.

Financial support to campaigns from illegal activities also remains a concern. In sum, even after 33 years of democracy, the election process in Albania does not ensure a fair voting process and is still in transition, posing serious threats to overall trust in the democratic system. Moreover, youth mass emigration does not help. Youth show a prominent level of pessimism and lack of trust in political participation. Their wish to leave the country is motivated by scarcity of meritocracy and opportunities. Furthermore, their detachment from political processes leaves political leaders with little pressure and provides incentives to strengthen their malpractices.

Overcoming the above-mentioned threats to democracy is quite challenging. A broader involvement of societal actors should be encouraged, not leaving important processes in the hands of politicians only. Based on the analysis and findings of this paper, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. **An inclusive process of legislative review and improvement**

An in-depth assessment is required in relation to the legislative framework. As explained, despite some partial improvements, functionality and enforcement remain questionable due to fragmented initiatives and amendments. This process should be inclusive. Albanian non-state actors have developed considerable knowledge and

expertise in this regard; therefore, broader involvement of societal groups should be guaranteed. Based on the domestic experience so far and the need to address the European Commission's recommendations, a thorough analysis and revision of legislation should be implemented. A national consensus should be built on this matter and political actors should be pressured, like the experience with the justice reform where unanimous voting took place in the parliament despite many opposing it.

Under this approach, the Albanian parliament in collaboration with the CEC should establish a special working group for electoral reform, including the participation of nonpolitical experts. Under the example of the justice reform, the scope of this working group should be based on a well-defined theory of change, with the help and direct assistance of the international community. Direct involvement of members from Albanian academia, civil society organizations, and other experts is crucial to the working group and its outcomes. Apart from technical assistance and expertise, the international community should also embrace the initiative through public pressure and conditionality. A similar approach should be taken to the one which led to the passage of the justice reform by a unanimous decision in the Albanian parliament in 2006, despite clear opposition of some political groups. This approach would overcome the partial interventions to the legislative framework and will help design a solid ground for addressing all the main shortcomings listed in this paper.

2. **Establishing a monitoring mechanism and legal access instruments for all actors**

Considering the above-mentioned shortcomings and challenges, non-state actors should be fully involved in the electoral process by accessing information, data, and documents concerning political parties, their processes, and especially their candidates. To improve trust levels in the democracy process, increasing transparency should be a first firm step. This should be reflected in the legislative revisions mentioned and in the political parties' approach through internal and external pressure. Monitoring mechanisms need to be reconsidered and reviewed based on the current challenges. In particular,

monitoring should go beyond the election campaign period or election day and become a continuous instrument in political life.

In this regard, the CEC in collaboration with the Commissioner for Information and Data Protection should establish a joint mechanism for reviewing and improving the overall access to electoral data and participation in the election process. The CEC has been provided with substantial funding in recent years and is testing digital voting in three municipalities in 2023. However, as mentioned, non-state actors' involvement should be guaranteed throughout all cycles of political elections (before and after the campaign). For this purpose, the CEC should work on two issues: to improve its administrative and legislative acts related to public access, and to improve digital instruments at the public's disposal for monitoring and increasing transparency.

3. Raising awareness and designing interventions for limiting criminal influences

This is a difficult obstacle to overcome as it has been impacting Albanian politics for a long time. As mentioned in the first recommendation, there should be substantial work done at the legislative level by the Albanian parliament, in collaboration with civil society groups to monitor elections and democratic processes. This structured

intervention should improve the current situation in the short and medium term. However, for the longer term more in-depth work needs to be done at the societal level to tackle the image built by local criminal actors in their communities. Continuous education programs on the importance of the rule of law in democratic societies should be designed and implemented to limit the space for criminal involvement in democratic processes, beyond what already exists in the legal framework.

The aim should be to discourage and eradicate the establishment of negative role models, especially for youth, which have led, in recent years, to the normalization and acceptance of illegal activities by considerable parts of society. The promotion of positive practices and information on the functioning of democratic societies should be introduced at a very early age in school curricula. The Ministry of Education and Sports, in collaboration with civil society organizations and experts, should undertake a review and introduce changes to school programs to include civic education and democratic culture. Countering the daily negative models that youth are exposed to with affirmative actions, positive role models, and structured education practices should be a priority for schools, community leaders, civil society organizations, and international donors.



4. Increasing youth involvement in democratic processes

In addition to the recommendations above, to stop youth migration and its effects on Albanian democracy, their involvement in decision-making should be improved considerably. There should be programmatic support for their capacities to organize, structure their actions, and effectively participate in institutional and political debates, within and beyond political parties and groups. In this regard, there is a need for better synergies among actors working in this area, including public institutions, like youth agencies and councils, and international development agencies present in the country. Under the example of the international donors' coordination working group, a sub-section of this format should be created specifically for youth programs and support. The aim should be to streamline efforts and better structure support to youth, in the direction of their involvement in democratic processes.

In addition to the work of increasing youth capacities, the loss of trust in internal democracy and meritocracy should be tackled at the legislative level by establishing a working group or task force which needs to review all legislative and institutional provisions in this regard. Youth participation in local councils, national initiatives and strategies, and other important components should be guaranteed and enhanced. For this purpose, legislative acts regarding public consultation and practices for involvement of non-state actors in decision-making processes should be revised and foresee specific opportunities for youth representatives. A permanent consultative body dedicated to youth representatives should be established at the Albanian parliament and government. In this context, youth councils across the country should be directly supported by the Ministry of Education and Sports, particularly the Youth Agency through a substantial increase of budgetary provisions, to create conditions for their participation.

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