

Albania's challenging Path to EU Integration in the 21st Century

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Abstract

It is more than a quarter of a century that Albania has abandoned self-isolation and embarked on a *quasi* Europeanization pathway. While significant progress has already been achieved on many fronts, considerable roadblocks have been faced and others still lie ahead. Indeed, a multifaceted array of problems among which, a distorted democratization panorama, a divisive political environment, fragile institutions, and a lagging economy, are noticed along transition years while the country is still hobbling on the weary road to EU. Albania's application for membership to the European Union nearly a decade ago was a major landmark for its future aspirations, but the long awaiting question that needs to be addressed is whether Albania can meet minimum EU accession requirements in the context of persisting domestic gaps and deficiencies that characterize the environment where its integration mode operates. In the above context, this paper focuses on the trails of Albania's journey towards the EU membership goal especially during the 21st century. Given the slow pace of integration encountered so far, where internal and external factors share their own pieces of responsibility, the paper aims to analyse and assess certain critical junctures which deem to have had more impact on Albania's delayed EU prospect, as well as underline some of the challenging issues that still need to be faced.

Keywords: Albania, transition, perspective, EU integration.

1. Introduction

After the fall of the communist system, Albania has been undergoing many complex transformations, moving gradually from the initial numerous difficulties of the transition phase towards the later challenges of the European integration pathway. The country's trajectory of developments has not been an easy one, indeed, concerning the persistence of a wide array of political, economic, legal, and social problems throughout the years. However, despite Albania's troubled reputation, especially noticed over (but not confined solely at) the first post-communist decade, when certain domestic legacies continued to have a negative impact on the country's integration mode, the turn of the 21st century opened a new page of perspectives. The European Union began to express its unequivocal support for all the Western Balkans countries, coupled with a region-tailored enlargement policy which was widely promoted as the anchor of future reforms (Elbasani, 2013) that would lead to an eventual accession to the common 'club'. This friendly open-doors support coming from the neighbouring Europeans, accompanied by an ever increasing domestic interest for integration, led to Albania's formal engagement to the EU membership goal.

To date, many years after having embarked on the Europeanization pathway, Albania still has a long way to go despite the roadblocks that have already been surpassed. In this context, the long existing issue that still needs to be tackled concerns not only the past, but also the present, and if possibly the future peculiarities and challenges of the country's trajectory of developments where internal gaps and deficiencies, accompanied by an external scepticism, keep shaping its (delayed) pace and (poor) quality of EU integration. Therefore, in order to shed more light on this panorama, the first part of the paper provides a chronological description of the EU integration process of Albania, highlighting the key moments from the early beginnings up to date, by focusing mostly in the 21st century developments when the EU perspective of the region became increasingly articulated by both sides concerned. In addition, the second part of the paper focuses on some background domestic factors that are thought to have had a deterring effect on the integration mode of the country, not only during the first years of the transition period, but also further than that. And finally, the third part of the paper generalizes on Albania's challenging integration journey that it has embarked upon, by focusing mostly the current setting where intermingled internal and external elements need to be well considered in order to adhere to the EU requirements properly, and thus eventually achieve the long-aspired accession goal.

II. Pursuing the traces of Albania's integration journey

Albania's diplomatic relations with the European community were established in 1991, after many years of international isolation and self-reliance approach. Indeed, this historic step towards the long-expected opening process was not simply of diplomatic value but also practical one, as it hacked the pathway for the subsequent signing of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement a year later, and make Albania eligible for funding under the PHARE programme (Abazi, 2008; Veshi, 2012; Kalemaj, 2016). In the upcoming years, due to the political developments that the whole Balkan region faced as a result of ex-Yugoslavia's dissolution and the subsequent creation of a set of new states, the European Union was urged to adopt a Balkan policy called "Regional Approach" in 1996. In the context of a significant threat to European security, the aim of this step was to develop and strengthen relations between Balkan countries and the EU, where the fulfilment of political and economic conditions was of paramount importance. Unsurprisingly, as far as Albania was concerned, the noticeable 'democratic deficit' encountered in the new pluralist context; the politics' inefficiency to hold free and fair elections during the mid 1990s; and the state institutions failure and economic collapse of 1997 (Jano, 2008, p.59; O'Brennan & Gassie, 2009, p.64; Biberaj, 2000, pp.471-494), prevented the consolidation of Albania-EU strategic relationship, which had been epitomised earlier, since 1990, in the calls of the country's youth "We want Albania like the rest of Europe" (in Varoshi, 2012, p.332).

In a broader context, however, the European perspective of the Western Balkans, where Albania belongs, was not particularly accentuated until Kosovo's conflict near the end of the decade. Indeed, the Union policies towards this region changed in a positive direction when the EU leaders finally reached the consensus that in order to achieve stability in the region and consequently in Europe, there was a need for faster integration (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012, p.29; Varoshi, 2012, p.238). Thus, it was in May 1999 when the European Union proposed a new Stabilization and Association Process for those countries that had not concluded any agreement with the EU earlier, and Albania became part of this initiative since its launch. The process aimed establishing closer relations between the EU and each respective country by specifying commitments with regard to political, economic, trade, and human rights reforms fulfilment, as well as promotion of regional cooperation (Hoffmann, 2005, p.59; Abazi, 2008, p.239). However, in November 1999, the European Commission report on the feasibility study for opening negotiations with Albania for the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement concluded that Albania did not meet the conditions for such an agreement (O'Brennan & Gassie, 2009, p.64; Xhuvani, 2013). Given the noticeable problems that the country encountered during the first post-communist decade, the EU question would remain pending even at the turn of the 21st century.

At the Zagreb Summit organized in November 2000, the EU emphasized its interest in the Balkan region by considering the Stabilization and Association Agreement as a starting point for the accession perspective of any aspirant country (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012, p.32). In order to support the process the European Council established in December 2000 the "Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization (CARDS) as a new financial instrument for the region (Hoffmann, 2005, p.60; Abazi, 2008, p.248). As for Albania, the Union decided to intensify cooperation through the creation of a High Profile Taskforce which aimed to assess the country's capacities, as well as point the areas where improvements were needed, in order to meet obligations arising from an agreement with the EU. After a series of meetings held in Tirana, the Commission concluded that although much remained to be done, the prospect of opening negotiations for a Stabilization and Association Agreement with Albania was the best way to maintain the pace of political and economic reforms in the country (Elbasani, 2004, p.38; Xhuvani, 2013). After certain technical discussions and necessary preparations, negotiations were formally opened on January, 31, 2003, by the president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, whose notable stance was about building bridges, not destroying them; opening borders, not closing them; and restoring relations and trade links, not severing them (Prodi, 2003).

Indeed, a clear integration perspective was officially stated within a few months time, at the Thessaloniki European Council Summit held in June 2003, which confirmed that the Western Balkans countries, including Albania, were identified as potential candidates for EU membership. One important element of the Thessaloniki Agenda and the progress towards European integration concerned the political and economic dialogue (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012, p.33). While relatively rapid progress during the first years of the new decade (especially in comparison to the chaotic and struggling 1990s) strongly confirmed the necessity and inevitability of EU support and guidance in conducting successful post-communist reform, and thus defined the essence of Western Balkan states' and people's motives to accede to the EU, it also confirmed the rightness of the EU's motivation and policy to expand into this region (Petrovic, 2009, p.44). As a result, in June 2006

Albania signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement, which was finally ratified on January 2009 by all the EU member states of the time, after a continuous grappling with an image problem and unstable environment. This historical and important moment for the country, in fact marked transition towards a new stage, where Albania moved on to a more concrete footing in its relationship with the European Union (O'Brennan & Gassie, 2009; Goxha, 2016).

Compared to the first post-communist decade of the 1990s, in time there could be observed a major shift in EU's strategic priority, from an approach aimed at reconstruction and economic development to one of integration (Hoffmann, 2005, p.64). Indeed, the beginning of the 21st century appeared to have opened a much prosperous pathway in terms of Albania's future EU accession goal. Immediately after the Stabilization and Association Agreement entered into force on April 1, 2009 Albania applied to become an EU candidate country on April 28. Despite this daring step, in the next two upcoming years the European Commission did recommend neither the candidate status nor the opening of accession negotiations for Albania as a result of the country's failure in fulfilling the required reforms with respect to the 12 key priorities, put forward by the Commission Opinion of 2010. However, the lifting of the visa regime in November 2010 finally made Europe a touchable reality for many Albanian citizens who had dreamt about their freedom of movement for many decades in a row (Xhuvani and Kane, 2012, pp.448-449).

Although this act can be interpreted very positively from the point of view of symbolic integration into Europe, in terms of economic and political development Albania kept being hindered by the lack of basic preconditions, e.g. weak institutions and governance, political instability and polarisation, high emigration rates, weak rule of law, corruption allegations, underdeveloped infrastructure, high dependency on foreign aid etc. Indeed, even during the second decade of the new century, Albanian developments were rather unsatisfactory considering the slow pace of general progress. Nevertheless, recognizing the need to address 12 priorities identified by the European Commission's Opinion for Albania the government and opposition embarked in a joint endeavour in November 2011 that led to some concrete results, such as the adoption of electoral reform, the adoption of important pieces of legislation, etc. Consequently, in October 2012, the Commission recommended that Albania be granted EU candidate status subject to completion of certain reforms, thus by reinforcing the EU's transformative power and its role as a catalyst for positive change in the country as well as the region as a whole (Xhuvani, 2013, European Commission, 2016).

On June 24, 2014, Albania finally received the candidate status after a series of failed attempts. In the subsequent years, despite a number of problems, there was a notable progress in the integration journey of the country, whose changes have been mostly due to impositions by the EU representatives rather than by the Albanian political elite, which has frequently hampered this process due to lack of political dialogue between political forces (Goxha, 2016; Mirel, 2018, p.4). In order to lead the country to the next station, which is the opening of accession negotiations, Albania continued to actively participate in high level dialogue meetings as well as in related joint working groups especially regarding the 5 key priorities namely: corruption, organized crime, judiciary, administrative reform, and human rights. Undoubtedly, the consecutive yearly Progress Reports for Albania did note on each of the improvements made while at the same time pointing at those that still had some way to go.

The 17th of April 2018, finally marked another important date in Albania's path to EU membership as the Commission recommended for the first time an unconditioned opening of EU accession negotiations with the country. Two months later, on June 26, after a marathon session, the European affairs ministers followed-up with a prominent decision to open the accession talks within 2019, while launching an immediate screening process in the meantime (Deutsche Welle; Politico; Reuters, 2018). Referring to the past experiences, it is worth reminding that despite a positive Commission recommendation in 2012, it was not until 2014 that the Council decided to grant candidate status to Albania. A similarly negative decision was taken even in 2016, after a conditional recommendation on future reform by the Commission to open accession negotiations that year. Yet, taking into account the EU's belief that the perspective of a closer integration is strong enough to induce reforms and consolidate transformation in any aspirant country, there is still enough room for optimism regarding Albania, which now seems to be 'a big step closer to the European family' (Goxha, 2016).

Indeed, the end of this EU Commission's term has been accompanied by an increased political momentum for enlargement towards the Western Balkans. Both the EU High Representative, Mogherini, and Commission President, Juncker, visited this region in February 2018. Likewise in April, the Union's President, Tusk, started a regional visit from Albania with the message that there is a clear EU future for the Western Balkan countries. On one hand, it is true that Albania remains much behind the EU average in terms of economic development and good governance, and it is ranked partly free by Freedom House in 2018 (Kajsiu, 2018). However, on the other hand, the country has also made considerable progress in the rule of

law, especially after Albanian political parties unanimously voted for the first time in 2016 to change Albania's constitution, in line with demands from the EU and other Western partners (Barbullushi, 2018). In view of such developments, the EU focus on the region is expected to be maintained, but it is also in the hands of each respective country, including Albania, to accelerate (or not) the pace of integration and catch up with the wasted time.

III. Does the background matter? Assessing some domestic factors

Generally speaking, the integration agenda during the transition years has been characterized by a mixture of achievements as well as limitations and failures. Considering the Union's expressed interest in bringing all the Western Balkan countries into the EU family, the case of Albania can exemplify some of the typical features that explain the slow pace of integration, given the long time span that this country has needed in order to reach the upcoming station of accession negotiations. In this context, it is worth pointing at three factors that had to be confronted and coped with in the course of Europeanization processes during transition, namely: (1) the role of domestic elites; (2) hindering historical legacies; (3) weak stateness (O'Brennan & Gassie, 2009, p.72; Elbasani, 2013, p.9). These factors were not insuperable obstacles, indeed, but their restraining impact has been noticeable throughout the transition years among the Western Balkan countries, including Albania, which is part of the same spectrum.

As far as the first factor is concerned, Albania's break with the totalitarian past was rather ambiguous in the early 1990s and many old apparatchiks managed to survive the regime change and take hold of key political and governing positions by converting some of their previous power into new political and economic clout, thus managing to resist the EU's reformation agenda in the subsequent years. However, compared to the vicious circle of the first post-communist decade, when the aforementioned phenomenon was quite evident, the new century brought a much better atmosphere indeed (Jano, 2008). The country moved towards accumulating more 'liberal capital', be they individual leaders, political parties, and social groupings that were more favourable to the project of European integration. Still as anywhere else in the Balkans, even in Albania these reformists often proved too weak to pursue deep-seated change, embedded, as they were, amidst hybrid institutions and complicit old networks that had everything to lose from substantial reforms (Elbasani, 2013, p.10). Consequently, such roadblocks served to impede the Europeanization processes of the country and unavoidably slow down its EU integration pace.

As regards the second factor mentioned above, the post-communist Western Balkans undoubtedly was not a very fertile ground for the introduction of the political culture of liberal democracy primarily because of its past legacies (Biberaj, 2000, p.119; Jano, 2008, p.59). This heritage has been rather problematic for the respective countries of this region, 'which share a general weakness of reformist coalitions, but also next-to-no prior democratic experiences, long-term patrimonial state-society relations, poor socio-economic development, former totalitarian regimes, and predominantly violent and chaotic modes of transition' (in Elbasani, 2013, p.11). Given this context, the eventual violent breakdown of Albanian state authority in 1997, and the quasi-destabilization in 1998, due to the conflictual political culture demonstrated by the parties, proved that they were as 'infected' as their communist predecessors since political opponents were considered as 'enemies' (Biberaj, 2000, p.498; Radovanovik, 2012, p.209; Sabriu 2013, p.75). This background, on one hand exemplifies the dramatic impact that the above mentioned factors had on the country's transition pathway during the first post-communist decade, whereas on the other hand, it explains the difficult nature of the democratization, Europeanization and integration trajectory that was to be pursued in the years ahead.

As far as the third aforementioned factor is concerned, the problem of weak stateness is related to the lack of infrastructural capacities to exercise state authority and enforce the rule of law. Along the basic challenges in the political, economical and social sphere, other problems came to the fore, among which the most challenging ones were corruption and organized crime (Jano, 2008, p.63; Mirel, 2018, p.7; O'Brennan, 2018, p.4). Indeed, the disorderly transitions across the Western Balkan states, including Albania, created great opportunities for ruling elites to emasculate the state by 'privatizing' decision-making mechanisms as well as exercising government prerogatives on behalf of clientelistic interests (Elbasani, 2013, p.12). This type of state, partly captured by particular interests and quite often subject to elites' predatory projects of extracting state resources, was generally short of necessary capacities and willingness to carry out the necessary reforms and implement policy visions, such as the EU integration goal. As a consequence, the process of building institutions capable of overcoming every single problem mentioned above was not only an issue that delayed the integration steps for so long, but also a challenge that keeps determining the future EU perspective of the country.

IV. The EU test for Albania: handling the ongoing challenge

There exist many concerns and doubts on Albania's capacities and eventual readiness to join the European Union. Indeed, this issue gets more and more complex as the conditionality keeps standing, the screening keeps growing and the standards keep elevating. However, it is of great importance that significant measures are taken especially by the political ruling elite since complying with EU standards depends first and foremost upon them. This is easier said than done, though, as far as the problems of integration do not rest only on the formal compliance to the EU requirements. Indeed, Albanian's greatest challenge is to abandon many practices of the past and become "behaviourally Europeanized" (Jano, 2008, p.67; Radovanovik, 2012, p.211). Therefore, it is of great importance that every relevant actor in the country keeps the prospect of EU membership intact in order to proceed with accomplishing all the reform processes needed, because any other option would seriously undermine stabilization and instigate a vicious circle of disappointment, frustration and destruction (Xhuvani and Kane, 2012, p.450).

Indeed, 'the rift between formal commitments made by the leaders and informal practices is still a challenge' for Albania's EU perspective (Mirel, 2018, p.8; O'Brennan, 2018, p.4). The European guiding rhetoric of integration does not count much unless it is put into practise by undertaking deep-seated political, economical, legal and social reforms. The EU, on its own initiative, has already put into practice the use of 'the sticks' (i.e. punitive) and 'carrots' (i.e. rewarding) principle in order to push forward any aspirant country to comply with the set of membership requirements known as 'Copenhagen Criteria'. Such mechanism have been Union's most powerful tool in inducing changes and accelerating reforms in order to bring laggard countries like Albania closer to the EU trajectory. Within this context, by following the practise of transformation prior to accession, the EU normative model has automatically turned into a necessity (Abazi, 2008, p.240), that has to be replicated sooner or later in order to achieve the manifested membership goal from any possible candidate.

However, a whole set of questions do constantly come to the fore concerning the Europeanization capacity of states like Albania. In view of the great number of challenges that exist in this geo-political area, convergence would still require time, patience, and persistence on the side of the aspirant but also a constant and firm support by the EU (Radovanovik, 2012, p.212), which is not short of its own internal problems too. Indeed, during the recent years the European Union has been finding itself in a critical situation, since, on one hand, it has been continuously putting conditions to every country that seeks to become part of the club, whereas, on the other hand, it is facing many internal challenges regarding self consolidation. The articulation of the so-called "enlargement fatigue" and the questions raised over the EU's "absorption capacity" has led to further tightening of the terms of membership for every potential candidate. (Petrovic, 2009, pp.45-47; O'Brennan, 2018, p.2), leading to the perception that the Union aims to keep the Western Balkan countries within Europe, but outside the EU institutional core.

Despite what is mentioned above, Albania still has a long way to go before it can realistically expect to be accepted as a full member of the Union. Therefore, in order to maintain the integration trajectory safe, combined efforts from both sides are vital, as long as it is in the common interest to implement reforms and to create a framework for long-term stability which can counteract any negative trends that may stem from lack of peace, security, and prosperity (Sabriu, 2013, p.72; O'Brennan 2018, p.12). Indeed, despite all existing uncertainties and difficulties regarding the EU integration process, what is of great importance is that it is rather irreversible (Jano, 2008, p.66; Radovanovik, 2012, p.211). The variety of factors at large, are likely to influence only the speed but not the general course of integration. This means that joining the Union stands as the only long-range vision not only for Albania itself but also for the rest of the Western Balkan region. Truly, due to the geographic proximity the EU integration course is a strategic necessity and destiny as long as it serves to complete the European geo-political jigsaw where both parties happen to be.

V. Conclusion

Albania's a-quarter-century-old integration journey, starting from the early Trade and Cooperation Agreement in 1992, and heading towards the memorable beginning of the EU's led Stabilization and Association Process at the turn of the 21st century, by reaching at the current desirous stage of accession negotiations scheduled opening in 2019, has been marked by a multifaceted array of challenges. On one hand, the country had to adapt to the Union's pattern which has ranged from an initial shaky reaction to regional events culminating with Kosovo's war in 1999, into a later crystallized strategy that embraced all the Western Balkan countries as prospective EU member states. On the other hand, Albania had to engage in a long, deep, tiring, and sometimes even defiable EU-oriented self-reformation process in order to become an eligible, credible and promising EU aspirant. For this small Western Balkan state, indeed, the European Union remains the primary

focus of its diplomatic and political activity, and the only game in the town as regards its geopolitical orientation (O'Brennan and Gassie, 2009, p.81). However, evidences have shown that Albania has faced many difficulties on its long and weary journey towards meeting EU's norms and standards.

Along the ups and downs encountered during the years, the paper has highlighted a set of internal factors such as: the role of elites, the past legacies, and the weak stateness that are believed to have had a restraining impact on Albania's Europeanization and reformation processes, by weighting heavily on many political, legal, economic, and social sectors of the country. Besides this, the EU perspective of the Western Balkans, including Albania, has also been affected by the occasional external articulation of the so-called "enlargement fatigue", and the issues raised over the EU's "absorption capacity" help to explain why the accession process of any aspirant country of this region, is not to be considered as an easy one. Indeed, the Albanian experience up to date testifies that the EU integration has been a highly complex process that resembles the pieces of a puzzle that need to be considered all, in order to give the true picture of a country, with its many transformations, challenges and causalities (Jano, 2008, p.68). Nevertheless, despite the uncertainties of the integration journey noticed so far, Albania should keep accelerating the momentum for deeper reforms, and renew its commitment to a profound restructuring and change according to the best EU model, as long as this continues to be the only gravitating force that can make the country a success story.

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