



## THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY: DIAGNOSTICS AND PROGNOSSES

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# POLIS

ISSN 2223-8174

No. 19, issue 2/2020

SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL OF THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES,  
EDUCATION AND LIBERAL ARTS

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The journal has been catalogued at the National Library of Albania and the Library of the European University of Tirana, Albania.

(print ISSN: 2223-8174/ online ISSN: 2223-8174)

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Published by:  
EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA / ALBANIA

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# *Political conflict as a solution* \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Abstract**

*Albanian politics is customarily characterised as producing tension and conflict to serious degrees. There is also the critique that part of this conflict is entirely artificial (i.e. not occasioned by objective reasons that one can find in the reality of society) and could have, therefore, not been generated at all in the first place. This description of politics certainly has its merits, since it directs our attention to a problem that seems to bring along other problems for the society. However, one can also view the production of tension and conflict as solution to a problem, even though this might only be a political problem. Then, this problem runs the risk of not receiving any attention, for all attention is focused on the solution; it remains latent and, because of this, highly productive in undesirable consequences. Here we will use another viewpoint in order to elucidate the phenomenon of political conflict as well as to provide guidelines for solution.*

**Key words:** *conflict, semantics, Luhmann, power, democracy*

## **Introduction**

The usual way of treating political conflict is by pointing to regional differences, to differences between nation-states, to listing of characteristics presumed to be unique for a certain national society, hoping thereby to gain understanding of it and possibly some indications for reform. This simply divides the world in developed and undeveloped countries and provides for a semantic of development and modernization. On the other hand, it gives occasion to opposing voices that

claim to represent the local truth and the authenticity of local culture (nationalist and terrorist movements for example), while protecting these from attempts at colonization and knowledge produced elsewhere in the so-called developed world. However interesting all this may be, the end result of such procedure is creation of antagonisms that exacerbate tension, indeed transform it into societal conflict (semantically as a conflict between nations, or between cultural groups), which can then no longer be managed at the level of communication, but necessitates the use of destructive technology and violence.

Instead, we start with functional differences. This does not mean disregarding differences between regions, but only repositioning them as not suitable for starting theoretical investigations. The underlying assumption is that regional differences of modern society can be accounted for and their effect can be fully comprehended only by a theory that starts with functional differences. The theory of functional differentiation developed primarily by Niklas Luhmann (Luhmann, 1995, 2012) is better suited for this task.

According to this theory, modern society is differentiated into autonomous function systems such as politics, economy, law, science, art, religion and so on. Modern society is polycentric; it cannot be directed successfully either politically, economically, or scientifically. Politics is just a system among others, with no privileged viewpoint and no superior knowledge of what is best for society. However, in the functionally differentiated modern society, politics realizes a specific function, which cannot be fulfilled by other societal systems: it ensures collectively binding decision-making (Luhmann, 2004: 368). In order to realize this function politics uses its own structures and operations, above all, it uses a specific code for processing information in the form of political communication. Thus, the medium of power, which is used by the political system for establishing itself and continuing its operations, is codified into superior and inferior power, or as it is the case with organized power, into governing and governed. However, modern politics in the form of democracy uses a secondary code, too: that of distinguishing between government and opposition. This can be described as coding of the authority, i.e. as coding of the governing (Luhmann, 1990: 172-176). Without going into more detailed descriptions of the political system of modern society, we assume that problems of high tension and conflict one observes in Albanian politics ought to be interpreted and accounted for as problems of application of the political code.

## **Exclusion of the public from politics**

The primary coding of political power divides the world in two halves: governing and governed. Despite their difference in power (whatever the case, e.g. the



governing may have all the power while the governed none of it, or the governing may simply have more power than the governed), both parties contribute directly and decisively to political operations, i.e. political actions and political processes. This follows from the concept of the code. The code is always a form with two sides, and in order for the code to be operative in the system the connection between the sides must be preserved. In clearer terminology, one side of the code contains the positive (operative) value; it is used as point for connecting the operations recursively. The other side has negative (reflexive) value. But as it makes no sense to speak of positive without negative, likewise, there is no operation without reflexivity. Thus, the reflexive side of the code serves to put limits to the meaning of the operative side: it works to constrain arbitrary use of operations. For the political system this means that the governing (operative side) must take account of the governed (reflexive side) when operating power. To clarify it further we must have a glance at the concept of the system. Unlike the long tradition that begins with Aristotle, systems theory does not presuppose that a system is an entity, a “thing” that contains a certain substance. Rather, the system is a difference with the environment, a difference that is produced by the systems operations, for which there is no counterpart in the environment (Luhmann, 2006). That is, in order to maintain itself as a system, the system must be able to link operations recursively, thereby producing and reproducing its difference from the environment. In other words, a system is a form with two sides: system and environment. It is the unity of the difference between system and environment. But, in order to link operations recursively, the system must be able to observe and describe itself as different from the environment. Therefore the concept of self-observation becomes central to systems theory. With Heinz von Foerster (von Foerster, 1984, 2003) and second-order cybernetics we now speak of observing systems. These are systems that are able to observe other systems in their environment (politics for example can observe economy), but also themselves (politics can observe and describe itself as conservative politics, or progressive politics, or democracy). However, in order to produce self-observation, a system must produce an image of itself as different from what it imagines as “environment”. This calls for application of the mathematical operation that Spencer Brown has named “re-entry” (Spencer Brown, 1972). It means that the form of the system (the distinction system/environment) re-enters itself on one side, the side of the system; as it were, it is copied into it. Thus, the system that is able to observe itself also contains a copy of itself (i.e. an image of itself and an image of its environment). This is how the system produces information that it then uses for performing its operations. As Gregory Bateson put it, information is a difference that makes a difference (Bateson, 1972: 199). Thus, the first system/environment difference that is produced simply by the operations of the system via drawing a clear boundary with everything else that is not a



system operation (the environment) brings about another difference occasioned by self-observation, i.e. an image of the system as different from the image of the environment. However, although it appears that the difference remains the same (it is system/environment in both cases), it is actually a different difference. Using traditional terminology we can say that the first difference produced by the system's operations is objective difference, while the second (re-entered) difference produced by the system's observations is subjective difference. Relevant to our argument about the political system, this means that politics constructs an internal environment (as a consequence of the re-entry operation), which is not the same as the external environment. This internal environment is the public, while the external environment of politics is everything else non-political: economy, law, families, health care, education etc.

However, the political system is an historical system and that means that secondary coding of politics has not always been in use. Indeed, it is an achievement of socio-cultural evolution that corresponds to the functional differentiation of society. Functional differentiation postulates an autonomous political system, which is capable of self-organization and self-observation. To realize these, the system needs secondary coding of power as a means of performing re-entry, i.e. of linking one difference to the other, and thus gaining information about itself and its environment. This is typical of modern politics, for it cannot rely on information and observations produced elsewhere; for example, as shown first by Machiavelli, it cannot accept moral observations as premise for correct political action (Machiavelli, 1984).

Before the historical introduction of secondary coding, politics consisted only in those who govern and those who are governed. It could not, so to speak, perform re-entry. It was unable of self-observation and self-description. Therefore, politics could only be observed and described from outside positions, e.g. morally, religiously, or legally. Nevertheless, both the governing and the governed were within the system and could thus contribute to hold its balance.

This situation changes dramatically with the passage from stratification to functional differentiation. Differentiation of politics as an autonomous function system, which only has itself to rely on for operations, observations and descriptions, necessitated a secondary coding of political power for purposes of reflection (Luhmann, 1990: 176-178). Authority (the governing) is no more the eternal authority justified by divine law and natural law doctrines: it is itself made contingent by providing for political opposition. In the semantic tradition this was celebrated as democracy. Indeed, whatever else a democracy is, as a minimum, it must constitute rules that allow the opposition to compete for power. Alongside these developments was coined the term "public", and the derivatives "public opinion" and "public interest".



But this achievement had also a cost. The secondary codification of power in the political system made room within the system only for government and opposition. No further differences were necessary for directing political operations. That means that the governed, now under the name of “public”, were reduced to a non-position, or in logical terms, to an excluded third. The public became the parasite (Serres, 1982) of the political system, and therefore had to be prevented to ever gaining political power. But politics, apart from processing operations in the medium of power, also needs to prove its worth for and in the society. For this reason, it needs the public as internal environment, as an environment constructed entirely politically and only for political aims (King & Thornhill, 2003: 86-91). Therefore, the once excluded public is now included in the political system, but under conditions that neutralize its potential for getting into power. For instance, the public re-enters the system as capable of providing a mirror for political actors, in the form of “public opinion”, where these actors (both governmental and oppositional) could see their actions reflected and evaluated. Also the public is internalized in the system by using certain procedures as voting, whereby the public is transformed into the electorate, who can decide who will be in the government and who will be in the opposition, but cannot itself claim political power.

In light of the above considerations, *the problem of political tension and conflict that one finds in Albanian politics, ought to be related to the need to first exclude and then include the public in the political system.* However, before going into that discussion, we need to explore another issue, which concerns conceptualization of public experience in the face of political operations. It is important to observe our reference problem from both sides, i.e. from the active perspective of political authority (government/opposition), and from the experiential perspective of the public.

## **Semantics of political authority**

Following Luhmann (Luhmann 1986, 1995, 2012) and Andersen (Andersen, 2003, 2011) we define semantics as condensed meaning that society considers worth preserving for communication in more than one situation and more than once. This definition has important implications. First, it means that semantics serves as a structure for societal operations, i.e. it makes some operations (communications, actions) more probable than others. On the other hand, semantics derive from repeated use of operations and from that follows that they can be changed by them, at least when operations manage to change social structures and expectations attached to them. For example this happens when society changes values, programs, or distribution of roles. Such change of social structure puts pressure

on the semantics to adapt accordingly, lest the society suffers from inadequate self-descriptions. Another point to be emphasized is that semantics, as condensed meaning, is expressed through concepts, ideas, images and symbols (Luhmann 1986, Andersen, 2003). One has therefore the possibility of combining the theoretical work of Luhmann with that of Koselleck by focusing attention to the concept of the concept as a key to studying semantics and its relevance for societal investigations. For both Luhmann and Koselleck (Koselleck, 2004), a concept is a form with two sides: concept and counter-concept. A concept condenses expectations in such a way that many different expectations become condensed into concepts. Concepts are never unambiguously definable. A concept is a kind of expectation structure. To use a particular concept in a communication establishes particular expectations about the continuation of the communication. Moreover, concepts are general in the sense that a concept is not identical with its specific use in a specific communication. The concept is generally available to communication but is given, in the communication, a specific meaning and actualizes specific expectations (Andersen, 2003).

When looking at the secondary code of the political system we can easily notice that we are dealing with a concept, i.e. we have the concept “government” and the counter-concept “opposition”. One of the keys to performing semantic analysis relates to the phenomenon of conceptual shift. Although there are many possibilities for realizing conceptual shift, we shall focus our attention to one of them, namely the case when concept and counter-concept remain the same, but the meaning dimension within which the distinction is defined may have shifted (Andersen 2011). Following systems theory, if we distinguish between a temporal dimension, a social dimension and a factual dimension, one may imagine that the form of the concept changes dimension so that a factual dimension is defined as social or temporal. However, first we need to introduce certain distinctions that distinguish the meaning dimensions.

The factual dimension is about the choice of themes and objects for communication and consciousness. Themes and objects are all structured according to the form of the meaning termed ‘thing’ as the unity of the distinction between this and everything else. The social dimension is based on the non-identity between communication participants and constitutes the horizon of possibility in a tension between ‘alter’ and ‘ego’. Thus, it is about that which is not recognized by me as me. In terms of semantics, it is a question of generalized forms of distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Social identities are the unity of the distinction us/them. Thus the social dimension is the dimension for the semantic construction of social identities, where there can only be an ‘us’ (concept) in relation to a ‘them’ (counter-concept). Finally, the temporal dimension articulates the tension between the past and the future. The temporal dimension is constituted by the fact that the difference between before and after,



which can be immediately experienced in all events, is referred to specific horizons, namely extended into past and future. The semantics of temporality is about the way in which we observe and conceptualize the past and the future. The future is a horizon of expectations and the past a space of experiences, and any present exists only as the tension between the two. What moves in time is past/present/future together, in other words, the present along with its past and future horizons (Andersen 2003).

Now, what conceptual shifts have occurred to the concept government/opposition and what societal problems relate to these shifts? We know that this concept derived from another concept, the one that indicates the primary code of politics: governing/governed. The difference between governing and governed was understood as objective, as essential difference, and therefore it was established in the factual dimension of meaning. That meant that the governed, because of their substantial being, could never be given the chance to govern. It also meant that those in power (the governing), because of their substantial being, could never get out of power. Certainly, this semantic conception corresponded to stratification of society on the basis of rank, and to a morality that since Aristotle divided people into perfect and corrupt beings.

The passage to functional differentiation of society undermined the social support for this semantic conceptualization. Also there were breaches in the field of morality (Nietzsche), where now the road ahead was beyond good and evil, as there were significant changes in the law, which became positive, i.e. changeable. All this was reflected in politics by its secondary coding that defied the unquestionable everlasting of political authority (the monarch, the emperor, aristocracy). Now, those who have been the governed could join the opposition and therefore try their chance to get into power. Having both parties competing for political power, one could no more see the difference between government and opposition as a factual difference. Thus, democracy provided a conceptual shift of the political code away from the factual dimension. The only other options for repositioning this concept remained the temporal and the social dimensions.

Temporality offered some obvious possibilities. It was clear that today's opposition was tomorrow's government and vice versa. This understanding made it possible and, indeed, necessary to focus on certain technical issues. For example, it became indispensable to condition the possibility of rotation. Thus mandates were specified both temporarily and factually and elections were defined as the mechanism for deciding the winner. But besides these technicalities, which provided some structure for the political system, the temporal dimension could not provide an answer to the question of relevance of politics for the society. Actually, this temporal understanding of politics as a simple game of rotation between two players exposed the exclusion of the third player, the public, and risked to turn it into an alienated public. After all, it had to be the latter that would decide the

result of the game, by participating in elections. For this reason, the government/opposition distinction cannot be held solely through temporal means. Therefore, it was worth trying to experiment with the social dimension.

That means that the difference between government and opposition had to be constituted as a difference of observational perspectives. So, government and opposition need to be established as different observers who, although referring to the same object (societal reality), would reach different conclusions about it. But as it is well known, in order to reach a conclusion you first need a premise, and then some reasoning process. To this purpose, one could refer to societal values as a starting point and make them into premises by forming ideas. The next step is both logically compelling and historically verifiable: the organization of ideas into ideologies (Luhmann, 2008). Ideologies have the advantage of relating conjunctively several premises with one another and also any of the premises to the conclusion via a deductive operation. Therefore, the difference of conclusions depended above all on the selection of values one started off with. It is interesting to notice that, although there is societal consensus at the level of values, one cannot claim societal consensus at the level of ideologies. Thus ideologies serve to transform unity into difference and to produce from a single observing position (society) a plurality of observing positions (the different ideologies). However, these ideological positions can only be used by systems, as Heinz von Foerster reminds us. In a democracy, this means that observers have to be politically organized systems, i.e. political parties. Therefore the social difference between 'us' and 'them' emerges as a difference of party ideology. Of course, one can form numerous ideologies quite easily, but in order to provide points of orientation in the political system, they are usually aggregated and reduced to left and right, or progressive and conservative ideologies (Luhmann, 1990). At the level of political parties, this reduction plays an important function: that of conditioning coalition formation on the basis of common values and similar ideologies. This paves the way for creation of concepts like "integrity" and "responsibility", which condense expectations about the relation of political parties to a certain ideological position, as well as their relation to the public. However, in order to become credible, party ideology needs to be supplemented by an instrument that provides the means for its realization, i.e. a programme. This means that the difference between 'us' and 'them' must also be articulated programmatically. Party programmes tell the public how 'we' are going to do this in difference to how 'they' would do it. But since a programme is made in the present and refers to the future (which may prove it right or wrong, because no one knows the future for certain), the public usually experiences it as uncertainty and possible cost, rather than as difference between government and opposition. Therefore, the different observers (and their observations) established by the



semantics of sociality are undermined by the temporal dimension of meaning and replaced by a single imaginary observer: the future.

*For democratic politics this leaves two options: either making a claim for the future, or objectifying the present.* It is here, in the decision to opt for one of the options over the other that the cultural and historical (i.e. regional) differences make a difference. The argument goes that culture and history indeed do play a significant role by providing structure to this decision situation.

## **Albanian democracy revisited**

The discussion on Albanian democracy ought to focus on the two points identified as crucial by the conceptual analysis: 1. The exclusion/inclusion mechanism of the Albanian public in the political system; 2. The decision between claiming the future and objectifying the present. Therefore, on the level of description and relevant to first point, one may raise the following questions: What is peculiar about the Albanian political system's mechanism of exclusion/inclusion? Is the exclusion smooth or noisy? What about the inclusion? Which criteria are used for excluding/including the public in politics? Could it be that some of those who pretend to be excluded are in fact included, and vice versa? On the level of explanation one may ask: What cultural and historical features condition the peculiarities of this mechanism of exclusion/inclusion in politics? Are these features not present in the culture and history of other countries? How does the culturally and historically established Albanian mass media system contribute to forming and/or reinforcing the illusion of inclusion/exclusion? How do the political parties contribute to this?

Regarding the second point, on the descriptive level one may ask: Is Albanian politics demonstrating a preference for claiming knowledge of the future, or is it attempting to objectify the present? Is the present high tension and artificial conflict a symptom of the former or the latter? Could it be that we are witnessing a combination of both options, in a kind of transitional move from the one to the other? If so, from which to which? On the explanation level, accordingly: How do Albania's cultural and historical features constrain the choice of one of the options over the other? How strong is the influence of culture and history in this decision? Could the Albanian political system operate without breaking itself via using the other option?

These are questions that have been merely posed in this article, they all point to the problem of reality of political artificiality, but in order to answer them much empirical work is necessary. However, the aim of this article was to contribute in changing the perspective of studying this problem, thereby, making a programmatic stance for future research.

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# *Albania's road toward the European Union through security dimension* \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Abstract**

*The current defense doctrine of European Union uses two main concepts regarding the Western Balkans: security and preservation of the status quo. In the absence of a relatively stable security in its periphery, specifically Western Balkan countries, Europe seeks to maintain a special status quo, because it can't allow this space to fall into the other powers influence. In this respect, EU seems to be acting based on specific limited interest. Observing recent moves, the European Union is reluctant to engage in a "geopolitical war" with other powers, which can be avoided by including Western Balkans into EU. The drafting of the strategy for such area (first signs given in the Berlin process) and possible opening the negotiations with Albania and Macedonia will make the EU a stronger geopolitical player, as it is competing with Russia, China and Turkey, but it is also suffering from internal problems – from enlargement fatigue to populist movements, endangering its own existence.*

**Key words:** *doctrine, security, euro-skepticism, status quo, geopolitical war*

## **Introduction**

According to a study conducted by the St Gallen University, if the list of criteria for EU accession and implementation of the reforms imposed by Brussels is followed,



Western Balkan countries such as Albania and Macedonia will find it difficult to “find European development momentum” and can be accepted in the EU by 2050 (Morgan, 2017). As an obstacle to meeting this goal earlier, the study underscores the chaotic political situations in these countries, and the geopolitical clashes of major powers. Another key point of the study is that enlargement is based on the progress of a country and not on the “expansionist” Union policy” (Böhmelt, & Freyburgc, 2017).

There is a fundamental contradiction between EU bodies, as demonstrated in the recent disagreement between the European Commission’s recommendation and the decision of the EU Council of Ministers: on the one hand, accession to EU through achieved progress (Albania 2018 Report) and on the other the Commission’s political decision (EU to start membership) that finally has a broader, longer-term vision for building a future Europe.

The Commission came to the conclusion that Albania’s place is in Europe and the invitation should be materialized in concrete projects, which means that 2050 may be approached through stricter EU supervision.

According to Juncker, this would bring two advantages: first, “it would be dangerous to leave EU aspirant countries in strategic uncertainty, despite challenges in the Union”; and secondly, “a rejection of the ‘open door’ policy would be a big mistake for the European project, because it would activate Russia in the region and affect the loss of confidence of these countries in the European future.” For this reason, Juncker says that “I encourage the West to make important strategic decisions” (Borsa, 2018).

## **Sovereign countries vs. supranational institution - EU**

But the June 26, 2018 report found that sovereign countries are stronger than the supranational institution - the EU, and overturned its decision. It was decided that for a period of one and a half years there would be monitoring of reforms and progress based on the Commission’s annual report. The decision to open negotiations with Albania will be made after an Intergovernmental Conference at the end of 2019 if it is judged to have made progress. The reforms will be based on five priorities: public administration reform, judicial reform, the fight against corruption, the fight against organized crime and the protection of human rights. Most likely, Albania will be unable to make the expected progress for many reasons related to Albanian domestic policy (EU to open accession).

There are also reasons deeply rooted in EU policy for Albania not to be accepted at the end of 2019 or later. Due to the post-Brexit membership crisis, the populism that has alarmed politicians in many countries and the Euro-skepticism of some



countries, the sovereignty debate at the expense of supra-nationalism has come to the attention of many analysts.

As we demonstrated lately, France, Netherlands and Denmark disregarded the Commission's decision to open negotiations with Albania. In this way, the national interest of these states took precedence over the general European interest. There is an ongoing debate, but it is clear that there is a contradiction between national and supranational interests, which has hampered this process - or Albania's rapprochement with Europe. The "burdens" mentioned above, the objectives that Albania must fulfill in order to be "worthy" of the EU, are relative and interpretable.

In this context, having in mind the possible changes in the security architecture dictated also by the US role in NATO in relation to other allies, Albania may remain outside the area of influence of the European "empire".

Given Juncker's initiative to make a "strategic decision" for Albania, and the way the EU is now exercising its foreign policy, there is a tendency to surpass European Council's decision-making boundaries. According to the current EU Global Strategy, presented by Federica Mogherini in 2016, "no state should oppose external challenges affecting the Union internally" (The EU Global Strategy, 2018).

But the crackdown in the decision-making process between the Union and the member states undermines the European position. This strategy is seen as a necessity in raising the Union's profile in the international arena. Only after defining clear common interests and identifying threats from outside will the EU be able to gain the status as a major power and neutralize other powers, such as the US, Russia and China in its areas of influence. Under this logic, we should emphasize that the Albanian space is considered an important domain in the EU geopolitics.

However, with the decision taken for Albania, Europe has shown that preserving the status quo at the moment is its right move: a curtailed presence and a deadline postponement on paper, but with no guarantee of the future. Apparently, under the conception of the French, the Dutch and the Danes, but also the Germans as the Union's leaders, the Albanian space is not that relevant and is not in their strategic interest. That becomes a very complicated issue.

Under these conditions, the EU can consider Albania a EU partner rather than a candidate country, as it is happening with Turkey. This reluctance of the EU, depending on the future situation and the game of other actors, may provide another scenario for Albania's future: non-EU membership. In this case, EU can propose a different model, such as a privileged partnership or a good neighborliness, simply for the sake of stability on its periphery.

To sum it up, the latest decision shows that, if one day Albania joins the EU, it will happen not for its own sake, but for the benefit of the EU.

## Keeping the status quo - a “clash of titans” in Albania

So Europe wants to continue maintaining a status quo, in terms of security. Two main concepts are today used within the framework of the European Union's doctrine of protection in the Western Balkans: the security and preservation of the status quo. In the absence of relatively stable security, Europe demands a special status quo in the Balkans, its periphery. Simply put: to have as much supervision as its interests go, not allowing this space to fall under the influence of other powers, because doing so would harm Europe itself. Keeping the status quo means a buffer zone, before security instruments are activated. From this point of view, it seems that the EU is acting as far as its interests go.

Considering the latest moves, the European Union appeared to be reluctant to engage in “geopolitical warfare”, a clash it had previously feared to wage in the Western Balkans (WB). The drafting of the WB strategy and the opening of negotiations with Albania and Macedonia reinforce the EU role as a geopolitical player. This is true, at a time when the main EU countries use the rhetoric of “enlargement fatigue”, due to fear from populist movements.

First of all, the EU fears Russia in the Balkans, after witnessing the event in Ukraine and now Russian undisputed presence in the Middle East. Europe has come to realize that it is no longer Russia of the 1990s, but rather an aggressive power that attempted a coup in Montenegro or continues backing Slavic nationalists in the region. Therefore, for the EU, Russia should be restrained from destabilization of the fragile Balkan countries.

In this regard, the European Council on Foreign Policy concludes that “Russia regards the Balkans as a battleground in its ‘political struggle’ ... and is seeking to exercise authority in this region ... and by doing so it is aggravating further tensions” (Galeotti, 2018). Additionally, this document issued by the Council states that Russia is limited in its influence in Albania and that Minister Bushati has stated that “Albania is a stronghold against Russian influence in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia and Croatia” (Rettman & Maurice, 2018). Russia is therefore a serious concern, but European officials fear Turkey as well. Currently, Turkey is undergoing strained relations with the EU. It is still unclear whether President Erdogan will fully disclose his agenda in the Western Balkans, while, unlike Russia, has built mechanisms on the ground. The primary danger is the co-ordination of Turkish policies with Russia in the Balkans, as is the case in the Middle East. Therefore, Europe is “rushing” to curb such maneuvers in the Balkans.

Turkey certainly needs to be taken into consideration, especially with its current course of its foreign policy. Its strategic position and historical legacy - applied

through soft diplomacy in the Balkans - enables Turkey to become involved in Balkan domestic affairs. Thus, Turkey cannot tolerate losing the Balkans. Not only Turkey needs to use the Balkans as a bridge to the West, but it also intends to exert influence on this bridge (Weize, 2018).

Turkey's intentions in the case of the Balkans are clear: impact on the region and other opportunities towards Europe, because, according to Davutoglu (2001), "an Anatolian country that has no influence on developments in Balkans . . . cannot even maintain integrity over this geopolitical sensitive area, and cannot even be opened to the world".

Only in recent years has there been serious talk of China in the Balkans. It may be argued that the EU does not consider it a threat, but the first geopolitical risk, set out in the Eurasia Group's 2018 report, is "China filling the vacuum" (Bremmer & Kupchan, 2018). The report in question states that "Trump has renounced the US commitment to Washington-led multilateralism and generated much uncertainty about the future US role in Asia, creating a power vacuum that China can now begin to fill . . ." and ". . . For most of the West, China is not an appealing substitute. But for most everybody else, it is a plausible alternative. And with Xi ready and willing to offer that alternative and extend China's influence, that's the world's biggest risk this year." Under these circumstances, it should be noted that in the Balkans China is an active player and has set clear long-term objectives. In case of a vague strategy for WB integration to EU, it turns out that China is ready for intervention.

It is worth emphasizing the "One Belt, One Road Initiative" - a strategy proposed by President Xi, which focuses on interconnection and cooperation between European countries and China. With the implementation of this strategy, China has become an important actor in the Balkans. While establishing a network of infrastructure links through Eurasia, the Balkan countries possess a valuable asset: their geographical position. China - like other Eastern powers - considers the Balkans a geopolitical bridge between the Mediterranean and Central Europe, and beyond, between the West and Eurasia. For China, the Council of Europe's Foreign Policy document states that "... it is an ambitious global actor and seeks to gain influence through investment... Even Russia has not achieved in the Western Balkans what China has done so far" (EU Global Strategy, 2018).

We should also mention the undisputed role of the US against the backdrop of European efforts to dominate the Balkans. In relation to the Albanian space, a pro-American space, the US has openly demonstrated strategic interests, especially in security architecture. In this theater of geopolitics, the American - having the role of the show director - paves the way for EU acceptance, considers Russia a strategic opponent, categorizes Turkey as a shaky ally, and regards China as an important global actor, most likely a rival of the future.

As noted at the outset, the EU must become a fierce geopolitical player. If the EU is not vigilant to these wake-up calls (these new geopolitical realities), the strategy of European bureaucrats for WB integration will fail. The main example is the Berlin Process. When the Berlin Process was launched five years ago, it was supposed to trigger a new dynamic to regional cooperation and bringing the Western Balkans closer towards the EU. By circumventing formal institutional structures and bringing in all EU members, the process could avoid excessive duplication of existing structures, but as Bieber (2019) says “. . . much has changed since Berlin . . .” because as this process “has been hijacked by some member states, the EU policy towards the Balkans has been undermined by the shortsighted politicking of members” at a time when the EU is aware that “neglect breeds crises, destructive external intervention and democratic backsliding in the Balkans.”

### **FRONTEX: signal of Albania’s EU integration through the security dimension**

Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, Dimitris Avramopoulos, during the ceremony of the launch of FRONTEX in Tirana, declared that “he wants Albania to be part in the European family” (Albania - part of the European family).

It should be noted that FRONTEX is the European Borders and Coast Guard Agency, and is thus formulated by the French “Frontières extérieures” (“External Borders”). This implies that the Albanian borders are already borders *de jure* recognized by the European Union (even external ones), which further implies a step further towards Europe for Albania.

Avramopoulos adds that this is “a step further towards security and immigration challenges”, that “. . . security is at the center of our attention. . .” and that “. . . what is happening in Albania and the Western Balkans affects the European Union, and vice versa” (Lami, 2018).

It is noted that the European Union is gradually overcoming the above mentioned dilemma of how to integrate Albania into the Union, emphasizing security before advancing through the criteria. To put it in another way, Europe is realizing that Albania – even with this political class and culture - cannot unite with the European part of the continent, if it were to fulfill the criteria required by the Commission. And the Commissioner makes it clear that “Albania is part of the European family. Our challenges are common. They know no boundaries. The progress we are witnessing today is yet another concrete action and evidence of our commitment to bring us closer. To make us stronger” (Lami, 2018). It is important



to emphasize that Europe is gradually understanding the priorities: security before criteria.

Let us first explain this dilemma. The Union is confused about Albania's integration: through meeting standards or through a political decision as a consequence of the security dimension.

Albania, far beyond the wishes of its inhabitants, is far from being a European country. In this sense, reforming to enter Europe – as noted above - is likely to happen by 2050. But with reference to current regional and European security challenges, Albania can become part of the Union first - through supervision by the EU institutions i.e. being fully involved into European security infrastructure. This dimension would then integrate other sectors of Albanian society.

Measures to discipline the various fields have been noted before, and now, this operation is a concrete step towards a closer enlargement: not through the progress of a country, but through the Union's "expansionist" policy (Blockmans & Wessel, 2013). This depends on the decision-making process of the EU bodies (unlike the June 26, 2018 decision to not open negotiations with Albania; in this case, it turned out that sovereign countries were more powerful than the supranational institution - the EU). Juncker at the time stated that "it would be dangerous to leave aspirant countries in the EU in strategic uncertainty despite challenges in the Union" and "encourage the West to make important strategic decisions" (Zalan, 2017).

As part of the FRONTEX mission, the Commission was forced to take action in the wake of the 2015 immigration crisis, in order to improve the security of the Union's external borders. According to the BBC, it has been demonstrated that this Agency has a limited mandate, insufficient staffing and lack of authority to conduct border management operations (Migrant crisis, 2015). Further, some governments regard the Agency's mandate as a violation of national sovereignty, mainly Poland and Hungary. But this is an internal problem of the Union and not subject to this paper.

Of course, border protection goes further than the humanitarian crisis of refugees. In such context, there are two other factors directly related to Albania. The first factor is related to the internal stability of the country. The report on the security environment states that "NATO and the EU must be committed to encouraging countries in the region to continue the reform process" (Andreychuk, 2018). The lack of internal stability creates vacuums, which - according to the report - "can be filled by forces with anti-democratic and anti-Western agendas" (Ibid). A crisis in the Western Balkans can bring about severe consequences for European security and stability. This leads us to the second factor which is related to the regional and European stability. The same report states that "NATO's continued military presence in its Western Balkan partner countries is essential to regional stability" (Ibid).

There is a tendency in the Europe decision making process. EU is being inclined toward strategic decision making rather than maintaining the status quo.

## **At a time of an anachronic NATO?**

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is at a time when there are strong disputes between the US and its allies over the very existence of the alliance. It is a moment when - according to the Americans - there is no direct threat to Europe. But not for countries that might be targeted by Russia. As Friedman (2019) points out in the article titled *NATO Anachronism*, “Americans have an interest in confronting the Russians, but do not need a NATO war plan to do so.” So we are faced with a reality when the EU has to take its destiny in its own hands.

And EU tends to demonstrate this too in its periphery, where it fears Russia, which sees the Balkans as a battleground in its political clash. It fears Turkey, which apparently has not fully disclosed its agenda in the Western Balkans, while, unlike Russia, has built up its mechanisms on the ground. It also fears China, which is proving to be a successful “predator” wherever there is a vacuum.. Further, Friedman notes that “there is a changing reality”. Under this presumption, Albania should adjust to the new trends. As we refer to this article on NATO, emphasising that:

. . . this is not an American or European abandonment of NATO. It is simply a reflection of the fact that a military alliance has a mission, and the mission on which NATO was founded is gone. The general principle that brought NATO members together – that Europe and the U.S. have common security interests – will always be set against a realistic appreciation of the situation. Retaining a military alliance that is irrelevant to the reality increases rather than decreases the danger to Europe and the United States. But NATO is an anachronism that has survived long past its original mission.

It is an imperative for Europe to get directly involve in mentoring, monitoring or even supervising Albania, and the latter should imply to the EU’s new doctrines.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, based on Juncker’s initiative to make a “strategic decision” for Albania, but also on the way the EU already exercises foreign policy, there is a tendency to surpass the narrow-minded thresholds of the European Council’s decision-making. This is clearly stated in the current EU strategy, which states that “no external challenges affecting the Union from within should be opposed”.



Based on the arguments given in this paper, some conclusions are worth mentioning. Junker points out that West should make important strategic decisions. And one of these strategic decisions must be that Albania has to be supervised in implementing its reforms.

The deadlock Albania faces from some sceptical countries should be avoided, as security should precede criteria when it comes to EU priorities. These countries should consider – as Mogherini says – that “. . . no state should oppose external challenges affecting the Union from within”.

EU must become a powerful geopolitical player. If it doesn't act so, there will be vacuum, and other powers are ready to intervene. Therefore, the opening of negotiations with Albania, there is a need for a proper strategy for strengthening relations between EU and Albania. When two parties have the same aspirations, this will be easy to be achieved.

Under the credentials of a powerful geopolitical player, EU should follow the lead of creations of empires, which have expansion into their DNA.

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# *Why It Should be Regulated and Which System of Lobbying Regulation for Albania?* \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Abstract**

*In these 28 years after the transformation of the system from the communist to the democratic one and toward the market economy, the democratization of Albania has faced various problems, which has often led to the loss of public trust in the political class and the political system in general. This loss of public trust, in large part of the cases, has come as a result of the public discovery of various corruption scandals, political clientelism, illicit influences or a political decision-making process that is often conceived as closed and monopoly of those who have been elected or appointed to leading positions. For this purpose, that of channelling and controlling the impacts that particular vested interests exerts on the decision-making process, a good part of countries in Europe in the last years, have begun to consider undertaking regulatory reforms for lobbying in their environments. The main objective of regulating lobbying activity in Albania on a legal basis would be precisely the handling/curbing of such informal relationships that exist at various levels between interest groups and decision-makers and which are often on corrupt and clientelistic grounds. This paper argues that the best system for regulating lobbying in Albania should be that of a statutory type, in which lobbyists on a legal basis be obliged to register in a publicly accessible register and to disclose data on critical aspects of their activity.*

**Key words:** Lobbying, Lobbyists, Interest Groups, Clientelism, Statutory Regulation System Information Disclosure.

## Introduction

Legal regulation of lobbying, though it can still be considered a relatively new practice in different countries of the world (mostly, it has the longest tradition in the US and Canada), it is increasingly attracting the attention of various governments and legislatures to undertake regulatory reforms in this area. This responsiveness has also come as a result of the discovery of various scandals of interest trafficking or the exertion of illicit influences with which various politicians have faced in their countries. In this sense, the lobbying referred to here as the interest groups' effort in influencing public decision-makers about specific issues from which they are affected, is a phenomenon that exists anyway in society, regardless of the different forms, means or degrees in which it appears. In a sense it can be said that the activity of lobbying or the influence in politics is as old as politics: it existed, exists and will always exist. In this paper, we will define lobbying as *"the act of individuals or groups, each with varying and specific interest, attempting to influence decisions taken at the political level"* (Chari & Hogan & Murphy, 2010: p. 3). Lobbying includes all communications, information or arguments (to persuade) undertaken by a group or individual employed or not by an organization, whether or not receiving remuneration from it to public officials or public service employees regarding specific policies or legislative decision-making on a particular issue.

Twenty-eight years of Albania's experience in the pluralist democratic system and in that of the market economy have sufficiently differentiated the various structures and interests that exist in the Albanian society. These diverse structures and interest groups, which are becoming more and more active and well-placed, have legitimate interests and the right to influence policies and legislation in the respective fields whenever they are affected by them. (Sqapi & Gjuraj & Lami & Mile, 2018: p. 30). Among the various groups of interest and governance, there are links that tend to develop naturally. Lobbying should, therefore be regarded as a force for good and as an essential element of the democratic process (D.P.E.R. Ireland, 2012: p. 9).

But where lobbying activity is not recognized or regulated legally through regulatory frameworks, these links tend to be consumed away from the public eye, thus also causing phenomena such as interest trafficking, illicit influences, corruption of officials, clientelist relationships formed on mutual benefit basis to the detriment of the public interest. This is especially true of transitional societies (as is Albania) where such corrupt and clientelist relations of politicians and policymakers exist at different levels in each country. It has been argued that such clientelist relationships exists precisely because in periods of transition the political



and economic spheres are necessarily intertwined as economic decisions take on an increasingly political nature (Gadowska, 2006). In other words, in transition periods, especially from a former communist system (where the transition is not only in the political plan), economic interests and enrichment in such societies are due to the links developed with politics. For the most part, these links remain informal but are considerably developed, though far from the attention of the public. One of the main goals of a comprehensive framework to regulate lobbying on a legally compulsory basis would be precisely the handling/curbing of the problem of uncontrolled lobbying, or of the informal (or personal) links that exist at different levels between interest groups and decision-makers. By doing so, lobbying regulation can strengthen transparency, accountability and sheds light on the public on the particular interests behind the proposed policies.

## **Reasons for Lobbying Regulation**

Among the main reasons given in the literature for lobbying regulation, is emphasized that: by regulating lobbying activity through registration and reporting requirements as well as the introduction of a professional code of conduct, the aim is to strengthen public confidence in politics and in the business of government, to increase the accountability of decision-makers and to subject public policy making, and those who seek to influence it, to greater openness, transparency and to the potential for appropriate independent scrutiny (D.P.E.R. Ireland, 2012: p. 5). The main contribution that regulation of lobbying activity can bring is the increase of transparency and accountability in the political process of drafting public policies. This need is even higher in countries like Albania, where interaction relations between interest groups and governance remain poorly developed and in the vast majority of them are informal. “Lobbying regulation is expected to serve a valuable function in promoting openness and transparency, supporting integrity and enhancing the efficiency and ethnicity of the public policy making and decision making processes. Regulation of lobbying renders politicians and government officials more accountable and in and of itself helps promote transparency” (D.P.E.R. Ireland, 2012: p. 10). Shedding light on relationships that exist between particular interests and politicians or public officials should be seen as a significant development in the function of good governance.

Likewise, another valuable function that would perform the regulation of lobbying activity in the country would also be to provide exuberant pieces of information that would come from all stakeholders, and that would make it more well-informed decision-making process. Lobbying provides decision-makers with valuable insights, information, policy perspectives, identification of and debate

regarding different policy options (D.P.E.R. Ireland, 2012: p. 9). This role would be far more effective if the lobbying activity would be regulated and the influence of interest groups in the society would be channelled towards the policy-making process. Given the complexity of the political process in undertaking effective public policies, which in itself involves not only the issue of proper formulation, but also the harmonization and finding a balance between competitive interests, as well as the issue of effective implementation when such (strong) interests are at stake, the need for complete and comprehensive information on the feasibility of these policies is vital. Different authors have pointed out this role of lobbying when they emphasize the functional need for additional information and perspectives and better prospects for implementation if concerned interests are involved in the policy stage; political need to “appease social unrests”... and communicate policies to the public (Cummings & Norgaard, 2003). In any case, the benefit that would come from comprehensive information from all parties and broader perspectives from various interest groups would be in favour of a better public decision-making.

Another reason for the legal regulation of lobbying activity is because it would make it possible the creation a level playing field for all the different interests that exist in society, giving all parties fair and equal access in public policy development. The inequality that exists in virtually every free and democratic market society between the various interest groups, either in the resources, capacities or different opportunities that they have, will largely be remedied by granting equal access to influence on the process of drafting public policies. Just as in the first principle of transparency and integrity in the OECD guidelines for lobbying is emphasized: “Allowing all stakeholders, from the private sector and the public at large, fair and equitable access to participate in the development of public policies is crucial to protect the integrity of decisions and to safeguard the public interest by counterbalancing vocal vested interests” (OECD, 2013: p.3). Creating a level playing field for all interest groups that would be made possible by legal regulation of the lobbying activity and by legitimating the influence that any group can exert in the political decision-making process would be one great help for countries like Albania where civil society, almost throughout the period from 1991 to today, continues to remain relatively weak and unorganized. In such an environment, certain interests (say, environmentalists) are even less likely to compete honestly and equally in the face of the most powerful interests, as well as the structural disadvantage of a weak civil society where they lack the mobilization traditions regarding specific causes (however fair they are). Matraszek, but also other neo-pluralist authors of interest groups have noted the disadvantage that some groups enjoy in the face of the most potent groups in capitalist societies: “those interests that are disorganized, weak or dispersed, such as foreign investors, private entrepreneurs, or consumers, remain disadvantaged in the decision-making



process, whether in parliament or in the administration” (Cited in McGrath, 2008: p. 20). Legal regulation of lobbying activity would make it possible for all parties/interests to have equal opportunities to influence public policy development, to have each their voices in this process, and to protect their policy perspectives even in the face of the most powerful interests that may exist in society.

Finally, regulating lobbying activity through a legally compulsory registration and by public disclosure in a lobbying register of some required information (not only by lobbyists but also by the “lobbied” persons, which in this case are public officials: ministers, MPs or officials at various levels of the Civil Service) would minimize the dangers of corruption. In the context of today’s Albanian society where corruption is a widespread phenomenon and where there is a “coffee” or favours culture, most of the interactions between specific interests (groups) and public officials tend to be mostly based on mutual obligations or benefits. This, in turn, has often taken the form of uncontrolled lobbying, thus giving rise to such negative phenomena as officials’ corruption, clientelism, the exercise of illicit/inappropriate influences, etc. Precisely, “unregulated lobbying can give rise to significant public concern about the role of vested interests in policy making and risk that privileged or excessive influence may result in sub-optimal public policy decisions which might be made to suit private agendas to the overall detriment of the community and society at large” (D.P.E.R. Ireland, 2012: p. 10). Legal regulation of lobbying would have as its primary focus precisely shedding light on the relationships/ties that exist between certain interests and public politicians/officials in the form of identification of players and disclosure of interests that seek to influence public decision-making. This, in turn, would only increase transparency in the political process and reduce the premise of corruption and illegal influence on officials.

## Options on Different Types of Lobbying Regulatory Systems

There are different types of regulatory regimes in different countries for lobbying activity. In general terms, different regulatory systems of lobbying activities can be classified in two ways. The first way is to divide these systems into those of a *statutory* type, where lobbyists on a compulsory basis are enrolled and must report data of the activities they undertake; and *voluntary* ones where, although more minimum rules governing lobbying activity exist, it is left to lobbyists or different interest groups to register and report data to the register, thus supporting their self-regulation approach. Another way of classifying the different types of regulatory systems is by dividing them in: Lowly, medium and highly regulated systems. What differentiates these systems in different jurisdictions is the amount, frequency and

details of the information that lobbyists need to disclose and report about their activity in a publicly accessible register.

Likewise, if we could mention another approach which includes some countries (such as Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, etc.), which although not having specific legal rules regarding the behaviour of lobbyists and their activity, it can be said that they recognize lobbying activity as such. The approach in these countries is to regulate the behaviour of the *lobbied persons* (elected politicians and civil servants) and not that of lobbyists. In these countries there are well-defined codes of conduct and norms that guide the behaviour of politicians or officials in relationships/interactions with any interest group or lobbyist, by preventing them from receiving financial gains or any other reward from them, as well as obliging them to declare any possible conflicts of interest they may have in the exercise of their public functions.

In general, it can be said that countries in the function of their needs, characteristics, and goals have chosen different regulatory approaches of lobbying practices in their environments. The most important classification among the regulatory lobbying systems remains one of the statutory and voluntary legal frameworks, and whether they are small, medium or highly regulated systems.

Among the major countries that have statutory rules and regulations for lobbyists and their activities are the United States (since 1946) and Canada (since 1989). Following a tradition inaugurated by James Madison, the US has chosen not to limit the lobbying practice and, generally speaking, the interest groups activities, but to regulate them in order to assure more fairness, transparency, and responsibility (Mihut, 2008, pp. 1-2). Among the key features of the lobbying system in the US [at the federal level], according to the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 (LDA), are: the obligation for lobbyists to register with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House, and to make semi-annual reports on their activities; they have to report who their clients were, what house of the Congress or what agencies they lobbied, how much they were paid; the law restricts gifts to officials and obliges the departing members of the Senate to wait for two years before lobbying former colleagues (the former members of the House of Representatives must wait one year) (Mihut, 2008, p. 8). Likewise, another feature of the statutory regulatory approach to lobbying in the US and Canada is that they include broad and comprehensive definitions for the entire range of lobbying activities and lobbyists' categories, with emphasis on any communication that is undertaken with public officials for influencing public policy formulation or legislative decision-making on a particular matter. In Canada, there is also a Code of Ethics that lobbyists must strictly adhere to in dealing with officials who want to lobby.

Other features of regulatory systems include: clear rules for lobbyist' registration with details of their activity that should be publicly disclosed in an accessible



register; the names of clients for whom they are lobbying; details on the legislative / policy proposals of a draft law on which they are pressing; public officials who are lobbied; the existence of a state agency responsible for overseeing and controlling the entire regulatory system for lobbying and having administrative powers to undertake audits/investigations of possible violations and to ensure compliance with the rules in force etc. Further, what differentiates statutory lobbying systems into lowly, medium and highly regulated, is the amount, frequency and details of the information that lobbyists need to disclose and report about their activity. In lowly regulated systems, fewer details are required about lobbyists' activity; no data is needed on the financial costs of lobbies or their employers to be disclosed; targets of lobbyists may be only members of the legislature or their staff [i.e., only the legislative branch of government]; there is usually little implementing capacity by the agency overseeing the regulation system; there is no provision for any "cooling off period" in the legislation for MPs or public officials after leaving their duty<sup>1</sup>. In medium regulated systems, the rules for lobbyists' registration are stronger [usually more data is required for their activity]; the definition of lobbyists also includes the executive branch of government; there is a cooling off period before legislators, having left office, can register as lobbyists. While in highly regulated systems, in addition to the above statutory requirements, more detailed reporting is required on financial expenses by both lobbyists and their clients; the details in the lobbying register should be continuously updated at regular intervals; and the state agency that monitors the regulation system has administrative powers to undertake audits/investigations and punish or exclude possible violators of the rules (Chari & Hogan & Murphy, 2010: pp. 27-28). Table 1 summarizes the requirements for lobbying in different regulatory systems.

**TABLE 1:** The Different Regulatory Systems

	Lowly Regulated Systems	Medium Regulated Systems	Highly Regulated Systems
Registration regulations	Rules on individual registration, but few details required.	Rules on individual registration, more details required.	Rules on individual registration are extremely rigorous.
Targets of Lobbyists Defined	Only members of the legislature and staff.	Members of the legislature and staff; executive and staff; agency heads and public.	Members of the legislature and staff; executive and staff; agency heads and public.

<sup>1</sup> See for more on lowly regulated systems of lobbying in Raj Chari & John Hogan & Gary Murphy (2011), "Legal Framework for the Regulation of Lobbying in the Council of Europe Member States", p. 27.



Spending disclosure	No rules on individual spending disclosure, or employer spending disclosure.	Some regulations on individual spending disclosure; none on employer spending disclosure.	Tight regulations on individual spending disclosure, and employer spending disclosure.
Electronic filing	Weak on-line registration and paperwork required.	Robust system for on-line registration, no paperwork necessary.	Robust system for on-line registration, no paperwork necessary.
Public access	List of lobbyists available, but not detailed, or updated frequently.	List of lobbyists available, detailed, and updated frequently.	List of lobbyists and their spending disclosures available, detailed, and updated frequently.
Enforcement	Little enforcement capabilities invested in state agency.	In theory state agency possesses enforcement capabilities, though infrequently used.	State agency can, and does, conduct mandatory reviews/audits.
Revolving door provision	No cooling off period before former legislators can register as lobbyists.	There is a cooling off period before former legislators can register as lobbyists.	There is a cooling off period before former legislators can register as lobbyists.

Source: Raj Chari & John Hogan & Gary Murphy, 2011: pp. 28-29.

While in voluntary schemes of lobbying [or self-regulation] schemes, another approach is followed to regulate lobbyists' activity. Among the key institutions that have a non-compulsory registration system for lobbyists are the European Parliament and the European Commission. Given their particular specifics (especially the democratic deficit that characterizes them, as well as the more limited competences compared to those of a national state or government), these institutions [particularly the Commission] see the interest groups "with a much better eye" and are more open to them in the policy-making process. Consulting with "interested parties" or "civil society organisations" as the Commission prefers to describe such organisations is an important resource from a governance point of view (Institute of Public Administration: p. 11). In its lobbying approach, the EP has established a formal regulatory framework [Rules of Procedure adopted in 1996] based on a system of lobbying accreditation, where access permits to the European Parliament are granted to interest groups' representatives in exchange for their acceptance of a code of conduct and registration in a register of data such as the name of the lobbyists, their addresses, the name of the organization they are lobbying and their general interests. From this, it can be seen that the amount of information required to lobby in EP is small compared to those of regulatory systems

in other jurisdictions. It should also be noted that the formal regulatory framework for lobbying in the EP provides only the regulation of the lobbying activity that is carried out within the Parliament building [through the permits given to lobbyists] and not what happens outside it, doing that “several of the lobbyists actually active in the EP are not registered” (Chari & Hogan & Murphy, 2011: p. 9). Similarly, another issue which highlighted in the case of lobbying regulation in the EP is “that while names of lobbyists are available to the public, other information stated on the registration form, such as the ‘nature of the lobbyists work’, the interests for which the lobbyist is acting, and which MEPs may have served as references for the lobbyists, is not available to the public (European Commission, 2006: p. 7).

The European Commission, on its part, has an even more open approach based on self-regulation of lobbying activity, and by setting [in 2008] only a voluntary registration system for interest representatives involved in lobbying. In this ‘voluntary database’ of interest representation, called CONECCS [Consultation, the European Commission and Civil Society], civil society organisation (including, for example, trade unions, business associations and NGOs) could sign up in order to provide ‘better information about (the Commission’s) consultative process” (Cited in Chari & Hogan & Murphy, 2011: p. 11). Although the (minimum) rules on the information that lobbyists have to provide in the register exist, this remains entirely voluntary and is mainly done with the only incentive that they will receive alerts from the Commission regarding the consultations taking place in their areas of interest. In the case of the European Commission, the approach followed for the registration of lobbying activities is entirely voluntary, entrusting in the profession of lobbyists and thus encouraging their self-regulation model.

## **A Short Analysis of Lobbying Regulatory Systems and Which System Is Better For Albania**

The approach followed by the European Commission to establish only a voluntary registration for various interest representatives or lobbyists in Brussels, as well as the incentive for the self-regulation of this sector, has its problems. As is generally the case with voluntary regulation systems, most of the lobbying activities in Brussels (or elsewhere, where there are voluntary regulation systems) occur without being registered and without serving the main goals that lobbying should play in the political system: increasing transparency, accountability, and giving to the public the opportunity (through disclosure of relevant information) for an independent scrutiny of lobbying activities of the various influences that are exercised in the decision-making process. In the case of the European Commission, the voluntary registration system, coupled with low incentives for lobbyists’ registration (mainly

that of receiving alerts regarding consultations in a given field) has made that only a few lobbyists signed up to the voluntary register monitored by the EU Transparency Register Secretariat. Approximately less than 7 per cent of all lobbyists (i.e. less than 1,000 lobbyists of the over 15,000 estimated) signed up to the voluntary registration system (Smyth, 2006). “In other words, lobby groups can attempt to influence the Commission at any time and any place, whether or not they are on the registry” (Cited in Chari & Hogan & Murphy, 2011: p. 11).

The self-regulatory approach and voluntary public register for lobbyists who wish to lobby the European Commission reflects most the need of the latter for the consultation and dialogue with various interest groups (or civil society organizations, as the Commission prefers to call them) to narrow the democratic deficit that characterizes it by making the governance “more open”. However, given the various shortcomings that emerged from the operation of the self-regulatory and voluntary registration system of lobbyists (which in the most part undertake lobbying activities to the European Commission even without being registered in the public register), the Commission in turn has left open the possibility of introducing a statutory regulatory system and a compulsory registration for those who lobby at the European level. As in a statement the European Commission says: “In any event, after one year of operation, the Commission will evaluate the register, in particular regarding participation. If it proves to be unsatisfactory, compulsory registration and reporting will be considered”<sup>2</sup> to be established. On his side, the EP since 2008 “was already openly stating that it wished to have a mandatory register for all lobbyists that attempt to influence all institutions in the EU” (Cited in Chari & Hogan & Murphy, 2011: p. 14).

In the same line, many European countries that have adopted legal frameworks for regulating lobbying activities in their jurisdictions have done so by preferring statutory regulatory systems and mandatory registration for lobbyists. In several cases, statutory regulation has been introduced as a direct result of particular scandals in which lobbyists were found to be exercising undue or corrupt influence on public officials (McGrath, 2008: p. 23). Precisely because of the highly sensitive nature of lobbying in the eyes of public opinion, as well as the intent of controlling the exercise of influences by different interest groups, in many European countries statutory regulatory systems were preferred as the best and most efficient way to control and discipline lobbying activities in their environments. Self-regulatory or voluntary lobbying systems are not effective in including the range and the actual level of lobbying activity that occurs in their jurisdictions, making the lobbyists’ registration to be only at minimal levels, and thus not serving the general objectives which should have the legal regulation of lobbying activity, that are

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-08-428\\_en.htm?locale=en](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-08-428_en.htm?locale=en) Brussels, 23 June 2008. See also in Conor McGrath, (2008), “The Development and Regulation of Lobbying in the New Member States of the European Union”, p. 22.



those of increasing transparency, disclosure of information, accountability and the guarantee of integrity of public policymaking.

“Thus far, mandatory registers of lobbyists have proven to be more successful than voluntary registers in reflecting lobbying activities in a more comprehensive manner and bringing greater transparency to the system” (Ninua, 2012: p. 4). Voluntary or accreditation systems for lobbying (such as the aforementioned European Parliament, but also those in France and Germany) fail to control lobbying activities in the environments where they operate, even because they can never offer enough incentives to encourage lobbyists’ registration as well as due to their lack of legal force to force lobbyists to register and report on their activities. If we refer to a method of analysis (known as Hired Guns), undertaken by the Center for Public Integrity to measure the effectiveness of lobbying legislation in terms of transparency and accountability they promote, we see that the weaker results on a scale from 1 to 100 points, are precisely in the voluntary or in the accreditation systems of the European Parliament jurisdictions (15 points), Germany (17), France (20) and the European Commission (24)<sup>3</sup>. While a completely different picture occurs in the jurisdictions of countries where statutory lobbying systems and compulsory registration are in place (e.g. in the US at states and federal level, in Canada etc.), where the results are much higher. Their high results<sup>4</sup> highlight the effectiveness of their legislation to promote public disclosure of lobbying activities, open access and transparency.

Based on previous experience of regulatory systems operating in other countries, the best international experience in this field, as well as the guiding principles developed by the OECD on transparency and lobbying integrity, in this paper it is argued that the regulatory lobbying system that must exist in Albania, should be of a *statutory* type. In such a system, lobbyists on a legal basis should be obliged to sign up in a register that will be publicly accessible; they have to disclose some information on the important aspects of their activities and must undertake they conform to the legal norms specified in the legislation (Sqapi & Gjuraj & Lami & Mile, 2018: p.32). Such a binding legal scheme for regulation and reporting of lobbying activities both by lobbyists who take them, but also by lobbied persons (politicians or public officials) who are subject to influences from different groups of interest would better serve the main goals and objectives that should be pursued by

<sup>3</sup> See for more in Raj Chari & John Hogan & Gary Murphy (2011), “*Legal Framework for the Regulation of Lobbying in the Council of Europe Member States*”, pp. 23-26. “Hired Guns” is a method for analyzing the lobbying legislation based on a survey that contains a series of questions regarding lobby disclosure. Its main objective is to measure the effectiveness of lobbying legislation in terms of its transparency and accountability. The questions address eight key areas of disclosure for lobbying that has to do with: Definition of Lobbyist; Individual Registration; Individual Spending Disclosure; Employer Spending Disclosure; Electronic Filing; Public Access (to a registry of lobbyists); Enforcement; Revolving Door Provisions (with a particular focus on ‘cooling off periods’).

<sup>4</sup> See countries’ jurisdictions scores in Raj Chari & John Hogan & Gary Murphy (2011), “*Legal Framework for the Regulation of Lobbying in the Council of Europe Member States*”, pp. 25-26.

the law on lobbying in Albania, namely: enhancing transparency in policy-making and decision-making, increasing accountability levels, creating opportunities for an opening and greater participation of the public and stakeholders in the process of drafting public policies; as well as ensuring the integrity and efficiency of public policymaking (Sqapi & Gjuraj & Lami & Mile, 2018: p. 32).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we could re-emphasize that the reasons for recognizing and regulating lobbying activity in Albania are primarily based on the need to increase and strengthen transparency in decision-making, accountability, and creation of opportunities for greater openness to public and interest groups engagement in the process of public policymaking. Democratic systems in many Western countries (but not only) are increasingly being under pressure to take into account the need to articulate interests from different groups within their societies and to channel them into the political system through practices that are consistent with openness, transparency and equal access. In this sense, legal regulation of lobbying activity in Albania is expected to be a valuable function in promoting openness and transparency in formulating and developing public policies, as well as in strengthening the efficiency of public policy-making and decision-making processes. Likewise, shedding light on relationships that exist between particular interests and politicians or public officials [through obliged legal requirements to publicly disclose information] should be seen as another valuable contribution that legal regulation of lobbying can bring in the function of good governance. This need for public disclosure is even higher in the context of transition countries such as Albania where patterns of social and political relationships that are based on clientelism and corruption are widespread, and the links between different interests and politicians take place more on an informal basis, taking the form of uncontrolled lobbying (Sqapi & Gjuraj & Lami & Mile, 2018: p. 38). The main aim of adopting a legal framework for lobbying activity Albania would be to discipline and control the links between various interest groups and politicians at different levels and to develop these links on formal, transparent grounds and in favour of the public interest and democratic governance.

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# *Post-communist Tirana: lost in transportation*

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper I will present the current situation in Tirana related to international buses and the lack of the bus station. The city has experienced changes and development after the fall of communism, trying to catch up with Western neo-liberal cities. One of the main features of globalization and contemporary cities is mobility of people, goods and information. In Tirana the mobility of people as such exists, but unlike other cities even in the region there is not a central bus station that regulates the information about travelling. I will try to analyse this phenomenon by focusing on the transition period and urban planning and to see what actually this tells about the capital city and its citizens. The methodology used is desk research and observation, by using the city as a case study. The paper mainly uses concepts of Auge, Lefebvre and Amin and their theoretical approaches to analyse cities.*

**Key words:** *Tirana bus station, space, non-space, post-communist transition, South Eastern Europe, transport, urban planning.*

## **Introduction**

It has often occurred to me to meet people who were doing their Balkan tour and to get surprised that most of them wanted to visit Albania, but could not, unless they were driving their own car, or taking a flight. And as I was always trying to convince them by offering my help, I realized that some of the travellers avoided

traveling to Albania because of the lack of information. Since I spent almost all my life in the country, I could not grasp what they were referring to as “lack of information about public transportation”. As Massey points out, order and chaos are relative concepts since they depend on the individual and their everyday interaction. (Massey: 2005) What the tourists always complain about and refer to as chaos is the lack of a main bus station in Tirana. This is true, the city does not have a main bus station, and therefore one must be a local in order to have the information about inter-city and international transport.

In this paper I will analyse how Tirana dealt with the process of urban changes during transition, taking as case study the lack of a central bus station. How do citizens access the necessary information? What kind of relations are at stake? What does the lack of the station as geographic public space effects local citizens? How is the city situated in the process of globalization? In order to answer these questions, I will use secondary resources such as academic papers, books and scholar publications. Secondary resources will be combined with my experience and will be used to explain certain processes that are taking place in the city.

In this paper I will take into consideration also the issue of post-communist cities and the transformation that happened after the fall of communism. More specifically, I will write about urban transformations that occurred in Tirana after 1991. The city faced rapid changes that were supposed to bring the citizens closer to Western World. However, because of the uniqueness of the previous regime, compared even to other socialist states, changes in the capital city of Albania have some special features.

The paper will mainly use concepts of Auge, Lefebvre and Amin and their theoretical approaches to analyse cities. Firstly, there will be presented the general frame of transition in post-communist countries and the effect in cities, with a focus on Tirana. Further, the paper will take into consideration the case study of Tirana and the absence of the bus station. Finally, I will try to see how this informal bus station affected mobility and what its political and economic effects are for citizens.

## **Transition and the city:**

The fall of communism in Albania, as well as in other Eastern European countries was followed by quick political and economic reforms. “Like the ambitions of most uprisings in history, the goal of the 1989 revolution was to undo the old system by tearing down the tenets of a crumbling political structure.” (Stanilov, 2007: 21) Transitions in post-communist Europe have a similar feature: the main focus was put in economic and political issues. Cities in these countries faced a



rapid growth of population, since migration within the country became a common feature. The new comers in the city settled in the suburbs, where new buildings were constructed. In the case of Tirana, the city has faced an increase number of population. “Since the fall of communism, according to official statistics, Tirana has doubled in population. However, this total only includes formally registered residents. Unofficial sources estimate this figure at one million<sup>1</sup>.” (*Pojani: 2*)

The capital city faced quick increase in informal areas. The surface of the inhabited city area almost doubled, but the main face of post-communist urbanization of Tirana, are the informal areas. This refers to the fact that after the fall of communism the living area of the city expanded in the suburbs, but this process involved illegal construction. One of the biggest problems of the city is the unregistered inhabitants, therefore until recent years basic services such as addresses and postal services were almost impossible. Inhabitants had to count on local postmen and their abilities to know where the inhabitants live in that neighbourhood, although this has been challenging. The areas now after all these years are registered and have street names.

Another feature of the post-communist city is directly related to the change of the previous political system. Economic and political reforms in post-communist Europe had to deal with processes of privatization. So, the cities dealt with a decrease in public services, while private sector is still boosting. The developments do not occur in the city centre but in the periphery. “Just as the socialist government preferred to direct its attention to the urban periphery, where the majority of the large housing estates and giant industrial zones sprung up, most of the energy of the post-socialist growth has been channelled to the suburban outskirts, where new shopping centres, office parks, and clusters of single family residences have popped up, leaping over the belt of socialist housing estates.” (Stanilov, 2007: 8) The economic reform requires a renewal of private property, which in Albanian communist state was totally erased. Differently from some Eastern communist systems, the Albanian one was one of the most isolated and totalitarian one. Therefore, private property was totally erased.

“The illiteracy in the country immediately after World War II was as high as 80%... This is related to the existence of a traditional and very patriarchal society in pre-war Albania, where female illiteracy was 90% ... The country’s economy was totally rural and backward.” (Gjonça, 2001:44)<sup>2</sup>The communist regime brought the massive industrialization process. Most of the cities took the shape that they have today during the early phase of the communist regime. Tirana was of course in centre of attention; since the first university was build there. Also, the modern architecture and functionalist buildings, related to the concept of Le Corbusier,

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.academia.edu/2098755/Urbanization\\_of\\_Post-communist\\_Albania\\_Economic\\_Social\\_and\\_Environmental\\_Challenges](https://www.academia.edu/2098755/Urbanization_of_Post-communist_Albania_Economic_Social_and_Environmental_Challenges), last accessed 20 January 2015

<sup>2</sup> Sentences in between these sentences were deleted by me in order to show the point of my argument.



were spread all over the country. Growing and fast industrialization required creation of small cities evolving around the factory. The main connections between the cities were the railways. Private cars and buses were not an option for citizens. So the main national public transportation was arranged through trains.

When it comes to movement of goods and people Tirana and Albanian cities experienced a severe system of control and surveillance. Movement from one city to another where mainly by bus and train. However, it was not always easy to commute from one city to another. Some special cities, which were developed after the fall of communism, were serving only as military basis. In order to travel into border areas of Albania, the citizen must have a special permit. Therefore, the direction and surveillance of citizens' movements were regulated by the state. The most, important feature is that trains were used to travel only inside the country. Even nowadays there is no railway that connects Albania with neighbouring countries. The only international one build in 1980 with Montenegro was used only for freights. Stanilov while citing Dingsdale is very appropriate to explain the lack of railroads with neighbouring countries "Urban form has been often described in social theory as a passive element of our social existence, a mirror reflecting past and present socio-economic conditions, or a "text" serving as a basis for their interpretation."(Stanilov, 2007: 5)

The fall of communism and the transition brought back the private property, but as well as the shift from "the big brother" <sup>3</sup> as the state, into "big brother" as the market. Travelling within the country was shaped by the "chaos" of the new system. Railroads and train stations were rarely used and until now, nothing is done to renovate this sector. A new order within this chaos took place: travelling by using local social interaction. The lack of informational screens does not seem to stop the flow of travellers. Thus, the idea that airports and stations are "non-places" seem to be challenged by this practice, which shows to be "place" and "non-place" at the same time.

## How is the space divided: factual information?

The concept of the station as we use it in our everyday life has already gained an association with a certain building. So, there should exist some sort of physical boundaries that represent the place called station. Secondly, temporality of the people in the place is crucial. Stations are transit points; this is the specificity of it as a place. "The specificity of place is continually reproduced, but it is not a

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow the concept of "big brother" introduced firstly by George Orwell in his novel "Animal Farm" (1946), in order to refer to the surveillance of citizens, which I consider to be present in both communist and capitalist society but performed by different authorities. First one refers to the state and its apparatus and second one to market forces.

specificity which results from some long, internalized history.” (Massey, 1993: 69) So the specificity of every space is its everyday reproduction. The area in Tirana used as a bus station reproduces itself as such, through new interactions that take place there.

In the image below, it is presented one of the sides of the Boulevard “Zogu I”, which starts from the National Museum towards the old train station. It is in this street that all travel agencies are located and the buses, according to the hours are staying in specific parts of it. From 2017, Tirana has changed the system and there are three main terminals the one for buses traveling to east south, North and South. Nevertheless, there are still no information on schedules and only few information about the location on online forums and travels portals.

There are no big screens with information, but the role of screens is played by travel agencies and also direct contact with drivers. This shows actually that in terms of this kind of transportation, kinship is important or at least acquaintances. Some tourists have tried to put information according to their experience in travel forums. This particular space of Tirana serves mainly for this purpose. Exchanges, tourist agencies and small fast food and bars, hotels can be found in that street. This shows how the place got shaped as a typical station, which would have most of these elements coordinated by a central authority.

The place is socially produced through the movement of bodies, if we use the terminology of Lefebvre. “Rhythm analysis plays an intrinsic part in exposing the social production of space for Lefebvre. Indeed, rhythm analysis seeks to capture empirically the embeddedness of social relations in the sensory make up of space.” (Edensor, 2010: 24) So during transition this area saw the emergence of market forces and the authority (state and municipality) did not intervene with any urban planning. The place keeps producing itself as such and most of drivers refer to it as the station, which shows that relations and interactions actually construct the identity of the place.

## **The plaza as space and non-space**

“Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations are ceaselessly rewritten.” (Auge, 1995: 79) The urban anthropologists’ concepts will be necessary at this point of my analysis, given the fact that his concepts are directly connected to areas like airports, railway stations and so on.

In his book “Non-Places, Introduction to an Anthropology of Super modernity. Cultural Studies”, Auge introduces us to the new concept of non-place, by taking

into consideration also the difference between space and place concepts, firstly introduced by Michael de Certeau. Augé brings into the theoretical debate an interesting approach to analyse flows and the concepts of place in our everyday life. Augé differentiates the concepts of geographic place as we refer for example to the bus station geographically, and anthropological place. (ibid: 78) This is the revolutionary momentous that Augé brings into the field of studies.

Anthropological place as a concept refers to human relations and interaction with the place and in the geographic place. Augé in his book defines that “place is completed through the word, through the allusive exchange of a few passwords between speakers who are conniving in private complicity.” (ibid: 77) Augé explains that non-place is the measure of time and our interactions within it. Therefore, travelling and constant movement is the ideal version of this non place. “The traveller’s space may thus be the archetype of a non-place.” (ibid: 86) Deducing from Augé’s conclusion, one can simply claim that stations, airports and these transitional spaces are actually non-places too. But what does this say for Tirana and the lack of the main bus station, but a well-functioning connection with neighbouring capital cities?

As it is mentioned in the previous section of this paper, during transition the main train station was almost out of use and citizens started using buses, operated from private companies. These private companies, especially the ones that travel to Skopje, Greek cities<sup>4</sup> and Prishtina have almost a common meeting point. This has the city centre and precisely the plaza behind the National Museum until 2017 and currently speaking the Palace of Sports. The lack of a main regulatory institution, which will deal with logistical problems of the “typical” order in a main station, does not seem problematic.

Typical order of a main bus station consists on having an information desk, ticket desks also, specified departure places for specific buses. Moreover, the necessity of a regulator is more present when it comes to information about bus numbers and gates. Of course, for tourists a website is necessary. All these regulatory features of a bus station are lacking in the case of Tirana, which should not create to the reader an image of a less industrialized capital city compared to other cities in the Western Balkans. Order is actually put by the private travelling companies and citizens’ needs to travel. “As Lefebvre has pointed out urban is the area where ‘claiming the right to the city’ takes place.” (Kuyumlu, 2013: 1) Given the fact that not even the most current master plan of the city<sup>5</sup>, which includes a project for tramway in Tirana, has not mentioned anything about bus station, means that citizens approve

<sup>4</sup> Massive migration in Greece and Italy was another feature of Albanian transition. Mostly, migration was illegally done, but as soon as emigrants were settled and had regulated their stay, the need for connections with Albania was born. So, private companies started operating connecting Tirana with all big cities in Greece. Offices and departure places are in the same segment of the Boulevard.

<sup>5</sup> <http://grimshaw-architects.com/project/tirana-masterplan/> last accessed 28<sup>th</sup> January, 2015

this order imposed both by their need but also by companies. “The main direction of urban spatial restructuring could be defined as a transfer of assets, resources, and opportunities from the public to the private realm.” (Stanilov, 2007: 10)

The struggle for information that tourists have to deal with was unfamiliar to me, until the point I found myself as a tourist in my own city. I then realized that for foreigners it is even more difficult to access the information. I got to know the “ghost” station while I was trying to get some information about buses that go to Skopje and Prishtina. As I was walking in that part of the Boulevard starting from the museum until the old train station, realised that actually that space is the real bus station. Every company has a specific spot in the street, and the destinations are also split pretty logically.

Considering the concepts of Auge, I would argue that this space in city centre is actually both place and non-place. It is a geographic place, but also an anthropological one. Given the fact that place is about relations this “ghost” bus station functions well and apparently effectively thanks to the personal relations with drivers or acquaintances that had some previous experience. On the other hand, during a normal day one can observe the travellers with luggage and their flows the same as ones in a normal station.

## **Questions of urban planning: Consequences of a missing plan**

In this final section I will analyse the issue in terms of urban planning of the city. Urban planners in modern cities face different challenges. Moreover, in post-communist transitional cities, urban planners need to equilibrate between new economic reforms and social justice. New system where the city needs to operate imposes changes to cities, on the other hand mobility flows of people requires settling of the new comers in the city. Tirana dealt with this issue after the fall of communism. However, urban planners failed during these years to deliver any concrete proposal regarding a main bus station, which would connect the city with other cities. Furthermore, the connection with neighbouring cities in the region is of an extreme economic importance.

Post-communist cities faced a phenomenon that Stanilov explains as the period of difficulties for urban planners. Basically, politicians took advantage of the situation. “Thus, urban development became characterized by a highly individualized and a rather permissive approach to managing investment decisions, which severely undermined the ability of planners to advance coherent strategies for city growth.” (Stanilov, 2007: 414) This spatial conflict between social justice and new needs raised the question of the developments in the city. While, local politicians were dealing with informal areas of Tirana and immediate problems such as informal

buildings, unemployment and internal migration, the need to travel was shaping Tirana's centre. Early year of transition faced illegal economy, common feature for post-communist country. This activity influenced also transportation section, but this paper takes into analyse the actual period when informal activity related to transportation be it urban, inter-urban or international, is already fixed.

Harvey (1996) discusses the issue of city and social justice. His main thesis is that social justice rather than universal is local and contextual varying in terms of individuals, time and place. How does Tirana's bus station stand in terms of these two concepts: social justice and modernity? The fall of communism did not only increased mobility within the country, but for the first time after 46 years Albanian citizens could travel abroad. The old system never saw the need to build a bus station as the ones we see in Zagreb, Belgrade, Skopje and also Prishtina. However, going from an isolated country to a liberal democracy requires market economy and a relocation of Tirana in regional and global market relations. Communication is the key to re-integration. Also, communication and transportation, according to Sterne go together. "Communication is best conceptualized as organized movement and action. All movement has a symbolic dimension, to be sure, but movement is also a constructive physical phenomenon." (Packer, 2006: 118)

Harvey takes into consideration seven arguments in order to dissolve the conflict presented above. Given the fact that the plan for the city is missing, I would use Harvey's arguments to argue that the actual functioning does not help the improvement of the city. The economic growth argument (Harvey, 1996: 203) would be of great importance even to local politicians, since the municipality budget would benefit from taxes and fees paid in the station. Not only is the economic argument at stake but also the social justice one itself. Such system based in social interaction that has the form of kinship, damage new and small entries in the market.

Furthermore, this practice represents an opposite model of "a good city" as Ash Amin claims in this book. While reading Amin the reader can notice four elements that according to the author make the city a good one. These elements are called the four R-s: Repair, Relatedness, Rights and Re-enchantment. (Amin, 2006) However the author says that the answers to his questions would require an "urban utopianism" (ibid: 1013) I will give briefly an explanation of the four R-s. Firstly the Repair relates with the facilities that help circulation. Bus stations, tram stops, and public transportation routes seem to fall in this category. I think that this practice of Tirana shows how the city is not good in this direction. If transportation is about facilitating mobility, communication and so on, the city partially failed to do so.

Secondly, Relatedness is connected with the concept of equality. Although relatedness is more connected to the welfare state and the excluded, the public plaza behind the National Museum seem to impose itself even to the ones who

are excluded from the information access. “The result is an equal duty of care towards the insider and the outsider, the temporary and the permanent resident.” (ibid: 1015) Relatedness relates to everyone in the city and the tourist, new comer, or even one as a first-time traveller. Therefore, information networks cannot be considered as such.

My experience with the station in Tirana can testify that the city in terms of Amin’s criteria can hardly be classified as a “good city”. The third element that Amin uses in order to define a city as a good one is “Rights”. His concept of rights is also connected with the one introduced by Henri Lefebvre. “The right to participate presumes having the means and the entitlement to do so.” (ibid: 1017) Amin would argue in a situation like that present in the capital city of Albania, as a situation where the means are there but being used by people who have access to the information. This practice denies the right of new comers, new drivers and foreigners.

Finally, Amin presents us the fourth R, which is “Re-enchantment”. “Re-enchantment in the history of urban utopian thought has tended to focus on a paradise to come, usually around grand projects designed to engineer human life materially, morally and ethically.” (ibid: 1019) re-enchantment is not about urban planning rather than sociality. In order for this to become present the public space is needed. The station as the place of social interaction is a form of public space; however, it is the public space similar to ancient agora. It excludes certain categories, which actually do not know how to enter this specific public space.

In another work of Ash Amin, where the author deals with urban public space more specifically, the concept of culture is at stake. (Amin: 2008) Collective culture is produced in public spaces if the latter is well-organized. “Public space, if organized properly, offers the potential for social communion by allowing us to lift our gaze from the daily grind, and as a result, increase our disposition towards the other.” (ibid: 6) The ghost bus station in Tirana is a public space, well organized within its internal logic. However, the lack of a visible and formal structure of public space station as such tells us about the collective culture produced in that area.

Firstly, and most obviously is the consumption culture, which is totally in line with the logics of a modern liberal city. Transportation is communication and they both are forms of consumption in our society. Secondly, what does this say about the values of commons? The plaza where the buses wait for passengers is becoming the common area of drivers and passengers, passers-by and people who are drinking something in the terraces. This common space is based on social interaction and getting information from acquaintances. This half form of kinship does not produce a critical view in this public space because as Durkheim has pointed out, the solidarity here is the mechanical one. Organic solidarity is required in order

to produce participation of citizens as such in public space. This lack of collective culture can explain why this problem is not even being addressed publicly. As I already mentioned above, there is no master plan that involves building such station, but there have not been any massive protests from the drivers or citizens related to the issue. This is because the informal station produces itself everyday through interactions but does not produce the collective culture necessary to turn this place into a place of sociality.

## Conclusion

The issue of the lack of Bus station in Tirana has always intrigued me. I always wondered what kinds of relations were produced to keep the transportation and mobility alive, but on the other hand no action was taken to improve it. Given the fact that now after transition period the city is integrated in regional economy the need for an organized station is more urgent. Public spaces have a real say about the way we are located in world economy and globalization process. I consider everyday practices of Tirana in this direction as produced by market forces, citizens' needs and maintained by a set of certain interaction. These interactions do in fact produce the same practices as those we face in a normal bus station in other capitals of the region. However, in Tirana inclusiveness is at stake.

Tourists, new comers and new travellers who do not have a previous experience with this practice find themselves lost in transportation, unless they get some information from other people. I have observed most of travel forums and blogs online to see the opinion and experiences of other travellers, especially foreigners. These forums are actually playing the role of the official website that normal bus stations have. It is surprising to see how this system of interactions maintains itself and how online information is making it easier for foreign tourists at least. However, what is disturbing is the local production of this space for the citizens.

Taking into account efficiency and market criteria this space is not able to take the best out of it. Administration of a bus station would make municipality expand the budget, but also ease the flow of tourists, since tourism is the main service Albania is focusing on nowadays. On the other hand, if we leave aside this liberal logic and focus more on the citizens and their relations to the public sphere, this area is constantly reproducing itself with the same logic, but it is not producing a common collective culture of participation. Given the fact that these needs are not being addressed publicly shows that for citizens this is not yet perceived as a problem. Yet, it is from this experience that we understand where Tirana stands in this global network of communication and transportation, which is not by the side of Western cities as most of citizens would expect after transitional period ended.



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# *The REBUS project at Volga Tech: on the way towards student-centered learning*

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## **Abstract**

*The paper analyses the impact of the REBUS project (REady for BUSiness) on development of student-centered learning (SCL) at Volga State University of Technology, one of the two Russian universities participating in the EU funded Erasmus+ endeavor to introduce entrepreneurial education for engineering students. Along with mobility, lifelong learning and employability, SCL composes philosophical grounds of a European Higher Education Area. Such tools as ECTS, Diploma Supplement and Qualification Frameworks are all aimed to help students to achieve certain learning outcomes, or statements that describe the knowledge*

*or skills students acquire by the end of a particular assignment, and help students understand why that knowledge and those skills will be useful to them. The authors perceive SCL as a complex phenomenon, representing both a mindset and culture of teaching and learning. In practice, it deploys innovative methods of teaching, and fostering transferable skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and reflecting thinking. The Russian government signed the Bologna declaration in 2003, thus giving path to series of reforms aimed at modernization of national university system, and increase of global competitiveness of Russian higher education institutions. Since that, Russia has taken extensive efforts to adjust its higher education system to the European standards. One of the most prominent steps was move towards Bachelor's - Master's – Postgraduate learning cycles in the vast majority of universities, along with introduction of mobility programmes, ECTS-like credit transfer system and Diploma Supplement. However, not too much has been changed at programme and classroom level to make learning process more student-centered. The authors argue that REBUS project with its intense use of blended learning, personalized tools for validation of competences and skills, and international mobility has created a new type of student-teacher relationship within one piloting programme, and can serve a good example of SCL in practice.*

**Key words:** *higher education, student-centered learning, Bologna Process, international mobility*

## **Student-centered learning: a didactic concept or a political paradigm?**

Student-centered learning (or SCL) is a complex phenomenon that is causing vigorous debates among academics in Europe and far beyond. In fact, the Bologna Process did not deal directly with SCL from the outset. Instead, the key principles of SCL are broken down into smaller action lines, and the concept itself was only substantially included in some official communique (e.g. the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Bologna Process ministerial conference, 2009), and no official definition of SCL for the Bologna Process documents was put forward.

Eventually, however, the Bologna Process has come to include several elements which can help to establish a functioning SCL system. Many of these are tools which offer students increased flexibility and allow for better visibility of the qualifications that students gain, enabling increased comparability and compatibility across the European Higher Education Area. These tools also prove to be helpful in fostering SCL, since Bologna-inspired reforms also provide an opportunity for change, replacing some of the more traditionally rigid elements in higher education.

In fact, SCL composes philosophical grounds of a European Higher Education Area, as it is embedded into such areas as academic mobility, lifelong learning and employability. Such tools as European Credit Transfer System, mobility support programmes (of which the Erasmus+ is especially noteworthy), Diploma Supplement and Qualification Frameworks are all aimed to help students to achieve certain learning outcomes, or statements that describe the knowledge or skills students acquire by the end of a particular assignment, and help students understand why that knowledge and those skills will be useful to them.

Within the EU, the most serious efforts to rethink the meaning and the future of SCL included the EU-funded project entitled “*Time for a New Paradigm in Education: Student-Centred Learning*” (T4SCL, 2009-2010), jointly led by the European Students’ Union (ESU) and Education International (EI). The T4SCL ideas were further developed in the project entitled PASCL (“*Peer Assessment of Student Centred Learning in Higher Education Institutions in Europe*”). Both projects operated with the developed SCL Toolkit (ESU, & EI, 2010a), which is still the most comprehensive modern manual on basics of SCL and use of it in practice.

There is a general acceptance across Europe that SCL started to be researched and analysed long before the first Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999 as one of the possible pedagogical approaches for higher education (ESU, & EI, 2010b, p.6). From philosophical point of view, SCL is broadly based on constructivism as a theory of learning, which is built on the idea that learners must construct and reconstruct knowledge in order to learn effectively, with learning being most effective when, as part of an activity, the learner experiences constructing a meaningful product. SCL is also akin to *transformative learning* which contemplates a process of qualitative change in the learner as an ongoing process of transformation which focuses on enhancing and empowering the learner, developing their critical ability (ESU, & EI, 2010a, p.2).

Paul Ashwin and Debbie McVitty (2012) in their approach towards SCL use the concept of student engagement, which can be realized in a variety of formats: in a wide range teaching and learning processes; in the scholarship of teaching and learning; in quality enhancement processes, in decision making processes; in learning communities (Ashwin, P. & McVitty, D., 2012, 344-345). Furthermore, conceptualizing the degree of student engagement, they highlight three broad degrees of engagement: *consultation* in which students engage with a fixed object that is not changed through their engagement; *partnership* in which students participate in the transformation of a pre-existing object of engagement; and *leadership* in which students create new objects of engagement (Ashwin, P. & McVitty, D., 2012, 346).

Nowadays the SCL Toolkit underlines a general acceptance across Europe that SCL is a learning approach, which focuses on the needs of the learner rather than

those of others involved in the educational process. It is also widely agreed that SCL ultimately has a far reaching impact on the design and flexibility of curricula, on course-content, on learning methods used and on consultation with students. It also provides understandable and practically proven checklist to access compatibility of academic programmes with basic principles of SCL.

For the sake of brevity, this article operates definition of SCL given in the Toolkit: “Student-Centered Learning represents both a mindset and a culture within a given higher education institution and is a learning approach which is broadly related to, and supported by, constructivist theories of learning. It is characterized by innovative methods of teaching which aim to promote learning in communication with teachers and other learners and which take students seriously as active participants in their own learning, fostering transferable skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking and reflective thinking” (ESU, & EI, 2010a, p. 4-5; Geven and Attard, 2012, p. 155). Reviewing use of SCL principles in the wider national context (the Russian Federation), and on the local level (university and piloting academic programme) will allow us to reconsider the real meaning of one particular Erasmus+ project – REBUS, which, in fact, occurred to be much deeper in its philosophy than just get the students *Ready for BUSINESS*.

## Russia’s higher education system in transition

As a participant of the Bologna process since 2003, the Russian Federation has taken extensive efforts to adjust its national higher education system to the standards and guidelines of the European Higher Education Area. In general, Russian higher education is characterized by a huge number of institutions (more than 700) and a relatively high extent of centralized regulation of the academic programmes’ delivery, structure and learning outcomes.

The Federal Law ‘On Education in the Russian Federation’ (in power since 2013) introduced and set the current multilevel structure for training of specialists with higher education:

*Bakalavr* (Bachelor’s level) — first cycle. Bachelor programmes have a standard duration of four years and are offered virtually in all fields of study with few exceptions (for example, medicine, which still keeps ‘old-fashioned’ five-year *Specialist Diploma*).

*Specialist or Magistr* (Master’s level) — second cycle. The duration of Master degree programmes delivered by Russian HEIs is usually two years. Master level programmes offer students a deeper and a wider perspective on related fields of study, and in-depth specialization in their majors. While Bachelor level



programmes are more practice-oriented, Master programmes provide students with competencies they will need for their future research or teaching activities.

*Aspirantura* ('Training of highly qualified staff', or post-graduate studies) — third cycle. The length of postgraduate training may vary from 3 up to 5 years depending on the profile of the programme. Postgraduate programmes contribute more to students' broader knowledge in pedagogy, methodology, research and development.

Thus, a typical learning path of a graduate can be realized by the following scheme "Bachelor-Master-Training of highly qualified staff" (Federal Centre for Educational Legislation, 2018).

Though the transition of the Russian HE to the three-cycle system is almost complete, approximately one hundred programmes in the specified majors (Medicine, Arts, etc.) still lead to the *Specialist* Diploma, which is a traditional form of Russian/Soviet higher education, comprising basic education with in-depth specialist training in the chosen area. Regular duration of a full-time programme is 5 years, or 6 years in a distance mode.

The Russian National Qualification Framework (NQF) is currently underway, being a subject for a vivid public discussion between the government, academic community, and business. The first project of the Russian NQF was proposed by the Ministry of Education and Science in close cooperation with the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs in 2007. Since then the framework has been publicly debated and approved in the process of devising occupational (Ministry of Labor) and educational standards (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation). The proposed framework comprises nine levels, compatible with the eight levels of the EQF, while the ninth (additional) level corresponds to the postdoctoral qualification (a *Doktor nauk* degree). Levels six through eight are relevant to the system of higher education in Russia, where *Bakalavr* (Bachelor) corresponds to level 6, and *Magistr* (Master) and *Specialist* to level 7. The framework also specifies the ways of achieving qualification levels. Each of the qualification levels is characterized by the system of descriptors. Level descriptors fall into the categories of knowledge, skills and competences. These categories are further described in terms of autonomy and responsibility, degree of complexity and knowledge content of a professional activity. The Russian draft NQF mainly serves for the purpose of defining qualification levels as well as for devising occupational standards. Therefore, the learning outcomes as seen in the Russian academic community (and bureaucracy) should be aligned with appropriate occupational standards set by the national Ministry of Labor.

Occupational standard, in turn, determines the qualification an individual should achieve to perform specific kind of a professional activity. The document specifies types of professional activities, general labor functions and qualification

requirements for chosen labor functions; moreover, it gives a description of knowledge, skills and competences a person should have to occupy a specific position.

In the absence of NQF, the quality assurance criteria in the Russian higher education are mainly set by the learning standards, or the Federal State Educational Standards (FSES). The FSES is a mandatory set of criteria (descriptors) for all state accredited educational programmes at all levels, from primary to higher education. The FSES actually shape the contents of education and establish the required quality of its content (curricula and syllabi); the teaching and support staff; the information provision of the teaching and research process (sources of information and different types of available support – printed and electronic – which correspond to the content of course programs as well as means of information transmission, storage and use); the actual knowledge and skills of graduates (minimum requirements in regard to the level of knowledge and skills).

The FSES are a subject to regular renewal; in higher education “Generation 3” standards have been in use since 2009, gradually transferring to the “Generation 3+”, and “Generation 4”. The “Generation 4” standard is more labor oriented as the part 7 of the Article 11 at the Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation” suggests “...the Federal State Educational Standards should be aligned with provisions of relevant occupational standards in terms of professional competences”.

The FSES system, however, has some exclusions: ten HEIs having the status of “the Federal University” and twenty-nine “National Research” universities, along with the two biggest and oldest Lomonosov’s Moscow State University and St. Petersburg State University enjoy the privilege to develop their own educational standards at all levels of higher education, although their learning standards cannot be below the corresponding requirements of the FSES. At the same time, these three groups of stronger HEIs, along with affiliated representatives of the academic community and employers now develop the FSES.

Thus, despite serious transformations since joining the EHEA, the higher education system of the Russian Federation is still strongly centralized, and gives almost no (if any) autonomy to HEIs in defining learning outcomes of their academic programmes. Even being practice oriented and using modern ways and technical tools of teaching, the existing system is, in most cases, very teacher centered, and constrains dissemination of other Bologna innovations, such as student-centered learning, or student engagement. Under such circumstances, international, especially European inter-university cooperation projects is one of the few windows of opportunity left to experience SCL.



## Volga Tech in the REBUS project

Volga State University of Technology (Volga Tech), established in 1932, is a nationally recognized public university under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Higher Education and Science of the Russian Federation. As a state-run establishment, Volga Tech follows the national guidelines for higher education development policies set by the national (federal) legislation on education, which, in turn, includes Russia's obligations within the framework of the European Higher Education Area and the Bologna process.

Within a changing structure of national higher education system Volga Tech remains its status of a 'regular' public university, operating primarily as a school of engineering, and facing the challenges of stiff competition both at local and national levels, where huge new entities such as Federal and National Research universities started to expand since 2006 and 2009 respectively, having priority funding from the government. Budget cuts for education made the government strengthen its yearly monitoring of HEIs activities and efficiency that also makes regional HEIs be more flexible in their educational and economic policies, and more internationally open. With its student population (2018) of about 9,000 (of whom about 5,000 are full-time, and more than 960 are international) Volga Tech is a mid-sized university, typical for a regional capital city like Yoshkar-Ola (population 260,000). Its structure includes two branches (in small towns Mariinski Posad and Volzhsk), and two autonomous sub-divisions (the Higher College "Polytechnic" and Yoshkar-Ola College of Agriculture), providing academic programmes in professional training (fit to levels 4 and 5 of the EQF and draft NQF of Russia).

As most of the Russian state universities, Volga Tech has accomplished its transition to the three-cycle system (Bachelor-Master-Training of highly qualified staff), and to academic credit system required by the "Generation 3" of FSES. Since 2011, Volga Tech has developed its own model of the European Diploma Supplement to promote mobility of its staff and students (however, like in most of HEIs throughout Russia, it is still issued on demand at the costs of an applicant).

Having a solid background of four implemented Tempus joint European projects (since 2005), and being the very first Russian school of engineering to open its Jean Monnet Center of Excellence (2016), Volga Tech joined the REBUS consortium with a serious intent to widen the scope of applications of the European expertise and practices, as well as to expand the range of its international partnerships (see List of Tempus projects (2019)). The Erasmus+ REBUS project (REady for BUSiness: Integrating and validating practical entrepreneurship skills in engineering and ICT studies) was considered a logical continuation of series of international endeavors – predominantly EU funded – aimed at further integration



into the European Higher Education Area, enhancing the quality of teaching, and gradual turn to the SCL.

## **REBUS goes student-centered**

As Volga Tech always had forestry and environmental science among its study and research priorities, the Master's degree programme "International Cooperation in Forestry and Nature Management" was chosen to perform in a new Erasmus+ capacity building project: a standing out application in comparison with the majority of other REBUS applications from Russia and Western Balkans. The programme teaching staff took part in series of trainings, both online and on-site (in Sarajevo, Vienna, Palermo, and Essen). The core target group comprised 14 students of this particular programme (including 7 internationals – citizens of Uzbekistan).

From the very beginning, it was clear that the REBUS would bring a lot of innovations in the didactic approaches, making the programme more student centered. The REBUS component of the Master's programme was aimed to bring the key elements of entrepreneurship and innovation to the programme curricula, partly as 'regular mode' classes (lectures and seminars), and partly in e-learning format, using the computing equipment and software purchased and provided within the project (*Mahara* and *Level 5*). Worthy of note, the REBUS team at Volga Tech actually could not intervene into already existing (linear) curricula of any Master's degree programme; therefore, it was only possible to offer the entrepreneurship related courses and classes only as electives. In practice, some key topics raised within REBUS were quite smoothly incorporated into the syllabi of several subjects, taught almost exclusively by the project team members.

Keeping in mind the focus of all three Master's degree programmes on Environmental Issues, Environment Protection, Forestry and Ecology, etc., the set of themes covered within REBUS should have include eco-tourism, sustainable urban forestry, sustainable forest management, monitoring of environment and natural resources, economics of forest complex (e.g. timber production, forest protection, forest infrastructure), international ecological certification, wildfires monitoring and protection, use of renewable energy sources (e.g. biofuel), and many other. The project team has developed a didactic framework, which implied that by the end of the project students should be able to detect and assess the entrepreneurial opportunities in the field of forestry, nature management, landscape design and architecture. They should have also obtained the skills necessary to implement their own entrepreneurship projects, such as needs analysis, strategic and operational planning, time management, financial issues, other 'soft skills' (proposal writing



and presentation, communication skills (including command in English), team work); basics of copyright and patenting their innovative ideas and products. The successful implementation of students' entrepreneurial project implied they had mastered their capabilities in the chosen fields of expertise (such as Forestry, Urban Ecosystems, etc.) during their Master's study. As for the attitudes, students were supposed to develop their personal motivation for entrepreneurship and innovation, readiness to risk in developing a new product or service, ability to negotiate and debate on their project proposals, flexibility in decision making and finding compromises in troublesome situations.

Within REBUS a stronger accent was made on individual student projects (with opportunity to choose and adjust the topic individually), and incorporation of entrepreneurial vision and innovative approaches towards Forestry and Nature Management in students' Master's theses. For example, students could consider the possible applications of their project as a core idea of a start-up; for those who took part in international study visit the latter condition was a must.

Needless to say that the use of e-learning tools within the REBUS project was already a good start for trying more student-centered approaches in teaching and learning. Personalization of students' profiles in *Mahara* and *Level 5* platforms give the learners a degree of individual academic freedom and the educational environment for self-expression they could hardly obtain during regular classes at the Institute of Forestry and Nature Management. One should also take into consideration the orientation on an individual project (at the end of the course), and healthy competition for being included into the group for international study visit – in case of Volga Tech, to the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany.

The international study visit was an intense and exciting enterprise that lasted for 10 days but actually became a life changing experience for eleven Volga Tech students. They worked in international teams (Russian-Bosnian-Albanian-Kosovar), studying various aspects of entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity in relation to their field of knowledge. The educational interaction within the groups and with the teaching coordinator was based on the principles of design thinking - the methodology of creative, rather than analytical solutions for engineering, business and other vitally important spheres.

Every day of the study week was devoted to one stage of design thinking: emphasize – design – ideate – prototype and test. Eventually, students presented their developed, elaborated and tested ideas. So, Volga Tech undergraduates participated in the preparation and public defense of three group projects, one of which, the "Eco-Museum", won a special prize in the nomination "The best project documentation". According to the feedback from the participants, they learned a lot of new and interesting things that they would use in their further work and studies. The REBUS team members from Duisburg-Essen, Sarajevo, and Vienna

have effectively projected their entrepreneurial mindset on students. As a result, something that initially seemed impossible or unrealistic for learners was gradually turned into real, almost ready-to-sell product.

Hence, participation in REBUS studies and international mobility allowed students to learn and put into practice new methods, technologies, approaches, but what is more important, interaction with students from other countries, search for a common solution to the difficulties arising within co-working, operating in a team altogether contribute to the establishment of friendly relations between young people, and therefore, to some extent, between the countries involved. For 40 students who took part in the REBUS study visit (or three times more, taking into account visits to Graz and Palermo), the world will never be the same again – it has become brighter and friendlier.

The SCL Toolkit gives an opportunity to estimate the depth of changes in learning process of the REBUS piloting student group. Using the “SCL Checklist”, one can assess if learners are really engaged in consultations on the programme content and methodology used, able to give their feedback on the quality of educational process, have a clear vision on learning outcomes and workload (ECTS compatible), and many other options (altogether 45 descriptors) (ESU, & EI, 2010b, 11-14). Such self-assessment shows that fundamental principles of student-centered learning are already in use with REBUS students, if not at the university level but at programme and classroom level.

## Conclusions

Implementing the REBUS project in a mid-sized Russian engineering university like Volga Tech has brought to light serious problems, albeit quite typical for a country, which higher education system is still in transition towards the EHEA, and where principles of SCL are still not in the focus of the national Ministry of Higher Education and Science. Previous Tempus experience of the university project team was of a great value when used in the newly designed Erasmus+ capacity building framework. Measuring the efficiency of the REBUS project should not only include formal outcomes (such as statistics on mobility flows, number of new courses and publications, units of technical equipment purchased, etc.). A project focused on entrepreneurship and innovation must also stress upon intangible outcomes: networking, development of a corporate or professional community culture, changes in attitude and mind set. This is what Erasmus+ has been designed and is working for.

Placing students in the center of the REBUS teaching of entrepreneurship and innovation was probably the most challenging – both mentally and technically – and



the most exciting part of the project. Strongly supported by the European partners, Volga Tech has developed new patterns of interaction in the classroom, and new organizational models of student research and practice. At least thirty students went through REBUS related courses, of whom eleven used their opportunity to study in Europe, although for a short while. However, as student feedback shows, for many of them it was a life changing experience. Moreover, engaging not only Russian (domestic) but also Uzbekistani (international) students into the REBUS activities, and giving them a unique chance to be placed in the center of study process, Volga Tech has promoted dissemination of SCL in Central Asia.

Indeed, Volga Tech – or, at least, the REBUS team – has experienced a true *capacity building*, as during the course of the project all teachers, administrators and students involved have increased their capacities in programme planning, course design, use of distance learning tools, foreign languages, to say nothing about intercultural communications. Some of the key REBUS elements, such as unique modes of (self) validation of entrepreneurial skills and competences, represented a novelty for Volga Tech, even though the Volga State University of Technology enjoys the reputation of one of the most advanced HEIs throughout the Russian Federation in using e-learning tools and technologies.

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# *The impact of new media in the promotion of protected areas as tourism destination (Albania)* \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Abstract**

*Tourism sector have become lately a key sector for the Albanian economy. Promotion and marketing are identified as main pillars to tourism sector. Protected Areas as a tourism destination is a new concept to Albanian citizens and stakeholders given isolation of these areas during communism regime. On the other hand the promotion of PAs to enhance tourism is also a new practice followed by government and stakeholders, during the last decade only. A crucial phenomena of the present decade reshaping the world, is the worldwide accessibility to the internet. New media is increasing immensely its usage and is gaining significant ground each year toward traditional media. This study will bring light on how new media influence and impacts the promotion of PAs in Albania as tourism destinations, as researchers have called for further studies in developing countries on this field of study.*

**Key words:** *Protected area, new media, social media, domestic tourism, promotion*

# INTRODUCTION

## *Introduction*

“Albania is truly blessed with spectacular natural and cultural heritage, the backbone of its tourism sector, a sector which has shown impressive growth over recent years,”  
**UNWTO1 Secretary-General, Taleb Rifai, December 2014**

Worldwide recently seems to have a reallocation of media investments away from “traditional media” channels as TV, radio, print or OOH. Nowadays in Albania, new media, as per the findings of studies done by researchers and business companies, is considered a key tool on promoting the products and services, but also other forms of communication. eMarketer reports that, total digital media spend increased from \$16.9 billion and 6% of total media investment in 2007 to \$83 billion and 36.7% in total media investment in 2016, according to eMarketer. McCann Tirana (2018)<sup>2</sup> reported for this research, that ad budget share of digital media at national level has increased from 3% in 2012 to approximately 12 % in 2017, by their agency estimations based on the monitoring data. The tools of new media in country are rapidly embraced even from central and local government, public sector and their high ranking representatives. In a mapping done this study all Ministries in Republic of Albania do have a public page in Facebook and Twitter, and all 61 Municipalities in country do have a public page in Facebook.

Tourism in Albania is set a key priority sector by the Albanian Government<sup>3</sup>, given the crucial direct impact tourism gave to the Albanian economy on the recent years. Albanian Government (September 2017) proclaimed as main direction the urge of tourism as an important economical and development source. The main goal set is a sustainable tourism in 365 days. One of the five pillars the Albanian Government have supported the program 2017-2021 for tourism chapter is the marketing and promotion through digital and social media at regional and international level. Which clearly shows, that new media is identified a real potential for the promotion of this prior sector of the Albanian economy, but also identifies that the domestic tourism is not considered yet a priority.

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<sup>1</sup> World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), UN agency

<sup>2</sup> McCann Tirana, Advertising Agency , part of McCann Group global network, contributed for this research with their data and statistics

<sup>3</sup> Republic of Albania, The Government Program 2017 – 2021 [accessed February 2018 <https://kryeministria.al/files/PROGRAMI.pdf> ]

## *Tourism impact in Albanian Economy*

“Located in the Mediterranean region, Albania could well be Europe’s last tourism secret.” **Export.gov 20174**

European Commission (June 2017) reports that Albania is experiencing a gradual economic upturn that is expected to continue in 2017-2019. Since 2014, Albania’s economy has steadily improved and economic growth reached 3.8% in 2017<sup>5</sup>. The trade balance improved thanks to the good performance of tourism,. In economic development for 2016 the World Bank reports that Albania’s economy expanded 3.4% in 2016, supported by robust domestic demand. Net exports contributed 2.1 % points, driven by tourism services exports<sup>6</sup> that expanded significantly in 2016 from a relatively low base and is expected to continue performing well.

The tourism is one of the key contributors on the Albanian economy in several directions as growth of GDP, new work places, exports and investments and relative contributor on other sectors. World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) forecasts that Albania in a decade (2018 – 2028) can be able to turn tourism as the main contributor of the GDP.

WTTC (2018) reports the data of Travel and Tourism contribution for 2017. The direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was 8.5% of total, and is forecast 9.3% by 2028. While the total contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was 26.2% of GDP in 2017, and is forecast to be by 28.9% of GDP in 2028. In 2017 Travel & Tourism directly supported 93,500 jobs (7.7% of total employment) and is expected to 111,000 jobs (8.8% of total employment) in 2028. While total contribution 24.1% of total employment (291,500 jobs). This is expected to rise to 344,000 jobs in 2028 (27.3% of total). Visitor exports generated 54.2% of total exports in 2017 and is expected to go in 2028, 62.2% of total. Travel & Tourism investment in 2017 was 7.5% of total investment and forecasts to go in 2028, 8.2% of total.

The tourism law has been going through many changes during the period of post-communism. The actual Tourism Law, December 2017, Article 1 as the main scope of the law the promotion of Albania, as a touristic destination for foreigner and domestic visitors, relying on the development of a sustainable tourism.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.export.gov/article?id=Albania-Travel-and-Tourism>

<sup>5</sup> The World Fact Book – CIA [accessed March 2018]

<sup>6</sup> World Bank “Albania-Snapshot-Fall2017” <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/805501507748388634/Albania-Snapshot-Fall2017.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Tourism Law, Republic of Albania [accessed February 2018] [http://www.qbz.gov.al/Ligje.pdf/turizem/Ligj\\_93-2015\\_,27072015\\_%20perditesuar\\_%202017.pdf](http://www.qbz.gov.al/Ligje.pdf/turizem/Ligj_93-2015_,27072015_%20perditesuar_%202017.pdf)



Cvetkoska & Barišić (2017) findings show that the most efficient country in the period of six years (from 2010 to 2015) was Albania among all countries of Balkans studied in their research.

The government have been “aggressive” during recent years in promoting tourism regionally and internationally, and the statistics show that this strategy has offered a good result.

### ***Risks and Challenges***

Yet tourism strategy path in country seems to be unclear and unsafe. “From 1990 up to date many strategies proposed by international donors have been refused or not approved, and the ones that have been considered were partially implemented due to lack of capacities, expertise or willing” said a representative officer of one of the biggest international donors in country for tourism sector.

She emphasized that the shifts government does from a strategy to a new one, costs money and extent lack of trust among stakeholders. A high ranking representative in the Ministry of Tourism and Environment (MTE) recognize the situation and claim that due to the new tourism law entered in force December 2017, a new strategy is need.

IMF (2017) reports that though Albania has benefitted from the recent tourism boom in the region, the outlook for exports remains challenging. On the other hand, European Commission (EC) reports that the services sector development contributes 70% of the gross value added. EC emphasizes tourism sector in particular is identified with significant development potential, but is impeded by a number of challenges linked to the lack of skills of tourism professionals, low accessibility of tourism services, the absence of a sustainable natural and cultural offer, etc. The measure to standardize the tourism sector, if implemented successfully, could be a driving factor for competitiveness.

The bank industry in country see a high perspective on the sector. “Tourism has high potential, but and a masterplan for the development of the tourism would give access to a structured development” suggests Blanc, Frederic (2017)<sup>8</sup>. EU Delegation in Albania (2018) also seek a Master Plan for sustainable tourism in country. EU Ambassador in Albania Romana Vlahutin, underlined that “a national Tourism Master Plan is a must”<sup>9</sup>.

“The government have no official strategy for tourism yet. This means lack a clear vision for the sustainable development of sector. There can’t be marketing and promotion, if there is no strategy” said Rajmonda Lajthia, Executive Director of ATOA<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Blanc, Frederic, CEO, Societe Generale Albania Bank, Interview for Monitor.al Magazine

<sup>9</sup> Round table “Support to Tourism companies in Albania, organizer European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)

<sup>10</sup> Rajmonda Lajthia, Executive Director, Albanian Tour Operator Association (ATOA), Interview with Ana Kekezi, March 2018, Tirana



## *A shadowy domestic tourism*

At the heart of tourism is the excitement of new cultural experiences <sup>11</sup>

The statistics from the National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) report that 5.1 million foreign visitors visited our country in 2017, + 8.1 % more tourists than the previous year (2016). Monitor.al (2018) reports that the boom of 2017 from foreigner visitors and tourist may not be stable and on the other hand WTTC (2017) has defined Albania as a high risk country, as it has a poor infrastructure network in quality and quantity, a threat for the development and sustainability of tourism.

On MTE's Draft Strategy of Tourism 2018 – 2022 is identified that aiming a sustainable development in this sector leads the strategy. Though a clear direction for domestic tourism was not identified.

WTTC (2018) reports that domestic travel spending generated 24.6% of direct Travel & Tourism GDP in 2017 compared with 75.4% for visitor exports. On the other hand, Bank of Albania (2018) reports that 1.3 billion euro have been the spending of Albanians outside country, +11% increase comparing year 2016. INSTAT (Institute of Statistics, Republic of Albania), reports that 5.18 million Albanian citizens have traveled outside country, +12% comparing 2016. Figure 1 identifies a low interest of domestic visitors in cultural attractions.

**FIGURE 1:** Visitors in cultural attractions 2014- November 2017

Visitors	2014	2015	2016	Nov. 2017	2017 vs 2014
Domestic	198,536	148,669	185878	202557	2%
Foreigners	156,446	238,187	282157	349390	123%
Total	354,982	386,856	468035	551947	55%

Source: Ministry of Culture, Republic of Albania, Jan 2018

The Albania Tour Operators & Travel Agencies Association (ATOA) reports that given the non-secure path the Albanian tourism is having on attracting the foreigner visitors, a proper mid-term strategy is urgent need, to attract Albanian citizens to domestic tourism. They claim that the Bank of Albania reports should be taken in consideration and proper evaluation is need, to understand how much money can stay in-home<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Theunissen, P., Mersham, G., & Rahman, K. (2010). Chapter 5: The New Media, Cultural Transformation,

<sup>12</sup> Scan TV ,Studio Interview with Kliton Gërzhani, Chairman ATOA (March 2018)

ATOA concerns are connected mainly to a low seasonality of Albanian tourism, even though a high touristic potential for 365 days tourism and the potential of niche segments, to encourage and attract domestic visitors. RisiAlbania (2014 p. 4) has identified why Albania agonizes from a short seasonality. In their finding country suffers from a numerous limitations such as poor or absence of infrastructure, absence of information for market, poor customer service, and absence of the set standards, poor marketing and a touristic product that often does not meet the expectations of the customers. There is no survey on domestic tourism and efforts are needed to improve the business register (EU, 2016)<sup>13</sup>. GIZ (2016) reports that 98% of tourists who have been interviewed; have responded positively to the expectations of accommodation in Albanian Alps, but in their research is not defined either they are foreign or domestic tourists. While on the survey done for this study 64% of the respondents of Q1 answered that accommodation quality vs price is the main reason, they do not prefer to choose domestic tourism.

On the Q2 survey participants on this research, 16 out of 16 responded that focus on domestic tourism should be immediate from the government and public sector and 11 out of 16 responded that government has worked far better with the promotion on foreign tourist's target.

Leonard Maci said that domestic tourism will be on National Agency of Tourism (NAT) focus, but he acknowledged that yet NAT have not worked with a proper strategy or plan on this direction. He claimed that the efforts and tools of NAT during (2013 – 2017) have been focused to reach the market beyond borders, as a good economic potential.

### *Internet fast penetration*

During the last decade Albania has witnessed an outstanding level of access to internet. Albanian Institute of Media (AIM, 2015) identifies that the real growth of internet in Albania started after the privatization of ALBtelecom Company in 2007. The Albanian Government vision on access to internet has been a primary goal since 2010. Two main priorities set (2010) “Internet for all” and “Albania in the Internet age”.

Electronic and Postal Communications Authority (AKEP) on the Annual Report of 2010 estimates that the number of families that have broadband internet access until the end of 2010 is about 110 thousand or about 13.7% of families, while it is estimated to be over 10.000 business subscribers. Based on these data, the number of broadband lines per 100 inhabitants is about 3.7%, compared to 2.5% that was by the end of 2009. AKEP(2018)<sup>14</sup> reports that the number of active users Broadband in internet from mobile networks on (Oct-Dec 2017) was around

<sup>13</sup> European Commission, Albania 2016 Report

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.akep.al> [accessed March, April 2018]

2 million, with an increase of +20.4 % with same period in 2016 and an increase of approximately +124% vs. 2014. The number of customers Broadband accessed in Internet from fix line networks was around 295.000 having an increase of +10.6% with same period of 2016 and approximately +42% comparing with 2014. This data show the fast penetration of internet, especially the increase from mobile networks. Internetworldstats.com (2018) reports for Albania that 1.932.024 or 66.4% of population are internet users and 1.400.000 are Facebook users<sup>15</sup>

### *Protected Areas in Albania*

We aim to have the Albanian tourism in a real development industry  
**(Blendi Klosi 2017)**<sup>16</sup>

A protected area (PA) is a clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values. (IUCN Definition 2008)

Albania a small sized country is very rich in biological diversity. The tremendous diversity of ecosystems and habitats supports about 3,200 species of vascular plants, 2,350 species of non-vascular plants, and 15,600 species of invertebrates and vertebrates, many of which are threatened at the global or European level (Ministry of Environment, *Annual Report 2015* Republic of Albania).

On the first Forestry Law, Republic of Albania (1923), there are clear elements that define protection and special for various species and fauna and for controlled hunting. National Agency of Environment (NAE) (2014) reports that in 1940 Kune-Vain, Lezhë was proclaimed hunting reserve and as per the IUCN definition, this one may be identified as the very first PA in Albania.

The legal, political, economic and social contexts for tourism in and around protected areas vary widely across the globe, yet there are many common elements and a diversity of experiences that can enrich the understanding of those involved (IUCN 2018).

The first law of Protected Areas in Republic of Albania<sup>17</sup> entered in force in 2002 and was reviewed in 2017<sup>18</sup> to align with the EU directives and allow to reach the goal of 17% PAs of the country territory by 2020.

The National Agency for Protected Areas (NAPA)<sup>19</sup> manages the national system of protected areas in Albania, whereas day-to-day management is delegated to 12 Regional Administrations for Protected Areas (RAPA)

<sup>15</sup> internetworldstats.com, statistics reported for June 2017

<sup>16</sup> Minister of Tourism and Environment, Mr. Blendi Klosi, Press Statement, 06 October 2017

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.qbz.gov.al/doc.jsp?doc=docs/Ligj%20Nr%208906%20Dat%C3%AB%2006-06-2002.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Law 81/2017 [http://www.qbz.gov.al/botime/fletore\\_zyrtare/2017/PDF-2017/116-2017.pdf](http://www.qbz.gov.al/botime/fletore_zyrtare/2017/PDF-2017/116-2017.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> The Agency was established by Act of Council of Ministers , February 2015



As per the categories set internationally by IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), in country there are actually 798 PAs extended in a total of **460,060 ha or 4.600 km<sup>2</sup>** of the country territory.

**FIGURE 2:** Protected Areas in Albania, Year 2017

Category	Description	No.
I	Restricted areas	2
II	National Park	15
III	Natural Monument or Feature	750
IV	Habitat/Species Management Area	22
V	Protected Landscape/ Seascape	5
VI	Protected area with sustainable use of natural resources	4
		798

Source: National Agency of Protected Areas (NAPA)

NAPA reports that Albania has recently made significant progress in expanding the network of PAs from 5.2% of the country's territory in 2005 to 16.02% of the country's territory in 2017. The majority of them have been designated in the category nature monument (750), but National Parks do cover approximately 210,501 ha or 46% of the total.

Stynes (1997) suggests that economic impact is part of a group of analyses that can be used to evaluate tourism in PAs (other analyses include: fiscal impact analysis, financial analysis, demand analysis, benefit cost analysis, feasibility study and environmental impact assessment). In this study, such factor is not taken in consideration given the primary aim of the study and on the other hand the gaps PAs face in this perspective. The official data of MTE provided for this research show that 6.000 euro are the PAs incomes generated for year 2015 and only 48.000 euro for year 2017. Considering the visitor statistics of NAPA, there is a discordance between data and money generated. "PAs in Albania are facing many challenges and none of them have ticketing system, except National Park of Butrint, protected by UNESCO" stressed a high ranking official of MTE.

Natura 2000 (2016)<sup>20</sup> on the assessment conducted has identified tourism as a potential risk for Albanian PAs. In their research infrastructure development for tourism purpose have been identified as a threat in 27 protected areas (50%), though at a low level. Threats from recreational activities and tourism were reported for 31 protected areas in Albania (76%).

<sup>20</sup> Natura 2000 is the largest coordinated network of protected sites in the world. [www.natura.al](http://www.natura.al)

## Marketing strategies for the PAs as Tourism Destination

NAPA since it was established on 2015 is missing a promotion and marketing strategy for PAs as tourism destinations, a high ranking official confirms.

Leonard Maci, Director of Marketing, National Agency of Tourism(NAT)<sup>21</sup> said that on the promotion and marketing strategies to regional and international markets, PAs have been promoted as a competitive advantage due to a unique experience, the wilderness, virgin landscapes, flora and fauna richness they offer. Rajmonda Lajthia, ATOA also confirms that tour operators never avoid PAs on their touristic guides, even on daily ones. Villa Jose (2018) argues that the marketing industry has been focused — and somewhat obsessed — with digital for the better part of the last decade. The discussion and insights offered in the segmentation sections of the report, highlight the importance of using a robust segmentation strategy in order to understand visitors and potential visitors and the experiences they see (Reid 2008). “We do not have yet a marketing and promotion strategy short-term or middle-term one. The actual communication plans applied by NAPA, do not rely on a segmentation strategy or any previous research done for this purpose” said Denisa Xhoga, Communication Specialist, NAPA<sup>22</sup>.

Reid (2008) proposes that information promoting national parks is disseminated by a wide range of organizations, including protected area agencies, visitor information centers, tour operators, state tourism organizations, regional tourism organizations and corporate businesses.

NAPA has clearly identified as main target the domestic visitors. The NAPA statistics show that 2/3 of the total are domestic visitors and 1/3 are foreigners. The Agency has supported the raising awareness and promotion and in two main directions (i)Media communication and promotion and (ii) extensive collaboration with local communities of the PAs. (NAPA, Annual report 2017). NAPA reports that on 2015 there were not any information center or infopoints accesable. “Only promotion and marketing can make domestic visitors attracted to Albanian tourism. The potential our country is huge, but unfortunately albanians are not awared yet of this potential.” said Fation Plaku<sup>23</sup>

NAPA statistics reports (see Figure 3) a boom of visitors in PAs sites. NAPA reports that for 2017 statistic 62.8% are of daily visitors and the rest accomodates at least one night. The most visited category by 50% of visitors is Category II, national parks.

<sup>21</sup> Leonard Maci, Marketing Director, National Agency of Tourism (NAT), Interview with Ana Kekezi March 2018, Tirana

<sup>22</sup> Denisa Xhoga, Communication Specialist, National Agency of Protected Areas (NAPA), Interview with Ana Kekezi, March 2018, Tirana

<sup>23</sup> Fation Plaku, Travel & Tourism Influencer, Interview with Ana Kekezi, March 2018, Tirana



**FIGURE 3: Number of Visitors in PAs**

Visitors	2015	Jan-Sept 2017
Domestic Visitors	359.937	1.489.815
Foreign Visitors	112.080	552.101
Total	471.967	2.041.916

Source: National Agency of Protected Areas (NAPA)

Denisa Xhoga claims that the rangers at national level are offering free guides to visitors as a promotional tool to make them come back and spread their experience. “NAPA have no annual budget for pure advertising on traditional media or new media. These are considered up to date as free of charge promotional tools” said Denisa.

Rajmonda Lajthia, ATOA claims that the tour operators, as main stakeholder on the sector have been clear with their demands and their proposals for the development of PAs as tourism destinations, but they remain doubtful if government implement them on the strategy.

## **A “cool, many to many media” for the promotion of PAs**

Digital transformation is a journey, not a one off-event. McLuhan (1964) is well known for the postulate “the medium is the message”. He proposes that the media, not the content that they carry, should be the focus of study. McLuhan (1964) identified two types of media: “hot” media and “cool” media. As per the definition the author proposes, cool media, a more hearing focus, are the ones that need high participation from users, due to their low definition (the receiver/user must fill in missing information). Conversely, hot media, a more visual focus, are low in audience involvement due to their high resolution or definition. Where new media stands? The researchers suggest that new media in the way it engages it’s audiences to fill the gaps and create a fuller picture, may be defined with no doubt “cool” media.

New Media is new concept in marketing theory and developed after 1991 the www was presented to the world.<sup>24</sup> Nowadays industry seeks to gain from the advantages of two-way dialogue with consumers primarily through the Internet. Manovich, Lev (2002) proposes new media in 8 perspectives, arguing that new media is born in early 1920, differently from now, where information and technology are the basement with base on Web 2.0 technology. Törenli, (2005: 159) suggests that one of the main characteristics of new media, the flows of information

<sup>24</sup> The World Wide Web was invented by **Tim Berners-Lee** and **Robert Cailliau** in 1990.

can be possible between user groups or individual users. Piontek, Dorota (2014) proposes that new media, especially the Internet, can be defined as a channel of communication in terms of technology or as a platform of resources, co-created by all users. Piontek reveals that in new media there are three types of them: institutional (similar to the traditional model), social - the different social actors that through access to new media have become independent from institutional media agency, and individuals - each user of new media, who has the need to actively co-create them. Crosbie, Vin (2002) described on his study three different kinds of communication media. (i) Interpersonal media as “one to one”, (ii) Mass media as “one to many”, and (iii) New Media as Individuation Media or “many to many”.

This paper uses the term “new media” with the meaning which is widely accepted among researcher. Social media maybe the most well-known tool of new media is accepted by researchers to have two main concepts: Web 2.0 and user site (Rouse, 2013). Web 2.0 applications support the creation of informal users’ networks facilitating the flow of ideas and knowledge by allowing the efficient generation, dissemination, sharing and editing of informational content (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). User generated content can be defined as information that users provide or share on a website. The information might be a photo, video, blog or discussion forum post, poll response or comment made through a social media web (Constantinides, E., & Fountain, S. J. (2008). There are still many ongoing debates and discussions regarding social media’s universal definition; as social media has been transforming and merging into the evolving development of New Media (Solis 2010).

“Lately, the marketers in Albania are mostly focused on social media comparing other tools of new media” said Elvin Civici, Online Account Manager<sup>25</sup>. Nevila Popa, tourism expert, emphasizes the usage of online tools, social media networks, blogs etc are determinative for Albanian tourism; not only as destination, but also for the foreign investments<sup>26</sup>. Rajmonda Lajthia stress the importance of social media in the promotion of domestic tourism. She claims that social media gain weight during last years, as per the high time consuming spent in social platforms. She identifies that most of tour operators in country have shifted from traditional media in online marketing, having a positive outcome. McCann Agency report that for 2017 Albanians consumed 143 minutes/day on social media and 91 minutes/day on online news portals.

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<sup>25</sup> Elvin Civici, Online Account Manager, McCann Tirana, Interview with Ana Kekezi February 2018, Tirana

<sup>26</sup> Interview for Monitor.al, January 2018 [accessed February 2018 <http://www.monitor.al/turizmi-ne-2018-ne-trend-pozitiv-problem-infrastruktura-2/> ]



## METHODOLOGY

### Methods applied

This research adopts a mixed method approach to achieving its objectives. For this research are used primary and secondary data. Piontek, Dorota (2014) suggest that in researching new media, all methods and techniques developed for examining old media, are useful, especially the quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The insights that generated from the qualitative data collected in field were highly beneficial to the process of data analysis and interpretation. Triangulating the findings provided evidence for the study to make sense of phenomenon under study (Mathison 1988, p. 15)

#### *Data Collection Tools*

Primary data are significant information to lead this research; and secondary data have been employed as valuable especially the governmental and public sector statistics, reports and data.

The following methods of primary data were employed to carry out the research:

- a) Observation (conducted in sites of 2 PAs Divjak-Karavasta National Park, Fier RAPA & Shebenik-Jabllanicë, Elbasan RAPA in natural settings, February 2018)
- b) Semi-structured interviews with 14 participants (9 employees/civil servants in MTE, NTA, NAPA and RAPAs; 1 official of UNDP Albania, Denisa Xhoga, communication specialist, NAPA; Leonard Maci, Director of Marketing, NAT; Rajmonda Lajthia, Executive Director of ATOA; Elvin Civici, Online Account Manager, McCann Tirana )
- c) In deep interviews with 3 participants (Ardian Koci, Director, RAPA of Fier; Fatmir Brazhda Former Director, RAPA of Elbasan; Fation Plaku, Photographer, travel and tourism Blogger and Influencer)
- d) Online Surveys; Q1 (109 citizen respondents); Q2 (16 respondents employee/civil servants in central and local government bodies directly related to tourism sector); Q3 (6 participants; 3 webdesigners 3 online content experts), Q4 (6 participants Influencers & Bloggers living in Tirana)
- e) Observation of Internet sites (webportals, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, forums, photo and video sharing) (similar to netnography proposed by Kozinets, R. but simpler)
- f) Official data and documents for this research by MTE, NAPA and NAT



## Challenges & Limitations

*Confidentiality* – Ethical considerations are critical in research. Many of participants in interviews required to protect their identity in this research. Working on central and local government make them uncomfortable to reveal their identity. This barrier may present difficulties to other researchers to understand in deep the primary data.

*Time Barrier* - The surveys conducted for this research were questionnaires' sent electronically in random citizens, assuming them as potential domestic visitors. The sample of 109 respondents is considered a limited size and the Q1 maybe would have given a better result, if it would be conducted with visitors in PA's sites.

*Data analyses* – No data measurements or any research at national level was identified to support this study.

## COOL MEDIA IMPACT ON ALBANIAN PROTECTED AREAS

### Not military zones: Protected Areas as touristic destinations

“Protected areas before ‘90s have been considered by state as isolated areas. Recently the government, stakeholders and community in country agreed, that access to them will assure sustainability and development to the economy and bring boost to the domestic tourism” **Lefter, Koka (2016)**<sup>27</sup>.

PAs in Albania during communism regime and even in post-communism (1990-2005) have been considered as isolated areas, to be protected and conserved. “The mentality and actions of stakeholders on development and sustainability in PAs begun changing during the last decade” a high ranking official of MTE said. Recently the decision makers and stakeholders in PAs have been proactive to develop strategies toward a sustainable path for PAs along with access to tourism. Articles suggests that in developing countries the new conceptualization of tourism which incorporates sustainability and community participation as dominant elements is favorable to an alternative theoretical framework of development. A high ranking NAPA's staff claims that to fight the mentality of open access to PAs as tourism destinations have been quite a challenge to NAPA staff themselves. It is clear that promotion through all stakeholders of hospitality and tourism can give to PAs, the opportunity to grow and raise awareness on the unique experience they do offer

<sup>27</sup> Former Minister of Environment, Republic of Albania (2013-2017) media statement, OraNews TV Interview 2016



for visitors. MTE (2018:9) in the draft national strategy reports that the product of ecotourism (where PAs are included) has increased with 10%-20% /year.

Fatmir Brazhda<sup>28</sup> emphasizes that in the early promotional activities (2013), their motto used to be “A protected area is not a military zone”. “Protected areas were perceived few years ago, by administration staff itself, as isolated perimeters to guard” said Ardian Koci, Director of Elbasan RAPA 2018<sup>29</sup>).

### ***Destination Image***

Destination image has been identified as a crucial aspect of tourism, recreation and leisure (Hall, Croy & Walker 2003; Croy 2004). The greater the exposure to images of the destination, the greater the familiarity and complexity of the image held (Smith & Croy 2005; Croy & Wheeler 2007). The greater the complexity of the image, the more knowledge of the specific decision-making factors (Croy & Wheeler 2007). The formation of a positive perception is determined by evaluative components of image. In this process, from awareness, to availability, through to deciding on an evoked set, destination image is the deciding factor (Lawson & Baud-Bovy 1977; Richardson & Crompton 1988).

Given the increased reliance of tourism providers and destinations on their online reputation (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2011), it is critical for them to not only understand what drives social media promotion or effectively manage it. On Q1 survey 109 out of 109 respondents confirm that image is important getting their attention and curiosity on PAs, they haven't visited before. 109 out of 109 on Q1 visit PA sites at least 2 times in year. 84% of respondents of Q1 confirm they do further searching on internet on the site, if the image attracts them. Ardian Koci, sharing his experience said that at the very beginning the team staff were profane on social media use, and image was not their focus; but the experience improved their skills. Image is identified as a key element on MTE Draft Strategy of sustainable Tourism 2018-2022.

Stakeholders and decision makers are working with no data or researches. On Q2 11 out of 16 responded that PAs are preferred most by foreign tourist, while the official statistics of NAPA opposes this. On the other hand 50.5% participants of Q1 respond that have little knowledge on the touristic potential of domestic PAs, but only 17 out of 109 have responded they are not satisfied or are little satisfied with what PAs offer.

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<sup>28</sup> Fatmir Brazhda, Former Director, RAPA of Elbasan, incl Shebenik-Jabllanic National Park, Interview with Ana Kekezi, 2018, Librazhd

<sup>29</sup> Ardian Koci, Director, RAPA of Fier, incl. the National Park of Divjaka, Interview with Ana Kekezi, 2018, Divjakë

## The many to many media need for domestic tourism

“One click in your profiles, photos, videos or share from the coast, Alps, Tirana, Berat, Gjirokastra, nature, culinary or history of Albania has the a much higher impact than dozens of fairs, official meetings, or money spent for promotion. This is a good thing that you can do to Albania, to Albanian tourism. “(Blendi, Klosi, 2017)<sup>30</sup>

‘The world narrated’ is a different world to ‘the world depicted and displayed.’ (Kress, 2003:2) *The world told* is a different world to *the world shown*. Kress (2003:2) considers that the effects of the move to the screen, as the major medium of communication and argues that this will produce far-reaching shifts in relations of power, and not just in the sphere of communication. Andreasen (2003) reminds us that social marketing met with resistance when it first emerged, blinking in to the academic world like a new-born baby. Researchers suggest that ‘Social marketers’ turning the power of marketing to social good, thereby compensating for its deficiencies with better outcomes (e.g. Kotler, Levy, Andreasen).

It is fact that state is orienting their vision and strategies toward new media, as a key tool to promote Albanian tourism, but how and what will be the process and roadmap seems unclear yet. 109 out of 109 respondents of Q1 consider new media tools (social media and newspostals) as very important to get information on tourism. Denisa Xhoga admits that NAPA set as a main promotional goal the focus on new media tools, considering them as a “free” tool. 10 out of 16 official of Q2 see the use of new media tools as extremely important for the promotion of domestic tourism.

Albania is facing a rapid digitization of media channels. The annual ad spending data show that Out-of-home (OOH) advertising is “disappearing” and same way the print media. Elvin Civici, McCann Tirana claims that for advertisers print media as traditional media has “dead”, while the biggest journals in country merely sells an average of 1.000 copies /day. Journal print shifted their battleground in online. Albanian Media Institute (2015) suggests that Albanian news media evaluate the role of the social media as an important means to boost the audience through the referral traffic deriving from these media.

Constantinides, E., & Fountain, S. J. (2008) present the consumers with a whole array of options in searching for value products and services and finding exactly what they need and want with minimum effort, in line with the current customer desire for personalization, individual approach and empowerment. There is

<sup>30</sup> Blendi Klosi, Minister of Tourism & Environment, Speech during launching event of ODA, January 2018 <http://www.javanews.al/shpallet-nisma-per-turizmin-rrjet-blogeresh-per-promovimin-e-shqiprise/>



evidence that customer reviews posted in different forums or online communities, Web blogs and podcasts are much more powerful as marketing tools than expert product reviews (Gillin, 2007); the influence of blogs and podcasts is increasing because of the fast expansion of the audience and contributors. 16 out of 16 participants of Q2 respond that to promote their work they use mostly new media tools (social networks and online news portals). 78% of respondents of Q1 confirm that when deciding to visit a destination, they get information from social media, while 94.4% are daily users of social media with at least 1 hour access in them.

## **The cool media impact on Albanian PAs promotion**

Manovich (2001) on his research on new media states that the identity of media has changed even more dramatically than that of the computer. “The statistics confirm that new media is growing its popularity in Albania and some of its components are becoming part of the mainstream” said Elvin Civici.

The latest articles and studies from the sector report an increasing attention globally on new media tools impact in Protected Areas promotion. Sinanaj, Shkelqim (2016) on his findings on a research conducted for tourism in Vlora Region, Albania suggests that the tourist’s loyalty is impacted by the elements and the platforms of social media. The role of social media in tourism is particularly significant and the impacts of social media use by tourists, destinations and tourism providers are manifold (Gretzel, 2018; Sigala & Gretzel, 2018). Fatmir Brazhda, former Director of Elbasan RAPA claim that + 90% of visitors that accessed the park, tag, post, comment in their social media accounts their experience in Shebenik-Jabllanicë National Park.

The researchers propose that new media require a shift in marketing thinking – consumers have become highly active partners, serving as customers as well as producers and retailers, being strongly connected with a network of other consumers (Thorsten, 2010).

Whether it be the traditional editor with a viewership, a micro-influencer with 5 thousand followers or a celebrity/politician with over 1 million followers, each individual has the ability to shape the industry by sharing their own opinions amongst their communities.

AIM (2015) refers that the very first social platforms Albanians were introduced was Facebook, which is actually a leading social platform in country (Socialbakers.com)

11 out of 16 of Q2 survey participants would highly recommend mostly new media tools (social networks and online news portals) to promote PAs. None of them recommended traditional media tools such as newspapers and outdoor.

## *Mapping Websites and social media accounts of tourism entities*

The emergence of new digital channels has allowed stakeholders to build their own “media” through which they can reach their final audience directly. Owned media, is simply defined as those channels the stakeholders own and control content for (including social, blog, etc.) has acted as a pull medium to achieve this goal and ultimately transform consumers into brand advocates and loyalists. A major challenge for Web site designers involves the functional complexity of the Web site’s content. De Jong & Wu (2018) propose that functional complexity is considered when communication is intended to serve more than one goal or address more than one stakeholder group simultaneously.

The official online channels of central government bodies (MTE, NAPA and NAT) are observed in this study and confronted with the opinion of 6 professionals, 3 web designers and 3 online content experts (Q3).

6 out of 6 participants of Q3 evaluated the websites of MTE ([turizmi.gov.al](http://turizmi.gov.al)) and NAT as poor. Image is skipped and not considered as a key element. They do identify that the 2 official websites of NAT (<http://wp.akt.gov.al/> and <http://albania.al>) are not appealing, have poor content. From the observation these two websites exclude the domestic or foreign visitors as one is in English language only and the other in Albanian language only. The <http://wp.akt.gov.al/> is considered for all 6 participants as unprofessional. On the contrary, they claim that social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter) are professional and appealing. While NAPA’s website <http://akzm.gov.al/> is identified from 6 out to 6 participants as an accurate website, but they would suggest much focus on image with higher quality photos, to motivate and appeal better a potential visitor. NAPA Facebook page as the only social account of NAPA is also evaluated as accurate but yet missing strong appeal, as often it loses focus from image.

12 RAPAs at national level do have websites and on social media Facebook accounts only

The websites of RAPA are only informative, not aiming promotion and marketing through this tool. The mapping of Facebook pages of 12 RAPAs found a correlation between the most visited PAs and the activity in their Facebook Pages.

The observation on Facebook and Instagram pages of actual Minister of Tourism and Environment (September 2017 – January 2018)<sup>31</sup> and former Minister of Environment<sup>32</sup> show that posts related to PAs or nature in general, seems more likable to the virtual community getting a higher number of likes, comments and shares, comparing other posts.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/klosiblendi/> ; [https://www.instagram.com/blendi\\_klosi/](https://www.instagram.com/blendi_klosi/)

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/lefterkokapolitikan/>

## *Web portals as “purely online media”*

Articles suggest that alternative media was presented in the beginning of 21st century from the journalists who decided to become independent from traditional media and provide to public a diverse perspective of the information from another point of view . In Albania this is a trend embraced by many well-known journalists in country as Armand Shkullaku & Andi Bushati with Lapsi.al , Rudina Xhunga with Dritare.net, Blendi Fevziu with Opinion.al, Ylli Rakipi with Tpz.al, Mentor Nazarko with Konica.al , Mustafa Nano with Respublica.al, Enkel Demi with 27.al and others. At present, the corps of “purely online media” is being shaped as one of the most dynamic in the Albanian online space, leading to increasingly frequent novelties and developments (Albanian Media Institute, 2015:18)

Denisa Xhoga and Elvin Civici claim that articles on purely online media have high impact and more credibility than paid online ad. Denisa Xhoga stress the fact that NAPA has focused her work with journalists mainly on web portals, as virtual community tends to engage and share the information. Webportals are considered for 109 out of 109 of Q1 respondents, as the fastest way to get information.. Whether 56.9% of them confirm that when deciding to visit a destination they get information from online news media. On the other hand, 16 out of 16 respondents of Q2 consider internet as the highest influencer to their work.

## *Word of Mouth in online context*

Word-of-mouth represents a highly influential information source for potential visitors and is therefore of great interest to tourism marketing professionals.

Kotler & Keller (2007) suggests that word of mouth Communication (WOM) is a communication process for the provision of advice either individually or in groups for a product or service that aims to provide personal information. Communication by WOM is considered very effective in expediting the process of marketing and be able to provide benefits to the organization. Other researchers confirm that customers prefer to seek advices from the people who have already visited that particular destination than merely trusting the conventional advertisements from the suppliers. (Crompton, 1992; Decrop & Snelders, 2005; Gligorijevic & Luck, 2012; Hyde & Laesser, 2009; Park, Lee & Han, 2007; Seddighi & Theocharous, 2002; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). Ring, & Dolnicar (2016) on their research found that tourists share both verbal and visual word-of-mouth content. They do suggest that stakeholders have the possibility to leverage word-of-mouth.

87.7% of respondents of Q1 trust more a recommended destination by a friend/relative rather than from other forms. 100% of them consider the online comments, posts and suggestions of their friends/familiars equal trustable as the traditional WOM. Ardian Koci claimed that +70% of domestic visitors in Divjaka National Park have been referred by a relative or friend, or a person they do follow in social media. Particularly as surveys indicate that word-of-mouth generally plays an important part in influencing visitation to national parks (Eagles & McCool 2002). 77 out of 109 respondents of Q1 used word-of-mouth sources to make destination choices.

### *Wiki Platforms & Blogosphere*

Wiki platforms are new media tool. Albanian language has its own space and as reported by Wikipedia. The community consists of 102.780 registered users, 296 of them have contributed with at least an editing during the last months. The information on Albanian language, for Albanian tourism and protected areas from observation seem extremely limited comparing with the one offered in English language. Also many bio links provided in Albanian language section of Wikipedia are not functional.

85.2% of the respondents of Q1 use Wikipedia as 2<sup>nd</sup> source of search, after Google. Another finding was that 55.6% of respondents of Q1 were using even social media (such as Facebook, Instagram or YouTube) as searching vehicles for tourism destinations. The largest number of blogs in Albania are created and hosted by Wordpress and fewer Blogspot platform. But it is hard to track in Albania bloggers or any blog for traveling, hospitality and tourism. Albanian bloggers and influencers are mostly focused on culinary and fashion.

### *Bloggers and Influencers*

Social media also support the emergence of influencers that occupy a middle ground between consumers and commercial users (Kozinets et al., 2010). eMarketer 2018, reports that for Influencers, Instagram is the clear-cut favorite and nearly 80% consider it their primary platform for collaborations. 6 out of 6 participants of Q4 members of ODA's network claimed for this study that they prefer better Instagram, while advertisers they collaborate prefer to use both Instagram and Facebook. None of them had a Twitter account. Only 9.1% of respondents of Q1 confirmed that they were not noticing or ignoring the destination of a post done/tagged by a VIP/public person (they fan/like and follow in social media).

## *Albanian ODA<sup>33</sup> - the bloggers' network*

A 2015 survey by Tomoson<sup>34</sup> emphasizes how influencer marketing can be highly lucrative for those brands who engage in it. Businesses are making \$6.50 for every \$1 spent on influencer marketing. Most businesses get solid results from influencer marketing, with just the bottom 18% failing to generate any revenue. 59% of marketers intend to increase their influencer marketing budget in the next year.

ODA – the Albanian blogger's network was an initiative of MTE launched in January 2018, to promote Albanian tourism. Over 200 Albanian representatives of art, culture, business from Albania and beyond borders are part of this network. "Jehoje dhe ti"<sup>35</sup> was a 60 second promoting video of the Albanian tourism that was posted firstly on the Minister Blendi Klosi social accounts, and after posted or shared by 200 bloggers. This video became rapidly a viral one. Marketers suggest that influencer marketing is about data, not celebrity deals. "We have not done yet any measurement or analyze on "Jehoje dhe ti" promotional video" acknowledged a civil servant staff of NAT.

### *Own Media*

"It's a pity Albanians overestimate what neighbors offer. It's matter of culture and mentality. The Albanians does not grow since childhood with the love for nature, as other citizens worldwide do. I am surprised that most Albanians have discovered their country lately, mainly from social media" **Fation Plaku, 2018**

Influencer marketing in travel and tourism builds on the importance of word-of-mouth in the travel context (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). Studies suggest that in the age of social media, consumers move from being fans to being producers of promotional content for brands, and from occasional endorsers to micro-celebrity-seeking social media influencers (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016).

Fation Plaku, whom passion for nature, have "transformed" him on photographer, a blogger and mostly identified as a key Influencer, while sharing his thoughts for this research admitted that he desired to make people visit the beauty of Albania nature, but he didn't know how. New media tool or "his own media" as Fation refers to his website and social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter) opened a real window to him. He started to share and shoot his unique moments for fun and from many years now he is doing it professional

<sup>33</sup> ODA word in Albanian language means room

<sup>34</sup> Survey 2015 "Influencer Marketing Study" [Accessed 10 March 2018 <https://blog.tomoson.com/influencer-marketing-study/>]

<sup>35</sup> Jehoje dhe ti - Echo even You – a direct appeal to the users, to make share the video, Video launched on January 2018



way. He also confirms that his favorite and most followed channel is Instagram. Fation claims that this is the first time he is interviewed/approached for study purpose. Same claimed even the 6 participants of Q4. Researchers admit that there is a lack of research that investigates the travel and tourism influencer marketing phenomenon Gretzel, U. (2018).

*PAs success stories; cheers to cool media*

Social media allow destinations to contact visitors at relatively low cost and higher levels of efficiency that can be achieved with more traditional communication tools (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). M.E. McCombs, D.L. Shaw (2004) suggest that those topics which are the most frequently covered by the media are seen as the most important. The crossing of secondary data and statistics of NAPA “decided” on the 2 success stories of this study (see figure 4 and 5). As the outcome of the increasing influence of tourism, natural and protected area management is evolving from one primarily focused around onsite management and conservation, to one that more broadly encompasses a greater range of holistic recreation and tourism experiences. In dealing with this evolution, national parks and protected area managers are now required to balance onsite interpretation activities with marketing and demand management activities. (Reid, Mike 2008). Natura2000 Albania (June 2016) in their assessment findings emphasize that protected area managers complained, that they are often not informed about or involved in research activities, and that researchers do not address their management priorities and needs. In the assessment is also reported, that in some protected areas in country, research has not been conducted for a long time. IUCN reveals that the continuing and dramatic increase in both international and domestic travel poses significant opportunities for managers of the globe over 100,000 protected areas.

**FIGURE 4 :** Visitors in Shebenik-Jabllanicë National Park

Year	2015	2017
Visitors	400	13.000

Source: RAPA of Elbasan

**FIGURE 5:** Visitors in Divjak-Karavasta National Park

Year	2015	2017
Visitors	1.500	383.000

Source: RAPA of Fier



## *Divjakë-Karavasta National Park – The shelter of Curly Pelicans*

Divjakë-Karavasta National Park, managed by RAPA of Fier is well known, as the Shelter of Curly Pelicans (Dalmatian Pelican). 97 out of 109 respondents of Q1 identified this PA with the colonies of curly pelican and 100 of them have visited it at least once.

On the internet mapping (online portals, TV chronicles and social media posts) done for this PA found that many journalists, government high ranking officials and public personalities, contribute the success of the Shelters of Pelicans to the passion and dedication of Ardian Koçi, Director, RAPA of Fier.

Ardian, managing RAPA of Fier for 5 years is a profound passionate, eager to attract visitors. He states that he found Facebook, as the only way to have visitors in park. On 2013 the agency of PAs was not established yet by law and PAs were managed under the sector of forestry. “In 2013 I was appointed Director of Regional Directorate of Forestry of Fier. Few visitors were coming” said Ardian. He said that the decision to open a Facebook page (see figure 6, left) was the best step ever took. “People were annoyed from tagging, but I didn’t gave up” confirms Ardian.

**FIGURE 6:** Left Drejtoria e shërbimit Pyjor, Fier (created 2013);  
Right RAPA of Fier (created 2015)



Source: Facebook, Screenshot 2018

Statcounter Global Stats (2018) report that, Facebook leads with 93.4%, followed by YouTube with 1.64% for April 2017- March 2018 period, social media in Albania. Ardian claim that the National Park was not visited at least once, even by citizens that live next to Divjaka. He identified Facebook as the only free of charge tool he had in power, to raise awareness of the park and make people visit the lagoon. The

page he opened back time in 2013 is still active, and with the establishing of NAPA by law 2015, Ardian activated a new page (see figure 6, right). Ardian claims that it was Facebook that attracted the journalists and reporters to promote the lagoon and raised interest in tour operators.

Healya and Wilson (2015) propose that host hospitality social media experts suggest that engagement on social media improves customer service and brand awareness, but they cannot validate if it influences buying behavior. Ardian claim that behavior of visitors has radically changed. “The domestic visitors’ main attraction during 2013- 2014 was culinary, now we can clearly identify that this trend changed for good. The culinary have altered as an extension, while main motivation and hours spent from domestic visitors are dedicated to lagoon and other areas of the Park” confirmed Ardian. He aims that the park be perceived by domestic tourists as a brand.

### ***Shebenik-Jabllanicë National Park – The biggest national park***

“Shebenik-Jabllanicë National Park<sup>36</sup>, managed by RAPA of Elbasan is a new discovery to key stakeholders; media, citizens and tour operators” claims Fatmir Brazhda, Former Director, RAPA of Elbasan. The park is known in online media, as the biggest national park in country, but yet not clearly identified by potential visitors. 76 out of 109 respondents of Q1 have heard of the park, and only 22 out of 109 have visited it.

Shebenik-Jabllanicë during 2013 was on a critical stage of brand awareness, given the fact that it was a brand new National Park. “The role of media have been vital to make the introduction of our Park. On early stages, we started with a Facebook page (2013) and after that focused on local media and community” state Fatmir. In the Facebook page mapping of this park<sup>37</sup>, it shows that the authority of influencers is adopted as a tool to promote the PA. Denisa Xhoga confirmed that national TV and newspaper journalists/reporters never heard of Shebenik-Jabllanicë, when she joined NAPA in 2015. Fatmir claims that social media is crucial to attract potential visitors, but success on delivering the experience in the Park is considered decisive that visitors go back or return “Shebenik-Jabllanicë ambassadors”.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Zeng & Geristen 2014 call for future research into social media in tourism and in developing countries suggesting that this may provide productive research environments. This study gave some important findings for impact of new media

<sup>36</sup> In 2008 declared by law National Park

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ShebenikJablanicaNationalPark/>



tools in protected areas as tourism destination in Albania as a developing country, where PAs have been lately considered by stakeholders as a high potential for tourism sector.

Findings of this study opposes the finding of Gover & Kumar 2007 in global rank where they identified that the role of internet was less important than was expected considering the population sampled. In this study internet and new media tools are key players to promote domestic tourism in PAs but also to get and share information.

First conclusion is that if protected areas and especially national parks who have more potential for accommodation units and recreation activities creation, need to become knowledgeable about marketing strategies and tools, and be competitive both from a product as well as a communication perspective.

Second conclusion is that perceptions of the brand and value of PAs as tourism destinations strongly relate with the promotion on new media tools.

Another finding is that protected areas can leverage their owned media channels to speak directly to their fan base. Word of mouth in traditional and mostly on online context, have been a promoter and amplifier to spread the message and raise brand awareness of PAs. The influencers can be lucrative to PAs (destination image)- when it's done correctly and when proper measurements are done. New media is important to Albanian citizens for getting information and having a decision on their next destination

Use modern and digital promoting tactics is one of the main recommendation. New media tools are suggested given the fact that tourism is a cluster very influenced by new trends. New media tools are advice, also as cost effective ones. Suggestions from this research are new media tools are swimming in rapid change environment, therefore they do need a continuous and persistent update.

The study identified existing barriers in the tourism sector, which should be resolved by active involvement of different stakeholders. Effective marketing strategies may foster competitiveness of Albanian tourism to domestic tourists.

It should be noted that many departmental websites are quite general and do not necessarily focus on promoting particular parks, but are rather a functions tool to access the department. This often makes them difficult to navigate and not consumer friendly.

In the literature review by Hawthorne (2014), only 25% organizations measure in detail the influences social media content marketing. This study suggests that in Albania none of the governmental or public sector has done any measurement on this context. For promotion and marketing strategies on domestic tourism is important to know the needs, desires and expectations of domestic visitors, therefore researches and deep analyses are highly recommend to lead to better results and understanding.

Another recommendation as other researchers found is that a tailor-made social media marketing approach targeting specific market segments would be critical to attract potential tourists in PAs (Zeng & Geristen 2014)

The research highlights the need for further studies into the impact new media have on destination decision-making and the actual use and experience of different communication tools. It is significant to encourage investigation about the positive impact of social media marketing on the development aspects of a sustainable tourism. Further research is needed to integrate and complete the analysis with various methodologies, to deepen the impact of the new media in tourism cluster in developing countries and more specifically in protected areas.

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