



## Research Article

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### **Perspectives and challenges of Albania's integration in the EU - From the fall of communism to the Thessaloniki Summit 1991-2006**

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#### **Abstract**

In 1991 students filled the squares of Tirana under the slogans "*We want Albania like Europe*", only few of them would have imagined that after 32 years from the fall of the communist regime, Albania would still be waiting to be part of the European family. The most optimistic thought that, once the regime fell, freedom and democracy would triumph and the integration process would take only a few years. As for the rest, this process would take time, but even for the pessimists it would never pass 2020.

The challenges of Albanian integration in EU, from 1991 to 2006, have been different and often the progress of undertaken reforms within the framework of the European integration has been slow and not at the required level. This slowness is often reflected in the European Commission reports or in declarations of different summits. This phenomenon reflects the limited culture in the state-building and that of political dialogue, which comes as a result of a strong isolation period, almost half a century under the communist dictatorship.

Between 1991 and 2006, the Albanian governments received financial and human resources from European organizations to help them abandon this self-centered strategy. This paper is written within the framework of International Visegrad Fund (IVF) Research Grand Programme of 2022, which involved consulting a significant number of archival papers in the European Union's Historical Archive in Florence, Italy.

**Keywords:** European integration, reform, democracy, financial aid.

#### **1. Introduction**

The death of the communist leader Enver Hoxha in Albania, on April 11, 1985, for many people brought a ray of hope for the end of the dictatorship and the beginning

of the country's opening to the West.<sup>1</sup> But these hopes faded quickly, as his successor Ramiz Alia, who took over the state leadership, followed the philosophy "*Loyal to the ideals of Enver*" and refused any deviation from Stalinism, a model that had governed Albania after the Second World War (Biberaj, 2019).

In this case, I would like to give a brief overview of the Albanian politics after the year 1945. The stability and progress of Albanians and their state, in the 1920 and 1930, suffered a big blow with the start and development of the Second World War (Dezhegiu, 2009). After the failure of the June Revolution of 1924 by Mr. Fan Noli, a young and pragmatic politician, and the taking of power by Ahmet Zogu, the political situation subsided. In the meantime, Albania's economic situation improved (Tomas, 2011).

Albania came from a profound economic backwardness, which had descend since the economic policy of the Ottoman Empire. These policies had been active since the end of the 15th century solidifying a highly feudal economy, accompanied by a lack of investments in infrastructure and human capital. When Albania gained independence in 1912, it was an agricultural country. Feudal economic relations prevailed. There was no foreign investment and everything was left in the previous centuries.<sup>2</sup> In reality, the economic and social standing of Albania, in the first days of independence, was actually very backward. The Ottoman occupation had suppressed the normal economic, political and social development of Albania. According to researcher Peter Bartl and Turkish researcher Halil Inalcik, the Albanian economy before the Ottoman conquest was focused on exporting grain, timber, and salt to the West. (Inalcik, Faroqi, 1995)

Following independence, Albania was involved in a flurry of world events including the Balkan Wars and the First World War accompanied by domestic political conflicts, which completely damaged the country's economy. According to Joel Migdal's definition, the chronological interval 1920-1939 thus represents the first experiment of an Albanian national government with certain continuity, that is: "*An organization with numerous agencies, directed and coordinated by a state leadership (executive authority) capable of producing and implementing parameters of legislation for other social organizations in a given territory, if necessary using force to impose its will*" (Migdal, 1988, p. 19).

<sup>1</sup> Enver Hoxha was one of the most brutal dictators in Eastern Europe after WWII. His role in the Anti-Fascist War is full of light and shadow. This did not prevent him from monopolizing the resistance of the Albanian people under the communist umbrella, which paved the way for taking the power in 1945 and the consolidation of a brutal personal power, which affected not only his opponents but also his closest friends. For more see, Kasoruhu. A (2021), *Un incubo di mezzo secolo. L'Albania di Enver Hoxha, Besa muci*, Lecce; Verga G, (2024), *L'uomo che non doveva mai morire. L'Albania e il regime di Enver Hoxha*, Prospero Editore, Milano

<sup>2</sup> The professor who was send by the League of Nations at the Albanian government's request to analyze the country's economic development possibilities gave a clear picture of the Albanian economy as a very primitive one, with an agricultural oriented industry and narrow roads that were unsuitable for economic growth. He declared that: "*Politically, Albania is a state, but not economically*". He emphasized the need for great infrastructural investment, agricultural development, the creation of a central bank and the exploration of mineral wealth. Milo P. (2018) "Political and economic development, years 1922-1944, in the Proceedings of the second conference of the Museum of the Bank of Albania on topic The role of money during wars, Bank of Albania, Tirana 2018, p 109.

The situation begins to stabilize when Ahmet Zogu retook power and in 1925 declared the Republic. This was accompanied by measures for the modernization of Albania's economy, which continued even n 1928 Monarchy was established. Everyone believed that economic recovery could not be achieved only with internal forces, but foreign capital had to be absorbed. This policy, which is sometimes referred to as the "open door" policy, opened a new perspective to the Albanian economic development and modernization. Foreign capital intervention, the creation of mixed capital companies, investments in infrastructure, as well as the construction of a contemporary legislative framework, created a favorable economic situation that vanished in April 1939, when Mussolini's fascist army landed in the largest port of Albania in Durrës.

Albanians couldn't benefit from post-war American help and support as at the end of 1944, the communists took control of the country and incorporated it into the Eastern bloc. Hoxha's government was related to Tito's Yugoslavia, which was present in Albania through its own political emissaries during the National Liberation War. The connection under the internationalist umbrella that the countries propagated for Albania was a dangerous adventure, since the Albanian side saw Kosovo as an internal Yugoslavian issue at the time (Pipa, 2010).

Vickers (1998) has no doubt when she describes the contribution of Popovic and Mogusha in the Albanian communist movement: *"The task of the Yugoslav emissaries was to monitor political developments in Albania."* This meant promoting divisions between the various factions of Albanian politics in order to delegitimize claims for national unity, emphasizing class and party loyalty.

The involvement of Yugoslav emissaries in the Albanian communist movement was acknowledged by Hoxha himself: *"When the Party was founded, we trusted in these two comrades, because I had no love and no clear organizational and political ideas. ...In that period I played a significant role, but Ali (pseudonyms of Popov) was always by my side* (Malltezi, Plasari, 1996, p. 153)

After the great collapse of Stalin and Tito, Hoxha seized the opportunity to break away from Yugoslavia, first by solidifying his leadership within the Communist Party of Albania, starting a wild hunt against what he called "Trotskyist hyenas". Secondly, by aligning with the Soviets, he thought that economic aid would be consistent. This "ballerina alliance" continued even when Hoxha later accused the Soviet Union of being a revisionist country, leading him to get closer to China, which he was considered as a true supporter of Marxist-Leninist ideas. But, when China also began opening up to the West, Hoxha condemned this movement and declared Albania as the only country in the world where Marxist, Leninist and Stalinist ideologies remained untouched by revisionism, introducing the country to an autarkic philosophy, which resulted in severe economic consequences for the country. Isolation became the cornerstone of Albania's foreign policy (Bogdani, 2007, pp. 23-24). As a result of this isolation policy, accompanied by the elimination of Albanians with Western education and the suffocation of all dissidents, Albania lacked intellectuals prepared for reforms that would take place in the early 1990s.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the events that took place in Romania, Albanian

students launched a broad wave of protests. First they were focused on economic issues but later developed strong political demands, the most important of which was the introduction of political pluralism in Albania. "We want Albania like Europe" was the slogan of student protests, which won the sympathy of intellectuals and laborers, who blocked the economy and pushed Albania into civil disobedience. In these contentious situation, President Ramiz Alia allowed the emergence of new political forces. After 45 years, the Albanians were able to escape the communist trap and looked towards the west. On December 8, 1990, the Democratic Party of Albania was formed by a group of Albanian students and intellectuals, who elected Azem Hajdari, a student, as Chairman of the Initiative Committee, and then cardiologist Sali Berisha as Chairman of the Party (Rama, 2012).

On March 22, 1992, the Democratic Party won an absolute majority in early legislative elections, symbolizing the introduction of democracy and political pluralism in the country (Halili, 2016).

Along with liberal economic reforms, economic privatization, agricultural reform, fiscal and tax reform, the new Albanian government also set the objectives of its foreign policy: the Kosovo issue (denied by the previous regime), European Integration (the previous regime had declared war to the West) and joining NATO (the regime described it as a military organization in the hands of imperialist states).

## **2. Establishing diplomatic relations between Albania and the European Community**

In the dynamics of events that go from 1990 to 1992, when the internal situation was very tense, what gave hope to the Albanian people was the resolution of the European Parliament dated July 19, 1990. After the Embassies events, it is evident that institutional Europe supported Albanian people and opposed any form of violence and repression of government against protesters.

The political climate in the fall of 1990 was intense: protests continued and grew more intense; intellectuals emerged from the Labor Party; the state border was repeatedly crossed and large numbers of people left Albania; the European press was constantly speaking about the situation in Albania and the European institutions were closely monitoring all the events in Albania. The departure of the writer Ismail Kadare in October 1990 was a a severe blow to the regime, as he was the most powerful voice of the Albanian world and his anti-regime views would undermine the propaganda created by Alia and his administration.

Kadare remarked: *"The danger had passed, I didn't leave because of that. However, it was a very delicate moment; as the country could either attempt to catch up to the West or adopt the conservative communist model of Cuba or Korea. Dictator Enver Hoxha was dead and, despite the social nervousness, officials decided there would be no change; they would choose the conservative, terrorist way; I wanted to state publicly that this was dangerous; I left to tell the truth that could not be told there"* (Gazeta Panorama, October 8, 2012).

All this internal and international pressure gave its results when President Alia, on December 8, 1990, recognized the formation of Albanian Democratic Party and de-

facto and de-jure recognized pluralism in Albania after nearly half a century. A few days after the Democratic Party was founded, Alexander Langer, member of the European Parliament's Political Affairs Committee, came to Tirana for an official visit and confirmed the achievement of the student movement in Albania. In the meeting they emphasised the need for a European Parliament resolution to support Albania's request for membership in the OSCE. The report of Alexander Langer made possible the second resolution of the European Parliament for Albania. This resolution would pave the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations with EEC. The draft resolution for Albania was approved on February 21, 1991 in the European Parliament (HAEU, 1991).

On February 20, 1991, through a verbal note, the Albanian government expressed the will to establish diplomatic relations with the European Community. After 4 months, on June 20, 1991, the General Directorate of Foreign Relations of the ECC, through a verbal note addressed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Albania, announced the establishment of relations between Albania and European Community.

### **3. Financial support for Albania from 1991 to 2006, PHARE and CARDS Program**

On April 19, 1992, Aleksandër Meksi was sworn in as Albania's first pluralistic prime minister. The government headed by him emerged from the March 22 elections. A government program was drawn up (by him and all the ministers), which was presented to the Parliament to receive a vote of confidence. The support and aid of the International Monetary Fund, which had an agreement with Ylli Bufi's stability government a few months ago, was crucial during these times. At that time, the entire government had a joint meeting with the IMF envoy, Mr. Singh, who delivered a lecture on the reforms that needed to be pursued.

On the government program presentation, the prime minister Meksi was clear about the challenges that would face during economic reforms: *economic system that guarantees the stability and well-being of a nation is market economy driven by the private property of free individuals. The socialist economy is not directly turned to a market economy. It requires self-reliance of economic mechanisms, a legal system, free competition and the disappearance of state bureaucracy. It also requires the integration of Albania's economy into the world economy, to allow foreign investment, modernize technology and increase the level of skills among our citizens* (Meksi 1992).

In the period 1991-1993, Albania received an international aid of 1 227 million ECU, of which 44% for food emergency, 42% for economic restructuring, 10% for payments balance, 6% for export credits. The EU was the main donor: 326 million ECU, equal to 27% of the total. Other donors were: Italy (24%), Turkey (7%), Germany (7%), USA (7%), Greece (5%) coordinated by G24 (HAEU, 1995).

European Economic Community used PHARE program to offer financial and technical cooperation to Central and Eastern European countries. Established in 1989 to support reforms in Poland and Hungary until 1996, PHARE program expanded by including 13 partner countries from Central and Eastern Europe (HAEU, 1995).

Albania managed to make great progress in the transition from a centralized to a free economy. The implementation of a series of reforms under the direction of the International Monetary Fund, from 1993 to 1995, lead Albania to an annual growth rate of about 9%, that was the highest growth rate of all countries of former communist bloc. As a result of a disciplined monetary policy inflation fell to 6% and unemployment decreased to 14% (HAEU, 1995). PHARE funds in Albania were focused in nine main sectors:

- Transport, Telecommunication and Energy Sector;
- The Higher Education System through TEMPUS program;
- Public institutions and administration reform;
- Agriculture;
- Improvement and adoption to the European Community legislation;
- Health;
- Financial sector;
- Private sector and aid to enterprises;
- Integrated Regional Policies;

According to the European Commission report regarding the financial progress of Eastern European countries during 1995, Albania had benefited social assistance in almost all economic sectors (HAEU, 1996). The financial statement of investments shows that during 1990-1992, Albania received almost 77 million ECU as aid to overcome economic crises. The infrastructural development network had managed to take 64.4 million ECU, in two main projects: The improvement of national road system Durrës-Elbasan and Pogradec-Kapshticë, as well as the construction of ferry terminal in Durrës. Agricultural sector was financed constantly and had absorbed around 30.3 million ECU. The greatest aid was received on financial sector recovery, about 107 million ECU. Other sectors such as: education, health and environment had benefited less aids, specifically 9.6, 13 and 3.3 million ECU.

In the spring of 1996, inflation went to 18% from 8% in 1995. This was accompanied by an internal political tension, which brought serious consequences in the process of integration reforms.

The general elections of May 26, 1996 took place in a climate of tension and were accompanied by problems on Election Day, there were attempts to manipulate them in specific electoral areas.<sup>3</sup> This led to the radicalization of Albanian opposition, represented by the Socialist Party.

Another important element was the appearance of a number of "pyramid" schemes which developed their activity on speculative basis (HAEU, 1997).

Anyway, Albania had once again become a committed partner of the PHARE Program. The Albanian authorities were already familiar with the procedures and implementation of the program. In 1996, PHARE aid supported the mid-term restructuring and modernization of Albanian economy as well as the strengthening of relations between Albania and European Union. The implementation of PHARE

<sup>3</sup> The report of the OSCE observers stated *"The electoral code has been flagrantly violated. The elections were compromised, 32 of the 79 articles of the Electoral Code were violated"*.

program remained in a satisfactory level: From 1991 to 1996, 69% of the total accumulated funds were contracted. This figure exceeds 80% of the funds, where only national programs are included.

At the beginning of 1995, Albania officially requested the opening of negotiations for an association agreement with EU. According to an assessment undertaken by EU Commission on the possibilities of free trade of goods, services and capital in Albania, a "classic" European agreement similar to those enjoyed by countries in membership negotiations with EU. The parliamentary elections of May 1996 put a question mark on democracy in Albania. The events and crisis of 1997 put the "status quo" in the contractual relations between Albania and European Union (HAEU, 1997).

#### **4. CARDS Program (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization)**

In 1999, EU launched a new initiative called the Stabilization-Association Process (SAP), a process which would support 5 Western Balkans countries, Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia (at that time the Former Yugoslav Republic), Croatia, Serbia and Albania. This process aimed to establish closer relations between EU and the above mentioned countries, through Stabilization and Association Agreements. (HAEU, Council Regulation, 2000). The Stabilization and Association process (SAP) is a progressive partnership in which the EU offers a mixture of trade concessions (Autonomous Trade Measures), economic and financial assistance (CARDS Program) and contractual relationships (Stabilization and Association Agreements) (HAEU, 2007).

The essential instrument that supported Albania during the PSA since 2001 was the CARDS program (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization).<sup>4</sup> For each Balkan country, the assistance was focused on supporting reforms and establishing the necessary institutions for implementing the obligations contained in Stabilization and Association Agreements. The amount made available for this program for the period 2000 to 2006 for all countries of the Western Balkans was about 4.65 billion euros and fund allocation for Albania was about 280 million euros in the form of grants (HAEU, 2000). The total population in the western Balkans region is around 24 million. Thus, the CARDS allocation represents an annual support of 30 euro per capita demonstrating the political importance that the EU attaches to the region (HAEU, 2007).

In the European Commission report of 2004, it was clearly stressed that Albania should engage strongly and seriously to maximize the advantages that the CARDS brought, "in order for CARDS to be capable of efficiently supporting Albania in addressing

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<sup>4</sup> The preamble of the CARDS Regulation describes the main objective of the assistance: 'The existing Community assistance should be expanded and redirected to adjust it to the European Union's political objectives for the region and, particularly, to contribute to the stabilization and association process and increase the responsibility of the recipient countries and entities in relation to that process'. Also, according to the Regulation the regional dimension of Community assistance should be given special attention (HAEU, 2007).

*its many challenges, it is vital that Albanian beneficiaries ensure adequate commitment throughout the project cycle, including provision of appropriate Albanian counterparts. It is also crucial that the beneficiaries have a genuine interest in, and motivation for, each project 's successful implementation" (HAEU, 2004).*

This financial package allocated to Albania, as defined in *the Multi-Year Indicative Program 2002-2004 (MIP)*, was aimed to support the Stabilization-Association Process, including contribution to a general social-economic development. The assistance was centrally managed by the Delegation of the European Commission in Tirana.

### **The CARDS program envisaged three forms of program implementation:**

- **Centralized** – where contracting authority role was played by European Commission in Brussels (projects in the field of customs, taxation and education (TEMPUS);
- **Deconcentrated** – where contracting authority role was played by the EU Delegation in Tirana (most CARDS projects). The deconcentration process lasted for a relatively long time and the transition to a new management structure was one of the main reasons for delays in the implementation of CARDS programs during 2001 and 2002;
- **Decentralized** – where the role of contracting authority was played by local authorities. The Local Community Development Program (LCDP) was implemented in a decentralized manner by the PMU, under the Albanian Development Fund (FZSH).

The PHARE program was based on the development of conditions for a smooth transition from a centralized economy to a free and capitalist economy. The CARDS program provided support for the establishment of institutions, the strengthening of administrative and judicial capacities, the rule of law, human and minority freedoms and rights, etc.

## **5. Conclusion**

After the fall of the communist regime in Albania, in the spring of 1992, the Albanian governments, regardless of the political party they belong to, were focused on three main issues: Kosovo issue, European integration and NATO accession. During these years, Kosovo gained its independence, Albania joined NATO, while European integration has encountered many obstacles, turning into an arena of internal battles within the Albanian political class regarding the achievements or failures of this process. In a society that is almost 93% in favor of entering Europe, while other Western Balkan countries exhibit Euroscepticism, Albanian governments have repeatedly failed in the process of state-forming reforms that would bring about the acceleration of European integration and why not the end of this process that is Albania's EU membership. The reason for these 34 years of failure is the Machiavellian approach that Albanian politics has had in relation to the integration process, which means that they preferred to consolidate their political power. This kind of power has often been

obtained and exercised in an abusive manner at the expense of the structural reforms required by Europe. The internal rhetoric that has accompanied Albanian transition has been a unified attitude of the Albanian political classes: European integration process is separated from the process of democracy consolidation, considering the latter as an internal matter, without reflections on the intergration processes.

This “insidious” division between democracy and European integration has produced deep political and economic crises, which are also reflected in the European Commission reports and Summit declarations. The inability to build a functional democracy and a state of law, as the European Community has defined since 1993, with the Copenhagen criteria, has put the Albanian reality in a “trap” where it is asserted that we have a functional democracy, but it is the position of the European Union regarding the enlargement process that is hindering Albania’s accession to the EU. Albanian society is realizing that EU membership does not automatically bring transformation into a developed and fully democratic country, which was the students dream in December 1990, who idealized The European Union as the paradise of happy nations. If we refer to the European Commission reports or the American State Department reports on Albania, it is understood that although there have been positive steps on EU integration, this is not reflected into a significant improvement on politics, the state of law, the fight against corruption, the decentralization of economy, the construction of a depoliticized and efficient administration, etc.

The regional environment in which Albania functions, particularly in the Western Balkans, is another significant factor contributing to its dismal progress towards EU membership. Two significant issues have plagued this region’s history since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The first issue is the rise of nationalism, which was suppressed by communist ideology, particularly in the former Yugoslavia. This led to a series of violent conflicts that lasted until the early 2000s.

Another major reason for Albania’s unsatisfactory progress towards the EU is the regional context, more specifically the Western Balkans. After the fall of the Berlin Wall the region has faced two major problems. The first problem is the rise of nationalism (which was kept under control by communist ideology) especially in Former Yugoslavia. This led to a series of bloody wars that lasted until the early 2000s. These wars, accompanied by flagrant violations of international conventions, produced humanitarian and economic crises and due to the domino effect the entire region found itself in serious difficulties. The second problem, which is a derivative of the first, is related to political aggression, where electoral processes have led to questions about the legitimacy of political power.

However, the international community has approved these processes at the price of democracy in order to impose what is known as stabilocracy in the majority of Western Balkan countries. In the conditions where state borders are still a matter of discussion, that produce strong tensions (the case of Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo), the disputes carried over from the last century are still present (Law of War between Greece and Albania). The international community has “tolerated” authoritarian leaders to pursue policies lacking the spirit of democracy, until the moment they offer stabilocracy in a region that has produced conflict for at least a century.

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