

# *The role of the International Community as a pivotal and reliable actor in democratic transition in Albania!*

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## **Abstract**

*The paper analyses the role of various actors in the democratization process in Albania, with specific emphasis on one key participant. It is structured into three distinctive sections: the first identifies the domestic actors in the beginning of transition, such as the political class, civil society, knowledge elite, media etc, highlighting the political class as the most powerful and influential of them. However, the paper argues that instead of being a reliable and responsible factor in the process of democratization and integration, the Albanian political elite has shown a chronic lack of responsibility, willingness, professionalism and commitment to tackle the country's major problems. Its primary objective has been its own self-interest and self-preservation. On the other hand, since Albania opened up to the world, another actor has been crucial for the country, the international community. The subsequent section focuses on this external actor, which has played a significant role throughout the three-decade transition period. It asserts that inability of local actors to deal with domestic challenges and cooperate with one another have 'promoted' this actor, which has been trying to fulfill the role of facilitator and mediator that the state institutions have proved*

*unable to perform. The lack of legitimacy and the unreliability of political parties and other domestic actors have increasingly amplified the importance of this actor. Therefore, the paper argues that legitimacy in Albania lies with the international community and its verdict tends to be considered as final. This is also reflected in public opinion surveys, indicating that Albanian citizens trust much more international than national institutions. The third section analyses the impact and influence exerted by the two most significant external actors: the European Union, whose significance escalated notably post-2000 owing to Albania's aspirational EU membership, steering reforms and providing financial assistance; and the United States, which, through its diplomats and ambassadors, has been very proactive in Albanian politics, helping the country to overcome persistent problems as corruption and organized crime, and more recently the judiciary reform. The paper concludes that Albanian road towards democratization could have had a different trajectory without the involvement and guidance of the international community pushing for and directing reforms. While acknowledging the significance of assistance from external driving forces, the primary onus for the progress of a country should rest upon its domestic actors.*

**Keywords:** *International community, domestic actors, political class, transition, democratization, European integration, the European Union, the United States.*

## Methodology

### Introduction

Albania emerged from communism with no traditions of capitalism and democracy, unlike some of the other transition countries which embarked on the 'era of changes' with varying potential levels of these traditions. It endured the most totalitarian regime among the Eastern Bloc countries. The communist society was not a fertile breeding ground for political democracy and the creation of a vigorous civil society. Consequently, the collapse of communism found Albania without a political and civic pluralism, with the Party of Labor being the sole political actor during the five decades of communist rule. Albania was experiencing democracy for the first time in its history and was clearly the country with the longest journey to travel from a rigid Stalinism to democracy. "Of all the former communist countries, Albania appeared least prepared for the painful transition from dictatorship to a pluralist democracy and a market economy", pointed out Biberaj (1998:149). The long and short political, historical, social and economic legacies of centralized, authoritarian rule and economic

underdevelopment placed serious impediments in the way of rapid and smooth democratization of the Albanian polity. Albania's task of overcoming this legacy and 'catching up' with the West was therefore immense, even compared to other former communist states.

However, soon in the early stages of the transition, Albania started to witness the emergence of a pluralistic society. This shift marked a departure from the mono-party system, ushering in political pluralism, characterized by the establishment of multiple political parties. Concurrently, numerous civic actors and organizations began to emerge, gaining a foothold in the realm of policy-making.

Against this background, there are a couple of research questions raised, which will be explored in this paper.

### *Research questions & Variables*

Who were the domestic actors during the transition in Albania? Which one has been the most influential and important among them? Why the domestic actors and political class did not become truly reliable and responsible factors in the process of democratization and integration? Did the international community, as an external actor, fulfill the role that the other domestic actors have proved unable to perform? And has it played the most significant role throughout the three-decade transition period of Albania? Which were the most significant external actors pushing for and directing reforms? Why Albanian citizens trust more international than national institutions?

I have identified the respective variables, which will help in analyzing and answering the above research questions: firstly, the dependent variable, which is the democratic transition period in Albania; and secondly the independent variable, i.e., the role of the International Community as a pivotal and reliable actor. Other secondary independent variables might be considered the domestic actors, including civil society, knowledge elite, media etc, with the political class as the most important of them.

### *Literature review & Added value*

There is a vast literature on Albanian transition, democratization and Europeanisation, both from international and Albanian scholars (M. Vickers, J. Pettifer, J. Loughlin, Sh. Rama, M. Bogdani, E. Biberaj, B. Kajsiu, A. Bumçi, A. Rakipi, etc). Similarly, the examination of domestic actors, particularly Albanian political parties, within these processes, has received likewise thorough attention in scholarly discourse. However, the analysis of the influence and role of external

actors throughout the 30 years of democratic transition remains an underexplored domain. It must be said, that as the most extensively studied among external actors, remains the role of the European Union. Consequently, a substantive body of literature addressing the broader spectrum of external actors in this context is yet to materialize. This paper seeks to address this lacuna and aims to contribute in filling this vacuum in the exciting literature. I, therefore, do hope to come up with some novel scientific evidence, arguments, and conclusions to enhance our understanding of the external actors' impact during the three decades of democratic transition in Albania.

### *Method & Type of case-study & Data*

The method used in this study is the Qualitative. Within this, the method chosen is the "Content Analysis" of the secondary literature. This is a "single case study", as it focuses on the analysis of the phenomenon/issue in one country, Albania. With regard to the data, it is mainly collection and analyses of secondary data from studies (books and articles) of renowned authors and scholars in the areas of democratization, transition and Europeanisation, reports and analysis of international organisations (European Commission, Council of Europe, European Parliament, UNDP, International Crisis Group, International Republican Institute, etc.), as well as articles from prominent newspapers, such as *Sunday Times*, *Deutsche Velle*, *The Huffington Post*, *Reuters*, *Transition Online*, *Balkan Insight*, *Euro-News Albania* etc.

### **The domestic actors in the beginning of democratic transition**

In the early years of transition, the Albanian decision-makers, as Bogdani and Loughlin (2007:174) argue, were either 'policy virgins' catapulted fresh into positions of power, starting to learn how to govern in unfamiliar settings, or those from the communist regime who had to unlearn old policy ways and learn new ones. An Albanian political analyst, Shinasi Rama (2004), described the Albanian elite of the first decade of transition in quite a pejorative way by saying, "The elite of Tirana has started a mad race to become artificially noble, forgetting that nobility can only be gained by and expressed through service and sacrifice towards the people. This so-called elite, which governs the Albanian state today, lacks every feature of nobility. The most powerful and influential elite group in Albania, the political elite, is composed to a considerable extent of people with no integrity and without enough education, coming from provincial and poor backgrounds. As for their wealth, it has been won in a gangster-like, corrupt,

mafia and criminal way, using the state power”. In this analysis, he refers mainly to the political elite or politicians, whom he calls ‘political hyenas’ from the fact they use their positions of power to scavenge the country and people’s resources in order to rule over Albanians.

The early transition period, therefore, exhibited a discernible limitation in leadership quality, primarily attributable to the substantial presence of former communist elites within the leadership ranks of post-communist Albania. This phenomenon is unsurprising given that a significant proportion of the country’s leaders and politicians had previously belonged to the Party of Labor and had lived under the communist system for the majority of their lives. As the Albanian journalist Mustafa Nano (2003) points out, “Albania has been governed by political leaders inexperienced in the procedures of democratic life, known for their incompetence and irresponsibility”.

One notable consequence of this historical context was the apparent persistence of a communist mentality within the Albanian political class, manifesting in a dearth of essential political skills such as tolerance, cooperation, compromise and negotiation. As Nordlinger (2005) argues, “Post-Communists aren’t so ‘post’, they still think like communists and act like communists. They have not developed democratic ways of living, dealing and governing”.

Civil society was another new actor emerging in the beginning of transition. According to Larry Diamond, the functions of civil society include “limiting state power, promoting a modern type of citizenship and democracy-building, and creating channels for the articulation of interests and opportunities for participation and influence” (quoted in Pridham, 2000:233). Albania did not inherit a ‘civil society’, because the state and the communist party had absolute control and penetrated every aspect of society and life. Even before that, Albania lacked civic traditions and independent social organizations and associations. These historical and communist legacies have been and still are among the major obstacles to the construction of a powerful civil society in Albania. Another reason has been the fact that during the transition the efforts by government to support its development have been scarce and there has been little dialogue and interaction between civil society and government. The political elite has neither encouraged, nor has been willing to accept the contribution from civil society. Another barrier has been its lack of real autonomy from the state and especially the political parties. NGOs, think-tanks and different associations and organizations have been very dependent on political influence or control. Even though numerous and existing in great variety, NGOs have been unable to speak on behalf of the general public or to bring substantial pressure to bear on government policies. “Most of the Albanian NGOs are not representatives of indigenous social movements - IRI (2003) noted - but rather closed circles of elites that conduct a one-way dialogue and try to

milk international donors, as well as the government”. The international donors, in order to bridge the gap between the public and politics, have put a lot of effort into strengthening Albanian civil society, mainly through funding the NGOs. Therefore, the NGO sector has been dependent on foreign funding, which UNDP (2000:71) in one of its report for Albania described as “a dependency relationship that is very disturbing, since there is a tendency on part of civil society organizations to accommodate in their projects the objectives of the donors rather than the priorities and needs of the country”. Therefore, as Bogdani and Loughlin (2007:188) point out, “civil society has not become the source of alternative views and approaches to the challenges Albania faces and which could greatly influence the decision-makers. It has not made enough efforts to explore citizens’ concerns and needs, let alone to articulate and channel them sufficiently. Therefore, it will take a long time for civil society to develop the culture, values and institutions, necessary to hold government to account in a democratic manner”. In the meantime, the political class, or rather, the political parties, will continue to dominate civil society rather than the other way around.

Similarly, the think-tanks, professional organizations, civic and grass-root associations, although numerous, lacked the organizational experience, financial resources and advocacy skills necessary to influence decision-making. Furthermore, many intellectuals with potential knowledge and experience to lead civic movements, associations and organizations, became instead attached to political parties, mostly because politics has become a very ‘profitable’ profession and also only through politics one can climb the career ladder in Albania.

Trade unions, as another actor, have been weak organizationally and have had limited affiliations, as a result of de-industrialization and high unemployment, which occurred during the first years of transition. Business and professional associations, on the other hand, thrived during the first phase of transition as the result of privatisation reforms and the emergence of the private sector. A new business elite emerged, a part of which has had a powerful role not only in the economic life of the country, but also in political life. A part of this business elite, known as the ‘oligarchs’, started to increasingly exercise considerable control and power over the media and politics. The informal connections between the business and political elites were what often counted in decision-making processes.

The ‘knowledge elite’ is probably the most important actor for ensuring progress and the success of the democratization process. Parson (1995:265) argues that “the rise of technical knowledge can lead to a meritocratic system in which the most highly educated will form the main social elite”. Knowledge is vital to understanding the modern world and to coping with the challenges of globalization, high technology and competition. Albania is not a society where ‘knowledge’ is sufficiently appreciated or considered important, but if the country is to succeed on

the road of democratization and European integration on which it has embarked, the ideological or political forms of policy and decision-making will have to gradually be complemented by a more technocratic approach. Unfortunately, during the years of transition Albania has experienced the phenomenon of 'brain drain', which is the emigration of educated people, professionals and intellectuals. This has led to negative consequences for the country, as intelligentsia (intellectuals, academics, talented and educated people) are a key section of the political, knowledge and cultural elites of a country and more importantly a very influential factor in the progress and democratization. Albania lost one-third of its qualified people over the first decade of the transition with many immigrating into countries which have 'points' systems to attract educated and highly-skilled migrants. The paradox is that wealth nations use various schemes to 'absorb the brains', while poor countries like Albania make little effort to stop them from leaving or to attract them back home. Whilst the emigration of the working class is seen more as economically beneficial, the exodus of intellectuals and professionals has almost entirely negative consequences: socially, because the country loses the 'brains' and talents; politically, because it loses the educated middle class, from which can come potential leaders; and economically, because the most educated people integrate quickly into their new homeland and seem less likely to send money back; fiscally, because tax-payers have paid to educate many of those who leave, who in most cases end up working in jobs below the level of their qualifications at home. In 2006 the UNDP office in Tirana undertook a 'Brain Gain' initiative, which was assisting the Government of Albania in the effort of utilizing expatriate Albanian expertise for the country's socio-economic development. Many educated Albanians, with good diplomas and work experience abroad, started to return to Albania with a good will to contribute for their country's development. However, they faced obstacles and disappointments, even for finding a job, never mind being considered as assets. As Bogdani and Loughlin (2007: ) argue, "the Albanian leaders seemed not interested in encouraging the brightest to return home, on the contrary, they used all means to de-motivate and discourage them... They are more comfortable governing a country from which the smartest, most educated, civilized and skilled citizens leave every day, rather than implementing strategies and finding ways to make the country a better place to live and to work". Unfortunately, a country like Albania, where advancement and progress depend on political affiliation rather than meritocracy, will continue to lose bright people to societies and countries where talent and 'brain' are appreciated.

Another important actor in the process of democratization is the 'bureaucratic elite' or civil servants. The undermining of the role of civil servants in Albania comes from the lack of a Weberian rational culture (Bogdani & Loughlin, 2004:51). Instead of a bureaucracy of professional and administrative values,



Albania has developed a politicized bureaucracy, where the attitudes of civil servants are shaped by political affiliation or the preferences of their ministers, as described by Hall (1993:275), “where they stand depends on where they sit”. The continuous shortcomings in the Albanian public administration, most notably the high degree of politicization, lack of professionalism and meritocracy, as well as high levels of corruption, have led to a poor quality of civil servants, especially those in key positions. Most of them have constantly been political militants, not having the necessary professional expertise and knowledge, or the administrative and managerial skills. After every rotation of power and a new party coming to government, most of civil servants are fired, making their appointments generally short-term, which harms the institutional memory. Moreover, ministers and high officials put their energies more into influencing (and subsequently profiting from) tenders and improper public procurements, rather than into strategic reform or developing a strong public administration and a professional, depoliticized and meritocratic civil service. This results in ineffectiveness, lack of productivity and failure to carry out reforms. As Miranda Vickers (2003) notes, “the government is composed mostly of mediocre officials and their patronage networks threaten to keep many reforms at a superficial level”.

A key pillar of any democratic society is an open and free press. The media plays a prominent role in the democratic process, because, as Hall (1993:288) argues, “the press is both a mirror of public opinion and a magnifying glass of the issues that it takes up”. Media and journalists have been an actor with a growing significant influence. From being just propagandists during communism, the journalists changed their role into being social advocates and critics. Media has had a very powerful and influential role, making important, outspoken and courageous contributions to raising the awareness of Albanians to democratic values and processes, by criticizing the wrongdoings of governments and politicians and by revealing domestic political and social problems, as well as possible solutions. Many written and electronic media (newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations) started to emerge and to grow in number in the first years of transition. In recent years, the proliferation and increasing popularity of social media platforms have led to the emergence of numerous online portals. These platforms exhibit a heightened degree of independence from political affiliations, consequently enabling a more transparent and efficient exposure of governmental and political wrongdoings. However, over the years, some media in particular started to be dependent on the various power centers (government, political parties, and economic interests), as instruments to serve their interests, and to have close ties with the political elites and business and thus have ceded part of their independence in exchange for financial gains (Council of Europe, 2004). In order to play a better role in the democratization process, journalists need to become more professional, ethical,



and independent (politically and financially) to provide balanced, responsible and objective reporting.

In this context, a pluralist society with a wide range of domestic actors has been developing during the transition. However, they have not been able to influence the policy and decision-making processes, which is one of the indicators of a well-functioning democratic society.

Among all the domestic actors, the most powerful and influential throughout the three decades of the democratic transition, has been the political class of the country. The process of democratic reforms and the prospect of EU membership in Albania have relied, to a great extent, on the political class. However, instead of being a reliable and responsible factor in the process of democratization and EU accession, the Albanian political elite, as the International Crisis Group (2003:15) points out, “has shown a chronic lack of responsibility, willingness, professionalism and commitment to tackle the country’s major problems. Its primary objective has been its own self-interest and self-preservation”.

## **Another crucial actor – the international community**

The inability of local actors, especially of political class, to deal with domestic challenges and cooperate with one another, the crisis of the electoral processes and other unsolved political and economic problems, has ‘promoted’ another actor, the international community.

Since 1991, when Albania opened up to the world, this new actor has been crucial in Albania’s transition. The lack of legitimacy and the unreliability of political parties and other domestic actors, governments and state institutions, have increasingly amplified the importance of this dimension. As Bogdani and Loughlin (2007:225) argue, “the international community in Albania has been trying to fulfill the role of broker, facilitator and mediator that the state institutions have proved unable to perform”. International organizations, such as OSCE and ODHIR (in elections and electoral campaigns), CoE, UNDP, World Bank and FMN (in economic affairs), as well as certain foreign embassies, most notably the US Embassy, have been important players on the Albanian political scene. Also, some international institutes such as the ‘US International Republican Institute’ (IRI), and the ‘US National Democratic Institute’ (NDI), have contributed greatly for fostering political dialogue and mediating the discussions among political parties.

Especially after the 1997 crises, Albanian politics have grown even more dependent on international mediation and arbitration. Its judgement has been brought to bear on very important domestic issues (even to the elections of the Presidents of the Republic), as the local actors have seemed increasingly incapable

of finding common ground. Albanian politicians have become increasingly prone to rely on international interventions, and they devote more time and effort to winning the sympathy of international actors, rather than get together and negotiate with one another. As Kajsiu, Bumci and Rakipi (2002:7) argue, “there was created a vicious circle of dependency culture, both economic and political, in which the local actors have become increasingly dependent on the international community and thus the latter has become increasingly involved in Albanian domestic politics”.

This has led to the loss of confidence and patience of Albanian people with their political class, and a growing majority seeing their hope as coming from outside, even thinking their country should be governed and monitored as an international protectorate of the UN, the US, or the EU. There is a widespread perception by the general public that most of the important decisions about Albanian politics (even the ‘decision’ which political party will win the elections) are taken with the ‘blessing’ of the international community. The omnipresence of foreign diplomats in government and political activities is one of the factors that has fueled such perceptions. The pattern of patronage in Albania remains prominent, as it has always been a distinguishable feature of Balkan politics in general.

This is also reflected in public opinion surveys, which show that Albanian citizens trust more the international than national institutions. A public opinion poll conducted in 2006 (organized by *Mjaft* Movement and carried out by Index Albania Company)<sup>1</sup> showed that Albanians believed more in international organizations: they trust NATO (67 percent), EU (65 percent) and OSCE (62 percent). Among national institutions the most credible ones were the media (56 percent) and the President of the Republic (53 percent). The least credible institutions were the government (41 percent), the prosecution service (35 percent) and the judiciary (32 percent).

Institute for Democracy and Mediation has conducted opinion polls on the perceptions and attitudes of Albanian citizens on matters such as transparency and accountability of public institutions, prevalence of corruption, level of citizen engagement in policy and decision-making, satisfaction with public-service delivery etc. The reports based on these surveys, named “Trust in Governance”, have been published annually since 2013.

The findings of 2021 poll,<sup>2</sup> showed that international organizations such as NATO (73 percent), the UN (71 percent), and the EU (71 percent) maintained their ranking as the most trusted institutions in Albania. Albanian citizens perceived religious institutions (67 percent) as the most trusted domestic institutions, followed by educational institutions (57 percent), the armed forces (54 percent),

<sup>1</sup> Mjaft, (2006) “The Public Opinion Poll over the first 100 days of the Government”, commissioned by the *MJAFT!* Movement and carried out by Index Albania Company. January.

<sup>2</sup> Institute for Democracy and Mediation, (2022) “Trust in Governance 2021”, Report of the Annual Public Opinion Poll in Albania, 9<sup>th</sup> Edition. September 19, 2022.

and civil-society organizations (52 percent). The president (23 percent), political parties (26 percent), the courts (27 percent), and the prosecution (28 percent) were among the least trusted institutions.

The most recent poll of 2022<sup>3</sup> showed again that international organizations, such as NATO (74 percent), the UN (71 percent) and the EU (70 percent), continued to be the most trusted institutions in Albania. Religious institutions (64 percent) continued to be the most trusted domestic institutions, followed by the armed forces (59 percent), educational institutions (54 percent) and civil society organizations (53 percent). Political parties (29 percent), parliament (33 percent), prosecution (35 percent) and the courts (36 percent) ranked as the least trusted ones. Half (50 percent) of Albanians trusted the Special Prosecution Office against Organized Crime and Corruption (SPAK), which was added for the first time to the list of surveyed institutions in 2022. This percentage is higher compared to the trust levels reported for the prosecution and courts.

As we can see from the findings of these polls and other empirical data, there is no doubt that legitimacy in Albania lies with the international community and its verdict tends to be considered as final.

## **The role of the EU and USA**

In this chapter the analysis will focus on the role of the two most significant external actors throughout the Albanian transition.

### *The influence of the European Union*

In the last 23 years the European Union has been the most influential and important actor, because of the prospective membership of Albania in the EU, including important processes such as the “candidate status”, visa liberalization, the opening of negotiations etc.

The EU has been the dominant external actor, for two main reasons: firstly, the attraction to the EU model, which represents an affluent, prosperous and democratic union of countries; secondly, the conditionality - EU leverage, exercised through financial aid and sanctions of “carrot and stick” approach.

European integration has become a driving force with an influential impact on Albania and a source of domestic change and transformation. The prospect of EU membership and the whole process of integration and Europeanisation has proved to be very useful for Albania. Europeanisation is the adoption of domestic policies, institutions and rules conform to those of the EU. It has been a complementary

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Democracy and Mediation, (2023) “Trust in Governance 2022”, Report of the Annual Public Opinion Poll in Albania, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition. July 18, 2023.

process with democratization, which is the whole process of transformation from totalitarian rule towards a liberal democracy. Hence, both these two processes aim to achieve their respective goals, by applying the same means - the democratic reforms.

Most of Albania's population and national elites have been in favor of joining this powerful club of democratic values and economic benefits, which furthermore is helping the country in its efforts of democratization. For this reason, the EU, through its Delegation Office in Tirana, has been amongst the most trusted international organization by the Albanian people, as mentioned above. According to the last report of the European Parliament, a poll in 2022 found that as many as 97 percent of Albanians were in favor of EU accession.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, asked by Barometer of Euronews Albania, 95.9% of Albanians support the country's membership in the EU,<sup>5</sup> remaining the most pro-European country in the region and perhaps in all Europe.

The political class of the country, on the other hand, despite being in favor of EU membership, has used it more as rhetoric than a true aspiration, as Bogdani and Loughlin (2004:92) argue. Taking into consideration the high levels of corruption and the connection of politics with organized crime, it could be assumed that this is a goal that Albanian politicians are not interested in achieving, for the simple reason that democracy and EU membership would mean the end of using the country's and people's resources for personal benefits, and no more dirty money in their pockets.

Therefore, the EU remains the primary locus of Albania's efforts in managing the difficult period of transition and its goal for the future. The EU seems to be the best guarantee of democratization and progress in Albania. This is because, firstly, the prospect of EU membership is a credible prospect in its political horizon, a strong incentive and a powerful driving force for carrying out domestic reforms. The Copenhagen criteria, which provide fundamental principles relating to democratic governance and the rule of law, as well as setting the objective technical standards for the development of a market economy, serve as motivating factors for the domestic actors to undertake changes and push the reforms ahead.

Secondly, the EU is committed to helping Albania and to bringing her closer to the Community, reflected in the concrete process of SAP, initially with the SAA and now with the opening of membership negotiations.

Thirdly, the EU is the largest provider of multilateral assistance to Albania, which operates under democratic conditionality. This financial and technical support has covered a big number of sectors, including humanitarian aid, trade, macro-financial assistance, political stability, public order, public administration

<sup>4</sup> European Parliament, (2023) "Report on Albania 2022", July.

<sup>5</sup> EuroNews. Albania, (2022) "Do Albanians still want to join the EU?". December 23.

reform, judiciary and law enforcement, infrastructure, agriculture, health and education, and fighting organized crime, fraud and corruption. Following the coronavirus outbreak in 2020, the Commission provided the region – on top of existing assistance – with over €3.3 billion worth of EU financial support, mobilized jointly with the European Investment Bank (European Parliament, 2022). Albania also received €180 million in the form of macro-financial assistance. Therefore, as European Parliament (2023) notes in its most recent Report on Albania, the EU remains the main donor of financial assistance to Albania, mainly through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III).

Because of this tremendous role, the EU is the only element of consensus that unites all political parties and all social groups in Albania.

### *The role of the United States*

Unlike the EU (and its Delegation Office in Albania) that has become an important player post-2000, the USA through its Embassy in Tirana has been as such throughout the whole transition, ever since the diplomatic relations were established between two countries right after the collapse of communism. American diplomats and ambassadors have been always very proactive in Albanian politics, acting as ‘sentinels’ of the newly fragile democracy. This is seen in many cases, in particular with regard to the most problematic issues such as corruption and organized crime.

The profound engagement of US Ambassadors in the domestic political landscape of Albania has been quite influential, extending beyond simply advising on democratization matters. This active involvement, frequently transcending the advisory roles, has subsequently cultivated a prevailing perception among Albanians that US Ambassadors behave like de facto ‘presidents’ of the country. This sentiment is linked with the decision-making authority vested in them, thereby positioning them as pivotal arbiters in matters pertaining to Albanian domestic politics. During the first decade of transition such palpable influence was notably evident in two critical junctures: the 1996 shambling elections when the US was the most outspoken critic, asking for their repeat from the DP government, and a year later when the pyramid schemes collapsed, bringing the country on the brink of a civil war.

The involvement and contribution of the international community and in particular of the US was also seen in the resolution of pre-election crisis before the parliamentary elections of 2017. In February 2017 the Albanian opposition parties led by Democratic party started a series of anti-government protests, largely in Tirana, that centered around government corruption, the illicit drug situation in Albania, fear of electoral fraud in the parliamentary elections, and

alleged manipulation of the voting process by the socialist government (Deutsche Welle, 2017). Protesters subsequently erected a tent, *The Tent of Freedom*, in which the opposition held daily meetings with supporters (Reuters, 2017). As the situation was escalating without finding a common ground among the political parties, in April two representatives from the European Parliament, MEP's Knut Fleckenstein and David McAllister came to Tirana to mediate a solution to the ongoing deadlock, but with no results (EWB, 2017). The solution came after the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs of the US State Department, Hoyt Brian Yee, visited Albania, setting a deadline for the leaders to find a solution to the political crisis. On 18th of May, Prime Minister Rama and Leader of Opposition Basha, met and discussed the offered solution package from David McAllister, which was called *McAllister+*. After more than 5 hours of negotiations, both parties signed an agreement, postponing the elections and setting a new date, as well as approved changes in the government cabinet, with several ministers and one Vice-Prime Minister from the opposition.

In the last decade one of the most outstanding involvements of the US Embassy has been in the Justice Reform. The judicial system in Albania has been constantly criticized from the international community for being chronically plagued by three problems: corruption, unprofessionalism and lack of independence (from politics and organized crime), therefore its reform was imperative. However, the genuine call for the reform was not led by Albanian political party leaders, but by international community, most notably the US Embassy through its then Ambassador Donald Lu. Many Albanians have seen Lu's commitment to the reform as a guarantee that it would be implemented; some have even described him as the potential savior of Albania at a time when corruption was rampant and impunity has been institutionalized. Indeed Mr. Lu has been the most outspoken person for the judicial reform. In an interview to BIRN, Lu described it as "the most important reform in the 25 years since the fall of communism...which has the possibility of ridding the Albanian judicial system of corrupt judges and prosecutors who steal the money of ordinary citizens and allow organized crime figures, murderers and corrupt politicians to buy justice" (Balkan Insight, 2016).

The justice reform process launched in July 2015 with a set of amendments that changed one third of the Albania's Constitution. The reform aimed to tackle existing shortcomings in the sector, including weaknesses linked to independence and accountability of judges and prosecutors and lack of efficiency and professionalism, as pointed out by the Progress Report of European Commission (2016:57). It is being implemented ever since and its main features have included measures to fight corruption, by establishing a new Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure (SPAK). Another measure to fight corruption and also establish public trust in the judiciary, has been the launch of a generalized re-



evaluation of all currently serving judges, prosecutors and legal advisers, called the 'Vetting'. It started in 2017, with the establishment of the first instance vetting body, the 'Independent Qualification Commission' (IQC), as well as the International Monitoring Operation (IMO), which is supervising the Vetting process and exercising independent oversight.

The other step in the judicial reform has been the "Law on Decriminalization" (approved by the Albania's parliament in December 2015), consisting of barring people with criminal records from holding public office or most civil service jobs - the so-called "law-breakers turned into law-makers".

In addition to the reform of judiciary, the US Embassy has played a very active role in helping Albania with its two persistent problems, corruption and organized crime. The inefficiency of Albanian government has constantly been highlighted with concern by the US Ambassadors. Mrs. Donald Lu in an interview stated "The biggest and most difficult challenge remains ahead of Albania – the fight against organized crime. Until the big fish are arrested, prosecuted and go to jail, the cannabis will return, judges will be bribed, and government officials will be corrupted" (U.S. Embassy Tirana, 2017). Frustrated with Albania's leadership to combat corruption, the US has shifted its policies from backing strong leaders to strong laws, a welcome change many Albanians and internationals have been waiting for some time (The Huffington Post, 2015).

However, the opposition Democratic Party has repeatedly said that EU and US ambassadors (in particular the last one, Mrs. Jury Kim), have favored the ruling Socialist Party, turning a blind eye on the wrongdoings of the government and the fact that Albania in the last years has become a narco-state. The opposition has accused the Socialists and their PM Edi Rama for turning Albania into a 'Columbia of Europe' (Sunday Times, 2018).

## Conclusion

Albanian road towards democratization could have had a different trajectory without the presence of the international community pushing for and directing reforms. If it were not for its role and some important players, most notably the EU and the US, Albania would continue to be a 'Balkan Banana Republic', left in the hands of irresponsible, incapable and egocentric politicians and governments, where corruption and organized crime would flourish, with the mafia, criminals and politicians, the country's '*nouveaux riches*', enjoying privileges, wealthy and luxurious lifestyles on the one hand, and the majority of the population living in poverty on the other.

The international community and international organizations have shown real determination to get Albania on the right track of democratic reforms and integration. These positive driving forces from outside (which give both a purpose and a direction) have been essential for the country to progress on the road to democratization. Their policies and influence have been helping Albania to get on, get in, and catch up with the rest of Europe.

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