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THE IMPACTS OF PAST TOTALITARIANISM ON THE TRANSITION PROCESS TOWARDS DEMOCRACY IN ALBANIA

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Abstract

More than 30 years have passed since the creation of one of the wildest totalitarianisms of Eastern Europe, the Albanian one. The Albanian totalitarian regime maintained constant control for almost 50 years in every social activity through terror and propaganda. Today, after a long and not easy transition, the country is still trying to find its way to full democratization. The lack of a functional democracy, the classification as a hybrid regime, as a partially free country and with a lack of active citizens as an institution of democracy are just some of the problems that are present in post-communist Albania and that will be discussed in this paper. The purpose of this paper is to offer a different perspective in the way we look Albania's path towards full democratization based on the influence of the totalitarian regime and the need to strengthen the concept of the active citizen and forms of active volunteering as a way to strengthen democracy, starting from a broader concept, from the citizen. The article provides a theoretical and practical perspective of totalitarian and post-communist period of Albania based on reports, statistical data and classic political studies scholar books.

Keywords

totalitarianism, post-communist, democratization, political culture, hybrid regime..

Resumo

Passaram mais de 30 anos desde a criação de um dos mais extremos totalitarismos da Europa de Leste, o albanês. O regime totalitário albanês manteve durante quase 50 anos um controlo constante de todas as atividades sociais através do terror e da propaganda. Hoje, após uma transição longa e nada fácil, o país ainda está a tentar encontrar o caminho para a democratização total. A ausência de uma democracia funcional, a classificação de regime híbrido, de um país parcialmente livre e a falta de cidadãos ativos como instituição da democracia são apenas alguns dos problemas presentes na Albânia pós-comunista e que serão discutidos neste artigo. O objetivo é oferecer uma perspetiva diferente sobre a forma como olhamos para o caminho da Albânia rumo à democratização plena com base na influência do regime totalitário e na necessidade de reforçar o conceito de cidadão ativo, bem como das formas de voluntariado como forma de fortalecer a democracia, partindo de um conceito mais amplo, o de cidadão. O artigo apresenta uma perspetiva teórica e prática do período totalitário

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e pós-comunista da Albânia, com base em relatórios, dados estatísticos e livros clássicos de estudos políticos.

Palavras-chave

totalitarismo, pós-comunismo, democratização, cultura política, regime híbrido..

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Introduction

The recent developments in Europe, especially the war in Ukraine after the Russian aggression, brought back into focus the discussion of topics related to the national security of states, the stability of democracy as a response to the Russian autocratic political tendencies not only towards Ukraine, but also beyond. Moreover, there is a tendency to return to the study of authoritarianism and the ways in which today's democracies can be strengthened in order to be more flexible to the challenges of the future. In a significant number of studies, a trend towards a democratic stagnation of a significant part of the European states, including Albania, is noticed in the published results. From totalitarian dictatorship to democracy. Thus, the more than 30-year path of the Albanian state to overcome the long and arduous phase towards democratic transition can be summed up very briefly. The effort to establish essential democratic institutions, in function of the citizen and his involvement in them, directs us to focus on the influences of the period of the Albanian totalitarian state by analyzing its influences after 1991. From a regime that fought and excluded individuality as a human value, in a regime that embraces it and tries to represent it. It seems idyllic, but not so easy. The fall of the totalitarian dictatorship did not mean the collapse of the undemocratic political culture which is still present today.

Communist Albania was under the leadership of dictator Enver Hoxha for 45 years. After the natural death of dictator Hoxha and the assumption of leadership of the communist party by Ramiz Alia, the first signs of the weakening of Albanian dictatorship quickly emerged. The fall of Albanian totalitarianism occurred naturally at a time when every other regime of this nature in Eastern Europe and the Balkans had already capitulated. The emergence of the new social and political system, democracy, came about because the Albanian totalitarian state could no longer prevent the inertia of change coming from outside the political borders of Albania. The world had changed dramatically, and Albanian society was already aware of this. As a result, the first protests started with the students of the University of Tirana and later turned into nationwide protests against the communist regime.

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"We want Albania like all of Europe" was the message of Albanian youth written on every banner in the city squares where demonstrations took place. However, the path to transition towards democracy would not be easy for the poorest and most isolated state in Europe. The fundamental change in the political, social, and economic regime would be radical, and the way citizens experienced this system change was also brutal. After more than 30 years of transition, this process is still unfinished, while democratization in many aspects has stagnated (European Comission, 2021). Albania is still classified as a semi-democratic system by international institutions such as Freedom House (Freedom House, 2021). One of the most lacking dimensions of democracy is the absence of active citizenship as a democratic consciousness of society.

For democracy scholars, democracy is seen from the perspective of two models: procedural democracy and substantive democracy. If procedural democracy emphasizes democratic standards, regulations, and the institutional-legal framework, substantive democracy (or substantial democracy) emphasizes citizen participation in the political system of a country and societal support for the political system as determining factors (Saikal, https://pesd.princeton.edu/node/251). Citizen participation in the political system, as political culture, is seen as one of the dimensions of the quality of democracy in different countries worldwide (Almond & Verba, 1963, 23). In this dimension of substantive democracy, which the post-communist Albanian society is still underdeveloped in, lies the interest of this work. Thus, the main aim of this work is to investigate the influence that totalitarian political culture has had on political developments in post-communist Albania, specifically to highlight the negative and obstructive role of this influence in building a substantive democracy in Albania. In this perspective, the role of political culture is considered quite important in the functioning of such a democracy, where active citizen participation in political processes and sensitizations is one of the key indicators. It is precisely here that we believe Albanian democracy struggles the most because, after more than 30 years of transition from the totalitarian system, an electoral and procedural democracy has been achieved, but the *democratic citizen* who is an active and determining political participant within a genuine substantive democracy has not been built.

Disappointed with the democratic successors of the transition period, or lacking a tradition of participatory democratic culture, Albanian citizens, for the most part, have been spectators and indifferent to political developments driven by partisan and clan interests of political parties in Albania during this post-communist period. Therefore, the purpose of this work is to analyze and interpret the influence that the totalitarian culture formed over almost half a century under the communist regime has had on Albanian society and how this influence has hindered other social agents in building an active and participatory citizenry in Albanian democracy. Has the long history under a totalitarian regime influenced the decline of volunteerism in Albanian society, and has it undermined the existence of a democratic political community in Albania during the post-communist period? Can there be substantive democracy without a solid political community that shares a common interest in democracy in this case? Have other social agents managed, and to what extent, to address the consequences of weakening the sense of community based on volunteerism in Albania? These and other dilemmas will be examined throughout this work.

The scholarly approach of this study will be based on qualitative research methods, as we aim to analyze and interpret the influence and role of the totalitarian culture in the fragility of present-day Albanian democracy. We consider all sources from various international organizations and institutions that provide statistical and analytical data on the extent and performance of democracy in Albania to be primary for this work, including the quality of elections, the functioning of institutions, civic accountability, and public involvement in political and decision-making processes. Another important part of the sources that will support this work will be the most significant texts of political theory, especially those that frame substantive democracy.

Enver Hoxha: L'état c'est moi

The Albanian totalitarian regime ruled over political Albania for almost five decades, of which 45 years were under the leadership of dictator Enver Hoxha. Statistical data published by the Institute of Studies on Crimes and Consequences of Communism clearly show the brutality of Albanian totalitarianism. The archive of the Ministry of Interior proves that up until the 1990s, 25,000 political prisoners were sentenced in Albania. However, researchers within this Institute claim that this number is between 30,000 and 34,000, as statistical data is missing for the years 1945-1946. In the 2016 report published by the Institute of Studies on Crimes and Consequences of Communism (ISSK) in Albania, it was stated that 984 prisoners died in prison, and 308 others lost their mental abilities. Meanwhile, 5,577 men and 450 women were sentenced to death and killed by the regime (Institute for the Studies of Communist Crimes and Consequences in Albania, 2016). The bodies of these victims were never returned to their families. During the period of 1946-1990, 110 internment camps were built in Albania, which were camps of forced labor where living conditions and working conditions were among the most severe. The prisons of Burrel and Spaç were known mainly for their inhumane and extremely harsh conditions for the *enemies of the people.* (Bunkart, http://bunkart.al/2/ekspozita_historike/policia-dhe-sigurimi-ne-kohen-e-diktatures-/burgjet-dhe-kampet-e-punes).

The persecution, investigation, and elimination of the different, heterogeneous and unique is essentially at the core of totalitarian logic. Just as with the biological body of a human, the social body must fight its own diseases, and the "disease" of the totalitarian system, which could endanger its existence, was freedom, i.e., any entity, group, or individual that had independent goals that differ from those of the regime. Therefore, within the totalitarian machinery built in communist Albania, not only the bourgeois, intellectuals, and *good communists* referring to Lefort's (Lefort, 2000) term for communists who believed in the values and principles of Marxist doctrine and attempted to criticize its actual implementation in society) were fought against, but the individual himself, or rather the community of free individuals, became the target of the police and state security.

The idea of the political enemy as a necessary element of the totalitarian regime kept the population mobilized at all times. The external enemy, *the revisionist*, *the bourgeois*, *the imperialist*, and the internal enemy (infiltrators of external enemies) were the justification for the totalitarian state to aggressively direct the state apparatus through total control measures over society. Only indifference, apathy of action and thought were

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accepted from the individual. As G. Orwell writes, "in totalitarian systems, thinking is a crime," (Orwell, 2005) as thinking itself is an act of freedom and a challenge to totalitarian oppression. The uniformity of thought and behavior of the Albanian individual became the goal of the totalitarian state and its propaganda tools. Conformism, which is, acting automatically without thinking about the logic behind the action, was achieved through the use of socializing agents of society by emptying them of their essential functions and turning them into instruments for the realization of totalitarian ideology. In these conditions, the individual was alienated from oneself, turned into an amorphous form without content, and as such, only had meaning within the collective. The collective was the place where individual homogeneity was dissolved, so throughout the totalitarian period, we witnessed the strengthening of collective structures and groups so that the individual would not stand alone, would not think. The totalitarian regime empowered artificial collective structures through the monopolization of the indoctrination center and the party. The individual is not left alone with themselves but is heavily worked on within social homogeneity, the aim of the new socialist society, as Lefort also raises the question: "Is this not the first time that the dimension of the other has been stopped or erased?" (Lefort, 2000)

This *psychic fluidity*, (Fridrich & Brzezinski, 1956) a distinct atmosphere of totalitarian dictatorship, is created through the collaboration of two phenomena that are interconnected and are one of those characteristics found only in totalitarian systems and not in other forms of governance: propaganda and terror. Propaganda and terror work hand in hand to extend state power into every part of society. Modern mass communication media, the press, radio, and film all function to transmit the party's message as the sole source of truth and its interpretation. Propaganda is directed by the party with the sole purpose of maintaining power and creating a relationship of manipulating reality between the citizen as the subject of propaganda and the totalitarian power as its enforcer.

In this context, the Albanian totalitarian regime would reach the extreme of propaganda and terror towards its citizens by challenging and suppressing any entity, community, or social segment that had collective influence in Albanian society at the time. In 1972, Albania would become the world's first officially declared atheist country. The claim to be the sole source of truth and its interpretation led the totalitarian regime to strive to be the sole earthly and heavenly authority in totalitarian Albania. Objects of worship were destroyed, churches and mosques were closed and either ceased to function or were demolished, priests and clergy were persecuted, interned, and executed by the dictatorship. A new phase of terror began against anyone who identified themselves with symbols of religious worship. Only symbols and myths associated with the party were allowed, an endeavor to establish the party's power as everlasting, rather than merely earthly and transient.

To dominate the social and private life of the individual was not enough; the Party sought to be the sole source of truth and its interpretation for the individual. Propaganda and terror thus worked towards this goal by gradually replacing every social agent along with their role in society.

Propaganda and terror are closely linked concepts, with propaganda being the means and form through which terror is conveyed. The construction of communist propaganda

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came gradually with the attempt to idealize and present the new totalitarian order as utopian/ideal. "*In one hand the shovel, in the other the gun"! Join comrades in the ranks (the party), let's climb the mountain with full bellies*, "*The masses build socialism, the party makes them conscious," "Let's sow the hills and mountains, let's make them fertile like fields," "We will eat with silver spoons* (Albanian Party of Labour), *"We'll take the rough with the smooth"* (Tautology with slogans in Albania by the propaganda of the communist regime).

The purpose of the PKSH (Party of Labor of Albania) was the revision of history, its alteration, and interpretation according to the perspective of the communist nomenclature. After replacing and fighting against the main religious beliefs in the country, *religion is the opium of the people*, now there was a demand to replace the concept of history itself. In this way, during the totalitarian dictatorship, the individual had no past or future but only a constant state: the presence of the party within them. Through propaganda and terror, through the control of social agents by the party and the fight against these *islands of separateness* (Fridrich & Brzezinski, 1956), the Albanian society was transformed into a *tabula rasa*, devoid of previous content and ready to be rewritten by the totalitarian regime. In his memoir book, the eminent Franciscan priest, At Zef Pllumi, writes, "Military drills are the main dish of all dictatorships. The army is a blind, paid, and thoughtless organism that survives only through obedience: Get ready! Forward! Backward! Order! This is the iron boot that mercilessly crushes every right and every human dignity; it is the heart and mind of every tyranny" (Pllumi, 2020). In this constant state of power exercise by the totalitarian system, social agents were at the center, their role and function in society.

The most important social agents in the significant process of socialization and promotion of social, cultural, economic, and political values, beliefs, orientations in society are: the family, peer groups, educational institutions (kindergartens-schools), religious institutions, and mass media.

The islands of separateness, as referred to by Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski (1956), the spaces of freedom where the individual managed to preserve his human essence, through propaganda and state terror, became the target of the totalitarian regime. The communist regime of Albania sought to break the intimate cohesion of the family, weaken and divide this "oasis of freedom," so that the individual would assimilate within political and collective structures. Every social institution had to be weakened in order to strengthen the party. Thus, the promotion of socialist morality, the proclamation of socialist values began within families, and from early childhood, from a very young age, individuals became subjects of communist indoctrination. There were families persecuted by the system, with a "stain in their biographies," hiding the truth from their children who grew up with the illusion of a just, equal, and free society: "Stalin, elevated, proud and unbeatable, who loved children as he loved freedom, our great Stalin, comrade with Uncle Enver." (Ypi, 2022).

On the other hand, educational institutions were another instrument of totalitarian power to shape loyal young people towards Albanian communism and its values. From 1945 to 1990, several reforms were implemented in educational institutions in the country; profound changes were made in the educational system depending on Albania's political alliances. In the 1960s, 1963, 1967, and 1970, an even greater phase of ideological

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indoctrination of schools began by increasing the presence of politically oriented subjects such as *History of the Party*, *Marxism*, and so on. Meanwhile, history and literature subjects became subjects of this ideology. The trinity on which the curriculum was based was: teaching, productive work, physical and military education, with the aim of creating entire generations of young people under the model of the socialist "new man." (Bunkart1, https://bunkart.al/1/ekspozita_muzeale/arsimimi-ne-shqiperi-1945-1990)

On the other hand, religious institutions were at the brink of survival as a result of the war against cult objects and religious beliefs in Albania, especially after the 1970s. Mass media, radio, and television, as well as other forms of official propaganda, were under state control, and the dissemination of news and the right to information were only done through the party's version of the truth. This reality would continue until the natural collapse of the communist system, following the economic surrender of the system and the inability to keep the country under control. The most evident consequence of almost 50 years in the totalitarian dictatorship was *the denaturalization of human relationships* that members of society had with each other and the substitution of natural social networks with artificial social networks, which were an extension of the party's power and totalitarian doctrine. Every relationship was politicized, the relationship between the priest and the believer, between the teacher and the students, between the director and the ordinary worker, between the head of the family and family members, and even between the husband and wife in intimate marital relationships. The emptiness of natural social networks and their alienation through the political dualism of the time changed the relationships between the *self* and the *other*, where the *other* became the subject of suspicion and exclusion. The loss of the ability to trust another individual has perhaps been the greatest cost that Albanian totalitarianism has brought to Albanian society, an ability that is still lacking 32 years after the fall of the system.

Voluntary work under communism was not voluntary but rather work forced by labor organizations. Factories and enterprises operated on the same principle as educational institutions: teaching (ideological), productive work, physical and military education. The totalitarian state viewed individuals as subjects of exploitation for the advancement and elevation of the communist system and, on the other hand, as subjects of transformation to turn them into the model of the socialist "new man." The concept of functioning in the productive sector was *productivity and efficiency*, the required yield to sustain the extensive state apparatus. The same approach was also applied to the construction of public works, which were built by prisoners of the system in forced labor camps and by young workers who were still in school.

Public infrastructure, the largest public works, was built through the forced labor of prisoners and internees in concentration camps. Taking the Soviet gulag model, from 1946 to 1990, labor camps were opened for rock quarrying, canal excavation, railway construction, or road building (Meta & Frashëri, 2018). After the fall of the communist dictatorship in Albania and the change of the political regime, new challenges emerged from unresolved problems of the past in the country's democratic journey.

Today, more than 30 years have passed since the fall of the communist system. Where does Albania stand in terms of the necessity of the system for political participation and citizen activism as essential elements of liberal democracy? And above all, has Albania

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managed to build *a new political community* that would be in line with democracy as a political and social system?

Post-Communist Albania: Transition from Totalitarian Community to Democratic Society

We cannot begin discussing the vitality of a society, its ability to mobilize and politically activate its members, without addressing the public sphere and the concept of *community* and its significance. For several decades, scholars and intellectuals have been concerned about the erosion of the concept of community and the fear of its dissolution. The rapid development of technology, the empowerment of virtual social networks, and the emergence of an economic system that has alienated individuals from their local communities have led to the anonymization of the individual within society. Intense individualism, atomization of the individual, and a constant sense of loneliness have resulted in the fading of natural social relationships that have played an important role in human society for a long period of time (Taylor, 2008). Consequently, states that emerged from strong totalitarian systems and embarked on the path towards democratization are most concerned about whether the dissolution of the totalitarian political community will lead to a new organization of the democratic political community or not, as well as the timeframe in which it can be achieved.

The concept of community may be one of the ideologically debatable concepts. According to the Oxford Political Dictionary, community is defined as "a group of people socially connected by a given location," (Mc Lean & McMillan, 2009) while further interpretations, depending on ideological orientation, are provided by conservative, socialist, and liberal doctrines. The perception and sense of belonging to a political community is an important condition for the sustainable development of societies and states today. Isolation, individualism, detachment, and the exclusion of individuals from the rest of society fragment this sense of community in which the individual lives, leaving behind only the feeling of a lack of belonging. How can one commit to the future in a society to which they feel they belong? According to Robert Nisbet in his book "The Quest for Community" the weakening of established social contexts as a result of modern political and industrial development has led individuals to create fewer secure interpersonal relationships that have given meaning and stability to human existence (Nisbet, 1996).

Self and *other* are two categories that determine political, moral, and social relations within a particular society. If the *other* is seen as similar to the *self* or as *hostile* and *antagonistic*, this relationship fundamentally shapes the individual's relationship with the political community of their country. For almost 50 years, the Albanian people lived within a totalitarian political community where the authorities aimed to destroy "autonomous social ties within the population and replace them with new connections, all of which derive their meaning and approval from the central structures of the state" (Ibidem). After the fall of the totalitarian system and the radical shift in Albania's political and ideological orientation, an intensive phase of new political and economic orientations began with the assistance of international institutions such as the IMF and allied states. The so-called *shock therapy* was applied, a concept derived from psychoanalysis, which implied a radical change in the nature of the country's political and economic policies, transitioning from the savage communist system to wild capitalist policies (Pusca, 2007).

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The change in Albania's political course happened abruptly, not through a gradual opening towards democracy and the free market, but rather a direct plunge into the new world. The situation was surreal for every citizen of the former communist Albania. Just like in "The Truman Show," where the main character Truman realizes that the reality he has been living is a manipulation and he himself is a victim of ignorance, he eventually chooses to leave the *cave* and seek the truth (the analogy of Plato's cave and the light). Thus, even before the "Albanian communist man" had completely disappeared, work began on building the *Albanian capitalist man*. This kind of radical transition would highlight a society oriented towards *materialism* as a value concept (Kocani, 2013).

The change in the political regime happened without social catharsis, without a phase of societal action in which reflection on the past took place and a public apology was demanded from the political class for what had happened for over 45 years. "Everyone was guilty and no one was guilty," this slogan absolved society as a whole from responsibility for the dictatorship. Meanwhile, the influence of the totalitarian past would be felt throughout the journey towards democratization of the country. The early years of post-communist Albania were filled with positive stimuli, especially notable being the international support. In 1992, Albania was chosen as the *Albania-most favorite nation* by the USA, but in 1997, the collapse of the state occurred as a result of the so-called "pyramid schemes" (UNICEF, 1993).

The event of the pyramid schemes brought back major turmoil, protests, the looting of public property, and almost a civil war. Disappointment from societal deception through pyramid schemes, which were licensed and allowed by the state as legal activities, once again raised the question of whether the Albanian citizen was prepared and willing to be part of a democratic political system, where alongside civil, political, and social freedoms, there are also civic responsibilities that need to be fulfilled. Democracy places the free individual at its core, capable of forming opinions and making decisions in their own and their community's best interest. A reflection of this is also the selection of various political alternatives compared to others. But can we speak of a free citizen (in the political sense of the word), just emerging from a totalitarian regime like Enver Hoxha's? We would say no, as the journey to freedom for the Albanian citizen begins only after the fall of the communist system. As sociologist Artan Fuga also writes, for the first time, the Albanian individual would be alone with themselves after the fall of the communist system (Fuga, 2008). For the first time, they would decide freely for themselves, the education they would pursue, the profession they would choose, marital relationships, dietary preferences, and so on.

The initial reaction to the dimension of freedom is fear; freedom is frightening precisely because it is unknown. Therefore, escaping from freedom led to the demand for other forms of security: money, materialism, cultivating economic logic within a free market. As mentioned above, various studies measuring the value system of post-communist Albanian society have revealed the dominance of a materialistic value profile. In general, human relationships are also conceptualized within this logic of the "economic man." At this point, what is the role of formal democratic institutions in a country? Their role is to shape, educate, and raise awareness among the public, politically emancipating them to create a democratic political community in the country. According to many researchers, in states undergoing democratic transition, the role of elites is crucial during this period of transition from a dictatorial or undemocratic system to a democratic political system,

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and this role of elites cannot be replaced (Wesolowski , 2009). However, other scholars argue that awareness and emancipation should be realized by the citizens themselves, but it is understood that this process is slower and may take a long time.

According to Putnam, social networks hold value for individuals, as "the connections between individuals—social relationships and norms of reciprocity and trust—derive from them" (Kierchel, 2000). Above all, according to Putnam (Siisiainen, 2000), the greatest benefit of social networks and their empowerment is the increase in social trust, which in turn helps support and renew political and economic institutions in respective societies. The interaction among members of a community with similar interests and issues that require solutions strengthens the sense of civic cooperation and the true nature of democracy, where citizens understand their importance in influencing the political and social system. Albania still faces deep problems regarding the main dimensions of democracy: procedural and substantive. In terms of procedural democracy, there are still difficulties in meeting international standards for the electoral process, such as holding free and fair elections for all citizens, agreement on the election results, and translating the will of each citizen into votes. Local elections were held in May 2023, and reports from international institutions note that the elections were partially fulfilling the standards, with an emphasis on electoral polarization and the presence of pressure on voters, along with ongoing concerns about vote-buying (OSCE, 2023a).

The OSCE/ODIHR report on the elections held in May 2023 describes them as partially accomplished and with standards and principles that are still unfulfilled in their complexity (OSCE, 2023b). The political competition and competitive nature of the Albanian political system continue to be more important than addressing local issues directly related to the quality of life that Albanian citizens have in their respective municipalities. The lack of focus on the needs and demands of local governance has also been highlighted by OSCE/ODIHR observers (OSCE, 2023c). If we were to chronologically examine the observation reports of local and national elections from 1996 to May 2023, we would repeatedly see the conclusion that the electoral process has been partially free.

Although more than three decades have passed since the beginning of the transition, there has been little progress in terms of substantial strengthening of democracy in Albania. According to the Freedom House Nations in Transit reports (1996-2023), Albania is classified as a hybrid political system, which fulfills some of the basic rights of citizens, but organized crime, corruption, links between mafia, politics, and business are present, compromising the overall economic and democratic development of the country Freedom House, 2023a). In the 2023 Freedom House report, Albania is ranked as a transitional hybrid regime and democracy in the country is assessed at 3.79/7 points, with almost negligible progress compared to 2022. Meanwhile, according to this organization that measures the level of freedom in all countries worldwide, Albania is ranked as partially free in 2023, with 28/40 evaluated for political rights and 39/60 for civil rights (Freedom House, 2023).

Another problem as a characteristic of the non-consolidation of democratic Albanian society in transition is the absence of a highly important element for democracy, such as the concerned or active citizen. In general, Albanian citizens during the transition period have been absent from every social and political process related to democracy. Apathy and the lack of citizen response to major public and national issues is an important

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missing filter of a non-functional democracy. The active/concerned citizen is a *watchdog of democracy*, crucial for the political and social system. As a consequence of the alienation of natural social networks (the creation of social groups) during the totalitarian dictatorship, the development of natural human relationships during the transition was a more artificial process, as a result of the continued dualism of the Albanian individual between who they are and who they claim to be. This aspect of human dualism still manifests itself in public political and social communication by institutions, political representatives, but also by ordinary citizens (Fuga, 2019).

There have been several attempts in recent years for a revival of environmentalist movements, which have had several causes such as the ban on construction in protected tourist areas, against the importation of waste from abroad, protests in defense of the national park of Vjose (the last wild river in Europe). However, these gatherings have not managed to have social support except from the organizers of the protests. It is still not possible to talk about mass protests like those in Greece on the 2nd anniversary of the train crash or in Serbia like the protests against government corruption.

Political dualism and the creation of a dichotomous relationship of social reality is expressed by the endemic culture of political conflict between political party forces in a country where confrontation is the basic feature of political communication in the political system. This constant tension influenced by the high level of political confrontation produces a cyclical cycle of deep political and institutional crises. Albania was the country with the highest number of parliamentary boycotts in the Western Balkans during the years 1991-2023. Repeated parliamentary boycotts reflect the lack of democratic institutional culture and the inability of institutions to resolve political disagreements through democratic procedures. Boycotts have been a continuous instrument in the history of Albanian parliamentarism to maximize political interests through radical instruments such as hunger strikes, abandoning parliament and going out on the streets (the case of the SP with the hunger strike and placing their umbrellas in the square where the opposition was located) or the case of the cadres being released as an action of the PD handing over the mandates (the case of 2019 by the PD). Such precedents of which the power is used many times when the political actors do not agree with the election result or the electoral rules or for other disagreements of a political nature created a situation of political mistrust between political parties by creating weak institutions and strong political ties.

This has often resulted to be harmful for the country's progress towards the integration of Albania into the European Union, as cases of parliamentary boycotts occurred at key moments in the process of visa liberalization, NATO membership, voting for candidate status, etc. As a result, the country has remained stagnant in some cases as a result of the inability of the political elites to find the institutional way of communication, where political competitiveness agrees with the compromise of the country's interests.

The non-institutional character of East- countries like Albania, which have emerged from long and harsh dictatorships, comes as an influence of the totalitarian period, where the reaction to concepts such as *politics*, *state*, *law* is associated with negative emotional load and is a non-rational organic rejection of the totalitarian period. As a result, east post-communist societies tried to build democratic society, civil society, democratic citizen, but without political content inside. (Tomash, Feher, Agnes-Heler pg. 45).

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Moreover, the attempt was not successful since politics is a social activity that creates relationships and interaction between members of society. The identification of the concept of politics with negative emotional sentiments is related to the totalitarian experiment where the individual was oppressed by the oppressive state machinery through terror, propaganda and indoctrination. In more than 30 years, there has been little or no change in this perception, where a relationship of mistrust still prevails between the Albanian citizen and the politics. There has been a lack of promotion of democratic political culture in society, which would build a healthy relationship between the citizen and the police. The vitality of a democracy is seen in the nature of citizen engagement and particularly in the response of young people to politically incorrect actions, public interest issues, rising prices, economic well-being, etc. Albanian youth see themselves as detached from politics, they do not seek to influence the political system to improve certain needs or put forward demands. This is also evident in a study conducted by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), where the findings (Westminster Foundation for Democracy & Qendresa Qytetare, 2022) show that Albanian youth are disconnected from politics, with 80% not being involved in political parties or civil society activities. Only 10.8% are members and 9.2% are activists of political parties.

Furthermore, the majority of young people lack trust in central and local institutions, with about 64% of respondents believing that the central and local government does not aim to serve the needs of society (Ibid, 9). This perception alienates citizens and young people from their own country's institutions. The lack of a sense of belonging to the public sphere has consequences for the country and democracy, resulting in approximately 71% of young people seeing emigration as a short-term or long-term solution to achieve their goals (Ibid.).

The countries of the Western Balkans (a concept used to indicate the countries left outside the EU) have a common history regarding the undemocratic systems of the past and after the 90s the effort for democratization. The Berlin Process has brought about an approximation of the legislation of these countries with that of the EU, but substantial progress has not yet been seen, especially in civic education and volunteering as a form of civic engagement. According to the European Fund for the Balkans and European Policy Institute (May 2019) the involvement of young people in youth organizations is low and one of the reasons is the lack of trust in these organizations. The low participation of young people in various forms of social engagement is a well-known phenomenon in all former communist countries, which is partly related to the lack of a legal framework for volunteering. Likewise, volunteerism is closely linked to the civic education of young people, where the lack of knowledge about the importance of social engagement comes as a consequence of the lack of cultivation of the concept of active citizenship as a concept that would strengthen democracy. Membership in civil society is conceived as something useless since it is an unpaid (free) commitment.

Final reflection: Empowering volunteerism as an opportunity to restore natural social networks for the sake of democracy

Citizen involvement in decision-making processes and public affairs has been the most discussed topic in the past decade, especially with a decline in social support for

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democracy, which can be seen in the low levels of citizen participation in electoral processes and, as a result, the loss of government legitimacy. This well-known issue among political science scholars has affected a large portion of states and has been further influenced by the role of virtual social networks (social platforms) which have started to replace a part of genuine and essential communication based on empathy, emotions, and human contact (highly important elements) in maintaining relationships within a community or society. Many European states are dissatisfied with the state of democracy in their countries (Kent, 2019). There is a close relationship between a state's economic performance and the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction the country has towards the democratic system (Ibid). The impacts of the war in Ukraine, in terms of inflation and the cost of living (Council of European Union, 2022), have led citizens to have more negative perceptions of the democratic system in a significant number of European countries and beyond.

The role of the citizen in the polis and their influence on the country's political system is the essence of much of the world's philosophical thought, from Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Locke, Tocqueville, Kant, to contemporary scholars (Schmidt, 2012). Democracy scholars call for finding motivating stimuli for citizens to engage more actively in the public sphere of their country. One good way is to encourage and support forms of social volunteering that strengthen social networks, foster a sense of community, and increase citizens trust in their fellow members of society and their country's institutions. Through volunteering, citizens would contribute to the public interest and feel a new sense of responsibility and participation when this interest is compromised by the elites of political power. In the case of Albania, a country that has inherited a complete breakdown of social networks and a high level of distrust among people from the totalitarian period, volunteering is an opportunity for re-socialization and the building of trust in the existence of shared values for all. Without creating this environment of belonging in a social and political community where common social values and aspirations are shared, political consciousness of the role of the *demos* in democracy cannot be developed. The successful transition of Albania from a totalitarian political system to a democratic one cannot be achieved if this transition does not also imply a transition of the political community from a totalitarianized community where interests were overridden by state power to a community of free individuals where these interests are shaped by the sense of public interest of all individuals and open discussion about this interest.

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