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DEMOCRACY STATE AND AUTOCRATIZATION FEATURES IN THE REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA

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Abstract: This article examines the Albanian political regime, as a single case study, for the period 2013-2021, as part of the Western Balkans' experience of democratic backsliding, by investigating the framework of factors linked with the formidable challenge posed by the emergence of a hybrid regime of Albania in these years. For the first time in Albania's post-communist history, the incumbent Socialist Party of Albania won for the third time in a row the parliamentary elections of April 2021, thus making the bid for the power of the leading opposition parties much harder. This paper uses country-expert statistical data from V-Dem and qualitative data analyses. The study reveals that the over-reliance on strong leaders, the growing government control over public life, fragmentation of the opposition, its lack of appeal, organization and mobilization, the boycott of the parliamentary mandates, combined with the weakening role of media and distrust of the citizens in democratic institutions, led to the resurgence of the authoritarian mechanisms, making the liberal democratic transformation in Albania an increasingly challenging task.

Keywords: Hybrid Regime; Autocracy; Liberal Democracy; Incumbent Party; Albania

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the former communist countries in the Western Balkans have faced a democratic backslide. As part of a global trend, this region has shown features of a non-democratic character (Levitsky and Way 2021; Bermeo 2016; Bieber 2018, 2020; Bruff 2014; Cassani and Tomini 2018). The post-2000s period in this region, including Albania, is characterized by hybrid political regimes (Freedom House 2022), displayed in forms of combination between autocratic and democratic institutional features (Schmotz 2019), therefore being "stuck in transition, combining a rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy with essentially illiberal and/or authoritarian traits" (Menocal, Fritz, and Rakner 2008, 29). Democracy is a complex notion, but most democracy researchers work on the Robert Dahl definition (1971) that includes eight institutional guarantees: freedom to form and join organizations, freedom of expression, right to vote, eligibility for public office, right of political leaders to compete for support and votes, alternative sources of information, free and fair elections, and institutions for making government policies that depend on votes and other expressions of preference (Dahl

1971, 3). In today's literature, various mechanisms are discussed which have shaped the current situation of democracy, related to the lack of credible actors able to shape the country's democratic transformation as well as the influence of international actors, such as the "EU enlargement fatigue" (Lika 2019, 8).

Among these challenges, the problems of internal democracy affecting opposition political parties, the ruling party, the overreliance on strong leaders, the weakening of public institutions, the lack of freedom of media and weaknesses of public organizations are some of the areas we analyze to establish their role as factors in the process of democratic backsliding of Albania.

METHODOLOGY

Considering the Albanian political situation in the context of the democratic regime trend, this article seeks to examine the features, extent and trends related to the hybrid political regime in Albania during the period 2013-2021, aiming to respond to the research question of why Albanian liberal democracy road is trapped in the hybrid zone during 2013-2021? The hybrid regime combines autocratic features with democratic ones (ECPS 2022), so the authors use quantitative and qualitative data analyses to answer the research question.

The first part of the article presents and statistically analyses the current situation of democracy in Albania. The analysis focuses first on the fundamental indicators of democracy, otherwise known as electoral democracy (V-Dem Institute 2022, 13), as the starting point for measuring democracy. It then proceeds to expand the analysis onto the liberal component of democracy. The combination of these two components tells us more clearly about the factors hindering progress toward Albania's genuinely liberal democratic system. The data used in this section focuses on empirical quantitative data extrapolated from the Democracy Measurement Database collected periodically by the V-Dem Institute for Albania and the Western Balkans by local experts.

The second part of the article focuses on the specific analysis of actors to explain Albania's weakening democratization credentials and the reasons behind the shape of the current Albanian political system, such as the role of the incumbent party, the functioning of the major opposition parties, the role of the leaders, citizens, etc. Albania is analyzed as a case study for the period 2013-2021. This period was selected for two reasons: almost all the Western Balkans countries are marked by the backsliding of democracy, and the second reason is more specific to the Albanian case. Since the 2013 elections, the Socialist Party (PS) has remained firmly in power. It increased the number of its MPs from 66 to 74 in the second mandate 2017-2021 and kept the same number of MPs (74) in its third 2021-2025 mandate (Central Election Commission Data for the parliamentary elections, results for 2017 and 2021). Winning its third term, the Socialist Party increases Albania's probability of dealing with a ruling party with growing authoritarian characteristics. This study relies on both primary and secondary data. Institutes of high reliability, such as INSTAT, the Balkan Barometer, the European Barometer, etc., mainly provide the primary data.

The results are combined with analyses of experts in the field and events classified as having a direct bearing on the challenges of Albania's democratic transition for 2013-2021.

EMPIRICAL OVERVIEW OF DEMOCRACY REGIME

The literature considers the current period coinciding with the third wave of autocratization. Differently “from the second wave, the transition towards a new hybrid political system is of a gradual type” (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1102).

First, our analysis sets out the basic level of democracy - electoral democracy. This precludes a sudden system change towards electoral authoritarianism. The starting point for the empirical analysis is Dahl's concept of polyarchy. The process of democratization and the achievement of the polyarchic regime, according to Dahl (1971), requires the fulfillment of empirical criteria to achieve the level of ideal democracy. V-Dem translated these criteria into the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) (Coppedge *et al.* 2021, 43). Based on these data (see: Figure 1), Albania in 2021 is classified as an electoral autocracy, together with Russia, Turkey, India, El Salvador, etc., with tendencies to fall to a lower level (V-Dem Institute 2022, 45). During the 2013-2021 period, the Electoral Democracy Index shows that in 2017 it reached its highest point, and from then, the trend line has declined.

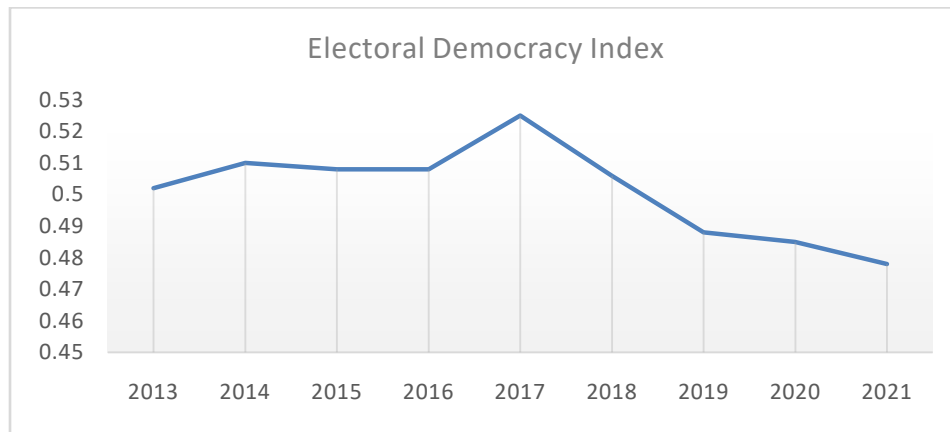


Figure 1: Electoral Democracy Index (Source: V-Dem Institute 2022)

Considering the above results, a detailed and comprehensive system used to appraise the democratic credentials of the current hybrid system in Albania is given by the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) that combines the assessment of the functioning of the electoral "core" institutions with the liberal aspects - executive constraint by the legislature and high courts, and the rule of law and individual rights (Coppedge *et al.* 2021). Through Table 1, we will present the trends (difference between 2021 and 2013 data) shown by the indicators of the political system through liberal democracy. Then we will provide a more detailed analysis of the behavior and activity of actors interacting in the political system.

Significantly, some of the more weighty indicators in measuring democratization in 2013-2021 have deteriorated (Table 1). Regarding the electoral process, the indicators that have suffered the most are those related to the free elections because of electoral violence and the still insufficient quality of the Central Election Commission in managing elections. There is a decline in media freedom, which means that the government has stepped up its efforts toward

media censorship, increased violence against journalists, and media credibility has suffered because of self-censorship.

The quantitative data analysis points to the deterioration of the autonomy of other parties *vis-à-vis* the ruling party. There has been a decline in the freedom of the individual from the abuse by public officials (concerning torture practiced by state officials or other agents of the state (e.g., “police, security forces, prison guards, and paramilitary groups” (Coppedge *et al.* 2021, 173).

Table 1: Albanian Liberal Democracy Components 2013-2021 (Source: V-Dem Institute 2022)

Liberal Democracy Components	Liberal Democracy Index		
	2013	2021	Difference
Barriers to Parties	3.64	3.816	0.176
Civil Society Organizations' Entry and Exit	3.108	3.34	0.232
Civil Society Organizations' Repression	3.464	3.382	-0.082
Election Free and Fair	2.865	2.295	-0.57
Election Government Intimidation	2.785	2.808	0.023
Election Other Electoral Violence	2.629	2.138	-0.491
Election Other Voting Irregularities	1.235	1.714	0.479
Election Vote Buying	1.043	1.307	0.264
Election Voter Registry	3.471	3.595	0.124
Elections Multiparty	3.961	3.791	-0.17
Election Management Body Autonomy	2.049	2.302	0.253
Election Management Body Capacity	2.72	2.104	-0.616
Freedom of Academic and Cultural Expression	2.997	2.676	-0.321
Freedom of Discussion for Men	3.252	3.416	0.164
Freedom of Discussion for Women	3.327	3.48	0.153
Government Censorship Effort - Media	2.429	1.311	-1.118
Harassment of Journalists	2.261	1.843	-0.418
Media Bias	3.237	3.198	-0.039
Media Self-Censorship	2.072	1.83	-0.242
Opposition Parties Autonomy	3.465	3.088	-0.377
Party Ban	3.784	3.784	0
Print/Broadcast Media Critical	1.686	1.665	-0.021
Print/Broadcast Media Perspectives	1.983	1.896	-0.087
Legislature Investigates in Practice	2.676	2.634	-0.042
Executive Oversight	3.01	2.798	-0.212
Legislature Opposition Parties	1.406	1.413	0.007
Legislature Questions Officials in Practice	0.825	0.825	0
Executive Respects Constitution	2.338	2.771	0.433
Compliance with Judiciary	2.991	3.111	0.12
Compliance with the High Court	2.877	2.823	-0.054
High Court Independence	2.062	2.165	0.103
Lower Court Independence	2.235	2.289	0.054
Access to Justice	0.92	0.905	-0.015

Freedom from Forced Labor	0.752	0.832	0.08
Freedom of Domestic Movement	0.879	0.93	0.051
Property Rights	0.792	0.792	0
Freedom of Religion	3.906	3.736	-0.17
Freedom from Torture	3.452	2.739	-0.713
Freedom from Political Killings	3.899	3.899	0
Transparent Laws with Predictable Enforcement	2.694	2.736	0.042
Freedom of Foreign Movement	3.869	3.904	0.035
Rigorous and Impartial Public Administration	2.45	2.315	-0.135
Access to Justice for Men	3.392	3.318	-0.074
Access to Justice for Women	3.396	3.295	-0.101
Property Rights for Men	4.779	4.779	0
Property Rights for Women	4.081	4.081	0
Freedom from Forced Labor for Men	3.497	3.585	0.088
Freedom from Forced Labor for Women	3.021	3.427	0.406
Freedom of Domestic Movement for Men	3.936	3.945	0.009
Freedom of Domestic Movement for Women	3.772	3.951	0.179

The government of the Socialist Party, in addition to deteriorating indicators of democracy in a country with a hybrid political system, can point at some aspects that improved during its rule. Civil society's ability to establish and dissolve non-governmental organizations has slightly improved. The executive also points to increased respect for the country's constitution. Still, on the other hand, there is almost no change in the opposition's ability to exercise oversight on the government against the wishes of the ruling party or coalition.

The entry-level of small parties in parliament is not too high and stable over time. This is another factor that affects the marginalization of the parliamentary opposition. The lack of small parties and opposition coalitions count among the factors that limit the power of the opposition to exercise its function as a shadow government by increasing the chances of the ruling party to increase its authoritarianism in the parliamentary system. These effects also come into being because of the electoral law in force in Albania.

In the context of the electoral process, some improvements have been made regarding the autonomy of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and in addressing some of the problems highlighted in each election process, such as vote buying, irregularities and absences in the registers of voters, irregularities during voting. It is also noted that several indicators have remained stable over time, such as those related to the entry-level barriers to political party participation (especially to small parties) and the level of hearings held with executive branch officials by the MPs. Finally, suppose we narrow the V-Dem components merely after the second term of the Socialist Party of Albania (PS) governance from 2017. In that case, all the components of liberal democracy are in decline, confirming the rising tendency of authoritarian political rule.

POLITICAL FACTORS ROLE

The Albanian case in 1992, 1997, 2005 and 2013 proved that the new ruling majorities right after they seized power further political rotations positively impacted democracy and the rule of law. They pursued reform programs catering to increased transparency and accountability. In 1996, 2001, 2009, 2017, and 2021, Albania's reformist majorities lost energy and political orientation as soon as their second term kicked in. They turned into net consumers of power and ignored critical voices and defense mechanisms of democracy.

Furthermore, the Covid-19 crisis, the 2019 earthquake, the immigration crisis and the recent war in Ukraine only weakened the political elite's commitment to the values of democracy and prioritized the need for stability at the expense of the need to ensure a functioning democracy. The lack of a clear EU enlargement strategy and the weakened role of the US in the region contributed to the expansion of the strong leader's powers.

Incumbent Party

Albania's democratic system after 1990 never experienced a party ruling for more than two governing mandates before 2013. The political rotation occurs between the two largest political parties PS and Democratic Party (PD), occasionally integrating other smaller parties, and the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) as a junior ally for the first term of the Socialist government. The overwhelming combined political force of PD and PS immediately after 1990 did not create enough space for a third party to appear in the post-communist Albanian political system. This situation enabled growing authoritarian approaches by autocratic party leaders. Additionally, in 2020, Albania marked a unique case of changing the Constitution (Kuvendi i Republikës së Shqipërisë 2022) to cater to the political needs of the ruling majority because of the next elections. By this logic, winning the third governing mandate in the 2021 elections in Albania automatically increased the power of PS as the ruling party. The result is a single, overly strong position party and a marginalized opposition.

In 2013, Albania's left wing came to power with the promise that it would fight back against the system of corruption, not just the corrupt people in it. Over the following two terms, it changed the people in the system. Its high-level corruption and deviations from democratic practices are widely documented by professional studies, monitoring reports, and international reports. The political elite systematically downplays these warnings by pointing at corruption and collusion with the crime as everyday occurrences in an overall successful democratic transition, and as a regional phenomenon, not only in Albania.

Besides, "the ruling party shows a growing tendency to control to be led by a strong party leader" (Bërdufi 2021). A statistical indicator of the leader's power and control can be found in the results of the Chapel Hill Candidate Survey 2019, according to which the control of the policy choices is totally under the control of political parties and not its members/activists, where the Socialist party results wielding the highest level of such control, higher than PD and LSI, with SP 9.6 out of 10 maximum, PD 8.15 and SMI 9.2. This rising tendency to support a strong leader is also observed in Albania (according to the data of Lavrič and Bieber 2021). These arguments indicate the party's high control over power and political decision-making.

Because the SP is in the third term of government, unlike the other two parties, it has a unique opportunity to extend its power to other political and public institutions.

Another factor indirectly catering to the current shape of the political system in Albania is that huge parties in Albania, in this period, had little or almost no ideological differences. The “competitive authoritarian regimes of the Western Balkans refrain from such characterization, and their authoritarian nature is exercised informally and without ideological justification. All political leaders were running as pragmatic reformers and received domestic and international support on that platform, at least initially (Lavrič and Bieber 2021, 24-25). The lack of difference between electoral platforms, and the (missing) orientation of political parties towards the ideological values on which they are formally grounded, led to homogeneous political representation in the voters' perception. In other circumstances, this element could influence the electorate's choices on election day. As this element of ideological difference in the Albanian political sphere is mainly missing, the ruling party can further strengthen its authoritarian position and efficiently ensure the continuity of the hybrid political system.

We emphasize that this period features the use of legal rather than military means of pressure from the ruling party to perpetuate its grip on power. The political agenda of most governments in the Western Balkans tend to be determined by a ruthless pursuit of self-interest of the ruling elites, reflected in the use of various legal means aimed at shaping the electoral system to benefit the ruling party. This is exacerbated by the difficulty of forming stable pre-election party coalitions, by continuous government-sponsored efforts to marginalize the opposition, and by the omnipresent restrictions to the access of small or new parties to the parliament.

In conclusion, combining these elements leads to a continuous increase in power and control of the ruling party. It ultimately results in a move towards a growingly authoritarian system.

Political Opposition

The political opposition uses various means to gain political ground and pave its way to power. In systems with autocratic tendencies, the stronger the ruling party and the longer its ruling power lasts, the lower the chances of the opposition to ground its bid for executive power. One of the tools used by the Albanian opposition to strengthen its hand was the boycott of the parliament (handing over the mandates of the deputies) during the second term of the SP government by the Democratic Party and the Socialist Movement for Integration and the boycott of the 2019 local elections.

In 2019, Albania became the only country in Europe where an opposition waived all parliamentary mandates and later altogether boycotted local elections, creating a paradox in political representation, with over 100% of local government controlled by the ruling political party and with over 80% of mayors elected without rival candidates. This choice of the opposition further strengthened the power of the Socialists at the local level. The failed strategy of the opposition further weakened its credentials, as it directly contributed to the ability of the SP and its leader Edi Rama to win the third government mandate in Albania. The opposition had

little or no effect on national and local politics from 2013 to 2021, resulting in a weak governance alternative and making things much easier for the dominant party.

A problem related to the above analysis is the inter-party polarization of the opposition. Albania shows “high levels of inter-party polarization” (BiEPAG 2017, 91). The “polarization of political parties contributes to a problematic tendency of internal parties' fragmentation. These arguments of internal political polarization and power centralization tendency from the party's leadership also convey the obstructive behaviors of the parliamentary opposition. Additionally, this political situation exposes the citizen to an overpowering control of the party's leadership” (Berdufi 2021). Moreover, the main opposition party in Albania, PD, in this period has shown a high level of fragmentation. On 21 March, the chair of the Democratic Party, Lulzim Basha, resigned (Euronews Albania 2022).

Citizens' Political Behavior

Important indicators of democratic participation from the citizens demonstrate deterioration in the analyzed period. The voter turnout, especially for parliamentary elections, is in decline, especially from 2013, the first governing term of the PS (CEC 2022), by - 6.99%. Moreover, Eurobarometer 2022 data show a high dissatisfaction among Albanian citizens with the functioning of democracy - at 61% (European Commission 2022).

Likewise, media is another instrument of democratic control in declining. According to Freedom House (FH) data, media independence declined from 2013 to 2021 by 0.50 points. The “Albanian media environment has long been plagued by oligarchic control like much of the region” (Csaky in Freedom House 2021, 14), increasing the possibility of control and manipulation of the media by autocrats. In this context, Albania is unique as its citizens' primary information source is Prime Minister's television channel and Facebook account.

According to the Balkan Barometer, the distrust of Albanians compared to the rest of the Balkans regarding the essential democratic institutions and the functioning of democracy in political parties in 2021 remains unchanged at 71%. Concerning the courts and judiciary, it increased to 65% from 61%. About the parliament, the distrust level increased to 67% from 61%. Concerning government, the level of distrust remained at the same extent, 57%. In relation to local authorities, it decreased to 53 % from 54% the last year; in relation to the Ombudsman, distrust remained at the exact extent of 46%. Distrust concerning the Supreme Audit institution increased to 51% from 48% (ACIT and EPIK 2021).

This high level of apathy and distrust in democratic institutions, the increase of Albanians' trust in the strong leaders, and the media freedom decline certainly do not support the efforts to push back the encroachments of the Albanian hybrid regime. Still, on the contrary, such a phenomenon boosts authoritarian behavior.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the features, extent and trends related to Albania's hybrid political regime during 2013-2021. Over the last decade, Albania felt the heat of the growing divide between its fading democratic aspirations and the grim realities of its electoral regime. The utopian promise of liberal democracy, supported by the civic vote and focused on critical structural and social reforms in the country, was systematically sidelined by ruling minorities that consistently ignored the standards of functional democracy while transferring a growing array of autocratic powers to strong leaders.

In 1996, 2001, 2009, 2017, and 2021, Albania's reformist majorities lost energy and political orientation as soon as their second term kicked in. They turned into net consumers of power and ignored critical voices and defense mechanisms of democracy. The impact of the authoritarian nature of Albania's government increased exponentially after the opposition relinquished its constructive role in political life, thus failing to control the majority by devaluing the mechanisms of democratic control.

The over-reliance on strong leaders, the growing government control over public life and the confirmation of the power of political majorities through problematic elections held in the absence of any accountability, as part of a trend that is visible both in Albania and in the region, combined with the weakening of watchdog institutions, civil society and citizens' voices and of critical media, eroded the very social basis of a functioning democracy. All these factors have made the path toward liberal democratic regime transformation of Albania more challenging during the period under study.

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