

# *Unveiling the Perils – Addressing Clientelism and Corruption in Post-Communist Albania through Enlightened Civic Engagement and Electoral Accountability*

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*Adela DANAJ, PhD<sup>1</sup>*

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DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED SCIENCE, FACULTY OF LAW,  
POLITICAL SCIENCES AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS.  
EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA, ALBANIA  
E-mail: adela.danaj@uet.edu.al

*Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ervis ILJAZAJ<sup>2</sup>*

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DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED SCIENCE, FACULTY OF LAW,  
POLITICAL SCIENCES AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS.  
EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA, ALBANIA  
E-mail: ervis.iljazaj@uet.edu.al

## **Abstract**

*This paper provides an overview of the challenges and dynamics surrounding the democratic transition and corruption in Albania over the past 30 years. It highlights the persistent issues of corruption, clientelism, and state capture within the country's*

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<sup>1</sup> Adela Danaj holds a PhD in Security Sciences from Obuda University, Budapest, Hungary; MA in Political Science, CEU, Budapest, Hungary; BA in Political Science, European University of Tirana. She is a political science researcher with special focus on voting behavior, EU policies, electoral systems, institutional consolidation in developing democracies and security, with an

*political landscape. Despite continuous reports from international entities and a growing concern regarding democratic developments, the road to European membership remains arduous. The influence of the same political elite and the re-election of corrupt leaders have contributed to the perpetuation of these issues. The prevalence of clientelism during electoral seasons has further complicated matters, with voters often prioritizing personal benefits over national-interest projects. Clientelism and clientelistic relationships put democratic instruments in jeopardy. In post-communist states, political science has had mixed success in discovering strategies to combat clientelism and ensure free and fair elections. In a post-communist society, the relationship between corruption and electoral responsibility is yet unknown. As a result, corrupt politicians continue to get elected over time. This theoretical paper presents a new technique for boosting citizen awareness about the existing situation of corruption and punishing corrupt politicians through voting. The breakdown of clientelistic links based on distributive advantages from rival political parties to citizens is at the heart of this strategy, as is developing a sense of belonging to a political grouping based on shared values and aims.*

**Key words:** *clientelism, voting behavior, corruption, in-group loyalty*

## **Introduction**

The year 1991 was considered the “golden” year for Albania because of the importance it had in the fight against communism and because of the opportunities that democracy would bring for the development of the Albanian people. It has

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emphasis on the Western Balkans and Albania. Mrs. Danaj is a reviewer of scientific articles for several international editorial boards. She teaches research and design, as well as EU policies, at the European University of Tirana. At the European University of Tirana, Mrs. Danaj serves as the director of the Center for Methodology and Scientific Research. Mrs. Danaj collaborates extensively with civic society and academia. She participates in public life by serving as a national expert for the OSCE/ODIHR, the 2021 parliamentary elections in Albania, and the 2023 local elections in Albania. Mrs. Danaj currently holds the position of Programme Director at the Liberal Institute of Tirana PASHKO in addition to teaching and conducting research.

<sup>2</sup> Prof. Assoc. Dr. Ervis Iljazaj serves as Lecturer of politics at the European University of Tirana and as the general director of the Liberal Institute of Tirana Pashko. Mr. Iljazaj has a wealth of expertise in academic efforts as a director and strategic planner. He served as the Doctoral School's former director at the European University of Tirana. He also, served as the Head of Department of the Applied Social Science at the same University. Due to his strong and natural connection with the media sector, Mr. Iljazaj served as the General Director of Mapo newspaper. At Sapienza University, Mr. Iljazaj earned a PhD in political science. Mr. Iljazaj was a key figure in creating the Joint master's in political science – Integration and Governance – PoSIG between the European University of Tirana and the University of Salzburg, Austria, due to his background in political science.



been almost 30 years since that moment and the sacrifices of the Albanian people do not seem to have received any answer yet. The endless reports of the international community on the democratic developments in the country have increasingly lit the alarm on the features that the political leadership in Albania has taken. The level of democracy seems to be following the trend that other countries of the former communist bloc are following. The road to membership in Europe still presents almost insurmountable challenges and the electoral years seem to be still years of 'war' for Albania. The fight against corruption continues to be the headline of every report published by international entities on every dimension of government (Trading Economics, 2020; Freedom House, 2020). Political clashes, implications in corruption scandals, vote buying are some of the most problematic issues in Albania (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023). All these scholars and reports relate to the consequences of communism and the lack of political will to take serious steps in improving these issues and advancing the development of democracy in the country.

Independent reports found signs of state capture, implying that lawmakers crafted legislation to benefit commercial interests. On multiple instances, the administration and the ruling Socialist Party majority in parliament pushed through legislation to safeguard the interests of private individuals and their networks (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021; 2023). According to an evaluation by the Southeast European Leadership for Development and Integrity, authorities who facilitate state capture and enterprises that pressure public officials operate with frightening effectiveness in Albania when compared to other Western Balkan countries (SELDI) (Freedom House, 2020). For the period studied above, one can realize that Albanian democracy consolidation is approximately in the middle (Çabiri and Danaj, 2017). Albania is quite close to having a stable democracy from the standpoint of local governance, but when it comes to corruption, the nation is headed in the direction of a stable authoritarian system. As it will be analyzed below, corruption is mainly spread in governance, which is also ranked as one very problematic category.

As a result, throughout Albania's 30 years of post-communist transition, discussions on political dynamics have captured the attention of various political actors. It is widely acknowledged that the relationship between the communist system and the democratic state apparatus helps to explain the nature of the democratic transition. This relationship explains whether the communist regime was based on an official, rational bureaucratic state apparatus that minimized various phenomena like corruption and clientelism, or whether it was based on informal networks that included interactions based on loyalty and reciprocity combined with patronage, corruption, and nepotism.

Since 1992, the same political elite has dominated Albanian politics, and the same political actors have been re-elected again after time (Today News, 2013).

According to research issued by Transparency International, Albanian citizens' perceptions of corruption improved between 2004 and 2016, although they continued to elect the same political elite (The Global Economy, 2016). Between 2004 and 2008, Albanian individuals' perceptions of corruption grew drastically. Despite the high level of corruption observed by Albanian citizens in 2008 (Transparency International, 2015), the Democratic Party led by Sali Berisha, which was in office from 2005 to 2009, managed to stay in power for the next four years. In 2017, the scenario is the same. The Socialist Party, led by Edi Rama, has been in power since 2014, and despite a high level of corruption observed by Albanian residents in 2016 (Trading Economics, 2020), Rama's government has managed to stay in power.

Citizens should be allowed to punish corrupt politicians during democratic elections, according to traditional perceptions, but empirical variations are observed in the Albanian example, with voters responding in the opposite direction, re-electing corrupt leaders. These conclusions are based on the implicit premise that Albanian voters choose private transfers over national-interest projects on a regular basis. Thus, clientelism, or the distribution of benefits from both political parties and political candidates fighting in the race to citizens, appears to be one of the key reasons why corrupt politicians are not punished by voters over time. Clientelism is a common occurrence, especially during election seasons. Clientelism, defined as a personalized trade between politicians and customers that takes place inside an institutional framework in which both parties quantify transactions, allows politicians to "purchase" electoral support by direct pay. Because politicians gain immediate personal gains (Kitschelt, et al, 1999) through personal channels and direct ties, citizens are less interested in public policies espoused by politicians.

Electoral year seems to be the most appropriate period for political parties to compete not only on the bases of their political platform, but with material stimuli given to citizens also (Gans-Morse, Mazzuca and Nichter, 2013). Through this way voters might trade corruption against some material gains (Manzetti and Wilson, 2007), or strong economic benefits such as: a job offer, a long job contract, etc. Hence, voters treat corruption differently. When voters have clientelistic relations with the corrupt candidates they do not punish him/her, while the corrupt candidate does not have a clientelistic relation with voters, the same voters will punish the corrupt candidate. We call them as: (i) in-clientelistic group (when the candidate and voters share mutual benefits among them) and (ii) out-clientelistic group (when the candidate and voters do not share mutual benefits among them). Thus, the important role of the in/out- clientelistic group in the punishment/non-punishment of corrupt behavior must be highlighted. However, there are expenses associated with the "give-and-take" of tangible gains, and it is difficult to implement in a clear manner (Winters and Weitz-Shapiro, 2013).



## The theory of strategic action fields (SAFs)

The theory of strategic action fields (SAFs) provides a rationale for overlooking poor behaviour (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011). According to this theory, individuals belonging to the same interest group are more inclined to overlook poor behaviour rather than punish it. When seeking to explain the asymmetric electoral punishment of corruption, it is important to investigate in-clientelistic groups. Additionally, both classical and modern research on election behaviour indicate that voters assign significant importance to social identities based on factors such as ethnicity, language, religion, or partisanship when evaluating candidates and deciding whom to support (Chandra, 2007; Landa and Duell, 2015). Moreover, studies on retrospective voting emphasize the role of group biases in election decision-making, illustrating that voters perceive corruption differently depending on whether it involves in-group candidates or out-group politicians.

This argument has captured the attention of social psychologists and experimental economists working in the field of behavioural ethics. They argue that although many individuals claim to value honesty and express a desire to punish unethical behaviour, in others (Aquino and Reed, 2002), experimental research indicates that this is not always the case. The existence of ethical dissonance (Barkan et al., 2012) between attitudes and actions can be attributed to biases in human decision-making, particularly in-group loyalty. These effects of in-group loyalty are especially prominent in competitive situations, as noted by Hildreth, Gino, and Bazerman (2016). Therefore, we should anticipate less electoral punishment for corruption when voters share the same political identification as the candidate, while out-group politicians are likely to face greater punishment, as suggested by recent findings. The underlying basis for this unequal punishment lies in in-group loyalty.

### *Analysing the Complexities of Corruption and Clientelism: A Theoretical Perspective*

In various institutional contexts, corruption has been shown to have a detrimental impact on political trust and undermine political legitimacy (Della Porta, 2000; Andersen and Tverdova, 2003), investments and economic growth (Del Monte and Papagni, 2001), as well as equality and poverty (Gupta et al., 2002; You and Khagram, 2005; Uslander, 2008). Consequently, its consequences are felt extensively throughout a nation, directly harming people's quality of life and sense of security. Free elections are expected to mitigate the occurrence of corruption in a specific

country for the aforementioned reasons. However, historical and current events have shown that corrupt politicians have been re-elected in both emerging and advanced democracies (Rundquist et al., 1977; Reed, 1996; Vivyan et al., 2012; Eggers, 2014). The existing literature provides a comprehensive understanding of corruption and its manifestations, encompassing subtleties such as bribery, clientelism, nepotism, graft, and extortion. Social anthropologists argue that corruption affects interactions between individuals and bureaucracies (Parry, 2000; Miller et al., 2001).

Klitgaard (1988:23) offers a concise and realistic definition of corruption: a corrupt official “deviates from the formal responsibilities of a public role for personal-regarding (individual, close family, private clique) monetary or status gains, or violates restrictions that prohibit engaging in particular ‘personal-regarding behaviour.’” Building on these insights, Klitgaard developed a sophisticated formula that effectively captures the logic of corruption.

#### *Formula of corruption:*

*Corruption = Monopoly + Discretion - Accountability (Klitgaard, 1988)*

Despite the variations and interpretations that authors have given to corruption over time, different perspectives exist on this issue. Its definitions vary by country and can encompass actions such as law-breaking and favouritism (Redlawsk, McCann, 2005). It is widely recognized that corruption poses a threat to social and economic progress (Rothstein, 2011). A 2014 study conducted by the Pew Research Centre revealed that 76% of individuals in more than 34 emerging and developing nations consider corrupt politicians to be a problem for their country. The research findings also indicate that people view corruption as morally reprehensible.

#### *Unveiling the Mechanisms to Combat Corruption: Strategies for Transparency and Accountability*

The perception of information by the public is seen as a key component in the fight against corruption. While the importance of knowledge has been emphasized, some scholars contend that it can often be difficult to uncover corruption because politicians “play different games” to conceal their corrupt behaviours (Besley, 2006). The findings of a study conducted in 2007 suggest that corruption levels fall as information availability rises. The study argues that the digital divide between nations can be seen as a solution to help reduce domestic corruption (DiRienzo, Das, Cort, and Burbridge, 2007). However, despite the crucial importance of information, empirical data has led to a variety of outcomes. On the one hand, other studies confirm that the relationship is not simple (Chong et al., 2015; Vivyan et al., 2012; Muoz et al., 2016). Some findings suggest that information increases electoral punishment by discouraging voting for controversial corrupt candidates



(Winters and Weitz-Shapiro, 2013). Additionally, research has highlighted the function of NGOs. While countries like Georgia, Romania, and Singapore have effectively used NGOs in the fight against corruption, other nations, particularly post-Communist republics, regard NGOs as a foreign invention (Grødeland, 2013).

The author argues that NGOs in the Western Balkans are often perceived as “salary machines” for the middle class or as extended arms of the international community, rather than organizations working for the benefit of society at large. As a result, NGOs face the same fate as state institutions in being perceived as representing “them” rather than “us” (Grødeland, 2013:598). The difficult task of fighting corruption takes time, especially if the phenomenon has developed over time. It needs to start from within society, and in the Western Balkans, political actors and citizens seem to be insufficiently engaged (Grødeland, 2013). One alternative way to fight corruption was proposed during the 15<sup>th</sup> International Anti-Corruption Conference (IACC, 2012) held in Brasilia. The conference’s key conclusions state that public mobilization, including anti-corruption mass movements employing new social media, can help achieve objectives in the fight against corruption (IACC, 2012). However, a vast body of research emphasizes the factors that contribute to the rise of clientelistic politics. According to Robinson and Verdier (2001), these factors include low productivity, significant inequality, and blatantly hierarchical social interactions. Other academics also emphasize the influence of history, culture, and economic development (Robinson and Verdier, 2001).

## **Why do voters frequently fail to hold dishonest leaders accountable? - The link between corruption and clientelism**

This subject has been addressed in a number of research studies in various ways, including: (i) at the individual and group level, and (ii) theoretically and experimentally. Some scholars argue that the effects of information asymmetry may weaken the electoral punishment of politicians, highlighting the significance of partisan and other in-group loyalties (Anduiza et al., 2013), side payments (Manzetti and Wilson, 2007; Fernández-Vázquez et al., 2016), strong economic growth (Klanja and Tucker, 2013), or a lack of institutional clarity (Schwindt-Bayer and Tavits, 2016).

Another important aspect that may influence the lack of punishment for corrupt politicians is the cultural setting. The distribution of advantages to voters by political parties engaged in a contest may be one of the key reasons why voters do not punish corrupt leaders. As a result, citizens continue to support them politically. Clientelism, a widespread practice that is most prevalent

during election seasons, plays a significant role in this context. According to Gans-Morse, Mazzuca, and Nichter (2014), the election season appears to be the best time for political parties to compete not only based on their political platforms but also by offering material incentives to citizens. Through political transactions, clientelism has gained widespread application in political contexts, but experts have begun to see it as a phenomenon that may hinder a nation's economic progress. Social scientists have observed the intricate connection between reciprocity standards in exchanges of goods and services, and they have used the term "clientelism" to describe this connection. In this context, politicians seem to "buy" electoral support by providing cash payments. By using personal contacts and channels to directly benefit themselves, politicians diminish voters' engagement with public issues they advocate (Kitschelt et al., 1999). Politicians can establish direct relationships with their followers by being active in technical administrative infrastructure but not in programming models that reflect aggregate interests.

This type of relationship is characterized by direct personal and material rewards. We define these relationships as clientelistic, which involve two distinct cycles of interaction. First, business representatives with financial resources, specifically powerful businesspeople, strategically share their financial support with politicians. When politicians come to power, they offer their supporters business favours such as public works contracts, subsidies, monopolies, and more. This provides businesspeople with access and protection in an insecure market. Second, middle-class individuals, representing the largest segment of the average voters, can gain material benefits before and after elections. Clientelistic parties invest intensively in administrative infrastructure to reward their supporters in exchange for votes (Kitschelt, 2000). Over time, the idea of clientelism has evolved and is now seen as a "give and take" arrangement where politicians and citizens exchange material benefits. Politicians bribe voters with monetary incentives in exchange for their political allegiance on election day. Receivers are referred to as clients, patrons are politicians, and brokers are intermediaries in this clientelistic relationship. This association is particularly evident in emerging nations (Lawson and Greene, 2014). According to Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina (1987), clientelism is a type of interest-group politics.

Political scientists have found profound ways to describe the operation of clientelism, which can work and have a deep effect in all political environments through different strategies. The article by Gans-Morse, Mazzuca, and Nichter (2014) establishes the link between clientelistic parties (political machines) and clientelistic electorates. These strategies include: (i) vote buying - providing benefits to opposing voters to change their vote choice; (ii) turnout buying - providing benefits to immobilized voters to encourage them to vote on election





day; (iii) abstention buying - providing benefits to rival voters to discourage them from voting; (iv) double persuasion - providing benefits to voters to encourage their participation; and (v) rewarding loyalists - providing specific benefits to loyal voters who have supported the political machines over time. The concept of “political machine” dates back to the early 1910s and has been developed further by scholars such as Moisei Ostrogorski, Harold F. Gosnell, and Steven R. Erie (as cited in Lawson and Greene, 2014).

Since voters perceive benefits from political parties or candidates, why do they not re-elect them in future elections? Why is it important to research the impact of clientelism on voting behaviour? According to Wantchekon (2003), such studies hold particular significance for several reasons. First, clientelism leads to excessive redistribution at the expense of providing public goods, as politicians divert government resources to favoured segments of the electorate. Second, since budgetary procedures in many countries lack transparency or are discretionary, clientelism tends to favour those already in control of the government, consolidating incumbency advantage in democratic elections. This advantage and the subsequent decline in political competition could incite opposition to political violence, leading to political instability and a potential collapse of the democratic process. Third, a systematic study of electoral clientelism could reveal the existence of gender or generational gaps, incumbency effects, and other results that have important policy implications (Wantchekon, 2003:401).

### *In-group Loyalty and Clientelistic Relationships: Exploring the Explanation*

The present paper highlights the significance of considering both in-clientelistic groups and in-group loyalty in understanding the punishment of corruption. The findings derived from this research carry crucial implications for comprehending the relationship between corruption and electoral accountability. The study proposes that voters belonging to in-clientelistic groups are not motivated to hold corrupt politicians accountable. This assertion aligns with previous research in social psychology and experimental economics, which explores the punishment of unethical behaviour, as well as the presence of group-serving biases in retrospective voting within political science (Healy and Malhotra, 2013). Our analysis leads us to believe that when voters receive benefits from clientelistic public officials and share the same political identity as the candidates in the race, it can result in a detrimental cycle of corruption. Due to the benefits received and the shared political identity, voters refrain from punishing corrupt candidates.

## Albanian Case

In the case of Albania, the aforementioned claim can be explained by the communist political legacy, which was based on the principle of loyalty. The attitude towards corruption appears to be deeply ingrained within society. Both voters and politicians have a tendency to manipulate situations in order to benefit from them. Due to the lack of democratic experiences, the Albanian state bureaucracy was primarily established on the foundation of the old regime, which implemented the principle of loyalty (Pellumbi, 2006). This principle, a characteristic of the communist regime, led to the resurgence of old practices such as clientelism, patronage, and the co-optation phenomenon. Consequently, corrupt politicians, through clientelistic relationships, are perceived as a legitimate source of success and as a means to access markets and careers. Family connections and close acquaintances with politicians are the main criteria that determine a citizen's workplace, educational opportunities, business success, ability to engage in unauthorized construction, employment prospects, and property restitution. It is this vertical link between individuals and politics that hinders the establishment of a healthy relationship among stakeholders and political parties.

Furthermore, this vertical relationship can explain the repetitive and stable behaviour of the Albanian electorate. It is worth noting that the dominance of clientelistic relations has persisted in the Albanian political environment for decades, and it seems that no party is interested in changing this dynamic. The main political parties, namely the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party, believe that this relationship reinforces their legitimacy (Krasniqi, 2012). Given the characteristics of the relationship between parties and beneficiary individuals or groups, Lauth (2000) classifies the SP and DP as "clientelistic parties".

In conclusion, due to the high level of corruption and its connection to voting behaviour, and the limited existing literature on the subject, this paper focuses on the Albanian case. The main objective of this study is to contribute to the scarce literature on voting behaviour in Albania. It is interesting to note that Albania has not garnered much scholarly attention, despite being one of the post-communist countries that has not witnessed a change in its political elite since the introduction of pluralism.

### *The Far-Reaching Implications of Corruption and Clientelism in Albania*

The prevalence of corruption and clientelism in Albanian politics has significant implications for various aspects of society and governance. Understanding these

implications is crucial for assessing the challenges faced by the country and formulating effective strategies to address them.

Firstly, corruption and clientelism undermine citizens' trust in political institutions and the legitimacy of the government. When politicians prioritize personal gains and favouritism over public welfare, it leads to a loss of faith in the democratic system. This erosion of trust hampers social cohesion, weakens democratic governance, and impedes effective policy implementation. Secondly, corruption and clientelism have detrimental effects on economic development. By diverting public resources for personal gain, corrupt practices hinder economic growth and exacerbate income inequality. They create an unfavourable business environment, discouraging both domestic and foreign investment. The diversion of funds intended for public infrastructure and services perpetuates poverty and limits opportunities for social mobility. On the other hand, corruption and clientelism weaken the rule of law, as they allow individuals in positions of power to act with impunity. When politicians and public officials engage in corrupt practices without being held accountable, it erodes the principle of equality before the law. This undermines the justice system, fosters a culture of impunity, and perpetuates a cycle of corruption.

It has also to be considered the fact that the prevalence of clientelism perpetuates social injustice by reinforcing unequal power dynamics. In-clientelistic relationships between politicians and voters perpetuate a system of patronage, favouring certain groups or individuals over others. This perpetuates social divisions and marginalizes those who do not benefit from such relationships. Consequently, social mobility becomes increasingly difficult, and meritocracy gives way to nepotism and cronyism. Furthermore, the entrenchment of corruption and clientelism in the political system contributes to political instability. The unequal distribution of resources and opportunities fuels social discontent and can lead to social unrest. Additionally, the persistence of corrupt practices undermines the democratic process, as citizens become disillusioned with the political establishment and are less likely to participate in elections or engage in political activities.

Corruption and clientelism also have implications for Albania's international standing and its integration into the European Union (EU). Persistent corruption undermines Albania's credibility and hinders progress in fulfilling the requirements for EU membership. It raises concerns among international partners and investors, limiting opportunities for economic cooperation and foreign direct investment.

Addressing these implications requires a multi-faceted approach that targets both the structural and cultural dimensions of corruption and clientelism. Strengthening institutional frameworks, enhancing transparency and accountability, and promoting a culture of integrity are crucial steps in combating corruption. Investing in education and raising awareness about the detrimental

effects of corruption and clientelism can foster a sense of civic responsibility and encourage active participation in democratic processes. Furthermore, it is essential to strengthen the role of civil society organizations, promote independent media, and ensure the independence of judiciary to hold politicians and public officials accountable. International cooperation and assistance can provide valuable support in building robust anti-corruption mechanisms and fostering good governance practices.

By addressing the implications of corruption and clientelism, Albania can pave the way for a more inclusive, transparent, and accountable political system. This transformation is essential for achieving sustainable development, enhancing social justice, and securing a prosperous future for all Albanian citizens.

## Conclusions

The current scientific paper reveals several important findings regarding the state of democracy, corruption, and clientelism in Albania. Over the past 30 years, since the country's transition from communism to democracy, Albania has faced significant challenges in consolidating its democratic institutions and combating corruption. Despite initial hopes for democratic development and European integration, the political leadership in Albania has been mired in corruption scandals and has struggled to address the issues that plague the nation. The reports from international entities and scholars consistently highlight the prevalence of corruption and the lack of political will to address it. State capture, where lawmakers craft legislation to benefit private interests, has been observed in Albania, indicating a troubling relationship between political power and commercial interests. This has hindered the progress of democracy and contributed to the persistence of corruption in the country.

One of the key factors that perpetuate corruption in Albania is the phenomenon of clientelism. During electoral years, political parties compete not only based on their platforms but also through the distribution of material incentives to voters. This personalized exchange between politicians and voters, where both parties quantify transactions, allows politicians to “purchase” electoral support through direct pay. When voters have clientelistic relations with corrupt candidates, they are less likely to punish them, while corruption by candidates without such relations is more likely to be punished. In-group loyalty and social identities based on ethnicity, language, religion, or partisanship play a significant role in shaping voter behaviour, leading to asymmetric electoral punishment of corruption. The consequences of corruption in Albania are far-reaching, undermining political trust, economic growth, equality, and poverty reduction. The fight against



corruption requires public mobilization and the availability of information to the public. However, the effectiveness of information in reducing corruption is not straightforward, and the role of NGOs in combating corruption varies depending on the context. Cultural factors also contribute to the lack of punishment for corrupt politicians, with clientelism being deeply ingrained in the political process, particularly during election seasons.

In conclusion, Albania's journey towards consolidating democracy and combating corruption has been fraught with challenges. The persistence of corruption, state capture, and clientelism have hindered progress and eroded public trust. Efforts to address these issues should focus on strengthening democratic institutions, promoting transparency, and fostering a culture of accountability. Additionally, public mobilization and the provision of information can play crucial roles in raising awareness and creating a more informed electorate. Only through sustained and collective efforts can Albania overcome these obstacles and advance towards a more democratic and corruption-free future.

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