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INVOLVEMENT OF ALBANIAN CITIZENS IN POLITICAL PROCESSES, WITH A FOCUS ON THE ELECTORAL PROCESS AND THE EFFECTIVE EXERCISE OF DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

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Involvement of Albanian citizens in political processes, with a focus on the electoral process and the effective exercise of democratic rights

Arnisa Tepelija

1. Summary

In the legal and formal context of our, more aimed at than applied, liberal democracy system, this policy paper aims at highlighting socio-economic reasons, which are amongst the main reasons that directly lead to the lack of healthy citizen engagement in political processes. The paper highlights the systemic, legal, and policymaking framework, and the exercise of democracy rules of the game framework in Albania by looking at elections' characteristics, the work of the institutions, and the inclusion climate, to then consider the perceptions of citizens regarding their lack of engagement in the political sphere. The study considers the following aspects:

- Systemic issues related to formal requirements for guaranteeing democracy (free and fair elections, formal/informal discrimination of certain groups, leader control over parties), and socio-economic and development nature (demographics, economic situation, education, marginalization, models, and roles) that lead to the configuration of the democracy applied today.

- Issues of fragile democracy and continued transition (lack of conditions for free elections, lack of tradition to exercise democracy), interconnected with the Albanian context; but also currently widespread challenges in consolidated democracies around the world and the renewed rise of authoritarian figures, the increasing role of social media when compared to traditional media that has led to a democratization of the debate, but also more opportunities for greater polarization of the society, parallel realities, fake news and voter behavior disorientation.

Lastly, from the analysis and findings, some conclusions are drawn on the damage caused to the public space and how it can be restored.

2. Methodology

The data of the policy paper have been collected from the existing literature by foreign contemporary democracy authors, combined with works from Albanian authors on the type of democracy applied in Albania. The studies have also been cross-referenced with statistical data published by or solicited from institutions on election turnout, campaigns and election challenges in existing barometers on trust in institutions, institutional climate regarding full inclusion, vote-buying and favoritism, criminalization of politics, public data on consultation and dialogue processes, and challenges for the rule of law in improving the rules of the game.

Interpersonal data were collected from semi-structured interviews with representatives from organized social groups¹, to obtain a *cross-cutting* approach to society. These included

¹ Interviews were organized with representatives from the following groups:

1. Women in policy and decision making
2. Youth
3. LGBTQ+
4. Organized groups with disabilities
5. The media
6. Activists
7. National minorities (the Roma and Egyptian Communities)
8. The diaspora
9. Health care staff (regarding the pandemic section).

representatives of youth, women, and marginalized groups organizations, unions, the media, business, and academia, while requirements for geographical dispersion and various social categories were respected.

Interviewees have answered regarding objective and subjective criteria for the participation of the communities they represent, related to the following aspects:

- Features of the various groups they represent:
 - Age, demographics, income, gender identity, religious belief:
 - Collective social identity and collective ideological identity
 - Rational/emotional elections
 - Ideology/Opportunity
- Political and ideological education, the sense of public and community space.
 - Methods of information. Image, campaigns. Media and communication of issues of interest; Identification of the community with its representatives
- Trust in the electoral system and the incentives to vote;
- Organization level and advocacy strength
- Expectations after the changes foreseen and trust in progress.

The data from interviews have been interpreted and coded, concluding sound/unsound norms of political behavior; social reciprocity forces in the community and social cohesion; individual and collective norms and values; conviction for and hope in progress; the ability for a collective and ideological organization.

3. Participation in statistics and facts:

Over the last 15 years, election turnout has constantly remained at just below 50% of the registered voters, except for the 2019 local elections. Last year, the lowest voter turnout in 25 years was recorded (22.96% of the voters), because the pluralist element was missing in the elections and there was no race between the candidates. In general, election turnout increases when the competition is stronger, and this was the case in 2011 when as a result of the strong competition in Tirana and some other municipalities, turnout increased by 4% compared to the previous local elections and 2% compared the latest general elections².

Election turnout over the years:

General elections

2017	2013	2009	2005
46,77%	49,86%	50.77 %	49.23%

² ISP Participation in the elections, contrasts, and impacting factors
<https://isp.com.al/index.php/2019/07/08/pjesemarrja-ne-zgjedhje-1992-2019-kontraste-dhe-faktore-ndikues/>

Local elections

2019	2015	2011
22,96%	47,83%	50.9%

Vote restrictions:

Concerning voter registration, the Final Report of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Monitoring Mission of 2017 Elections³ includes the following facts on discrimination and non-proportional voter suppression:

Restrictions of the right to vote for citizens that have been declared mentally unfit by a court decision violate the international obligations forbidding discrimination based on disability.

Contrary to OSCE standards, voters above 100 years of age are automatically removed from voter lists and must actively confirm their personal information to be reinserted in the lists.

The Roma and Egyptian Communities still face challenges when registering as voters. The vote-buying phenomenon impacts them especially, because of the financial difficulties, and challenges with employment and education.

4. Policy-making analysis

Democracy is the collective self-governance that aims at achieving the common goals of the society. In similarity with any other system based on a given model of governed citizens, democracy is based on the public sphere, a physical or virtual space where citizens are engaged in critical public debate⁴. This presumes active and engaged citizenship and informed choices in the context of a plurality of governing offers.

In Albania, one cannot yet speak of a sound civic engagement reality. Achievement paradigms in Western representative democracy models, such as **free and fair elections, democratic institutions, and media freedom in the framework of economic liberalization** have been formally embraced by Albania over the last 30 years, using mechanisms and agendas imposed from above, in the form of legal requirements for European integration.

To understand the context of civic involvement in political processes, one needs to look at two contextual descriptive presumptions, which are at the root of all elements describing the context in which democracy in Albania is exercised, from the perspective of international and national experts:

³ The General Election of 25 June 2017; OSCE/ODIHR Mission to Observe the 2017 Elections, Final Report http://www.cec.org.al/Portals/0/Documents/CEC%202013/syri_vezhguesit/Raporti%20i%20OSBE-ODIHR%20shqip.pdf?ver=2018-05-04-133953-700

⁴ Jurgen Habermas in "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" 1991

1. *Inefficient legal revolutions;*
2. *Mistaking economic liberalization for political liberalization.*

Both aspects lead to mistrust in the democratic processes and low public turnout not just in elections, but also in healthy democratic processes, in a spiral that downwards democracy.

4.1 Legal revolutions

Legal revolution is a term used by Blocker to describe the journey towards establishing a liberal democratic constitutional order in countries without a democratic tradition, which has in the past suffered under totalitarian regimes. This journey presumes the establishment of democratic constitutional and legal “rules of the game” that does not address consolidated power⁵, do not democratize the society, are dictated from above, and are not internalized by the texture of the society. They are the dichotomy of the Albanian citizens, who are split between two realities, that of the existing formalist-legal state and the informal reality dictated by private and party interests. This dichotomy undermines trust in the election processes, political party structures, and even media freedom.

Democratic institutions / undemocratic practices; transparency, the media, and citizens.

Scientific data show that the effects of historical institutions continue long after those institutions have ceased to exist. This is a result of the importance of behavioral norms that have been established in various forms as “informal institutions” or “culture” to distinguish them from official institutions⁶. Pandey secures direct evidence that connects historic power concentration institutions with the later political behavior and provision of public services⁷. A 2016 World Bank study of development policies⁸ distinguishes institutional norms, between *healthy political norms* related to transparency, accountability, citizens engagement, and *unhealthy norms of political behavior* such as those supporting forms of clientelism in political competition, where political support is gained based on ensuring targeted private interests and not the common public good. The existence of the institutional secret and the decision-making concentration in a few individuals, are models that exist especially in elected, but also appointed bodies. This leads to a form of government lacking reflection or public accountability, and *to a lack of drive to vote based on institutional performance*: The primary thesis that voter behavior depends on their evaluation of the “government policies from the point of view of their impact on daily life” may be applied to an election process or reality, but not to the overall 20-year electoral behavior in Albania.⁹ In the same line, the Final OSCE/ODIHR¹⁰ Monitoring Report on the 2017 general

⁵ Paul Blokker, *Dilemmas of Democratisation: from Legal Revolutions to Democratic Constitutionalism*, *Nordic Journal of International Law* 81 (2012) 437–470, 2012 DOI 10.1163/15718107-08104003

⁶ Alberto Alesina and Paola Giuliano, Culture and Institutions, *Journal of Economic Literature* 2015, vol 53, no 4, December 2015 <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/jel.53.4.898>

⁷ Sanjay K. Pandey, *Cutback Management and the Paradox of Publicness*, Wiley Online Library, 2010 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2010.02177.x>

⁸ Making Politics Work for Development - Harnessing Transparency and Citizen Engagement, Policy Research Report, World Bank Group 2016 <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/jel.53.4.898>

⁹ Afrim Krasniqi, Election behavior and vote identification in Albania, 2011 https://www.academia.edu/4420863/Sjellja_zgjedhore_dhe_identifikimi_i_vot%C3%ABs_n%C3%AB_Shqip%C3%ABri

¹⁰ THE GENERAL ELECTION OF 25 JUNE 2017; OSCE/ODIHR Mission to Observe the 2017 Elections, Final Report http://www.cec.org.al/Portals/0/Documents/CEC%202013/syri_vezhguesit/Raporti%20i%20OSBE-ODIHR%20shqip.pdf?ver=2018-05-04-133953-700

elections in Albania, recommends a revision of the measures taken against pressures related to voters' employment, as an issue that has not been effectively addressed by the public administration institutions, and as an element that connects institutional behavior to the drive to participate in elections.

Various scholars¹¹ argue that in those environments where public institutions are caught up to serve the interests of economic and political elites, the solution to improve governance is not through the traditional public sector reforms, but through external institutions that are accountable to citizens. Their results show that internal indicators of public sector management, such as civil servant's wages and bureaucratic rules, are not important, whereas the measures of external accountability institutions, such as citizens' voice and transparency are significantly correlated with lower corruption level and better quality of services provided.

Public authorities should apply the principles and procedures set out in the Law on the Freedom of Information and the Law on Public Consultation. According to monitoring conducted by Res Publica on the main public authorities at the local and central level regarding the Law on Public Consultation¹² as well as the Law on Freedom of Information and the work of the Commissioner for Freedom of Information and Data Protection, it resulted that these laws are implemented only formally: *"The status of implementation of the Law on the Freedom of Information has been, for several years, at mediocre levels. The implementation level of the law does not achieve the intention of the legislator nor the expectations aroused. This is a just observation since this Law entered into force in 2014."*¹³

The formal implementation of these laws is mainly related to the procedures enabling the timely receipt of and access to the necessary information and documents particularly required by investigative journalists and activists, who act either in the field of public information or monitor administrative and legal channels about the activity and decision-making of institutions. The interviews with the media revealed that: "The responses to requests for information are often delayed. The institutions delegate their duties. In some cases, it is impossible to verify data, since the Government has full control of information and media access is not allowed."¹⁴

From a media perspective,¹⁵ the principle of inclusion is also at formal levels in the work of institutions. The institutions are perceived as "prohibited" for active citizens and they invite selectively interest groups friendly to the government. *Many meetings often take place without informing the stakeholders. The increased violence against journalists, the denigrating language against them, the cancellation of press releases, sending of pre-recorded meeting tapes is a violation of media freedom, control over information, and repetition of propaganda. In many cases, the journalists only play the pre-recorded videos handed out by the Members of*

¹¹Kaufman, Mehrez, Gurgur: Voice or Public Sector Management? An Empirical Investigation of Determinants of Public Sector Performance Based on a Survey of Public Officials; World Bank Research Working Paper; 2002.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/23742851_Voice_or_Public_Sector_Management_An_Empirical_Investigation_of_Determinants_of_Public_Sector_Performance_Based_on_a_Survey_of_Public_Officials

¹² Public consultation - the challenges of the first year of the law implementation. A study on the effectiveness of Law No.146/2014 "On Public Information and Consultation", Res Publica Center <http://www.respublica.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/konsultimi-publik-sfidat-e-vitet-te-pare-te-zbatimit-te-ligjit.pdf>

¹³ Freedom of information 2019 - When the Commissioner for freedom of Information is downgraded to a monitoring body, Res Publica Center <https://www.respublica.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/E-drejte-e-informimit-2019-Res-Publica-web.pdf>

¹⁴ As pointed out in the interviews with media representatives

¹⁵ As pointed out in the interviews with media representatives

*Parliament without having the possibility to make ask questions at press conferences.*¹⁶ During the pandemic caused by Covid-19, there were no press conferences for accountability purposes, but the responsible institutions were mainly giving unilateral information.

The Covid-19 situation aggravated the state of access to information, such as the case of Covid-19 hospitals and patient suicides within their premises. No media was allowed to enter the hospital premises, whereas the Ministry has the “monopoly” of reporting the number of persons infected. Therefore, there was a lack of information regarding the number of tests, equipment, doctors, capacities, etc.

The personalization of political parties, the personalization of politics (authoritarian model); absence of public debate; polarization of discourse; avoidance of ideological approaches.

One of the most urgent problems to be addressed by the current electoral reform is the role of political parties' leaders. They have great power in their hands, obtained through the closed lists in the regional proportional system, among other things. The OSCE/ODIHR Final Monitoring Report of the 2017 Parliamentary Elections in Albania¹⁷ states that: *“Throughout the entire campaign, the prevailing mistrust between political parties and candidates triggered mutual personal accusations to the detriment of parties' introducing any concrete platform. In most of the cases, the candidates' campaign focused their attention on the personalities of the individual candidates, their past actions, and reputation... The web pages of the leaders were more active than the web pages of their respective parties.”*

Krasniqi¹⁸ has made the same observations about electoral behavior and vote identification in Albania and he emphasizes that the electoral image remains dominant over the programs.

4.2 Confusion between the liberal economic system and liberal democracy

The consolidated western democracies, particularly the European ones, are largely prepared to prevent the translation of citizens' economic privileges into political privileges. Tocqueville argues that inequality is not a problem per se' unless it translates into political privileges, in what he sees as equality of political liberty rooted in an outright rejection of privilege.¹⁹ The translation of wealth into greater political influence is what Wendy Brown calls the “economization of society”, a phenomenon that violates the basic principle of democracy: that of political equality of citizens.

¹⁶ Idem

¹⁷ PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, 25 JUNE 2017; OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation, Mission Final Report http://www.cec.org.al/Portals/0/Documents/CEC%202013/syri_vezhguesit/Raporti%20i%20OSBE-ODIHR%20shqip.pdf?ver=2018-05-04-133953-700

¹⁸ Afrim Krasniqi, Electoral Behavior and Voting Identification in Albania, 2011 https://www.academia.edu/4420863/Sjellja_zgjedhore_dhe_identifikimi_i_vot%C3%ABs_n%C3%AB_Shqip%C3%ABri

¹⁹ See Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, University of Chicago Press, 2000 paperback edition, pg.170-171: *“Not being able to take up a rank in public life analogous to the one they occupy in private life, [the rich] abandon the first to concentrate on the second.”*

The Albanian state, with its fragile institutions and lack of democratic traditions, is not able to manage the phenomenon of political inequality of citizens. The true undoing of *demos* is when citizens do not act as such, but as economic actors²⁰.

The regulatory framework and regulatory practices are weak where public interest intersects with private interests. The Freedom Barometer Report 2019²¹ on Albania indicates that the governance method chosen by the elected officials is the aspect that mostly undermines democracy in Albania because the legal regulations of public interest are made based on the private interests of the elected officials.

About this aspect:

The funding of political parties is the focus of the current electoral reform, for the fact that, up to date, such funding has been from numerous resources, such as from state funds, but also membership fees, from non-public funds. The latter was from financial donations, donations in kind, services, various sponsorships, loans, or various guarantees, as well as any other financial transaction. The amounts of money donated are higher than the amounts declared and the majority of it is informal and non-transparent, with loose state control and insufficient administrative fines.

The vote-buying is not addressed. There has been a significant lack of public rejection by politicians to accept financial support from individuals with criminal backgrounds. Their distancing from criminal political subjects could help in building public trust in the integrity of elections.

It is also widely known that the phenomenon of vote-buying affects the most vulnerable and marginalized (see above the OSCE/ODIHR report on Roma and Egyptian communities), further consolidating the social and economic status of the privileged and underprivileged categories.

Criminalization of elected representatives. While the number of Codes of Ethics and Conflict of Interest for elected representatives is increasing, no systematic measures have been taken to decriminalize the elected bodies, except for flagrant cases published in the media.

The lack of media independence, as noted by the journalists interviewed, is mostly related to the political interests of the businesspersons who own these media and their interests invested in politics. A Media Ownership Monitor Albania (MOM) study reveals that: *“Despite a large number of media outlets, only a small group of owners control the attention of the public, in the press, television, and radio - which poses a high risk to media pluralism. Most of these influential owners hold interests in highly regulated business areas, such as construction, oil, gambling, private higher education, or banking, which make them suspicious of pressure from the ruling elites, and that often affects the editorial line of the media they control. Due to such inappropriate influence on the media, which varies according to the political and economic interests of the owners, many journalists apply self-censorship, turning the media into networks of distributing the government propaganda and disinformation campaigns.”*²²

²⁰ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, 2015, pg. 30

https://www.mcgill.ca/ahcs/files/ahcs/wendy_brown_undoing_the_demos.pdf

²¹ Freedom Barometer 2019 Albania <http://freedombarometer.org/country/albania/172/2019/>

²² Media Ownership Monitor Albania <https://albania.mom-rsf.org/sq/pronësia/>

5. Interpersonal analysis of citizens

Political engagement, both in its healthy and unhealthy forms, has a high impact on governance, policy choice, and economic development. Political engagement can improve governance and the outcome of development by holding leaders accountable to citizens²³. This issue raises a big question: How can healthy political engagement be stimulated for the governments to work better in support of economic development?

In Albania, the inclusion of various groups in policy-making has challenges that depend on both well-known socio-economic factors as well as on local phenomena. To analyze these factors, we need to rethink critically many paradigms and put them into context.

The main reasons for non-participation in political processes observed among the personal perceptions of the respondents are summarized as follows:

1. **Socio-economic inequality and barriers.** The interviews revealed that the efforts promoting community participation face high risks of failure due to socio-economic inequality and barriers to participation. Demographics, access to information, access to education, technology, and institutions are the crucial factors for civic engagement.
2. **Mistrust in citizens' ability to make a difference by voting.** None of the respondents believed that the citizens believe in changing the situation by voting. The vote is not perceived as a means to change the situation, nor the will of the people. This infers an alienation of citizens from the government and the great association of the voting community with the community of political parties.
3. **Wrong association between involvement in politics and political party involvement.** According to a National Survey conducted by the Western Balkans Democracy Initiative entitled "Youth and Politics",²⁴ there is a low level of youth involvement in politics. *"Because of the widespread lack of trust in politics and the lack of merit-based models of progress in politics built on fair competition, Albanian youth do not consider political parties as the main means to change society and to advance their political skills and ideologies. While young people respond that they are aware that it is them who should be dealing with politics, most of them consider this to be something that should be done by others and not by them in their capacity."* The semi-structured interviews, conducted for this policy paper, show that there is a misconception of political engagement, which is demonized in public perception because it is often confused with party engagement. This leads us to the next observation:
4. **Lack of civic education and political education of citizens.** The overall political spectrum, from left to right, as well as their dominant guiding theories, are missing in the Albanian ideological-political landscape, whether being in education, beliefs, examples, or applied models. In political rhetoric, it is talked about "integrity or opportunism"²⁵, and this touches all political fractions. The media has no role in the political education of citizens. On the contrary, all statistics and each of the respondents indicated the great focus of public debate on charismatic persons and leaders, rather than on political processes and agendas.

²³ Evidence on the Impact of Political Engagement:
<http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/691801464199875908/Chapter-Five-Evidence-on-Impact-of-Political-Engagement.pdf>

²⁴ National Survey: Young People and Politics in Albania https://www.wfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/National-Survey_Young-People-and-Politics-in-Albania-FINAL.pdf

²⁵ As pointed out in the interviews with representatives of activists and civil society.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the fact that Albania has a marked lack of training or ideological beliefs, which is also mentioned by studies and interviews. This is also because the parties themselves do not have a genuine left or right identity and often behave similarly to each other, and/or completely contrary to the “ideology”, they represent. Another factor is the association of the leftist narrative with the country’s communist past.

5. **Distrust in progress.** All respondents said that they do not believe in progress. This explains also the high desire for emigration. There is a moderate and cautious hope **that there will be an element of democratization with the electoral reform and, in particular, with the opening of the parties' lists, but not as much as to make a fundamental change.** The same is valid for the diaspora vote, which perceives its vote as subject to compromise through technicalities, despite the strong willingness to contribute either by voting or by active citizenship models.
6. **Leadership models and success models promote opportunism and rapid enrichment.** The models of party leaders or political figures are not inspiring to the young people, but as their representatives said, the young people adopt these models in a timely and unconscious manner.
7. **The lack of a culture of debate.** There is no incentive for improvement by the regulatory bodies in terms of offensive and denigrating discourse, verbal violence, personal insults, the blurred line between public and sensitive personal information under discussion (in particular private life matters), discrimination because of race, gender, sexual orientation, and above all, the culture of impunity for all of these misdemeanors in the public debate. The logic of the arguments is generally weak, while the discourse is extremely rhetorical.
8. **Discrimination and financial instability.** The most vulnerable and marginalized groups, not only face the problem of systematic discrimination by institutions and the rest of society, but also the difficulties of funding, sustainability, resources, organization, capacities for management, lobbying, and advocacy. The groups with the highest influence in the system are those that are at the same time well organized and resourceful.
9. **Family models.** According to the respondents, family models are more oriented towards **security and guarantee of means of living**, rather than the contribution to the public space; guaranteeing immediate benefits rather than a long-term vision for life. The fear and uncertainty of the future are the factors that most influence the family representative patterns. The patriarchal values are also present and such models are inclined to be replicated by those involved in the political processes.
10. **Role of women.** The role of women continues to remain insignificant in respondents' perceptions, despite the progress made recently. Often women are not present in the real “decision-making rooms”, although they make half of the current government and the representation improvements made on paper. The same conclusion is backed by the latest OSCE/ODIHR report, which states that: *“Women were active and visible in the campaign and certain activities were specifically addressed to female voters. However, women were significantly underrepresented. None of the eighteen party leaders running in the election was a woman. The women candidates received little media attention. The public and private television channels monitored by the OSCE/ODIHR dedicated only 13 percent of the campaign coverage to women.”* Beyond the gender quotas, as a formal criterion yet to be finally put in place (we must not forget the fines imposed on the DP and SMI in the 2017 elections for non-compliance with the quotas - see OSCE-ODIHR report), their involvement

in politics is not a result of strengthening the position of women in society, but of other determining factors. The leadership models among women with public status do not reflect the gender agenda, nor do they inspire female voters to empower them. They are perceived as products of certain conditions not related to gender empowerment. The dominant traditional, patriarchal values or even the religious element in the society are still obstacles and discourage the engagement of women in political processes as well as generate negative models of success.

11. **Disoriented voters.** The absence of clear presentations of genuine political agendas and programs, the polarized debate, the inaccurate or misleading information, the bombardment with various information from various sources, make the voter feel disoriented. Only explicit guidelines concerning the control of resources, access to information, and responsible use of social media can address this worldwide problem.
12. **The pandemic** has aggravated the state of democracy everywhere in the world, as it did in Albania. Access to institutions, information, assemblies, public consultation, and dialogue has become difficult to be achieved due to the new situation. The government's control over data is a concern for the media and citizens. Many activities related to youth engagement have been canceled. Some of them, the most engaged ones, have considered this as an opportunity to adapt, to be digitally trained and prepared with the “*resilience*” skills that are suitable for the time. For this trend to reach the entire population, interventions and investments are needed in digital and innovative training oriented to the service needs, without leaving behind the ethical approach to consumption and the environment.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to identify what are the main factors causing the lack of civic participation in political processes. Based on the analysis, observations, interviews, and discussions on this topic, it resulted that this is true mainly for young people, marginalized groups, and women, up to a certain point. This policy paper concluded that Albanian citizens *are often contributors to political processes*, but either consciously or unconsciously they do so *through practices considered unhealthy for democracy*, such as non-transparent, nepotistic behavior, or even the use of public space or public interests in favor of private interests. Healthy public space-oriented engagements are lacking.

In Albania, democracy and capitalism are systems installed immediately with the change of the system, because economic freedom certainly needs political freedom. However, the balance weights on the private interests' side to the extent that public space acts only as a springboard for private interests. The public space does not exist in Albania according to the definition given at the beginning of this paper (see Habermas). The privatization process in Albania took place mostly in the public sphere as a whole. The contribution to this configuration is jointly made, so, to change the consequences, the approach of everyone to the system should be altered.

This is due to the bad practices of the institutions and their unfavorable climate, but also due to the lack of awareness of citizens on the instruments in their hands and their deep distrust in their ability to change the configuration.

The most important intervention is related to the aspect of development and corruption. The social inequalities generate a great power for a certain group of interest and a great vulnerability for others. The job guarantee, the means to provide a dignified life, and a good distribution of income provided by a state of public welfare is the qualitative step for democracy from transition to consolidation.

Political engagement is stigmatized by the fact that it is connected to party engagement.

The association of **politics - party-state** is deeply rooted in the mentality of the Albanian society and this is justified.

Recommendations

It is needed to fight more for the transparency and accountability of institutions, with the option of withdrawing their legitimacy. The reporting of violations/corruption and holding the institutions accountable for their work is much more important than sectorial or public administration reforms. Strengthening the capacity of media to be independent, aiming for self-regulation, or greater administrative sanctions for failure of institutions' to duly provide information are some of the solutions. The supervision and monitoring of consultation and information processes are relevant, as well as the education of citizens on access to institutions. Intervening with projects, which facilitate the dialogue between institutions and citizens, encourage open decision-making processes, educate citizens on budgeting through public participation is indispensable.

However, further interventions are needed from media self-regulatory bodies, the journalists' associations, the transparency-oriented donors through projects that strengthen the media, fight censorship, and self-censorship. Interventions with projects

for quality journalism, effective and ethical reporting are also needed. *Fake news* is a worldwide concern connected with the disoriented voting behavior based on the multitude of information and the incapacity to control every time the sources of information. The solution does not come with the anti-defamation package and targeting of critical journalists, but with self-regulation, the application of the Code of Ethics, and supervising the universally accepted ethical norms in the use of social media.

Political education is needed. The paradigms should be changed. Studies indicate that it is true that people are poor and therefore do not participate in the political processes. It is likewise true that they do not participate in political processes and therefore they remain poor. Political education programs among young people are needed, as well as political ideologies, knowledge on activism, and the rights they have and can exercise. Models of initiatives among young people are needed. It is needed to return debate in the public spaces. The mental empowerment of many groups towards critical thinking about public space is needed, and for the need to do so to be seen as something beneficial for them.

The argument-based debate needs to be rooted as part of the formal curriculum of schools and universities. To strengthen the culture of debate and activism, as the engaged young people suggest, it is needed: *to promote volunteering and include such programs in the education curriculum by setting a certain amount of volunteering hours that every young person should do over a school year.* A similar initiative is the "School as Community Centre"²⁶ which, in addition to the community aspect, tends to revitalize the debate, arts, and theater clubs, as in-school and extracurricular activities. This can be spread as a good practice with the support of the Regional Education Directorates in Albania.

The above-mentioned interventions must be **decentralized**, and not only in Tirana. The capacities for consultation on decision-making, participatory budgeting, and youth councils, which are consultative bodies to the mayor, in urban and rural areas, should be established at every municipality.

Certain **leadership models are needed in key positions**, who also have the attention of the media and guide their work towards the public and not private interest, who argue their platform and avoid empty rhetoric, who use structured arguments and respect for the other approach. This can be supported through projects or initiatives attractive to promising young people to encourage them to get involved in politics and decision-making.

We need women not simply to fill in the quotas, but **to strengthen the gender component** in every project or training program, in every training of public administration or civil society, until it is internalized, to empower substantially both women and men in terms of social roles and to emancipate the society.

A success story of collective organization and approach should be initiated in terms of public interest issues. This could give hope and serve as an example of the ability of the power of people to bring change when they are together. The 2018 students protest in Albania,²⁷ organized to oppose the high tuition fees was quite an example.

²⁶ Community Center School, a friendly school for all (CCS) <https://darvlore.edu.al/projekte-sarande/359-shkolla-gender-komunitare-shqk>

²⁷ Student Protest [https://sq.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protesta_studentore_n%C3%AB_Shqip%C3%ABri_\(2018\)](https://sq.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protesta_studentore_n%C3%AB_Shqip%C3%ABri_(2018))

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Interviews with representatives from the following groups:

1. Women in policy and decision making
2. Youth
3. LGBTQ+
4. Organized groups with disabilities
5. The media
6. Activists
7. National minorities (the Roma and Egyptian Communities)
8. The diaspora
9. Health care staff (regarding the pandemic section).



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