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READ International Scientific Conference

Albanian-American Development Foundation, 2026

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READ International Scientific Conference

First Edition

Organized by the Albanian-American Development Foundation,
in partnership with the University of Tirana and faculty from the University
of Richmond, and in collaboration with partner universities of the READ Project.

Date: October 15th & 16th, 2025
Location: Tirana, Albania

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ISBN: 9789928478849
Publisher: Albanian-American Development Foundation
Design: Orest Muça

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www.readdiaspora.al
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COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AND INHERITED SILENCE IN POST-TOTALITARIAN SOCIETIES: A PSYCHO-FORENSIC ANALYSIS OF DEFENSE MECHANISMS AND INSTITUTIONAL TRUST AMONG ALBANIAN YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the impact of collective trauma and inherited silence in post-totalitarian Albanian society, focusing on the psychological defense mechanisms employed to cope with this legacy and their consequences on institutional trust among youth. Through semi-structured interviews with 30 Albanian young adults aged 18 to 30, key defense mechanisms such as denial, rationalization, emotional dissociation, and idealization of the communist era were identified. While these mechanisms facilitate avoidance of direct confrontation with painful historical realities, they simultaneously contribute to distorted moral development and a pervasive distrust toward legal institutions and transitional justice processes. The findings highlight that inherited silence serves as a significant barrier to establishing stable moral frameworks and social reconciliation. Furthermore, inadequate historical education and the absence of comprehensive transitional justice have reinforced these defense strategies, fostering indifference and skepticism toward institutional reforms. This study contributes to interdisciplinary literature by linking collective psychodynamics with forensic psychology and offers practical recommendations for educational and political interventions aimed at strengthening institutional trust and addressing unresolved societal trauma.

INTRODUCTION

During the years when Central and Eastern Europe was in the first waves of democratization, Albania was still confined to a totalitarian regime, while its citizens lived in self-isolation away from globalist influences and the democratic processes taking place in the region.

Reviews of the Albanian Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure show that the procedural rights provided for by law were not implemented by the authorities. Defendants were rarely offered legal protection. Some people were sentenced without the right to appeal the trial; the minimum procedural guarantees provided for in the Code of Criminal Procedure were not applied in practice. The UN Committee and international organizations underlined that, in violation of international legal standards, the Albanian government practiced political detention and torture, inhuman treatment, while others were arrested critical of the government in power, to suppress dissent.

The change of regime and the establishment of pluralism in Albania marked an important attempt at political transformation, but this did not guarantee an immediate improvement in either the fundamental rights and freedoms, or the socio-economic situation of Albanians. However, the beginning of pluralism also marked the awareness of the Albanian people about the democratic possibilities of civic participation in a freer society[1].

These institutional experiences have reflected a collective trauma in the generation that experienced them, creating an unconscious perception of forced silence. Silence and non-discussion of these abuses became an intergenerational phenomenon, transmitted through fragmented narratives, fear of institutions and rigid social norms. Younger generations avoid reflecting on history, and this defense mechanism translates into a sense of loss of identity due to mentality, suspicion of authorities and the lack of a moral framework that allows them to understand and accept the past. Even after pluralism and the establishment of democracy, the lack of a complete historical education and the partial confrontation with the past have created a psychological and social vacuum, leaving young people exposed to incorrect or idealized interpretations of the past.

State institutions, in particular administrative mechanisms, have also had a main focus on absolute political control and the spread of fear among citizens. For this, every possible means with a limiting function of individual freedom and forms of resistance have been used. This systematic control created an atmosphere of constant fear, where citizens felt that every step, every word and every social relationship could be monitored and interpreted as a threat to the regime. Spartak Ngjela, in the second volume of "The Bend and Fall of Albanian Tyranny 1957-2010" quotes: "*Above all, Albanians had lived in a state that had never taken into consideration the individual, who had always been without any rights and without any guarantees for the future.*" Living in environments where every idea risked being considered politically incorrect, the individual learned to limit the expression of thoughts and feelings, developing strategies of self-censorship. Such a situation, in addition to burdening the psycho-emotional state of the individual, affected the lack of mutual trust between members of the community.

The lack of reflection on the past aims to avoid directly confronting the pain, fear and consequences of the trauma experienced during the totalitarian regime. Although this process

[1] Zaka, A. (2018). Çështja e të drejtave të njeriut në Shqipëri, gjatë tranzicionit. Tezë për mbrojtjen e gradës "Doktor", Universiteti i Tiranës. https://unitir.edu.al/ceshtja-e-te-drejta-ve-te-njeriut-ne-shqiperi-gjate-tranzicionit/

has ensured emotional and social stability to avoid direct clashes, the lack of open discussion has consequences that appear in subsequent generations. In the younger generation, this silence manifests itself in an indifference to historical and political issues, in parallel with deep skepticism towards state institutions. The lack of complete information develops partial or distorted perceptions of justice, morality and authority, as a derivative of the lack of historical and legal education. The psychological and social consequences of this narrative legacy are certain approaches, values and expectations towards justice and legal norms.

The psycho-forensic perspective clarifies the perception of young people towards this situation. In Albania, before and during the totalitarian period, unfair practices, non-implementation of the law and negative experiences of dealing with the legal system have created this model of institutional perception. On the other hand, skepticism is related to the critical assessment of institutional structures, including examples of lack of transparency, inadequate documentation and lack of implementation of legal rules. For this reason, the psycho-forensic approach suggests that the study of this legacy is not limited to individualistic analyses, but to panoramic analyses of individuality and historical social experience.

Existing literature does not support the post-totalitarian period with abundant information, facts and evidence, due to the low number and lack of studies or research on this field. The few literatures narrate it in the form of autobiography, but do not address the psychosocial aspects of that period. Such a lack is attributed to the fact that psychology and other social sciences have developed after the 1980s, leaving behind an academic and scientific gap.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to examine the inherited perceptions and beliefs about legal institutions in Albania, analyzing the impact of the lack of historical reflection, censorship, and transitional justice. The approach will focus on a psycho-forensic perspective, looking at how these factors influence younger generations in relation to the law and institutional trust. The study seeks to uncover the subtle defense mechanisms that shape attitudes toward justice and governance. Also, it aims to highlight the broader implications for democratic consolidation and the development of a culture of accountability in post-totalitarian societies.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do inherited perceptions and silences from Albania's totalitarian past shape young people's trust in legal and state institutions today?
- Which psychological defense mechanisms are most commonly employed by Albanian youth in processing historical and political legacies?
- To what extent does the absence of transitional justice and historical education contribute to skepticism and indifference toward institutional reforms?

- How does the collective silence surrounding past injustices influence the moral reasoning and civic engagement of the younger generation?
- In what ways can a psycho-forensic approach provide deeper insights into the relationship between inherited trauma, defense mechanisms, and institutional trust in post-totalitarian societies?

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The importance of the study lies in providing an integrated approach to understanding inherited perceptions and beliefs towards legal institutions. The contribution also focuses on an interdisciplinary approach, linking psychological analysis with elements of social psychology and law. In a practical sense, the study can serve as a guide for educational programs, institutional interventions and public policies, which aim to promote individual and social freedom of institution-individual interaction, through an analysis of current and inherited perceptions. Also contributes to understanding psycho-forensic mechanisms of inherited politics and historical education of totalitarian regimes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Collective Trauma and Inherited Silence

The concept of trauma, originally rooted in medical and psychological disciplines, denotes pain and disruption at the individual level. When transposed into sociology, trauma expands into a collective dimension, understood as the enculturation of social pain and the shared affective response to experiences of separation, exclusion, and marginalization from valued social structures and identities. In this sense, collective trauma refers not only to the psychological consequences of large-scale violence or repression but also to the dismantling of social infrastructure and its long-term impact on community well-being.

Jeffrey Alexander's theory of cultural trauma (Alexander, 2014) situates trauma as a socially mediated process, whereby a community collectively interprets and integrates past violence or injustice into its shared identity.[2] Trauma, in this framework, is not simply an individual's suffering multiplied across a population but rather a meaning-making process that binds group identity to painful historical experiences.

Freud had earlier suggested that the unconscious functions as a repository of repressed memories, where forgetting rather than remembering demands psychological work[3]. Repression, coupled with the creation of "screen memories," shields individuals and

[2] Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," in Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[3] Boag, S. (2006). Freudian Repression, the Common View, and Pathological Science. Review of General Psychology, 10(1), 74-86. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.10.1.74

groups from more disturbing recollections, thereby shaping both individual and collective narratives of the past.[4]

Jan Assmann (1995)[5] distinguishes between two forms of collective remembrance: communicative memory and cultural memory. Communicative memory refers to the everyday sharing of personal recollections, oral history, and informal narratives. It is typically unstable, unspecialized, and marked by thematic fluidity, relying on interpersonal exchanges such as storytelling, gossip, or jokes. In contrast, cultural memory encompasses stabilized forms of historical knowledge preserved through texts, rituals, monuments, and images. Unlike communicative memory, cultural memory is institutionalized, enduring, and subject to reinterpretation in light of contemporary needs, thereby enabling societies to continuously reshape their collective self-image.[6]

A crucial dimension of intergenerational memory is what Marianne Hirsch (2008) defines as postmemory.[7] This concept captures the relationship of second generations to traumatic events that preceded their birth but were transmitted with such emotional force that they feel like lived experiences. Postmemory explains how children of those who experienced repression, imprisonment, or political persecution under totalitarian regimes may internalize those histories as part of their own identities, even in the absence of direct experience.

Intergenerational silence often compounds this process. For victims, remembering trauma may serve an adaptive function for group survival, reinforcing vigilance against future threats while fostering a collective search for meaning[8]. However, for perpetrators or institutions complicit in repression, silence functions as a defensive mechanism, denying history, minimizing wrongdoing, or reframing past events to protect collective identity[9]. In post-totalitarian contexts such as Albania, this silence not only obstructs transitional justice but also hinders the development of institutional trust, leaving younger generations to navigate inherited narratives shaped more by repression and censorship than by open reflection.

Totalitarian regimes have been extensively analyzed in classical political theory, with Hannah Arendt's The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951). Arendt describes totalitarianism as a political

[4] Olick, J. K., & Robbins, J. (1998). Social Memory Studies: From "Collective Memory" to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices. Annual Review of Sociology, 24, 105–140. http://www.jstor.org/stable/223476

[5] Assmann, J., & Czaplicka, J. (1995). Collective Memory and Cultural Identity. New German Critique, 65, 125–133. https://doi.org/10.2307/488538

[6] Assmann, J., & Czaplicka, J. (1995). Collective Memory and Cultural Identity. New German Critique, 65, 125–133. https://doi.org/10.2307/488538

[7] Hirsch, Marianne. "Memory / Poetics Today.". https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/research/centres/ehrc/research/current_research/memory/poetics_today-2008-hirsch-103-28.pdf

[8] Hirschberger, G. (2018). Collective trauma and the social construction of meaning. Frontiers in Psychology, 9, Article 1441. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441

[9] Raimundo, F. (2014). Strategic silence as a third way. Political parties and transitional justice. Democratization, 22(6), 1054–1073. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.901965

system that seeks unlimited domination, extending control beyond political institutions to every aspect of social, cultural, and even private life.[10]

Control is achieved through the calculated use of fear, terror, and propaganda. Surveillance and repression function not only as political tools but also as psychological instruments designed to suppress dissent and produce conformity. Propaganda constructs a homogenized worldview that delegitimizes alternative perspectives, while terror reinforces submission by blurring the boundaries between guilt and innocence, ensuring that the entire population lives under constant threat[11].

A central feature of totalitarian systems is the systematic suppression of pluralism and the imposition of a single "official reality."[12]. Censorship plays a crucial role in shaping this reality, eliminating access to competing narratives and constructing a closed system of knowledge where the ruling ideology becomes unquestionable truth.

The psychological consequences of censorship extend beyond silencing opposition. Over time, individuals internalize fear and begin to self-censor, anticipating punishment even when direct surveillance is absent. This process of internalization transforms repression into a self-sustaining mechanism, as citizens discipline themselves to conform to the ideological framework imposed by the state[13]. Among the totalitarian states of Eastern Europe, Albania under the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha (Britannica, 2025) represents an extreme form of isolation and control.[14] Unlike other communist regimes that maintained limited ties with the Soviet Union or later with Western Europe, Albania followed a path of radical self-isolation, cutting off almost all contact with the outside world after the 1960s.

This unique trajectory differentiated Albania from its regional counterparts and intensified the effects of authoritarian control. The absence of cultural exchange, foreign media, or open borders meant that generations of Albanians grew up within an entirely self-contained ideological system[15]. The lack of external references reinforced the dominance of state propaganda and exacerbated the climate of fear and conformity.

Anna Freud's foundational contribution in "The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence" (1936) emphasized that defenses such as denial, projection, rationalization, and displacement

[10] Arendt, Hannah. The Origins of Totalitarianism. New York: Meridian Books, 1962.

[11] Steinert, C. V. (2022). The impact of domestic surveillance on political imprisonment: Evidence from the german democratic republic. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 67(1), 38-65. https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027221109797

[12] Plamper, J. (2001). Abolishing ambiguity: Soviet censorship practices in the 1930s. The Russian Review, 60(4), 526-544. https://doi.org/10.1111/0036-0341.00189

[13] Zuboff, S. (2022). Surveillance capitalism or democracy? the death match of institutional orders and the politics of knowledge in our information civilization. Organization Theory, 3(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/26317877221129290

[14] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Enver Hoxha." Encyclopaedia Britannica. Last modified August 30, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Enver-Hoxha

[15] Abrahams, F. C. (2015). Modern Albania: From Dictatorship to Democracy in Europe. NYU Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15r3zx3

operate not only in pathology but also in everyday life.[16] In societies like Albania, which experienced decades of totalitarian control, these defenses appear in collective discourse, cultural memory, and even institutional behavior. Denial, for example, is not only a refusal to recognize traumatic events at the personal level but also manifests socially through the minimization or outright rejection of state crimes[17]. This has direct forensic implications: when a community collectively denies that injustices occurred, there is little societal pressure to investigate, prosecute, or reform institutions that were complicit in repression[18]. Rationalization further sustains this pattern by reinterpreting authoritarian measures as necessary for stability or survival, thereby reducing the perceived need for accountability or transitional justice.[19] Projection may also play a role, as blame for repression is shifted onto vague "foreign influences" or isolated actors rather than state structures, which again undermines institutional responsibility.[20]

Building on this, George Vaillant's hierarchical model of defenses (Ego Mechanisms of Defense, 1992) allows for a nuanced understanding of how adaptive or maladaptive these strategies are in relation to institutional trust.[21] At the immature or neurotic levels, defenses such as denial, repression, intellectualization, and rationalization distort reality in ways that block the possibility of legal accountability. They may help individuals and communities avoid anxiety in the short term, but they perpetuate distrust by reinforcing the idea that institutions are either dangerous, untrustworthy, or irrelevant[22]. For example, intellectualization, the tendency to discuss traumatic history in overly abstract or detached terms, may explain why political discourse in Albania often refers to communism as a historical "period" rather than engaging with specific injustices and perpetrators. Such language avoids emotional confrontation but also erases victims lived experiences, leaving the legal system disconnected from moral reality.

In contrast, mature defenses such as suppression, sublimation, humor, and altruism offer pathways for societies to engage with traumatic history without collapsing under its weight.[23]

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[16] Freud, Anna. The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence. 1936. Reprint, London: Karnac Books, 1993.

[17] Hart, J. (2014). Toward an Integrative Theory of Psychological Defense. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 9(1), 19–39. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44290153

[18] Dror, I. E. (2015). Cognitive neuroscience in forensic science: understanding and utilizing the human element. Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences, 370(1674), 1–8. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24505159

[19] Jones, E. (1908). Rationalization in every-day life. The Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 3(3), 161. https://doi/10.1037/h0070692

[20] Di Giuseppe, M., & Perry, J. C. (2021). The Hierarchy of Defense Mechanisms: Assessing Defensive Functioning with the Defense Mechanisms Rating Scales Q-Sort. Frontiers in psychology, 12, 718440. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.718440

[21] Vaillant, George E. Ego Mechanisms of Defense: A Guide for Clinicians and Researchers. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1992.

[22] Di Giuseppe, M., & Perry, J. C. (2021). The Hierarchy of Defense Mechanisms: Assessing Defensive Functioning with the Defense Mechanisms Rating Scales Q-Sort. Frontiers in psychology, 12, 718440. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.718440

[23] Zook, R. (1998). Learning to Use Positive Defense Mechanisms. The American Journal of Nursing, 98(3), 16B-16H. https://doi.org/10.2307/3471781

Suppression, unlike repression, allows a conscious decision to "set aside" but not erase traumatic memories, which can support pragmatic reconciliation without denial. Sublimation could manifest in turning historical suffering into constructive cultural or civic initiatives, such as public memorials, education programs, or artistic works that acknowledge the past while reinforcing democratic values.[24] Humor, already a common mode of cultural resistance in Albania, can disarm authoritarian legacies by reframing them critically rather than reverentially (Ngjela, 2012).[25] Altruism, expressed through institutional recognition of victims and reparative measures, has the strongest forensic potential, as it demonstrates an ethical framework that legitimizes law in the eyes of younger generations.[26]

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory design, appropriate for examining the impact of collective trauma and inherited silence in post-totalitarian Albania, with particular focus on the psychological defense mechanisms shaping youth perceptions of institutions. A qualitative approach was chosen because the research questions center on subjective experiences and intergenerational transmission of silence, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone.

Instead of traditional oral interviews, participants completed semi-structured written interviews delivered as Microsoft Word documents. This approach allowed for the collection of a large dataset while retaining the open-ended and reflective qualities of interviews. Written interviews gave participants time to reflect on their answers, which is particularly important in dealing with sensitive issues related to trauma, silence and family narratives.

The design was guided by Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006), chosen for its flexibility and suitability for identifying both explicit (semantic) and implicit (latent) themes across a large number of participants.

Participants and Sampling

The study consisted of 30 Albanian young adults aged 18-30. This cohort was selected because they present the so-called post-memory generation: individuals who did not experience the communist regime directly but inherited its silence, narratives and psychosocial consequences through family and society.

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[24] Peterson, M. H. (1972). Understanding Defense Mechanisms: Programmed Instruction. The American Journal of Nursing, 72(9), 1651–1674. https://doi.org/10.2307/3422571

[25] Ngjela, Spartak. Përkulja dhe rënia e tiranisë shqiptare 1957–2010. Tiranë: UET Press, 2011.

[26] Hart, J. (2014). Toward an Integrative Theory of Psychological Defense. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 9(1), 19–39. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44290153

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure diversity in gender, education and geographic distribution. Recruitment was conducted through universities, youth organizations and online calls for participation, using the help of the snowball technique.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a semi-structured written interview, distributed electronically as Word documents. The guide contained open-ended questions covering the following areas:

- Family communication about the communist past (silence, secrecy, disclosure).
- Emotional responses to inherited silence and intergenerational narratives.
- Perceptions of justice, legal institutions and political reforms.
- Reflections on the communist era (idealization, rationalization, avoidance or criticism)

Participants completed the documents at their own pace and returned them electronically. The length of the responses varied between two and six pages. This approach minimized interviewer bias, logistical challenges and potential discomfort that might arise in face-to-face discussions of sensitive material.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA) was applied following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework:

- **Familiarization:** All 30 documents were read and re-read to gain an overview of the material.
- **Initial coding:** Segments of text were coded both semantically and latently.
- **Searching for themes:** Codes were clustered into potential themes reflecting defense mechanisms and their consequences for institutional trust.
- **Reviewing themes:** Candidate themes were refined to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness.
- **Defining and naming themes:** Themes were clearly defined, with attention to their psychological and social implications.
- **Producing the report:** Final themes were linked to the research questions and theoretical framework of psychoanalytic defense mechanisms and forensic psychology.

To enhance credibility, a second coder reviewed a subset of 20% of the written interviews. Coding disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. The triangulation ensured reliability without compromising the interpretative depth of the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and the voluntary nature of their participation. Identifying information was removed from transcript prior to analysis. Anonymity was further protected by the choice of data collection platform (Google Forms), which allowed participants to provide written responses without linking submissions to their personal identities. This design minimized risks related to privacy and enhanced participants' sense of security when disclosing potentially painful or stigmatized experiences. Given the sensitive nature of the research, participants were informed that they could skip questions they found distressing. Referrals to psychological support services were made available if needed.

Limitations

While written interviews enabled large-scaled qualitative data collection, they limited the researcher's ability to probe or clarify ambiguous responses. The depth of narrative varied between participants, with some providing very detailed accounts and others writing only minimally. Additionally, the study is not statistically generalizable; rather, it offers interpretive insights. Despite these limitations, the large sample size enhances the robustness of findings and contributes valuable perspectives to the literature on trauma, silence and institutional trust.

FINDINGS

DEFENSE MECHANISMS

Participants described a range of psychological strategies that helped them avoid direct confrontation with Albania's traumatic past. These strategies operated as defense mechanisms, inherited both through family narratives and broader cultural silences. Four subthemes were identified: denial and rationalization of the past, idealization of the communist era, detachment strategies and identification with the aggressor.

SUBTHEME 1: *Denial and Rationalization of the Past*

Several participants engaged in narratives that downplayed or justified the repressive aspects of the communist regime, often emphasizing stability, security and equality instead. Participants reflected:

> "Yes, there were problems, and some people suffered, but my grandparents always tell me to focus on the good things. They say that at least everyone had a job and people were not starving. They talk about neighbors helping each other, about order and respect

> in the streets. I understand there was repression, but they frame it as if the state was trying to protect them, not harm the citizens." (Female, 24, Tirana)
>
> "I often hear from my family that the system had strict rules, yes, but it provided stability. They tell me that now, everything is chaotic, that people steal, cheat and lie. My uncle even said that back then you could leave your door open and trust people." (Female, 27, Durrës)

Participants minimize their significance or reinterpret them as acceptable, framing stability and equality as compensatory benefits; and by that, the psychological mechanism of rationalization is demonstrated, passed down from older generations.

SUBTHEME 2: *Idealization of the Communist Era*

Beyond denial and rationalization, some participants expressed outright idealization of the communist period, even though they never directly experienced it. Their accounts often drew from family narratives, public discourse or collective memory that portrayed the era as a time of discipline, fairness and moral clarity. The idealization served as a defense mechanism, shielding them from confronting the painful realities of repression.

> "I have never lived in communism, but the way my grandmother describes it, sometimes it sounds like a paradise compared to now. She says everyone had jobs, that life was simple and that people respected each other. She talks about going to school without worrying about money and how nobody was left homeless. Listening to her, I sometimes wonder if maybe the system wasn't that bad." (Male, 21, Elbasan)
>
> "When I see how corrupt politics is today, I honestly feel jealous of the stories I hear from my parents. They say the streets were clean, people were disciplined and everyone contributed in the community. Maybe there was control, but life felt more organized, and my father sometimes thinks that when the system fell apart, something very important was lost." (Female, 20, Tirana)
>
> "My uncle often tells me that the country was poor, but people had dignity and they weren't obsessed with money and showing off. Compared to now, where everyone wants to go abroad and nobody trusts the government, he insists that communism made people more united. I feel almost nostalgic for a time I never lived." (Male, 25, Vlora)

The narratives above highlight how nostalgic idealization functions as a psychological defense, transforming a traumatic collective history into a story of unity, fairness and dignity. While denial minimizes abuse, idealization glorifies the past, presenting it as a moral standart against the present.

SUBTHEME 3: *Detachment Strategies*

Many participants avoided engaging emotionally with Albania's communist past by using detachment strategies. These included humor and sarcasm that trivialized historical trauma, as well as intellectualization, framing history in abstract or academic terms that removed personal and emotional weight. Such strategies allowed participants to distance themselves from the pain of intergenerational memory.

> "When my friends and I talk about communism, we mostly make jokes. We laugh about how people had to stand in line for bread or how everyone had the same clothes. Even when someine mentions 'Sigurimi' (security), it becomes a kind of meme, like 'Big Brother is watching you'." (Male, 19, Korçë)
>
> "For me, history feels like just a subject in school, not something that connects to my personal life. When I read about communism, it does not feel like something that touched real people. I prefer to think about the system in terms of theories like Marxism, totalitarianism or ideologies, rather than what families went through." (Female, 25, Vlora)
>
> "Sometimes, when older relatives start telling stories, I try to respond with humour. That way, I can keep things on the surface and nobody gets deeper into it." (Female, 23, Skrapar)

These accounts show how humor, cynicism and intellectual abstraction serve as defenses, keeping participants at a safe distance from the emotional weight of collective memory. Unlike denial or idealization, detachment strategies don't reinterpret the past, they just strip it of its affective charge.

SUBTHEME 4: *Identification with the Aggressor*

A smaller but notable group of participants expressed views that aligned with authoritarian logic, endorsing strict control or discipline as necessary for social order. Rather than condemning state repression, these accounts framed it as a regrettable but useful tool. Such narratives reveal how the defense mechanism of identification with the aggressor operates across generations, transforming fear into admiration for authority.

> "I hear stories about how the government would punish people if they spoke against the Party and honestly, I don't see it only as negative. People knew the rules and if you followed them, life was fine. Compare that to today, where rules exist but nobody follows them and corruption is everywhere. Fear might not be ideal, but maybe it is better than the lawlessness we see now." (Female, 26, Durrës)

> "I know dictatorship is supposed to be bad, but a part of me thinks that the discipline it created was valuable. People were not lazy, they worked, they studied and they respected authority. Now everyone wants to leave Albania, nobody trusts the institutions and people complain all the time. Freedom made us weaker, not stronger." (Male, 26, Shkodër)

These accounts illustrate how admiration for strong authority functions as a psychological defense , turning fear of repression into respect for order and discipline. This subtheme differs from denial or idealization in that participants do not minimize past abuses, but rather reinterpret them as socially useful or morally justified.

INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS

SUBTHEME 1: *Institutional Mistrust*

Mistrust of political, legal and judicial institutions was a dominated thread in participant narratives. Many described Albanian institutions as corrupt, unreliable or essentially unchanged from their authoritarian roots. While older generations transmitted fear of the state, younger participants expressed indifference or cynicism, often portraying institutions as unworthy of respect or engagement.

> "Everytime I hear about the courts or the police, it's always about corruption. People know that justice depends on money or connections. My father tells me that during communism, there was order and the law was applied the same for everyone." (Female, 25, Sarandë)

> "Institutions feel fake. They exist on paper, but they don't work for ordinary people. My parents used to warn me to never trust the police, because in communism they were watching you. Now they say the same thing, but for a different reason. Because they are corrupt." (Male, 23, Lezhë)

These accounts reflect a deep continuity of mistrust, from authoritarian control in the past to corruption in the present. For participants, institutions were less sources of justice than symbols of continuing betrayal, reinforcing disengagement and skepticism toward reforms.

SUBTHEME 2: *Inherited Fear and Caution*

Even though participants were born after the fall of communism, many described carrying a residual sense of fear and self-censorship. This inherited caution was not based on direct experience, but rather absorbed from family warnings, silences and cultural expressions of

distrust. It manifested in daily life as lowered voices, avoidance of political conversations or reluctance to express personal views openly.

> "My mother always tells me that we shouldn't talk too much or trust people with our opinions. She grew up in communism, but I notice I do the same, even though I wasn't born then. For example, I never post my real opinions about politics online. Rationally, I know it's safe, but emotionally I feel like I'm being monitored." (Female, 20, Elbasan)
>
> "I catch myself whispering when I talk about politics in public places. Nobody told me to do it, it just feels natural. I think that when my grandmother told us that walls have ears too, we got shaped by that phrase. It is hard to get rid of instincts." (Male, 28, Durrës)
>
> "Growing up, my parents always avoided political conversations. And now sometimes I hold back my opinion, because it feels unsafe to speak." (Female, 27, Korçë)

These narratives show how fear has been transmitted intergenerationally, shifting from a rational survival strategy under dictatorship to an unconscious caution in the present. Even in the absence of surveillance, participants described acting as if they were still being watched, suggesting the long shadow of authoritarianism over democratic life.

SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

SUBTHEME 1: *Moral Ambiguity and Distorted Values*

A recurring theme in participant accounts was the difficulty of developing a clear moral framework in a society where the past is silenced or distorted. Young people described confusion over what counts as "right" or "wrong", noting that family narratives often mixed nostalgia with trauma, and institutions modeled inconsistency rather than fairness. This ambiguity has created a moral environment where rules feel negotiable and justice appears relative.

> "When I ask my parents about communism, sometimes they say it was horrible, and other times they say that at least people had respect for each other. I don't know what to believe. If they can't decide was it good or bad, how can I? That's why I don't really trust institutions when they say they are fighting for justice, because justice itself feels like a word without a meaning." (Male, 22, Berat)
>
> "Growing up, I learned two sets of rules. The official ones like laws and school regulations, and the unofficial ones like how to avoid trouble or how to keep quiet. Sometimes the unofficial rules work better than the official ones. That makes me question if the laws are actually there to be followed or just to be broken if you know the right people." (Male, 23, Gjirokastër)

These accounts suggest that moral ambiguity is not just an intellectual dilemma but a lived psychological state. When young Albanians internalize contradictory stories and observe inconsistent institutions, they come to see morality as flexible, situational and unreliable.

SUBTHEME 2: *Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma*

Although most participants never directly experienced state violence, their accounts revealed signs of inherited trauma, transmitted through family narratives, silences, and emotional climates. This transmission often occurred less through explicit storytelling than through affective atmospheres, fear in a parent's tone, caution in their advice, or the weight of unspoken topics. In psychological terms, the trauma of one generation is preserved in the next through unconscious communication, modeling of defensive patterns, and unresolved mourning.

> "My father never talks about his uncle who disappeared, but I can see it in his face whenever someone mentions the dictatorship. It's like a shadow pass over him. Even though he never explains, I feel that sadness, and I think it became part of me too. I can't explain it rationally, but I carry emotions that aren't fully mine." (Female, 21, Tirana)
>
> "My mother avoids the topic, but the way she avoids it tells me everything. When I ask, she just says, 'It's better not to know.' That silence is heavy. It makes me anxious without knowing why, like there's something dangerous in knowledge itself. I think that fear transferred directly into me, because I also hesitate to ask questions." (Male, 25, Berat)
>
> "In my family, communism is never discussed, but we live as if it still exists. My grandmother still lowers her voice when she speaks about politics, and I find myself doing the same. It's not a conscious decision — it's automatic. That's how trauma passes on: not only in stories, but in behaviors you copy without realizing it." (Female, 23, Durrës)

These accounts illustrate how trauma operates beyond explicit memory, embedding itself in relational patterns, silences, and bodily habits. The absence of transitional justice and public acknowledgment has left families to transmit unresolved wounds privately, often unconsciously. As a result, youth internalize not only stories of fear but also the defense mechanisms, silence, avoidance, caution, that once ensured survival, perpetuating cycles of psychological constraint.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how young Albanians (18–30) navigate the psychological legacy of authoritarianism, with particular attention to the defense mechanisms and inherited silences shaping their relationship to history and institutions. Three interlinked dynamics emerged: the persistence of unconscious defenses, the erosion of institutional trust, and the long-

term social-psychological consequences of trauma transmission. These findings underscore how unresolved collective trauma continues to structure the moral and political landscape of post-totalitarian Albania.

Participants' reliance on denial, rationalization, idealization, detachment, and identification with authority illustrates how classic defense mechanisms have migrated from individual psychology into collective discourse.[27, 28] Instead of confronting painful truths about the regime's violence, many participants reframed the past as "better times," detached through humor, or idealized authoritarian order. Psychologically, these defenses reduce anxiety and preserve family cohesion, but they also distort moral reasoning by obscuring the boundary between victim and perpetrator, justice and repression.[29] In line with psychodynamic theories of collective trauma, the Albanian case demonstrates how avoidance defenses at the micro level consolidate into national myths that prevent reconciliation.

The deep mistrust expressed toward legal and political institutions reflects not only present-day corruption but also the transgenerational residue of authoritarian fear. Families transmitted caution through silence, whispered warnings, and avoidance of political speech, producing what Hirsch (2012) calls "postmemory", an inheritance of affect more than fact.[30] From a psychological standpoint, this explains why mistrust persists even in the absence of direct repression: institutions are not merely judged on present performance but are symbolically linked to the persecutory state of the past. In psychodynamic terms, the Albanian state functions as a "transference object", onto which unresolved feelings of fear and betrayal are projected.

The study also highlights how inherited silence undermines the formation of a coherent moral identity among youth. Mixed family narratives, simultaneously condemning and praising the communist past, create what Erikson (1968) described as identity diffusion, where moral frameworks are unstable and contingent. This ambiguity facilitates rationalization of corruption ("everyone does it") and fosters disengagement from civic life. Without clear moral boundaries, participants often defaulted to relativism, suggesting that morality is context-dependent rather than principled. From a developmental psychology lens, this raises concerns about arrested moral development at the level of entire generations.[31]

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[27] Freud, A. (1936). The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence. In The Writings of Anna Freud (Vol. 2, pp. 3–191). New York, NY: International Universities Press.

[28] Vaillant, G. E. (1992). Ego Mechanisms of Defense: A Guide for Clinicians and Researchers. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.

[29] Volkan, Vamik. (2001). Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity. Group Analysis. 34. 79-97. 10.1177/05333160122077730.

[30] Marianne Hirsch; The Generation of Postmemory. Poetics Today 1 March 2008; 29 (1): 103–128. doi: https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019

[31] Kohlberg, L. (1981) The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice. Harper & Row, New York.

The prevalence of emotional detachment and apathy reveals how unresolved trauma manifests as blunted affect in descendants. Rather than confronting feelings of anger or grief, youth regulate distress through indifference, sarcasm, or disengagement. Clinically, this resembles avoidant coping and emotional numbing, common in intergenerational trauma contexts.[32] While adaptive in shielding individuals from overwhelming affect, such detachment also weakens collective capacity for outrage against injustice, leaving institutional corruption and historical falsifications unchallenged. This defense, therefore, carries significant social costs, normalizing apathy as a cultural stance.

Finally, the findings affirm theories of intergenerational trauma transmission.[33] Trauma was not transmitted primarily through explicit storytelling but through silence, affective atmospheres, and embodied habits (e.g., whispering about politics, lowering one's voice, avoiding questions). This mode of transmission bypasses conscious reflection, embedding trauma in relational patterns. Participants described "carrying emotions that are not mine," which reflects what psychoanalysts call projective identification: unprocessed parental trauma unconsciously deposited into children. The absence of transitional justice and public acknowledgment has intensified this phenomenon, leaving families to process, or suppress, trauma in isolation.

From a psychological perspective, the findings highlight three urgent needs: Trauma-informed education that confronts historical violence directly, helping youth distinguish between rationalization and reality institutional reforms that address not only corruption but also symbolic legacies of distrust by fostering transparency and public acknowledgment of past crimes; community-based interventions that provide safe spaces for intergenerational dialogue, breaking cycles of silence and transmitting adaptive coping strategies rather than defensive avoidance.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the psychological legacy of post-totalitarian Albania, focusing on how collective trauma and inherited silence shape youth perceptions, moral reasoning, and trust in institutions. Through analysis of 30 semi-structured interviews, it became clear that the psychological imprint of the communist era persists in multiple interrelated ways.

First, participants exhibited a range of defense mechanisms, including denial, rationalization, idealization, emotional detachment, and identification with authority. These mechanisms operate both to protect individuals from confronting the painful realities of the past and to maintain family and cultural cohesion. Psychologically, they illustrate how intergenerational

[32] Danieli, Y. (Ed.). (1998). International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma. Plenum Press. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4757-5567-1 .

[33] Faimberg, H. (2005). The Telescoping of Generations: Listening to the Narcissistic Links Between Generations (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203086988

trauma manifests not only as anxiety or fear but as adaptive yet potentially maladaptive coping strategies that influence moral reasoning and social engagement.

Second, the findings revealed pervasive institutional mistrust and inherited caution. Despite living in a democratic context, participants internalized fears of state surveillance, corruption, and instability. These inherited attitudes function as unconscious extensions of trauma, shaping relational patterns with authorities and reinforcing cycles of skepticism and disengagement. From a psychological perspective, this highlights the enduring impact of transgenerational transmission of fear, where emotional and behavioral patterns persist even in the absence of direct exposure to repression.

Third, the study identified profound social and psychological consequences, including moral ambiguity, defensive indifference, and intergenerational trauma. Young Albanians often struggle to establish stable ethical frameworks, regulating emotional engagement through detachment and protective apathy. These findings underscore the ways that unresolved historical trauma can hinder both individual psychological development and collective social functioning, creating barriers to civic engagement, trust, and reconciliation.

Taken together, the study demonstrates that the effects of totalitarianism extend far beyond immediate victims, shaping the emotional, moral, and social landscapes of subsequent generations. From a psychological standpoint, this research underscores the need for trauma-informed interventions in education, community engagement, and policy. Addressing inherited silence, fostering emotional awareness, and promoting moral clarity are essential steps toward breaking cycles of avoidance, disengagement, and distrust.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of collective psychodynamics in post-authoritarian societies, offering both theoretical insight and practical guidance. By situating defense mechanisms, institutional mistrust, and intergenerational trauma within a coherent psychological framework, it provides a foundation for interventions aimed at restoring moral coherence, emotional processing, and trust in institutions, crucial components for the long-term resilience of Albanian society.

LIMITATIONS

While this study offers important insights into the psychological consequences of Albania's post-totalitarian legacy, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the sample of 30 young adults provided a rich qualitative dataset, it was self-selected, potentially overrepresenting individuals with stronger interest in history or politics. Second, the data collection method, interviews submitted via Word documents through Google Forms may have constrained depth and spontaneity compared to in-person or live digital interviews. Third, the study's focus on youth aged 18–30 limits generalizability to older or younger populations, whose experiences of intergenerational trauma and institutional mistrust may differ. Finally, while efforts were made to preserve anonymity, some participants may have moderated their responses due to perceived risks of disclosure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study highlight several avenues for intervention and future research. Trauma-informed education is essential, incorporating historically accurate curricula that address the human consequences of the communist era while fostering critical reflection and emotional processing. Such education would help young Albanians differentiate between inherited narratives and their own moral reasoning, promoting psychological resilience. At the community level, programs that facilitate intergenerational dialogue could allow families to discuss past traumas safely, while counseling or group workshops could support adaptive coping strategies for emotional detachment, moral ambiguity, and inherited fear. On an institutional level, transparency and acknowledgment of past abuses are crucial to rebuilding trust in legal and political systems, and insights from psychological research can inform reforms that resonate with citizens' lived experiences. Future research should broaden the focus to include older generations, exploring the interaction between direct experience and inherited trauma, and integrate quantitative measures of intergenerational trauma, moral reasoning, and institutional trust to complement qualitative insights. Additionally, investigating the role of media, social networks, and digital storytelling in shaping collective memory and psychological defenses could provide further guidance for both policy and practice. Together, these measures can contribute to breaking cycles of avoidance, disengagement, and mistrust, fostering emotional, moral, and social resilience in post-totalitarian Albanian society.

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CODE-SWITCHING AMONG GREEK-ALBANIAN RETURNEE FAMILIES: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines code-switching among Albanian returnee families from Greece, with a focus on how bilingual speakers alternate between Albanian and Greek in everyday communication. Drawing on data from 60 participants aged 16–50, with varying durations of residence in Greece, the research investigates patterns of language use, frequency of switching, and underlying motivations. Using a structured questionnaire, the study combines quantitative data on switching frequency and contexts with qualitative insights derived from participants' reflections and examples. The findings indicate that code-switching is widespread, particularly in informal settings such as family interactions, peer groups, and online communication. Greek is predominantly associated with emotional or intimate expression, while Albanian is favored in public and formal situations. Key motivations for switching include habitual use, emotional resonance, lexical gaps, and pragmatic adaptation to interlocutors. Notably, even participants with relatively short stays in Greece exhibited code-switching behaviors, pointing to the depth of linguistic and cultural influence. The analysis suggests that code-switching functions not only as a communicative strategy but also as a means of identity negotiation, allowing returnees to navigate between two cultural worlds. The study concludes that bilingual practices among returnees should not be viewed as linguistic interference but as complex expressions of lived experience, underscoring the need for more inclusive educational and social policies in Albania.

Keywords: *Albanian migration; returnees; bilingualism; code-switching; sociolinguistics; identity; translanguaging; Greece-Albania*

INTRODUCTION

Migration has been one of the most defining processes shaping Albanian society over the past three decades. After the collapse of the communist regime in the early 1990s, Greece emerged as the primary destination for Albanian migrants. According to the 2011 national

census, 480,851 Albanian citizens were permanently resident in the country, though this figure likely excludes significant numbers of undocumented Albanian migrants. These statistics underscore the historical role of Greece, alongside Italy, as one of the two principal poles of Albanian migration since the early 1990s. For many families, return migration has added yet another dimension, raising questions about how language repertoires acquired abroad are recontextualized upon reintegration into Albanian society.

Within the broader migration trajectory, language stands out as one of the most salient markers of experience. Research demonstrates that children born or raised in Greece often developed balanced bilingualism or, in many cases, Greek-dominant repertoires as a result of sustained exposure to Greek educational and social environments (Gogonas 2009; Androulakis et al. 2018). Parents, even when primarily Albanian-speaking, frequently incorporated Greek lexical items and expressions into everyday speech, a practice that aligns with well-documented patterns of code-switching and bilingual interaction described in sociolinguistic research (Gardner-Chloros 2009; Chatzidaki and Maligkoudi 2013).

Upon to Albania, bilingual repertoires among former migrants are not completely discarded but rather reintegrated and adapted to the new sociolinguistic environment, where Albanian once again functions as the dominant societal language (Vathi, Duci, and Dhembo 2016; Piller 2016). This adaptation process reflects both communicative necessity and social negotiation, as returnees navigate between linguistic practices acquired abroad and the monolingual expectations of Albanian society. Nevertheless, Greek often retains symbolic and affective significance, serving as a marker of migration history while simultaneously carrying undertones of stigma or linguistic insecurity. Such ambivalence reflects enduring language ideologies within Albanian public discourse and the emotional associations migrants attach to their past experiences in Greece (Chatzidaki and Maligkoudi 2012; Piller 2016).

Return migration to Albania has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years, particularly following the major waves of returnees triggered by the 2008 economic crisis in Greece (Carletto, Davis, and Stampini 2005; Labrianidis and Hatziprokopiou 2010; Vullnetari 2010). Existing studies emphasize the socio-economic challenges of reintegration, such as employment, housing, and social inclusion, yet the linguistic and identity dimensions of return have remained comparatively underexplored. In this light, examining how bilingual repertoires are renegotiated upon return provides not only a sociolinguistic lens but also a broader understanding of how identity, belonging, and adaptation are reconstructed in post-migration contexts.

Code-switching, defined as the alternation between two or more languages within a single conversation, utterance, or discourse, has been extensively analyzed in sociolinguistic research (Gumperz 1982; Myers-Scotton 1993). It is widely recognized as a systematic and socially meaningful practice, rather than a random or deficient one, through which bilingual speakers negotiate meaning, identity, and interpersonal relations. In migratory contexts, code-switching frequently serves both pragmatic and symbolic purposes, functioning as a marker of intimacy, solidarity, and emotional expressiveness (Gardner-Chloros 2009; Grosjean 2010). Most studies on Albanian bilingualism, however, have primarily focused on

integration in host societies such as Greece and Italy (Hatzidaki 2012), leaving comparatively little exploration of how these bilingual practices are maintained or transformed after migrants' return to Albania.

This paper aims to address that gap by focusing on the code-switching practices of Albanian families who have returned from Greece. Specifically, it investigates (a) the frequency and contexts in which code-switching occurs, (b) the motivations underlying language alternation, and (c) the role of bilingual practices in identity negotiation in post-migration contexts. The study draws on data collected from 60 returnees aged 16 to 50, with varying lengths of residence in Greece, combining quantitative measures (frequency and context of switching) with qualitative insights (narratives and examples from participants).

This paper addresses that gap by focusing on the code-switching practices of Albanian families who have returned from Greece. It investigates three central questions: (a) in which contexts and with what frequency does code-switching occur, (b) what motivations underlie language alternation, and (c) how do bilingual practices contribute to identity negotiation in post-migration contexts. Data were collected from 60 returnees aged 16 to 50 with varying lengths of residence in Greece, using a combination of quantitative measures (frequency and context of switching) and qualitative insights (narratives and examples provided by participants.

The findings demonstrate that code-switching constitutes an integral and recurrent aspect of everyday communication among Albanian returnees, particularly within informal settings such as family conversations, peer interactions, and digital communication platforms. Greek tends to be employed for emotional, affective, or intimate expression, whereas Albanian maintains its predominance in formal, institutional, and public domains. These results indicate that code-switching should not be interpreted as linguistic interference, but rather as a complex, adaptive practice through which speakers navigate the intertwined dimensions of their bilingual and bicultural experience.

By illuminating these dynamics, the study contributes to the broader field of sociolinguistics by showing how return migration actively reshapes bilingual repertoires and communicative behavior. Beyond its theoretical relevance, the research also carries applied implications: recognizing the widespread presence and functional value of code-switching may guide the development of more inclusive linguistic, educational, and social policies in Albania, where the realities of returnees often remain insufficiently acknowledged. Ultimately, this study posits that bilingualism among returnees represents not a deviation from linguistic norms, but a dynamic expression of cultural hybridity, emotional depth, and communicative adaptability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon of code-switching has long served as a central analytical lens in sociolinguistics for understanding bilingual and multilingual practices. Foundational studies, beginning with Gumperz (1982), conceptualized code-switching as a communicative strategy

through which bilingual speakers signal social meanings, delineate conversational boundaries, and construct solidarity. Poplack's (2009) seminal research introduced a grammatical framework for analyzing the structural constraints of language alternation, whereas Myers-Scotton's (1993) *Markedness Model* illuminated the social motivations and identity negotiations underlying linguistic choices. Building upon these early frameworks, subsequent scholarship, most notably Auer (1998) and Gardner-Chloros (2009), has reinterpreted code-switching as a dynamic, context-dependent resource for expressing identity, emotional resonance, and transnational belonging, rather than as a form of linguistic interference.

Within bilingual communities, code-switching performs a range of pragmatic and social functions. Speakers often alternate between languages to clarify meaning, express emotions, mitigate directives, or signal intimacy and group belonging (Grosjean 2010). These functions become particularly salient in migrant and transnational settings, where linguistic choice carries both communicative utility and symbolic value. As Fishman (2001) argues, language is deeply intertwined with questions of identity and belonging, since bilingual individuals must continuously negotiate the balance between maintaining their heritage language and adapting to the dominant linguistic norms of their surrounding society.

The case of Albanian migration to Greece offers a particularly insightful context for examining the dynamics of bilingualism and language contact. Since the early 1990s, over half a million Albanians have migrated to Greece, forming the country's largest immigrant community (Adamczyk 2009). Although many have since returned to Albania, exposure to the Greek language, especially among children, has been extensive, resulting in balanced or, in many cases, Greek-dominant bilingualism. Empirical studies further reveal that returnees frequently continue to use Greek expressions and structures in daily interactions even after reintegration in Albania, underscoring the enduring linguistic and cultural imprint of migration (Gogonas 2009; Hatzidaki 2015).

Importantly, code-switching among Albanian–Greek bilinguals extends beyond mere linguistic transfer, functioning instead as a process of identity negotiation and social positioning. Gogonas (2010) demonstrates that the use of Greek among Albanian adolescents in Greece often indexes modernity, upward mobility, and emotional intimacy, while the continued use of Albanian maintains national identification and public affiliation. This dual orientation resonates with broader studies of transnational families, where alternating between languages serves as both an emotional bridge and a form of pragmatic adaptation to shifting sociocultural contexts (Wei 2005). For returnee families in Albania, however, these bilingual practices undergo recontextualization within a predominantly monolingual environment, where Greek can acquire stigmatized or ambivalent meanings, often linked to migration histories and social perceptions of linguistic legitimacy.

Despite a substantial body of research on Albanian migration to Greece, a significant gap persists regarding the linguistic practices of returnees in Albania. Existing scholarship has primarily examined integration processes abroad, the intergenerational transmission

of Albanian within diaspora communities, and the symbolic functions of Greek in the construction of immigrant identity (Kasimis et al. 2005; Gogonas 2010). Yet, very few studies have investigated how bilingual repertoires are maintained, transformed, or re-evaluated when migrant families resettle in Albania, bringing with them language practices shaped by migration experiences. It is within this underexplored sociolinguistic context that the present study is situated, aiming to illuminate how code-switching operates within returnee households and how it contributes simultaneously to everyday communication and to the reconstruction of post-migration identities.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to better capture the complexity of code-switching practices among Albanian returnees from Greece. A structured questionnaire was administered to 60 participants, collecting demographic information along with self-reported data on linguistic behavior. The instrument was adapted from established sociolinguistic tools commonly employed in bilingualism research, with a particular emphasis on language choice, switching frequency, communicative contexts, motivations, and attitudes toward bilingualism.

Participants

The sample consisted of 60 bilingual respondents (32 female, 28 male) aged between 16 and 50 years. The age distribution included 12 participants aged 16–20, 20 aged 21–30, 9 aged 31–40, and 19 aged 41 and above. Regarding migration history, 39 participants had resided in Greece for more than ten years, 7 between five and ten years, and 8 for less than five years, while 6 had never lived in Greece but reported exposure to the language through family networks.

Most respondents were based in urban centers such as Tirana, Saranda, Vlora, Durrës, and Gjirokastër, reflecting key returnee communities in Albania. This diverse profile allowed for the exploration of generational and experiential differences in bilingual practices.

Instruments

The questionnaire was divided into sections covering: (1) Demographics (age, gender, city of residence, years spent in Greece); (2) Language use (preferred language at home, self-assessment of proficiency in Albanian and Greek); (3) Code-switching practices (frequency, contexts such as family, peers, workplace, online interactions); (4) Motivations for switching (lexical gaps, emotional expression, adaptation to interlocutors, habit); (5) Identity and attitudes (perceptions of bilingualism, its role in identity, acceptance in schools, media, and institutions).

Questions were primarily closed-choice (Likert-type scales and frequency measures), complemented by open-ended prompts allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences. The instrument consisted of approximately 25 items in total: around 20 closed-choice questions (Likert-type scales, frequency measures, and multiple-choice items) and 5 open-ended prompts. For example, a closed question asked: *"How often do you switch between Albanian and Greek in family conversations?"* (options: often, sometimes, rarely, never), while an open-ended question invited elaboration: *"Can you give an example of a situation where you felt switching was necessary or natural?"*

This combination of quantitative and qualitative items ensured both comparability across respondents and the collection of richer narrative insights.

Data Collection

Fieldwork was conducted in spring 2025 through online surveys. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and anonymity was guaranteed. All participants were briefed on the academic and non-commercial purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to map patterns of language choice, switching frequency, and communicative context. Results were expressed as percentage distributions and, where relevant, cross-tabulated (e.g., years of residence in Greece versus switching frequency). Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed thematically, with particular attention to the symbolic and emotional dimensions of code-switching. Direct participant quotations were included to illustrate recurring themes and to give voice to individual experiences.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, reliance on self-reported data may have led some participants to under- or overestimate their actual practices. Second, the sample size (N=60), though adequate for exploratory analysis, remains limited and geographically concentrated in southern and urban Albania, restricting the generalizability of findings. Third, the research is **cross-sectional**, capturing a single moment in time and not longitudinal developments. Despite these constraints, the study provides valuable insight into the everyday bilingual practices of returnees, offering a balanced view between statistical patterns and individual perspectives.

FINDINGS / RESULTS

Sociodemographic Profile

The study sample comprised 60 participants, with a relatively balanced gender distribution (32 females and 28 males). Age-wise, younger participants (16–30 years) represented slightly more than half of the respondents (53%), while older groups (31–40 and 41+) accounted for the remainder. With regard to migration history, the vast majority (65%) reported having lived in Greece for more than ten years, underscoring an extensive and sustained bilingual exposure. A smaller proportion had lived in Greece for shorter periods (12% for 5–10 years; 13% for fewer than 5 years), while a minority (10%) had never resided in Greece but were nonetheless exposed to the language through family networks. This distribution provides a strong foundation for analyzing both generational differences and the impact of long-term residence abroad on linguistic practices.

Table 1 offers a concise overview of participants' demographic and migration background, allowing for quick reference to key variables such as gender, age, and years of residence in Greece. Figure 1 complements this information by visually highlighting the predominance of younger participants and the significant share of long-term returnees. Together, the table and figure not only document the diversity of the sample but also contextualize the linguistic repertoires examined in subsequent sections.

Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of participants

Category	Subcategory	N	%
Gender	Female	32	53%
	Male	28	47%
Age group	16–20	12	20%
	21–30	20	33%
	31–40	9	15%
	41+	19	32%
Years in Greece	<5 years	8	13%
	5–10 years	7	12%
	>10 years	39	65%
	Never	6	10%

Language Practices at Home

Home language use among returnees reveals a diverse but asymmetric pattern. A plurality of participants (42%) reported speaking primarily Albanian at home, confirming the dominant role of the national language in domestic and intergenerational communication. At the same time, one-quarter of respondents (25%) stated that Greek was their main home

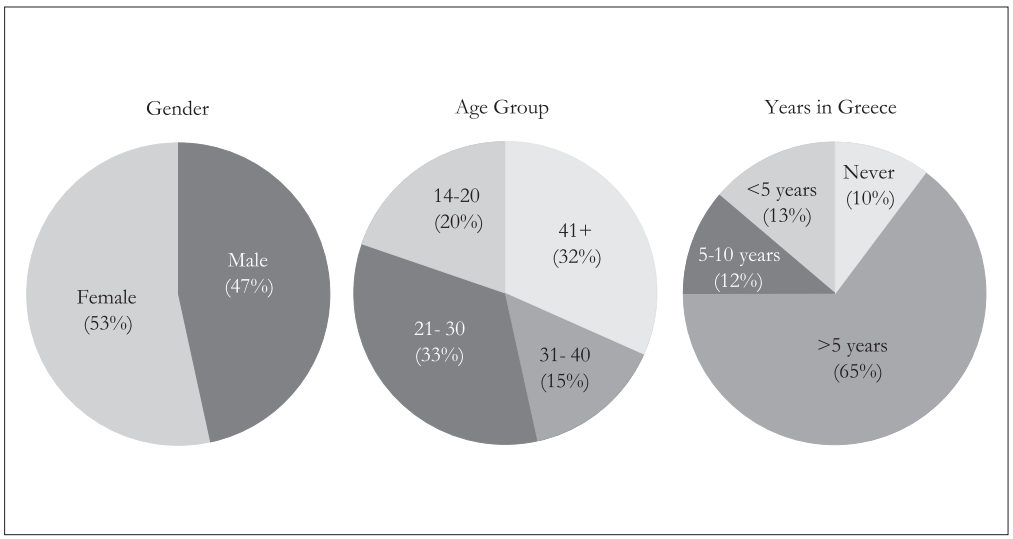


Figure 1. *Sociodemographic profile of participants*

language, reflecting the strong impact of prolonged migration and family ties. Notably, nearly one in four participants (23%) reported using both languages equally, pointing to stable forms of bilingualism within the household. A smaller group (10%) indicated that language choice "depends on the situation," highlighting the flexible and context-driven nature of bilingual practices.

Table 2 provides a clear breakdown of the main language spoken at home, while Figure 2 visualizes these proportions in an accessible way. The predominance of Albanian is evident, but the significant presence of Greek and balanced bilingual practices demonstrates that home remains a critical site of language maintenance and negotiation. The "depends" category further illustrates the dynamic character of bilingualism, where speakers adjust language use according to interlocutors, topics, or emotional nuance. Together, the table and figure highlight how returnee households function as multilingual spaces rather than monolingual ones, shaping the everyday reality of code-switching.

Table 2. Main Language Spoken at Home

Language Practice	N	%
Albanian	25	42%
Greek	15	25%
Both equally	14	23%
Depends on the situation	6	10%
Total	60	100%

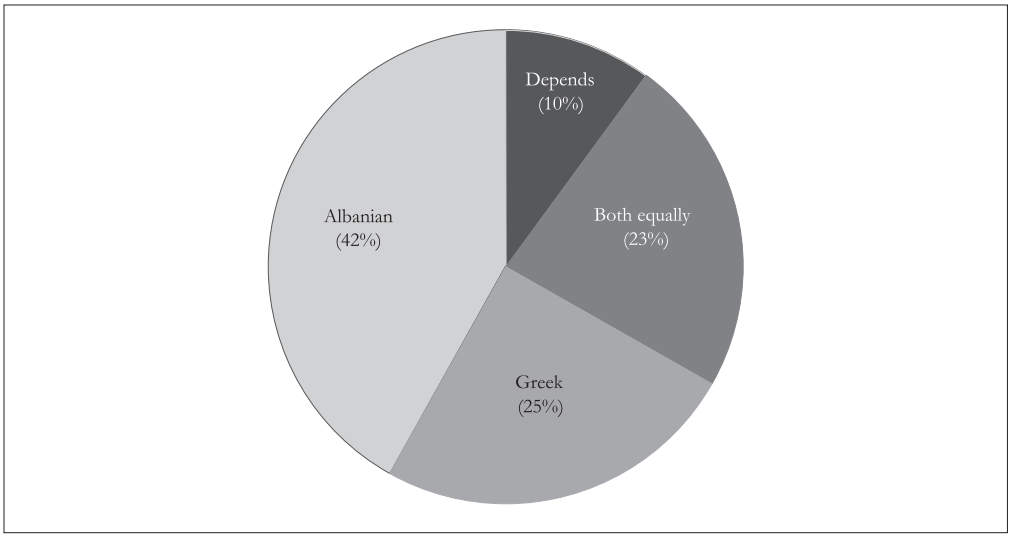


Figure 2. *Main Language Spoken at Hom*

Code-Switching Patterns

The data indicate that code-switching constitutes a frequent and normalized aspect of participants' everyday communication. Two-thirds of respondents (67%) reported switching languages often, while an additional 20% said they did so sometimes. Only a small minority stated that they rarely (7%) or never (7%) code-switched. These figures underline that bilingual alternation is not marginal but rather a routine practice within this community.

Contexts of switching further highlight its social and emotional embeddedness. Participants most frequently reported code-switching within family conversations and interactions with peers, followed by online communication and workplace exchanges. These domains reveal both pragmatic motivations (accommodating interlocutors) and affective functions (expressing intimacy or emotional nuance), with Greek often employed for emotional or emphatic expression.

Table 3 presents the frequency of code-switching in numerical terms, showing a clear predominance of habitual switchers. Figure 3 complements this by visually demonstrating the steep contrast between frequent switchers and those who rarely or never engage in the practice. Together, they make evident that code-switching is deeply integrated into returnees' communicative repertoire, especially in informal and relational contexts. The combination of quantitative data and contextual detail emphasizes both the regularity and the multifunctional value of bilingual alternation.

Table 3. Frequency of Code-Switching among Participants

Frequency	N	%
Often	40	67%
Sometimes	12	20%
Rarely	4	7%
Never	4	7%
Total	60	100%

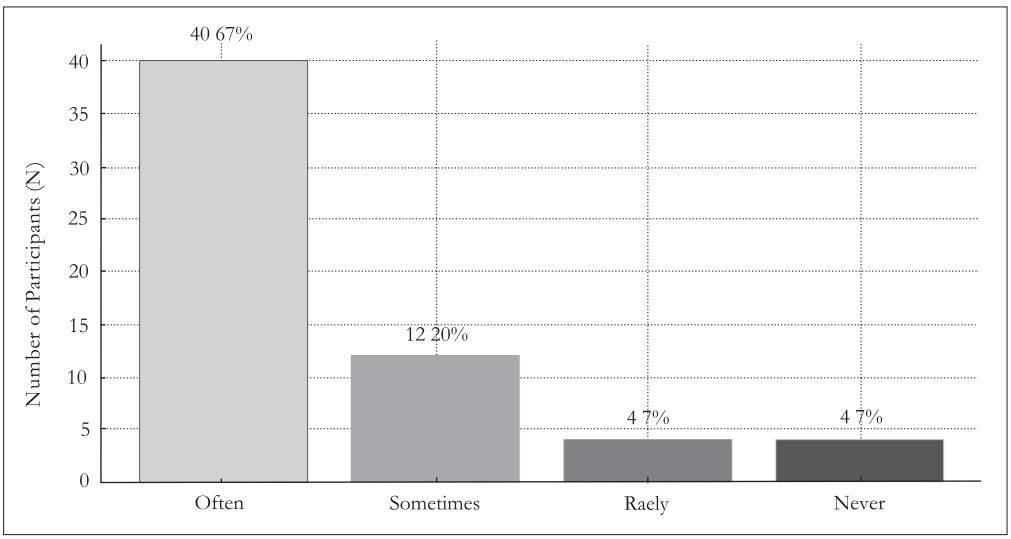


Figure 3. *Frequency of Code-Switching among Participants*

Motivations

The distribution of motivations for code-switching highlights a clear hierarchy of functions. The most frequently cited reason was emotional expression (18 participants, 30%), with many respondents reporting that Greek was the preferred choice when conveying strong emotions such as anger, affection, or emphasis. Lexical gaps were the second most common motivation (15 participants, 25%), where speakers filled missing vocabulary in Albanian with Greek equivalents. Adaptation to interlocutors accounted for 23% (14 participants), reflecting the importance of adjusting language use according to the audience, for instance, using Albanian with parents and Greek with peers. Finally, habitual use was mentioned by 22% (13 participants), with participants emphasizing that switching often occurs unconsciously due to long-term bilingual exposure.

Together, these motivations underscore that code-switching is both pragmatically functional (filling lexical gaps, adapting to interlocutors) and symbolically expressive (emotional nuance, identity performance).

Table 4 documents the range of motivations with qualitative examples, providing insight into the ways speakers themselves conceptualize switching. Figure 4 further illustrates the distribution, showing that while emotional expression stands out as the strongest driver, the other three categories remain closely comparable in frequency. This balance indicates that no single factor dominates; rather, code-switching among returnees emerges as a multifaceted practice shaped by both communicative necessity and social-emotional dynamics.

Table 4. Motivations for Code-Switching

Motivation	Description	Example use/context
Lexical gaps	Missing a word in one language	"S'e dija fjalën në shqip, përdora greqisht." - "I didn't know the word in Albanian, so I used Greek."
Emotional expression	Greek linked to expressing feelings	"Kur dua të shpreh inat apo dashuri, përdor greqishten." - "When I want to express anger or affection, I use Greek."
Adaptation to interlocutors	Switching depending on who is present	"Flas shqip me prindërit, greqisht me shokët." - "I speak Albanian with my parents and Greek with my friends."
Habitual use	Unconscious switching due to long-term bilingual exposure	"Nuk e vë re fare, më vjen natyrshëm." - "I don't even notice it; it comes naturally."

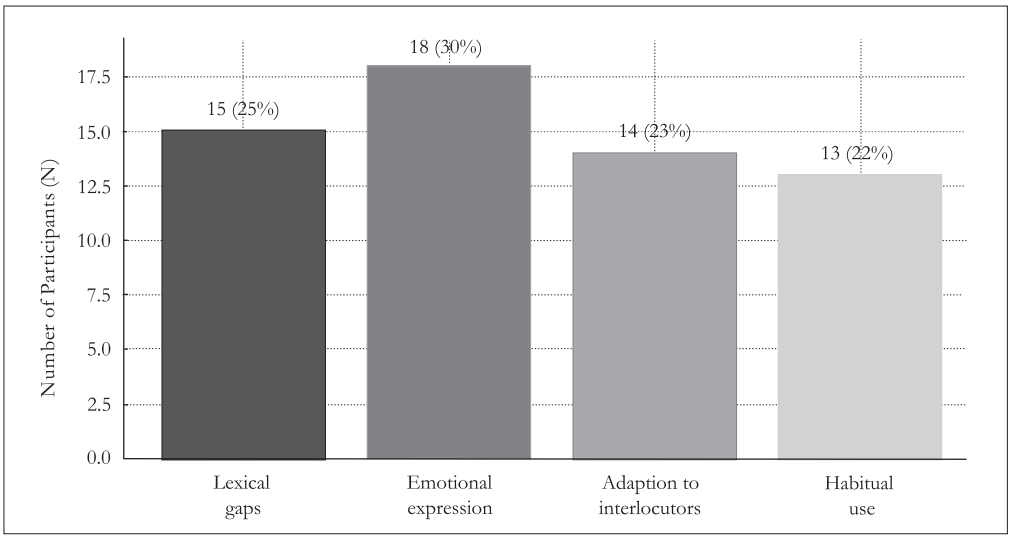


Figure 4. *Motivations for Code-Switching*

Identity and Attitudes

The findings reveal that identity perceptions among returnees are diverse. A majority of participants (32, or 53%) reported that code-switching does not undermine their self-concept, affirming that they maintain a clear sense of identity. However, 12 participants (20%) described themselves as multicultural, reflecting a positive embrace of hybridity, while 10 (17%) felt "in-between," suggesting ambivalence and a sense of tension in navigating two linguistic worlds. A small group (6, 10%) remained unspecified. These patterns confirm that bilingualism is not experienced uniformly: while for many it consolidates identity, for others it introduces ambiguity.

Attitudes toward the public acceptance of code-switching in formal domains were more contested. While 25 participants (42%) expressed support for recognition of mixed speech in schools, media, and institutions, 20 (33%) opposed it, and 15 (25%) were uncertain. This ambivalence reflects broader societal ideologies in Albania, where monolingual norms remain strong and the use of Greek may still carry migration-related stigma.

Table 5a provides a breakdown of identity perceptions, confirming that a majority claim a stable identity despite bilingualism, while minorities express multicultural or hybrid positions. Table 5b highlights the polarized attitudes toward institutional recognition of code-switching.

Figure 5a (pie chart) vividly illustrates the predominance of the "clear identity" category, yet also shows that nearly 40% of participants fall into multicultural or in-between positions. Figure 5b (bar chart) demonstrates the split regarding institutional acceptance, underlining that code-switching, while normalized in private life, remains contested in public domains.

Together, these results show that identity is simultaneously stabilized and challenged by bilingual practices, and that public legitimacy for code-switching remains an open debate in Albanian society.

Table 5a. Impact of Bilingualism on Identity

Identity perception	N	%
Clear identity	32	53%
Multicultural	12	20%
In-between	10	17%
Other/Unspecified	6	10%
Total	60	100%

Table 5b. Acceptance of Code-Switching in Institutions

Response	N	%
Yes	25	42%
No	20	33%
Not sure	15	25%
Total	60	100%

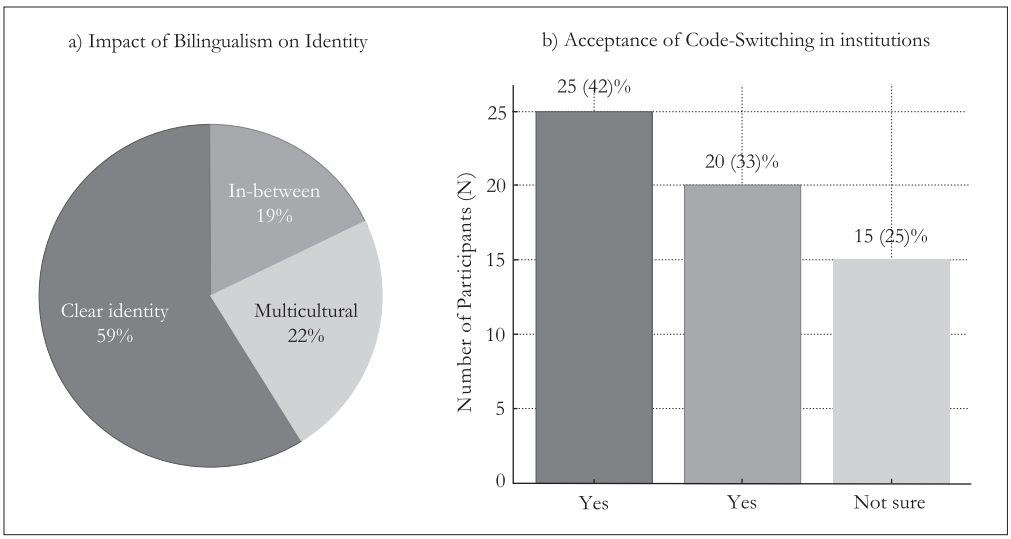


Figure 5. *Identity and Attitudes towards Code-Switcing*

Illustrative Examples

Beyond numerical distributions, participants' narratives reveal the lived experience of code-switching. For many, the practice was described as completely natural, embedded in daily speech and carried out without conscious awareness: *"Nuk e vë re kur ndodh – ndodh natyrshëm"* ("I don't notice when it happens - it happens naturally"). Others emphasized its expressive function, noting that switching enabled them to articulate emotions with greater precision and intensity: *"Më duket sikur shprehem më mirë"* ("I feel like I express myself better").

However, not all evaluations were positive. A minority of respondents articulated feelings of insecurity or stigma, perceiving mixed speech as a deviation from linguistic norms: *"Më duket sikur nuk flas pastër"* ("I feel like I don't speak 'clean'").

These contrasting perspectives illustrate the spectrum of attitudes toward bilingual practices: from normalization and pride in expressive potential, to discomfort linked with societal ideologies of linguistic "purity." Such tensions echo broader sociolinguistic findings that code-switching, while pragmatically useful and identity-affirming, may also be framed as socially marked or stigmatized (Gardner-Chloros 2009; Wei 2005).

Table 6 synthesizes these examples by categorizing them into three distinct attitudinal orientations: (a) Natural/Normal, emphasizing unconscious, routine use; (b) Expressive/Pride, highlighting emotional and communicative richness; (c) Insecurity/Stigma, reflecting concerns about linguistic legitimacy.

This qualitative evidence not only validates the statistical patterns observed but also underscores the emotional ambivalence of bilingual returnees.

Table 6. Illustrative Examples of Code-Switching Attitudes

Attitude type	Quote (origjinal)
Natural / Normal	"Nuk e vë re kur ndodh, ndodh natyrshëm" - "I don't notice when it happens, it happens naturally."
Expressive / Pride	"Më duket sikur shprehem më mirë" - "I feel like I express myself better."
Insecurity / Stigma	"Më duket sikur nuk flas pastër" - "I feel like I don't speak 'clean'."

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into the sociolinguistic realities of Albanian returnees from Greece. Code-switching emerges as a pervasive and normalized practice, particularly in informal domains such as family conversations, peer interactions, and online communication. This aligns with Grosjean's (2010) view of bilingualism as a dynamic repertoire, where speakers flexibly draw on multiple languages to maximize communicative effectiveness.

The motivations reported by participants-lexical gaps, emotional expression, adaptation to interlocutors, and habitual use-underscore that code-switching is neither random nor indicative of linguistic deficiency. Instead, it is a strategic resource, echoing Poplack's (2009) argument that switching follows patterned constraints, and Myers-Scotton's (1993) notion that language alternation reflects social choices. In particular, the frequent recourse to Greek for emotional intensity confirms earlier findings that migrant languages often become "languages of the heart" (Fishman 2001; Gardner-Chloros 2009).

At the same time, the attitudinal data reveal ambivalence. While many participants framed switching as natural and expressive, others described it as a source of insecurity, perceiving it as "impure speech." This mirrors broader ideologies in Albanian society, where linguistic purity is often valorized, and Greek carries associations with migration stigma. The divided responses on whether code-switching should be accepted in schools, media, and institutions reflect this tension: for some, bilingualism is a valuable resource; for others, it remains socially marginal.

Importantly, some participants explicitly noted that they did not even notice when switching occurred ("Nuk e vë re kur ndodh, ndodh natyrshëm" - "I don't notice when it happens, it happens naturally."). This resonates less with the classic notion of code-switching and more closely with the concept of translanguaging (García & Wei 2014), which views bilingual speech as an integrated system rather than the alternation of two distinct codes. From this perspective, Albanian-Greek bilinguals are not merely switching between bounded languages, but rather deploying their full linguistic repertoire fluidly to make meaning. This interpretive shift helps explain why many respondents framed their practices as "natural" or unconscious.

The findings also point to the identity implications of bilingual practices. A majority of respondents insisted that code-switching does not undermine their sense of identity, yet a significant minority reported feeling "in-between" or multicultural. This supports Gogonas'

(2010) argument that Albanian youth in Greece often associate Greek with modernity and social mobility, while Albanian anchors national belonging. Upon return, this dual orientation persists, situating individuals within a hybrid cultural space where linguistic choices embody both continuity and change.

From a broader sociolinguistic perspective, the study reinforces the argument advanced by Auer (1998) and Wei (2005) that code-switching is a form of identity performance as much as a communicative strategy. By also considering the translanguaging framework, it becomes evident that bilingual returnees are not just alternating between languages but enacting fluid communicative practices that reflect their lived experience of migration and return.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to filling a research gap on the linguistic practices of Albanian returnees, a group often overlooked in migration and sociolinguistic scholarship. By documenting their bilingual repertoires and code-switching practices, it highlights the resilience of Greek as a lived language even after return to Albania, and the ways in which bilingualism is both normalized and contested.

The findings suggest three key implications:

- Sociolinguistic: Code-switching among returnees is not interference but an adaptive practice that sustains communication and emotional expression.
- Identity Bilingualism is experienced as both a resource (enabling multicultural identities) and a challenge (when framed as stigma).
- Policy: Greater institutional recognition of bilingualism-in education, media, and public discourse-could help reduce stigma and harness the potential of returnees' linguistic capital.

Ultimately, the study argues that bilingualism in post-migration contexts should not be viewed as a threat to national linguistic purity but as a cultural asset, enriching the communicative repertoire of Albanian society. In doing so, it aligns with contemporary sociolinguistic scholarship that frames language alternation as a resource for navigating complex social worlds rather than as a problem to be corrected.

Looking ahead, further research should adopt longitudinal perspectives to trace how code-switching evolves across the life trajectories of returnees, particularly among children who re-enter the Albanian school system after years of exposure to Greek. Comparative studies with other major diasporic destinations, such as Italy, could also illuminate whether similar bilingual dynamics emerge in different host societies. Such work would deepen our understanding of how migration, return, and education interact in shaping the future of bilingualism in Albania.

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EXPLORING ALBANIA'S EFFORTS TO ENGAGE WITH THE PRINCIPLE OF RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT (R2P)

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ABSTRACT

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) emerged as a normative framework in response to the international community`s failure to prevent mass atrocities in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. Grounded in the principle that states bear the primary responsibility to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, R2P asserts that the international community shall take timely and decisive collective action when a state manifestly fails on this duty. Since its unanimous endorsement at the 2005 UN World Summit, various actors such as the UN, regional organizations, global networks and most importantly individual states as primary bearers of responsibility have undertaken efforts to operationalize the principle and uphold the promise of "never again". This year marks the 20th anniversary of R2P, yet scholarly analysis in Albania remains limited, with little to no systematic examination of how the country has implemented - or failed to implement - the principle within its multilateral engagements and its internal policy frameworks. This study addresses this gap by exploring Albania's engagement with R2P using the 3-pillar strategy for the implementation put forward by the UN Secretary-General in 2009. Particular attention is given to Albania`s membership on the UN Security Council (2022-2023), a period in which the country took visible position on issues related to atrocity prevention and accountability. We argue that the credibility of small states in advocating R2P internationally is ultimately reinforced when it is matched by consistent domestic action. The research reflects on potential avenues for advancing R2P-related initiatives during its current term at the UN Human Rights Council and concludes with recommendations for strengthening Albania's commitment to R2P.

Keywords: *Albania, Responsibility to Protect, Small States, Mass Atrocities Prevention, Diplomacy*

INTRODUCTION

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) emerged as a normative framework in response to the international community`s failure to prevent mass atrocities in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. The NATO bombing campaign during the Kosovo war in 1999, without prior authorization of UN Security Council, heightened fears of a new precedent for humanitarian intervention. These devastating events exposed the inadequacy of existing international norms for protecting civilian populations, challenging the international community to adopt stronger commitments. In 2005, at the UN World Summit, governments made a historic, unanimous commitment to prevent and halt genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and ethnic cleansing (often referred to as "mass atrocities" or "atrocity crimes" [1]) by unanimously endorsing the Responsibility to Protect principle in the Outcome Document.[2] The fact that the international community was able to agree upon this norm within five years of its articulation in the ICISS Report, bearing also in mind the controversies of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, speaks to the urgency and the will generated after the devasting events of the 1990s.

R2P rests on three pillars: Pillar I - the responsibility of states to protect their populations, Pillar II - the responsibility of the international community to assist states in fulfilling this duty, and Pillar III - the responsibility of the international community to take timely and decisive action when a state manifestly fails to protect its citizens.

Following its endorsement, the United Nations has worked to develop and institutionalize the norm at the policy level. Since 2009, the Secretary-General's annual reports, supported by the Joint Office of the Special Advisers, have framed the discussion and guided debates in the General Assembly. Over the years, the Security Council, General Assembly, and Human Rights Council have reinforced this process through resolutions that reaffirm the principles of the UN Charter and the duty to protect populations from mass atrocities.

The implementation of R2P has involved a mix of preventive efforts, diplomatic measures, and, in some cases, coercive actions authorized by the UN to protect vulnerable populations from mass atrocities. R2P has been referenced in resolutions concerning crises in countries such as the Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Libya, Mali, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. It has also informed thematic resolutions related to genocide prevention, conflict prevention, and the regulation of small arms and light weapons trade.

Despite the work done for greater clarity and articulation, R2P - like any concept dealing with international peace and security - remains contested and debated, particularly regarding

[1] In this context, the term *"atrocity crimes"* has been extended to include ethnic cleansing which, while not defined as an independent crime under international law, includes acts that are serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law that may themselves amount to one of the recognized atrocity crimes, in particular crimes against humanity.

[2] UN General Assembly, 2005 *World Summit Outcome: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly,* 24 October 2005, A/RES/60/1, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/44168a910.html [last accessed 17 November 2025].

its content, legal status, and operational aspects. This is even more the case since the 2011 intervention in Libya, initially considered a successful example of R2P in action but later drawing criticism for exceeding the scope of the UN Security Council mandate and pursuing regime change, thereby undermining trust in the principle's impartial implementation.

It is against this persisting and existential crisis of R2P that the role of small states in promoting and grounding R2P as a global multilateral commitment has been recently highlighted in several forums and articles. Indeed, many of the states that are champions of R2P are small states with an interest in leveraging R2P, because of their vulnerabilities such territory, population, economy, political instability and limited military capacity. Countries such as Norway, Finland, Denmark, Ghana, Slovenia are often cited as champions of R2P, having succeeded to integrate R2P in their foreign policy and development cooperation.[3] Reflecting on their strategies may offer valuable guidance for Albania, which during its 2022–2023 term on UN Security Council, demonstrated a renewed - albeit seemingly rhetorical – commitment to advancing the R2P agenda.

Why R2P is important for Albania? The historical and geopolitical context of Albania renders the R2P particularly relevant. As a small, upper middle-income country, with limited military capacity, Albania faces both strategic vulnerabilities and moral imperatives that align closely with the principles of R2P. The country's transition from dictatorship to democracy in the early 1990s placed it in a challenging geopolitical environment, as the Western Balkans became a region marked by violent conflict and political instability. Albania was directly and indirectly affected by these crises - most notably the Kosovo War (1998–1999) and the broader post-Yugoslav turmoil - which reinforced its sensitivity to the human and political consequences of mass atrocities.

Since then, Albania has gradually expanded its contribution to regional and international stability, primarily through multilateral cooperation within Euro-Atlantic institutions. As a NATO member, Albania participates in joint exercises, operational planning, and peacekeeping missions—enhancing both collective security and its own capacity to support the protection of vulnerable populations in conflict-affected areas. Moreover, its alignment with European Union enlargement priorities further strengthens its commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Albania's increasing international engagement also provides important platforms for advancing R2P at the multilateral level. Its tenure as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (2022–2023), and its current membership in the UN Human Rights Council (2024–2026), present strategic opportunities to promote early warning systems, support atrocity prevention resolutions, and collaborate with like-minded states and civil society actors.

[3] See: Sancin. Vasilka., *"UN Security Council Membership as a Litmus Test for Slovenia's Commitment to R2P," Nordic Journal of Human Rights 42, no. 4* (2024): 307–324, https://doi.org/10.1080/18918131.2024.2419286., Stensrud, E. E., & Mennecke, M. (2024). *On the 20th anniversary of the responsibility to protect: Can small states save R2P from failure and oblivion? Nordic Journal of Human Rights,* 42(4), 435–444. https://doi.org/10.1080/18918131.2024.2426404 Osei, F. O. (2024). Small States as Norm Entrepreneurs: Unveiling Ghana's Agency in Atrocity Prevention. *Nordic Journal of Human Rights,* 42(4), 563–576. https://doi.org/10.1080/18918131.2024.2409544

Despite Albania's growing engagement in R2P-related initiatives, scholarly research has yet to systematically explore how small states like Albania have or have not operationalized the norm within multilateral institutions and foreign policy frameworks and within internal processes. This article addresses this gap by examining Albania's contributions to R2P, highlighting the opportunities and constraints small states face in advancing the norm in both regional and global contexts. This analysis also reflects on how the credibility of small states such as Albania in promoting R2P internationally is strengthened when they also demonstrate domestic commitment to protection norms. This dual internal-external commitment enhances their legitimacy in international debates.

TWENTY YEARS OF THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT: DEVELOPMENT AND CHALLENGES

The twentieth century witnessed some of the most devastating episodes of mass atrocities. The genocide in Rwanda (1994) and the massacre in Srebrenica (1995), the NATO bombing campaign during the Kosovo war (1999) exposed the inadequacy of the existing international frameworks to protect civilians at risk of mass atrocities. In his Millennium Report of 2000, then Secretary-General Kofi Annan, recalling these failures, urged Member States to find common ground to fulfil the promise of "*never again*". He posed a critical challenge: "If humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica, to gross and systematic violation of human rights that offend every precept of our common humanity?"[4]

The challenge was taken up by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), which in 2001 published the landmark report titled "*Responsibility to Protect"*.[5] Drawing inspiration from Francis Deng's earlier formulation of *"state sovereignty as responsibility"*[6], the report reconceptualized the controversial notion of *"humanitarian intervention"* under the broader framework of Responsibility to Protect.[7] The concept encompasses three specific responsibilities, along with the military humanitarian intervention. The first, *the responsibility to prevent*, is considered the most important, addressing

[4] Kofi A. Annan, *We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century* (New York: United Nations, 2000), available at https://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/We_The_Peoples.pdf. [last accessed 12 November 2025].

[5] International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), *The Responsibility to Protect,* UN Doc A/57/303 Annex (2001) available at https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/bitstream/handle/10625/18432/IDL-18432.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y . [last accessed 17 October 2025].

[6] Francis M. Deng, Sadik H. Kimaro, Terrence Lyons, Donald Rothchild, and I. William Zartman, *Sovereignty as Responsibility: Conflict Management in Africa* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1996), cited in International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001). [last accessed 11 November 2025].

[7] Ramesh Thakur, *"The Responsibility to Protect at 15," International Affairs* 92, no. 2 (2016): 415–434, available at https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/ia/inta92-2-10-thakur_0.pdf. [last accessed 12 November 2025].

the root causes and direct causes of internal conflict and other man-made crises. The second, *the responsibility to react* involves taking timely and appropriate measures in situations of compelling human need. The last responsibility is the *responsibility to rebuild,* focusing on post-conflict rebuilding.[8]

In just four years, over 150 heads of state and government gathered in New York to conclude negotiations on the UN reform. In the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document (WSOD), states unanimously affirmed their responsibility to protect and its three pillars.[9] Achieving consensus so quickly, bearing in mind the controversies of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, speaks to the sense of urgency and political will generated by the mass atrocities in the 1990s.

In Paragraph 138 and 139 of the 2005 Outcome Document, Member States agreed that the responsibility to protect entails the prevention of atrocity crimes and their incitement.[10] They affirmed that when national authorities "*manifestly fail*" to protect their populations from these crimes, the international community has the collective responsibility to respond "in a timely and decisive" manner with appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means to help to protect populations from atrocity crimes, and failing that, with all the tools available to the United Nations through the Security Council, including as a last resort the use of military force.[11]

R2P, as agreed in the Outcome Document has been described as *narrow and deep*.[12] It is narrow, focusing only on protecting populations from four specific atrocity crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and ethnic cleansing, excluding natural disasters, terrorism and civil wars. It is deep because it covers a wide range of measures aimed at preventing and stopping these crimes. Thus, R2P is much broader than the scenario in which the international community decides to use force to end mass atrocities. The use of force is considered as a last resort if non-military measures are insufficient and the national government manifestly fails.

Unlike the earlier ICISS report, which described R2P in terms of the responsibility to prevent, react and rebuild, the above version of R2P framed it in terms of the role of

[8] Ibid. 4.

[9] Ibid. 2.

[10] Some prefer the term atrocity prevention over R2P. In practice, atrocity prevention and R2P often pursue the same objectives. See: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_r2p_atrocity_prevention_toolkit.pdf [last accessed 12 September 2025].

[11] R2P three pillars of responsibility (1) the primary responsibility of the state to protect its populations from four mass atrocity crimes: genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing; (2) The international community duty to assist individual; (3) the international responsibility to take appropriate collective action, in a timely and decisive manner and in accordance with the UN Charter.

[12] United Nations, *Implementing the Responsibility to Protect: Report of the Secretary-General,* A/63/677 (New York: United Nations, January 12, 2009), https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/63/677. [last accessed 11 September 2025].

different actors at different stages of preventing and responding to atrocity crimes. These actors and their responsibilities became later operationalized in the first Report of the Secretary-General in 2009, on implementing the responsibility to protect comprising three pillars: (i) the protection responsibilities of the State, (ii) international assistance and capacity-building, (iii) timely and decisive response.[13]

The strategy highlights the importance of prevention and, when it fails, calls for early and flexible response tailored to the specific circumstances of each case. There is no fixed sequence from one pillar to another, nor is it assumed that one is more important than another. The norm envisages explicitly the consensus of the international community responsibility to protect civilian populations and on the other hand it is conservative, as last resort option to protect population based on Charter VII mandate, resting firmly on existing UN system of state sovereignty.

Since 2009, the UN Secretary-General has issued annual reports, supported by the Joint Office of the Special Advisers, which build on the three-pillar strategy and have framed the discussion and guided debates in the General Assembly. These reports have elaborated on what R2P demands from different actors, with different priorities in each report. Over the years, the Security Council, General Assembly, and Human Rights Council have reinforced this process through resolutions that reaffirm both the principles of the UN Charter and the duty to protect populations from mass atrocities.[14] However, despite this steady stream of institutional engagement, there is still, no consolidated set of UN recommendations for the states on what R2P requires them to do. The closest resource is provided by the Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, whose publication "*A Framework for Action for Responsibility to Protect: A Resource for States"* constitutes an attempt to consolidate these requirements into practical guide.[15]

At this point it is important to note that views about the legal nature of R2P are diverse.[16] R2P was originally adopted as part of a UN General Assembly resolution and such decisions do not normally create international law. While some aspects of the concept cut through several fields of international law and reflect existing international law, others may at best be considered to represent an 'emerging norm' which has not yet gained binding legal force. Pillar I, enjoys broad acceptance among States and is repeatedly affirmed in UNSC resolutions. It largely mirrors obligations that already exist in international law. The prohibition of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing arise

[13] Ibid. 11.

[14] United Nations Secretary-General. *Responsibility to Protect: 20 Years of Commitment to Principled and Collective Action: Report of the Secretary-General,* A/79/875-S/2025/248. New York: United Nations, 2025. [last accessed 22 November 2025].

[15] Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect & Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. (2023, July 12). *A Framework for Action for the Responsibility to Protect: A Resource for States.* [last accessed 23 October 2025].

[16] Winkelmann, I. (2010). *Responsibility to Protect.* In R. Wolfrum & A. Peters (Eds.), *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law.* Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1464 [last accessed 23 October 2025].

from treaty and customary law, many of which explicitly provide for a 'duty to prevent' or are interpreted to do so.[17] Pillar II of R2P has been broadly supported by States and international organizations, but this support does not amount to a binding legal duty to provide specific forms of assistance for prevention or capacity-building. These endorsements are better understood as political or moral commitments rather than expressions of *opinio juris*. Military intervention under Pillar III is explicitly a last resort, and must occur through the UN Security Council, anchoring the doctrine in international law.[18]

Currently, the application of the norm has encountered two different lines of criticism surfaced among States and international organizations. On one hand, misuse concerns surrounded the case of Libya in 2011, which initially was celebrated as a textbook application of R2P and later criticised for exceeding its humanitarian mandate, with military action allegedly contributing to the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi's regime. Questions of proportionality and the underlying motivation began to erode the initial consensus on R2P.[19] On the other hand, critics highlight the frequent inaction of the international community signalling a persistent gap between the principle and its practice in the light of egregious human rights violations.[20]

R2P is struggling, as observed in the case Syria, Ukraine, and Israel – Palestine conflict, where there is a lack of R2P references. From the very beginning, the use of force was the most controversial part of R2P, it remains the most contentious element of the norm to this day. Indeed, if we consider the current political climate, even other more traditional human rights agendas create controversy. The veto power at the UNSC, the observed lack of political will to advance contentious human rights agendas and costly military interventions have also affected the advancement of R2P.

Due to this existential crisis of R2P, it becomes even more important to continue consideration of the principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), to improve understanding on it and to advance internalization by all states, including smaller and less influential ones. Indeed, the absence of a consolidated and universally accepted set of guidelines outlining what R2P specifically requires of states makes implementation more difficult. Therefore, clarifying these responsibilities and identifying the appropriate international forums for advancing R2P becomes essential to improving its implementation.

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[17] Gërdeci, A. (2021). *Ndërhyrja humanitare dhe përgjegjësia për të mbrojtur* (Tezë doktorature). Fakulteti i Histori Filologjisë, Departamenti i Historisë, Universiteti i Tiranës. Retrieved from https://online.fliphtml5.com/lscg/acty/#p=24 [last accessed 11 November 2025].

[18] Ibid. 16.

[19] Adams, Simon. 2012. *Libya and the Responsibility to Protect.* Occasional Paper. Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. October 2012.https://www.globalr2p.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/LibyaAndR2POccasionalPaper.pdf. [last accessed 17 October 2025].

[20] United Nations. (2025, June 25). *Responsibility to Protect: An unfulfilled promise, a ray of hope.* UN News. https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164926 [last accessed 27 October 2025].

UNDERSTANDING ALBANIA'S COMMITMENT TO THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT. PAST ATROCITIES, REGIONAL INSTABILITY AND INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Albania gained its independence from the Ottoman Empire just before the First World War. Its early statehood was disrupted in 1939, when fascist Italy, later supported by the Nazi Germany, occupied the country and heavily suppressed the rights and freedoms of Albanians.[21] After the Second World War, the communist movement under the leadership of Enver Hoxha established a regime that would define Albania for nearly five decades. The repressive regime isolated the country globally, eliminating political pluralism, suppressing dissent, banning religious practice and a establishing a pervasive personality cult developed around Hoxha.[22] The ruling Party of Labour of Albania exhibited totalitarian dominance akin to the contemporary regime in North Korea.[23] The exact number of victims of communism in Albania is still unknown. Currently, the names of 5,577 individuals who were murdered have been documented. At least 48,217 people, including 10,192 women and children, endured imprisonment in concentration camps as part of the oppressive regime.[24]

This legacy of foreign occupation, internal repression, and widespread human rights violations left deep societal and institutional scars. It also shaped Albania's post-communist orientation toward international norms aimed at preventing mass atrocities. The first pluralistic election was held on March 31, 1991, marking the start of rebuilding the institutions on principles tied to peace, security, good-neighbourly cooperation and respect for human rights. In the ambit of national defence, the Constitution of 1992 envisaged that "in its foreign relations policy, the Republic of Albania defends the national independence and interests, pursues the policy of cooperation and good neighbourliness, international peace and security".[25] The Constitution of 1998, as amended, in force, authorises participation in collective security arrangements designed to maintain peace and national interests.[26]

Albania joined the United Nations (UN) on 14 December 1955.[27] Its seventy-year experience at the UN, reflects the broader experience of many small states within the United Nations

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[21] Calussi, J. *Fascist System of Internment and the Italian Occupation of Albania: A Study on Relationships between the Army and the Population.* Available at https://autoritetidosjeve.gov.al/uploads/Sistemi%20fashist%20i%20internimit%20dhe%20pushtimi%20italian%20i%20Shqip%C3%ABris%C3%AB%20(1).pdf. [Accessed 15 August 2025]

[22] Institute of Studies on Crimes and Consequences of Communism. *A Short History of Albanian Communism.* 2020. Available at https://www.iskk.gov.al/en/mission/. [Last accessed 27 October 2025].

[23] Genocide Watch (2022) Albania Country Report, Available at: file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/Albania%20Country%20Report%20December%202022%20(2).pdf . accessed August 3, 2025.

[24] Ibid. 16.

[25] "Law on the Major Constitutional Provisions, 1991–1998." *Constitution.* https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/albania_law_on_major_constitutional_provisions_1991-1998.pdf. ConstitutionNet Accessed September 25, 2025.

[26] Gjykata Kushtetuese (Constitutional Court). *Constitution of the Republic of Albania.* PDF. Accessed September 25, 2025. https://www.gjk.gov.al/web/constitution_of_albania_2090.pdf.

[27] United Nations. *[Security Council resolution 109 (1955)]* Digital Library. United Nations. Accessed September 25, 2025. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/280564.

system. While their material influence is limited, small states comprise the majority of UN members and have often been among the strongest advocates of human rights, rule of law and democracy and multilateralism.[28] Although their influence in the UN Security Council may be limited, their collective advocacy in the General Assembly, Human Rights Council, and regional organizations give them the opportunity to play a role in international affairs. Existing research shows that small states can play a critical role in developing and strengthening international norms and institutions.[29] Although major powers often steer international debates on atrocity prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, research shows that small states have proven vital in sustaining and advancing R2P as both a normative principle and an operational agenda.[30]

The above-described post-communist transition in Albania unfolded within a difficult geopolitical environment, as the Western Balkans became a region marked by violent conflict and political instability. Albania was directly and indirectly affected by these crises - most notably the Kosovo War (1998–1999) and the broader post-Yugoslav turmoil - which reinforced the country`s sensitivity to the human and political costs of mass atrocities.

It might also be worth noting that Albania's engagement with questions of sovereignty and intervention predates the 2005 formal endorsement of R2P. The very first case heard by the ICJ, The Corfu Channel Case (United Kingdom v. Albania, 1949), established an important precedent concerning the limits of sovereignty and the legality of foreign military intervention, even though it did not directly deal with the protection of civilian populations. Albania thus found itself, from the outset of the ICJ's jurisprudence, at the centre of international debates on intervention and responsibility.

It is reasonable to argue that its own past legacy and these exposures within a turbulent region are the reasons for Albania focusing on conflict prevention, protection of populations, particularly women and children and becoming a supporter of R2P since its inception. Though norm advocacy may be an important strategy to gain influence, particularly for small states, from an international law perspective it must be noted that R2P is not yet a norm in the formal meaning.[31] While some aspects of the concept cut

[28] Permanent Mission of the Republic of Albania to United Nations. "Human Rights and International Law." *Newsroom.* June 20, 2023. Accessed September 25, 2025. https://ambasadat.gov.al/united-nations/newsroom/human-rights-and-international-law/

[29] Alavi, Sina, and Diana Barnes. "Liechtenstein and the Crime of Aggression." *New Zealand International Review* 45, no. 4 (2020): 6–10. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48594702. Okoth-Obbo, G. "The Role of Small States in Advancing the Responsibility to Protect: Personal Reflections of a Former United Nations Mandate Holder." *Scandinavian Journal of International Law,* 2024. https://doi.org/10.1080/18918131.2024.2419285.

[30] George Okoth-Obbo, *"The Role of Small States in Advancing the Responsibility to Protect: Personal Reflections of a Former United Nations Mandate Holder," Nordic Journal of Human Rights* 42, no. 4 (2024): 289–306, https://doi.org/10.1080/18918131.2024.2419285.

[31] Barkholdt, Janina, and Ingo Winkelmann. *"Responsibility to Protect."* In *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law.* Oxford University Press. Accessed September 25, 2025. https://opil.ouplaw.com/display/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1464.

through several fields of international law and reflect existing international law, others may at best be considered to represent an 'emerging norm' which has not yet gained binding legal force.[32] Some aspects may be nothing more than a political commitment. Thus, the notion of R2P should rather be seen as a principle, combing and reinterpreting existing and desirable rules under international law, all of which aim at ensuring the protection of individuals from mass atrocities.

One of the key challenges associated with the status of R2P, as Rebecca Barber notes, is that what an individual state can and should do is shaped by several factors, such as atrocity risk profile, available resources and development cooperation capacity, diplomatic influence, economic and trade relations, military cooperation and arms exports, and membership in international organizations.[33] While other global agendas, such as Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), often allow for context-specific adaptation, typically through national action plans - R2P has not followed this path. As a result, states have struggled to translate it into national frameworks in the same way.

For Albania, this absence presents both a challenge and an opportunity. While the country has successfully adapted other international norms, such as WPS, into national policies, there is no formal R2P national framework in place. To address this gap, it is important to examine what Albania has done so far in the context of atrocity prevention and international engagement, in order to identify pathways for translating its strong commitment to R2P into actionable policies in the future.

MAPPING ALBANIA'S EFFORTS TO OPERATIONALIZATION OF R2P. A REVIEW ACROSS THE THREE PILLARS.

Initially, it is important to underscore that no policy, document, or official report currently exists that maps Albania's efforts to implement or operationalize the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). What does exist are several explicit statements delivered in UN forums, along with indirect references to R2P-related commitments through Albania's broader positions on human rights, the rule of law, and international cooperation. Thus, this article aims to fill this gap.

The 2005 Outcome Document sets out the scope of R2P in explicit and narrow terms, limiting it to four crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and ethnic cleansing. R2P rests on three interconnected pillars: pillar I - the responsibility of states to protect their populations; pillar II - the responsibility of the international community to assist states in fulfilling this duty, and pillar III - the responsibility of the international community to take

[32] Ibid. 16.

[33] Barber, Rebecca. "A Proposal for Advancing Implementation of the Responsibility to Protect", *Global Responsibility to Protect* 15, 4 (2023): 361-391, doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/1875984X-20230007 [Accessed 15 August 2025]

timely and decisive action when a state manifestly fails to protect its citizens, in accordance with the UN Charter.[34] Although the scope of R2P are four international crimes, three of which legally defined crimes, as ethnic cleansing, is not yet legally defined but instead is absorbed by the three others, they constitute *erga omnes* obligations for states, the principle of R2P is not a legal norm and as Simonovic has stated R2P is not self-executing.[35] The diplomacy work surrounding the World Summit also demonstrates that states did not want to create additional legal obligations and that R2P was deliberately institutionalized as a political norm.[36]

Based on the above conceptualization of R2P, using the three pillars of R2P as an analytical framework, this study examines Albania's engagement and operationalization of R2P within Pillar I, focusing on the normative and institutionalization framework. At the intersection of Pillar I and Pillar II, are Albania's contributions to international forums and multilateral activities as well as in activities of its armed forces. Finally, at the intersection of Pillar II and Pillar III, is Albania`s UN Security Council membership contribution 2022-2023.

Pillar I

A state's normative framework includes all relevant domestic legislation and international legal commitments that tackle R2P crimes, in addition to policy documents and instruments that operationalize R2P. The basis for contemporary criminal law in Albania derives from the 1998 Constitution, as amended[37] and the 1995 Criminal Code (CC), as amended.[38] Albania ratified the Genocide Convention in 1956 and also all the major treaties forming the core of international humanitarian law.[39] Albania became a signatory of the Rome Statute of the ICC in 1998 and ratified it by Law No. 8994, of December 23, 2002.[40] In the period between signing and ratification Albania amended the CC, introducing changes to Articles 73, 74 and 75, criminalizing respectively genocide (Article

[34] Ibid. 2.

[35] Ivan Šimonović, *RtoP at a Crossroads: Implementation, or Marginalization* (Swedish UN Association, 2018), https://fn.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/RtoP-at-a-Crossroads-Ivan-Simonovic.pdf. [Accessed 15 August 2025]

[36] Jennifer M Welsh, Norm Robustness and the Responsibility to Protect, *Journal of Global Security Studies,* Volume 4, Issue 1, January 2019, Pages 53–72, https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogy045 [Accessed 15 September 2025]

[37] Constitution of the Republic of Albania (1998), as amended, Available at: https://qbz.gov.al/preview/635d44bd-96ee-4bc5-8d93-d928cf6f2abd . [Accessed 15 September 2025]

[38] Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania (1995), as amended, Available at: https://qbz.gov.al/preview/a2b117e6-69b2-4355-aa49-78967c31bf4d . Accessed September 21, 2025.

[39] United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,* New York, December 9, 1948, entered into force January 12, 1951, ratified by Albania May 12, 1956, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf. [Accessed 21 September 2025]

[40] Law No. 8984, dated 23.12.2002 "On the ratification of the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court" https://www.drejtesia.gov.al/aktet-nderkombetare/marreveshje-shumepaleshe/marreveshje-shumepaleshe/

73), crimes against humanity (Article 74), war crimes (Article 75), while no changes were enacted for provocation of war (Article 211). The changes were presented as a necessary adjustment to fully comply with the Rome Statute.[41] Membership in the ICC was considered a major milestone for Albania, signaling the country`s commitment to fight impunity and to ensure approximation of related crimes in domestic legislation. While they are not formally linked, the ICC and R2P were developed alongside each other, with similar purposes, to end impunity for these crimes.[42] The ICC, which came into force in 2002, is the first permanent international judicial body mandated to investigate and prosecute these crimes. Under RtoP, referral to the ICC is considered both a preventive measure, insofar as it can deter threats of mass atrocities, and a reactive measure, contributing to accountability and the prevention of impunity. These constitutes an important element of R2P. In line with its ICC commitment, Albania ratified the Agreement on the Privileges and Immunities of the ICC (APIC) on August 2, 2006,[43] but it has yet to sign that on enforcement of sentences. By contrast, in 2008 it signed such an agreement ICTY, allowing convicted persons to serve their sentences in Albania,[44] despite proximity to these persons' relations, no ICTY convicts were ever transferred. For example, Mr. Haradin Bala, a Kosovar Albanian, was transferred to France rather than Albania to serve his sentence.[45]

Albania adherence to UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons,[46] complements these international justice commitments by addressing one of the structural drivers of atrocity crimes. Curbing illicit transfer and irresponsible trade of small arms, impacts prevention of mass atrocities and government's ability to protect its population.[47]

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[41] A. Gerdeci and I. Jusufi, States and International Criminal Justice: cost ca18228 Scoping Survey: Albania. (Dataset, version 2) (2023), available online at https://justice-360.com /wp content/uploads/2023/06/Cost_Survey_V1_20230426.pdf (accessed 20 July 2024).

[42] Ainley, Kirsten. 2015. *"The Responsibility to Protect and the International Criminal Court: Counteracting the Crisis."* International Affairs, vol. 91, no. 1 (January): 37–54 [Accessed 15 September 2025]

[43] Parliamentarians for Global Action, Albania and the Rome Statute, available at: https://www.pgaction.org/ilhr/rome-statute/albania.html. [Accessed 25 September 2025]

[44] Agreement between the United Nations and the Republic of Albania on the Enforcement of Sentences of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, 19 September 2008. Available at: https://www.icty.org/x/file/Legal%20Library/Member_States_Cooperation/enforcement_agreement_albania_19_09_08_en.pdf . [Last accessed 16 October 2025]

[45] UN. ICTY Press Release (2008) Haradin Bala Transferred To France To Serve Sentence. Available at: https://www.icty.org/en/press/haradin-bala-transferred-france-serve-sentence. [Last accessed 16 October 2025]

[46] Albania. Small Arms, Light Weapons and Explosives Control Strategy 2019–2024 and Action Plan

2019–2021. Tirana: Government of Albania, June 24, 2019. https://www.seesac.org/f/docs/Albania-1/ENG_Albanian_Strategy_on_Firearms_Control-24-06-2019.pdf

[47] Simon Adams, "Remarks delivered at UN General Assembly Ministerial Side Event 'Small Arms and Light Weapons: The Real Weapons of Mass Destruction — New Dynamics in the Fight Against Illegal Trafficking of Small Arms'," *Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect,* 1 October 2015 [Last accessed 16 October 2025]

In 2013, Albania established a national focal point for R2P, which is part of the Global Network of R2P Focal Points and supports the work of the Global Centre for the R2P.[48] The R2P Focal Point is a senior official within a government who facilitates national mechanisms for atrocity prevention and promotes international cooperation by participating in the Global Network. Appointment of an R2P Focal Point is a considered as a step for governments to demonstrate their commitment to mass atrocity prevention, regardless of their capacity.[49] The Albanian R2P Focal Point is established at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, respectively the Responsible for Human Rights, Minorities, Reports under the Directorate of International Organizations. Currently, based on communication with Ministry the position is vacant.[50]

Pillar I/II

Albania is not yet a member of the Group of Friends of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) which is an informal inter-governmental platform very active in New York and Geneva.[51] The country is not part of the Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes (GMAAC), which is a State-led network of States, civil society and academic institutions committed to preventing atrocities worldwide. However, the R2P Focal Point has participated in its annual meetings of GMAAC.[52]

In 2013 the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency (ACT) Group was launched to advocate for transparency of the UNSC's working methods. Albania become a member of ACT. In 2015, the Group developed a "Code of Conduct regarding Security Council action against genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes", urging UNSC members to voluntarily refrain from voting against draft resolutions involving mass atrocity situations. As of 2022 the Code of Conduct has been signed by 121 member states, including Albania, including two permanent members of the Council (France and the UK), and 2 observers.[53] Complementing this initiative, France, with the support of Mexico, launched the "Political Declaration on Suspension of Veto Powers in Cases of Mass Atrocity" in August 2015.[54] The

[48] The Global Centre acts as the Secretariat of the Global Network and co-convenes an annual meeting of R2P Focal Points with member states.

[49] Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. "Global Network of R2P Focal Points." Accessed September 25, 2025. https://www.globalr2p.org/the-global-network-of-r2p-focal-points/.

[50] Shpresa Peza, Director of Treaties and International Affairs, MEFA. Response email 09.19.2025

[51] Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. "Group of Friends of the Responsibility to Protect." Accessed October 2, 2025. https://www.globalr2p.org/group-of-friends-of-the-responsibility-to-protect/.

[52] GAAMAC, "GAAMAC I: State Delegates," accessed October 1, 2025, https://gaamac.org/gaamac-i/gaamac-i-state-delegates/.

[53] Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. "List of Signatories to the ACT Code of Conduct." June 8, 2022. Accessed September 26, 2025. https://www.globalr2p.org/resources/list-of-signatories-to-the-act-code-of-conduct/.

[54] France & Mexico. 2015. *Political Statement on the Suspension of the Veto in Case of Mass Atrocities.* United Nations, 70th General Assembly, 7 August 2015.

declaration aimed at securing voluntary restraint on the use of the veto by the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council when faced with mass atrocities. Albania is one of the 104 member states and 2 UN observer missions that have signed the declaration.[55]

Albania has also aligned itself with broader international and EU initiatives protection agendas such the Kigali Principles on the Protection of Civilians[56] in peacekeeping.[57] In addition, in 2021, UNGA Resolution 75/277 established R2P as a regular agenda item, requiring periodic reports by the UN Secretary-General. Albania co-sponsored the resolution, proposed by former R2P Special Adviser Ivan Šimonović, reaffirming its commitment to atrocity prevention.[58] Albania was also among the 83 co-sponsors of the UN General Assembly Resolution on Standing mandate for a General Assembly debate when a veto is cast in the Security Council (A/76/L.52), adopted by consensus in April 2022.[59] In 2024, Albania became the first country to sign The Ljubljana-The Hague Convention on International Cooperation in the Investigation and Prosecution of the Crimes of Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity, War Crimes and Other International Crimes.[60] The convention represents a landmark international treaty to help deliver justice to victims and creating a new global framework for inter-state judicial cooperation on international crimes. These actions can be considered as efforts to materialize R2P reflecting its commitments declared during its tenure at the UNSC 2022-2023.

Pillar II/III

Under R2P the deployment of armed forces can be considered as assistance under pillar II or part of coercive force under pillar III. Albania has not so far participated in any pillar III coercive actions, but it does have significant experience participating in peace operations, as

[55] Global Centre for the Responsibility to *Protect. Support to the French-Mexican Initiative on Veto Restraint in Case of Mass Atrocities (Support List as of July 2022).* July 13, 2022. https://www.globalr2p.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2022-July-French-Mexican-Initiative-Support-List.pdf.

[56] The Kigali Principles on the Protection of Civilians are a non-binding set of eighteen (18) pledges for the effective and thorough implementation of the protection of civilians in UN peacekeeping. The principles on the Protection of Civilians emanated from the High-level International Conference on the Protection of Civilians held in Rwanda on 28-29 May 2015.

[57] European External Action Service (EEAS) "EU Statement – United Nations Security Council: Open Debate on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict." *Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations in New York,* May 27, 2020. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-statement-%E2%80%93-united-nations-security-council-open-debate-protection-civilians-armed-conflict-0_en. [Last accessed 16 October 2025]

[58] United Nations, "List of Sponsors, Resolution 75/277 (The Responsibility to Protect)," accessed October 1, 2025, https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/75/277#

[59] United Nations, "Resolution 76/262: Standing Mandate for a General Assembly Debate When a Veto Is Cast in the Security Council," *General Assembly, 76th Session* (adopted April 26, 2022), accessed October 1, 2025, https://documents.un.org

[60] Embassy of the Republic of Albania in the Netherlands. "Signing in The Hague: The Ljubljana – The Hague Convention." February 14, 2024. https://ambasadat.gov.al/netherlands/en/newsroom/nenshkruhet-ne-hage-konventa-nderkombetare-lubljane-hage/. [Last accessed 17 October 2025]

a mechanism for cooperation among states where populations are at risk of atrocity crimes.[61] Generally, R2P situations derive from situations of international or non-international armed conflict.[62] The Albanian Armed Forces (AAF) are engaged in different missions and conflicts at home and abroad in the framework of NATO, UN, EU and coalitions against terrorism since September the 9-th 1996, starting with the first mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This strategy is articulated through various strategic documents, including the Defence Directive 2025[63] and the National Security Strategy for 2023–2028.[64] The number of AAF troop participants in peacekeeping (PK) missions has increased, as well as the geographical field where these missions are conducted, reaching a total of 8998 military personnel in 2024.[65] Surprisingly, Albania seems more prone to contributing to NATO and EU led military operations rather than follow the traditional practice of contributing to UN peacekeeping.[66] The Armed Forces have completed peacekeeping missions in Iraq, Chad and Georgia, in Mali, ISAF and the RSM in Afghanistan[67] and are currently engaged in peacekeeping and combat missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, South Sudan and eFP Latvia, Bulgaria, Iraq, the Aegean Sea.[68] While the National Security Strategy 2023-2028, does not explicitly refer to R2P, the basic principles regarding global security contribution such as multilateralism, upholding human rights, protecting the vulnerable, respect for international law are R2P values. Though studies claim that Albania's engagement in international missions is more out of self-interest, as the ethics of intervention are not questioned either by the political elite, civil society or the broader society.[69] It is important to note that in addition to contributing to troops, states, including small ones like Albania should provide additional training to troops on R2P, strengthening the capacity of peacekeepers to identify the warning signs of atrocities and understand the means the mission has at its disposal to respond to such crimes, thus also operationalizing R2P on the ground.[70] No efforts have been made to educate or train

[61] Gjevori, Elvin, and Gëzim Visoka. "Albanian Contribution to International Peacekeeping: Identity, Interests and Peacekeeping." POLIS, no. 17 (2018). Accessed September 30, 2025. https://uet.edu.al/polis/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Albanian-Contribution-to-International-Peacekeeping-Identity-Interests-and-Peacekeeping.pdf.

[62] Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, "Populations at Risk," accessed September 30, 2025, https://www.globalr2p.org/populations-at-risk/.

[63] Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Albania, *Defense Directive 2025,* accessed September 30, 2025, https://www.mod.gov.al/eng/security-policies/strategies-of-mod/1840-defense-directive-2025.

[64] Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Albania, *National Security Strategy 2023–2028,* accessed September 30, 2025, https://www.mod.gov.al/eng/security-policies/strategic-documents/100-national-security-strategy

[65] Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Albania, *"International Missions,"* accessed September 30, 2025, https://www.mod.gov.al/eng/security-policies/international-missions.

[66] Ibid. 60.

[67] Ibid. 64.

[68] Ibid. 46

[69] Ibid. 60.

[70] Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. *Peacekeeping, Civilian Protection and the Responsibility to Protect: A Handbook for Trainers.* November 2018. https://www.globalr2p.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/R2P-Peacekeeping-Course-Handbook-Nov-2018.pdf. [Last accessed 16 October 2025]

AAF members to implement R2P when deployed in peace missions and there is a lack of explicit R2P language in the above strategic documents.

d) Pillar II/III

In June 2021, Albania was elected as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, receiving the support of 175 UN member countries, out of 190 countries participating in the vote. It served in this important body for two years, from January 2022 to December 2023. This was the first time ever that Albania was elected to the SC, marking an important political milestone in its international engagement and presenting an opportunity to advance its commitment to R2P. Thus, it is important to ask to what extent Albania included it commitment to and support for the principle of R2P and whether R2P featured in the agenda of this two-year mandate.

The slogan of Albania at the UN Security Council was "MEETING GLOBAL CHALLENGES THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS" intended to highlight its commitment to the multilateral system and institutions, brining a small state perspective.[71] Albania's mandate focused on Women Peace and Security, promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms and the implementation of international law; advancing preventive work against violent extremism and terrorism; climate change and security; as well as Security Council working methods. Although R2P was not mentioned explicitly, many of the areas are closely linked with atrocity prevention and R2P. Indeed, topics such as women and children in armed conflict situations and vulnerable groups, climate change, violent extremism and terrorism are indicators for common or and specific R2P risk factors.[72]

In its 2022 address to the General Assembly, Mr. Arian Spasse, representative of Albania stated that there is an urgent need to fulfil the collective responsibility to protect populations at risk, voicing the country's strong support for a survivor-centred and gender-inclusive approach to atrocity prevention. He highlighted that in situations of mass atrocity, it is the obligation of the United Nations, the Security Council and of the international community to prevent and respond. He reiterated that states have the primary responsibility to investigate and prosecute crimes committed within their jurisdiction.[73]

Albania played an important role in the UN Security Council's response to Russia's invasion

[71] Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania, *For UN Security Council: Albania 2022–2023: Meeting Global Challenges Through Partnerships,* accessed September 30, 2025, available at https://punetejashtme.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Security-Council-UN.pdf.

[72] See United Nations, *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention* (New York: United Nations, 2014),https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/publications-and-resources/Framework%20of%20Analysis%20for%20Atrocity%20Crimes_EN.pdf. [Last accessed 16 October 2025]

[73] Spasse. A. United Nations General Assembly. *Prevention Crucial in Upholding Principle of Responsibility to Protect Children, Youth, Speakers Tell General Assembly.* GA/12429. June 23, 2022. https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12429.doc.htm. [Last accessed 10 October 2025]

of Ukraine in February 2022. As a co-penholder on Ukraine alongside the United States, Albania drafted and advocated for the adoption of Resolution 2623 on February 27, 2022. This resolution invoked the "Uniting for Peace" mechanism - an exceptional procedure that allows the General Assembly to address issues when the Security Council is deadlocked due to a veto by a permanent member.[74] Resolution 2623 condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine and referred the situation to the General Assembly, leading to the convening of its 11th Emergency Special Session. This marked the first time in four decades that the "Uniting for Peace" mechanism was utilized, underscoring Albania's commitment to upholding international law and the principles of the United Nations Charter.

In June 2022, during its presidency of the Security Council, Albania organized a high-level open debate titled "Strengthening Accountability and Justice for Serious Violations of International Law." This debate focused on enhancing accountability mechanisms for mass atrocities, aligning with R2P principles.[75] During the debate, Prime Minister Edi Rama of Albania chaired the meeting, highlighting the importance of upholding international law and the principles of R2P.[76]

Also, as co-penholder of the human rights file in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Albania in close partnership with US Mission in New York, held in August 2023 the first open meeting of the Security Council, since 2017, focusing on the human rights violation in North Korea.[77] Albania also successfully chaired, for two years the Sanctions Committee on Yemen 2140, as well as the Informal Working Group on Documentation and Other Procedural Matters, known as the Working Methods Group of the Security Council. There were a number of activities held during this period in New York and Tirana.[78]

During the term, Albania has also prioritized the WPS agenda, aiming to strengthen the role of women in peace processes and conflict prevention.[79] This initiative supports R2P by

[74] Security Council Report. "Ukraine: Vote on Draft 'Uniting for Peace' Resolution." February 27, 2022. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2022/02/ukraine-vote-on-draft-uniting-for-peace-resolution.php [Last accessed 16 September 2025]

[75] Security Council Report, "Strengthening Accountability and Justice for Serious Violations of International Law," *Monthly Forecast,* June 2022, accessed September 26, 2025, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2022-06/strengthening-accountability-and-justice-for-serious-violations-of-international-law.php.

[76] United Nations WebTV. *Media Stakeout by Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania, in connection with "Strengthening accountability and justice for serious violations of international law" under the agenda item "Maintenance of international peace and security."* Video. United Nations, [date of recording]. https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1k/k1kjdxdc3s. [Last accessed 16 September 2025]

[77] Hoxha, Ferit. 2023. *"Fjala e ambasadorit Ferit Hoxha në mbledhjen e Këshillit të Sigurimit për DPRK." Misioni i Përhershëm i Republikës së Shqipërisë pranë OKB-së,* 25 gusht 2023. https://ambasadat.gov.al/united-nations/al/newsroom/remarks-by-ambassador-ferit-hoxha-at-the-security-council-meeting-on-the-dprk/.

[78] Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania, *"Albania an Active Contributor to UN,"* accessed September 30, 2025, https://arkiva.punetejashtme.gov.al/en/shqiperia-kontribuese-ne-politikat-e-okb/.

[79] Permanent Mission of the Republic of Albania to the United Nations, *"Albania's Priorities in the UNSC,"* accessed September 26, 2025, https://ambasadat.gov.al/united-nations/albanias-priorities-in-the-unsc/. See also: Security Women. "Albania | National Action Plan (NAP)." Accessed September 26, 2025. https://www.securitywomen.org/unscr-1325-and-national-action-plans-nap/albania.

promoting inclusive peacebuilding efforts.[80] At the national level, Albania is committed to the implementation of the UN Security Council resolution 1325. Has adopted a costed and budgeted National Action Plan and has increased the participation of women in the security sector.[81]

Taken together, the above findings show that Albania has taken some steps to engage with R2P, even though it has not adopted a dedicated national policy or a unified framework for atrocity prevention. The country's record reveals a mixed picture: Albania has made notable international commitments, through treaty ratification, participation in global protection initiatives, and an active role during its Security Council mandate, yet these external engagements are not fully mirrored by institutional developments at home. Gaps remain, including the absence of an operational R2P Focal Point, limited mainstreaming of R2P in security planning, and a lack of targeted training on atrocity prevention for peacekeepers.

ALBANIA`S MANDATE AT THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL (2024-2026). LEVERAGING HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS FOR R2P IMPLEMENTATION

The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) is widely considered as another alternative route for the promotion and implementation of R2P, which seems essential in a time when the Security Council is blocked.[82] Though the HRC does not have enforcement powers, it can play a vital role in atrocity prevention through accountability mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), special procedures that include fact finding missions, expert groups, commissions of inquiry and thematic resolutions.[83] Even though these mechanisms will not produce actual convictions, they can facilitate legal proceedings elsewhere and increase political pressure to end atrocity crimes. While the Council does not invoke R2P as frequently or explicitly as the Security Council, several of its thematic and country-specific resolutions are "informed by" R2P. HRC has pushed for Special Sessions on Sudan, Ukraine and Ethiopia; ensuring the establishment of investigative mechanisms for Syria, Venezuela, Yemen, South Sudan or the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT); and has shaped innovative accountability tools like the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar.[84]

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[80] Gerdeci, Alba. *"The Responsibility to Protect and Women, Peace and Security: Strengthening the UN Atrocity Risk Analysis with Gender Indicators." In The Limits of Responsibility to Protect,* edited by Vasilka Sancin and Maša Košič Dine, 126–135.

[81] Republic of Albania. 2024. *National Action Plan on the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security 2023–2027*. Tirana: Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/nap_2023-2027_eng.pdf. [Last accessed 16 October 2025]

[82] Mennecke, M. (2024). The UN Human Rights Council, Denmark, and R2P—the Perfect Match? *Nordic Journal of Human Rights,* 42(4), 463–483. https://doi.org/10.1080/18918131.2024.2434384 [Last accessed 16 October 2025]

[83] Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (2025). *"Strengthening the safety net: Reflecting on 20 years of the UN Human Rights Council and the Responsibility to Protect." https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/strengthening-the-safety-net-reflecting-on-20-years-of-the-un-human-rights-council-and-the-responsibility-to-protect/* [Last accessed 16 October 2025]

[84] United Nations Human Rights Council. 2018. *Resolution 39/2 — Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar.* A/HRC/RES/39/2, adopted 27 September 2018 https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/RES/39/2 [Last accessed 17 October 2025]

Albania is currently a member in the UN Human Rights Council for the period 2024–2026. The term represents a key opportunity to advance R2P. As a Council member, Albania is in a position to advocate for the integration of atrocity-prevention benchmarks into human rights monitoring, to support resolutions addressing emerging atrocity risks, and to cooperate with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on early warning and risk assessment initiatives.[85]

Since its election to the Human Rights Council for the 2024–2026 term, Albania has explicitly prioritized accountability for crimes against humanity, prevention of gross human rights violations, and support for investigative mechanisms.[86] Albanian officials have highlighted these priorities in Geneva, including in statements on the situations in Ukraine and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where they condemned widespread violations such as sexual violence, summary executions, and enforced disappearances.[87]

Although Albania has not emerged as a penholder or primary sponsor of R2P-referencing resolutions in the HRC, its consistent advocacy for accountability and prevention aligns it with the normative framework of R2P. In order to strengthen R2P as a norm and to give practical meaning to its three pillars, Albania could report on these measures in its own Universal Periodic Review (UPR) to the UN HRC. Albania could also more generally report on how Albanian national institutions such judiciary, police, security agencies, Ombudsperson, NPMs contribute to risk identification and prevention. In addition, ssupporting or co-sponsoring resolutions that establish or renew investigative bodies would allow Albania to play a more proactive role in strengthening atrocity-prevention and reinforcing its credibility.

CONCLUSIONS

Albania's engagement with the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) illustrates both the opportunities and constraints faced by small states in operationalizing emerging international norms. Despite its limited material and military capacities, Albania has actively sought to advance the principles of atrocity prevention, accountability, and protection of vulnerable populations through multilateral diplomacy, participation in peace operations, and

[85] Ministria për Evropën dhe Punët e Jashtme të Shqipërisë. *Pledges and Commitments: Candidature of Albania to the Human Rights Council 2024–2026*. Tiranë: Ministria për Evropën dhe Punët e Jashtme, 2023. https://arkiva.punete-jashtme.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/2_Pledges-and-Commitments-Candidature-of-Albania-to-the-Human-Rights-Council-2024-2026.pdf. [Last accessed 16 October 2025]

[86] Igli Hasani, "Statement by Minister Hasani at the High-Level Segment of the 55th Session of the Human Rights Council," Permanent Mission of Albania in Geneva, February 26, 2024, https://ambasadat.gov.al/geneva/en/newsroom/fjala-e-ministrit-hasani-ne-segmentin-e-nivelit-te-larte-te-sesionit-te-55-te-te-kdnj/.

[87] Permanent Mission of Albania in Geneva, "Statement of Albania at the 37th Special Session on the Situation of Human Rights in the East of the Democratic Republic of the Congo," February 7, 2025, https://ambasadat.gov.al/geneva/en/newsroom/deklarata-e-shqiperise-ne-sesionin-e-37-te-te-posacem-per-situaten-e-te-drejtave-te-njeriut-ne-lindje-te-republikes-demokratike-te-kongos/.

alignment with international legal frameworks. At the domestic level, Albania has made notable progress in codifying atrocity-related crimes, ratifying key international treaties, and establishing a national R2P focal point. However, failure to renew the R2P focal point representative, the absence of a formal national R2P framework or systematic integration into institutional practices highlights that much remains to be done to translate rhetorical commitment into effective implementation.

Internationally, Albania has leveraged its positions in the UN Security Council (2022–2023) and the Human Rights Council (2024–2026) to promote principles consistent with R2P. Although it has not always explicitly invoked the term "R2P," its work in atrocity prevention, support for investigative mechanisms, promotion of Women, Peace and Security, and participation in multilateral initiatives underscores its commitment to the spirit of the norm. The 2022–2023 mandate on UN Security Council, demonstrated a renewed - albeit seemingly rhetorical – commitment to advancing the R2P agenda. Albania's peacekeeping and military contributions, though substantial, have not systematically incorporated R2P-specific training or monitoring, limiting the capacity to translate normative commitments into practical protective measures on the ground.

Looking forward, Albania has the opportunity to strengthen its credibility in international atrocity prevention by institutionalizing R2P domestically, through the development of a national action plan or policy framework that integrates preventive, reactive, and rebuilding measures and renewal of the mandate of the R2P Focal Point. It can also enhance capacity-building for peacekeeping forces, ensuring that personnel deployed abroad are trained to identify early warning signs of atrocity crimes and equipped to respond in line with R2P principles. Albania can also leverage multilateral platforms more explicitly, including reporting R2P-related domestic measures in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and actively sponsoring or co-penholding R2P-referencing initiatives in the UN Human Rights Council.

In conclusion, Albania's experience highlights the potential and limitations of small states in promoting R2P. To fully realize this potential requires translating rhetorical support into structured, actionable, and accountable mechanisms that protect populations at risk. By doing so, Albania can serve as an example of how small states contribute meaningfully to global atrocity prevention while reinforcing the credibility and operationalization of R2P as an evolving international norm and their own credibility in international forums.

REMEMBERED BUT UNSETTLED: TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND SOCIETAL DISENGAGEMENT IN POST-COMMUNIST ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

More than three decades after the collapse of Albania's communist dictatorship, the social legacy of that regime remains marked by ambivalence rather than resolution. This article examines how the prolonged absence of a comprehensive and sustained transitional justice process is associated with contemporary orientations toward the communist past, particularly among post-communist generations with no direct lived experience of authoritarian rule. Drawing on original survey evidence from Albania, the study identifies a distinctive configuration in which widespread acknowledgment of repression and human rights abuses coexists with low levels of political nostalgia and limited support for accountability-oriented initiatives. The article argues that this pattern is consistent with the long-term effects of uneven and contested, and politicized approaches to transitional justice rather than cultural confusion or lack of historical awareness. In the absence of early lustration, systematic prosecutions, and robust educational and memorial frameworks, the communist past has tended to be normalized rather than institutionally confronted, producing acknowledgment without closure and remembrance without resolution. By framing Albania as a lagging or adverse example within wider post-authoritarian debates, the article advances transitional justice scholarship and the study of post-authoritarian societies by showing how shortcomings in justice processes can generate detached and ambivalent public attitudes toward authoritarian legacies.

Kewords: *transitional justice, case study, memory, transition, ambivalence*

INTRODUCTION

The political transformation of the early 1990s marked the formal end of communist dictatorship in Albania but did not produce a comprehensive reckoning with the authoritarian past. While the institutional structures of Enver Hoxha's regime were dismantled, efforts to address past abuses through criminal accountability, lustration, and truth-seeking remained limited, uneven, and short-lived. Criminal prosecutions were partial and quickly discontinued, initiatives aimed at excluding former regime officials were delayed and ultimately obstructed, and systematic access to the archives of the former secret police was institutionalized only decades later than initially anticipated (Austin and Ellison 2008; Stan 2009). As a result, Albania's communist past has not been authoritatively addressed through law, education, or public policy. Instead, it continues to circulate in social and political life in indirect and often ambiguous forms. The Council of Europe has emphasized that archival access, education, and memorialization constitute core components of transitional justice rather than supplementary measures. Where these elements remain delayed or fragmented, the Council of Europe warns that transitional justice processes risk losing coherence and normative credibility, potentially weakening the link between acknowledgment, accountability, and public trust (Council of Europe 2023/24). Recent research on Albania further demonstrates that this condition reflects not merely incomplete implementation but a pattern of sustained institutional nonfeasance, particularly with regard to investigations into communist-era crimes and the fate of missing persons (Abdurrahmani 2024).

This prolonged institutional silence has produced a distinctive empirical puzzle. More than three decades after the collapse of the regime, there is widespread recognition of the repressive character of communism, yet limited civic, political, or institutional engagement with accountability or memory-related initiatives. The communist past is neither openly denied nor fully confronted, but persists as an unresolved reference point with uneven and contested relevance in public life. Building on this puzzle, the article examines how Albania's inconsistent and politically contested to transitional justice is reflected in contemporary societal orientations toward the communist past, particularly among post-communist generations with no direct experience of dictatorship.

Contributions of the article

This article makes three distinct contributions to the literature on transitional justice and post-authoritarian memory: *First,* it provides original empirical evidence on contemporary orientations toward the communist past among post-communist generations in Albania. Drawing on an original survey of young adults with no direct lived experience of dictatorship, the study identifies a coherent attitudinal configuration characterized by high acknowledgment of repression, low levels of political nostalgia, moderate salience of justice-related issues, and substantial disengagement from accountability and memory-

oriented initiatives. *Second,* the article advances a conceptual contribution by reframing ambivalence and indifference as structurally conditioned outcomes of delayed and fragmented transitional justice, rather than as indicators of lack of historical knowledge or civic disengagement. By treating responses such as "not interested" and "not sure" as analytically meaningful rather than residual, the study interprets these orientations as outcomes shaped by prolonged institutional ambiguity and limited normative clarity. *Third,* by positioning Albania as a delayed case within comparative post-authoritarian research, the article contributes to broader debates on the societal consequences of transitional justice deficits. It challenges linear assumptions that associate acknowledgment of repression with increasing demands for reckoning, demonstrating instead that politicized and postponed justice trajectories may foster normalization and disengagement rather than polarization or authoritarian rehabilitation (Horne 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transitional justice and the structuring of collective understandings of the past

Studies on transitional justice has long emphasized that responses to authoritarian crimes shape not only legal accountability but also collective understandings of the past and expectations about the moral boundaries of the political community. Early foundational work conceptualized transitional justice as a framework through which societies seek to redefine the meaning of prior regimes and establish normative distinctions between past violence and present democratic order (Teitel 2000; Elster 2004). From this perspective, justice mechanisms are not merely retrospective instruments but forward-looking processes that signal how authoritarian legacies are to be interpreted, judged, and integrated into the post-authoritarian present. Comparative research has further shown that the timing, coherence, and credibility of transitional justice measures are crucial in shaping their societal effects. Trials, lustration, truth-seeking initiatives, and archival disclosure operate as institutional signals that delineate responsibility and clarify whether past repression constitutes a definitive rupture or a legacy to be absorbed into political normality (Olsen, Payne, and Reiter 2010). Where such mechanisms are introduced early and implemented consistently, collective narratives of the past tend to be more consolidated and normatively anchored. By contrast, delayed, partial, or politicized justice processes are associated with more fragmented, contested, or ambivalent memory formations (Stan 2009; Horne 2017).

A growing body of literature has focused on the consequences of delay and politicization in transitional justice. Subotić (2009) demonstrates that when justice mechanisms are instrumentalized for short-term political gain, they often lose their normative force, producing symbolic compliance rather than sustained societal reckoning. Waldorf (2012) argues that prolonged delays in accountability alter societal expectations regarding the likelihood and relevance of justice, encouraging anticipatory adjustment rather than sustained demands for reckoning.

Post-communist contexts, generational transmission, and institutional mediation

Within post-communist Europe, the relationship between transitional justice and collective memory is further shaped by generational change. For cohorts with no direct experience of dictatorship, historical understanding and civic orientation are mediated primarily through education systems, public institutions, and political discourse rather than personal memory (Bernhard and Kubik 2014). Where institutional narratives are inconsistent or contested, younger generations often inherit fragmented interpretive frameworks that combine general awareness of repression with limited engagement in accountability-oriented or commemorative practices. Research on post-communist justice trajectories highlights how elite continuity, institutional weakness, and partisan competition have constrained the scope and durability of accountability measures in several countries of the region (Stan and Nedelsky 2015). Albania is frequently cited among the cases where transitional justice unfolded unevenly and without sustained political commitment, despite the exceptional severity of communist repression (Horne 2017). In such settings, the absence of authoritative institutional judgment complicates the transmission of coherent historical narratives and weakens the link between acknowledgment of past abuses and demands for reckoning. Recent studies suggest that these conditions are more likely to generate ambivalence or disengagement than outright denial or nostalgia. David (2014) shows that unresolved responsibility and accountability can lead to routinized forms of social accommodation in which the authoritarian past is neither fully repudiated nor rehabilitated. This line of research challenges linear models that assume a progression from recognition of repression to moral consensus and political action, pointing instead to the persistence of unresolved and weakly institutionalized memory regimes.

Conceptual approaches to ambivalence, indifference, and normalization

Building on these debates, a number of scholars have called for analytical frameworks capable of capturing societal orientations that fall between denial and nostalgia. Rather than treating ambivalence or indifference as residual categories or indicators of apathy, this literature emphasizes their structural conditioning by institutional contexts marked by delay, ambiguity, and omission. From this perspective, disengaged responses toward the authoritarian past reflect learned expectations about the limited relevance or efficacy of accountability in the absence of credible institutional signals. Recent theoretical contributions further underline that transitional justice influences societies not only through the presence of formal mechanisms but also through their absence, fragmentation, or postponement. The social effects of justice are shaped by how consistently institutions communicate moral boundaries and responsibilities over time, rather than by the mere existence of legal frameworks (Meierhenrich et al. 2023/2024). Where such signaling remains weak or contradictory, the literature suggests that collective orientations toward the past may stabilize around forms of normalization distinct from reconciliation or closure.

Taken together, these studies provide the analytical foundation for examines how recognition of past repression, limited engagement with accountability-oriented initiatives, and forms of attitudinal distance toward the authoritarian past emerge as patterned orientations in contexts marked by delayed and fragmented transitional justice. Rather than reflecting historical unawareness or civic withdrawal alone, these responses point to socially structured ways of relating to an unresolved past, shaped by prolonged institutional ambiguity and the absence of authoritative judgment.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopts a cross-sectional survey design to examine how young adults in Albania perceive the communist past, with particular attention to historical acknowledgment, evaluations of the regime, attitudes toward accountability, and levels of engagement with initiatives addressing authoritarian legacies. The methodological approach is informed by transitional justice research and post-authoritarian political sociology, which emphasize the importance of examining societal orientations toward the past beyond indicators of ideological nostalgia or explicit denial (Teitel 2000; Stan and Nedelsky 2015). The survey is employed as a diagnostic instrument to identify patterned configurations of responses within a context of prolonged institutional silence and delayed reckoning within a context characterized by prolonged institutional silence and delayed reckoning.

The study examines how contemporaneous perceptions and orientations are patterned within a post-authoritarian environment marked by fragmented transitional justice, treating these perceptions as socially meaningful outcomes shaped by long-term institutional trajectories rather than as individual-level attitudinal causes.

Survey instrument

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire composed of closed-ended items organized into five thematic domains: (1) awareness of communist-era repression, (2) general evaluation of the communist regime and its leadership, (3) self-declared nostalgia, (4) perceptions of accountability and justice, and (5) engagement and indifference toward initiatives addressing the communist past. Particular attention was paid to the design of response categories. "Not sure" and "not interested" options were intentionally included across multiple items to allow respondents to express uncertainty or disengagement.

Following approaches in transitional justice studies that emphasize the analytical significance of delay and institutional ambiguity, such responses are treated as substantively meaningful indicators of disengagement and uncertainty related to unresolved historical issues rather than as missing or residual data.

To ensure conceptual clarity and analytical transparency, the questionnaire was designed to operationalize the key constructs discussed in the literature, such as acknowledgment, evaluation, accountability orientation, engagement, and indifference, through clearly specified item groupings. Each analytical dimension corresponds to a defined set of closed-ended questions, allowing attitudes toward the communist past to be examined not as isolated opinions but as interrelated configurations.

Acknowledgment of repression is operationalized through items measuring recognition of human rights violations, political repression, discrimination, and restrictions on fundamental freedoms during the communist period (Questionnaire Section A). These items establish a baseline level of historical awareness and serve as a reference point for interpreting subsequent evaluative and engagement-related responses.

Evaluation of the communist regime and its leadership is measured through items assessing overall judgments of the regime and its central symbolic figure, Enver Hoxha (Questionnaire Section B). Response options were intentionally non-dichotomous, allowing respondents to express negative, positive, mixed, or disengaged ("not interested") positions. This design enables the identification of evaluative ambivalence rather than forcing polarized judgments.

Nostalgia is operationalized through items capturing respondents' understanding and interpretation of "nostalgia for communism" (Questionnaire Section C). Rather than measuring nostalgia as a single attitudinal scale, the questionnaire distinguishes between affective longing and support for political restoration, allowing the analysis to separate emotional memory from ideological endorsement.

Perceptions of accountability and justice are captured through items addressing awareness of discussions about punishment for communist-era crimes and attitudes toward responsibility for past abuses (Questionnaire Section D). These questions reflect transitional justice researches's emphasis on accountability as a normative signal and provide insight into the salience of justice-oriented discourse.

Engagement and indifference toward reckoning initiatives are operationalized through items measuring willingness to participate in symbolic or civic actions related to the communist past, such as signing petitions or engaging with memory-related initiatives (Questionnaire Section E;F). Crucially, response options include explicit "not interested" categories, allowing disengagement to be observed directly rather than inferred indirectly.

Analytical treatment of response categories

A deliberate methodological choice in this study concerns the analytical treatment of response categories such as "not interested" and "not sure." Rather than collapsing these responses into missing data or neutral categories, the analysis treats them as substantively meaningful indicators of disengagement and uncertainty. This approach is grounded in transitional justice studies that highlight the analytical relevance of ambiguity, uncertainty,

and non-engagement in contexts where accountability processes remain contested or incomplete. "Not interested" responses are interpreted as indicators of active disengagement from evaluative or civic tasks related to the past, while "not sure" responses capture uncertainty that may reflect fragmented intergenerational transmission, weak institutional narratives, or low everyday salience. Where analytically relevant, these categories are examined separately to avoid conflating disengagement with lack of information. *Table 1* summarizes the relationship between theoretical constructs, questionnaire sections, and analytical indicators used in the study.

Table 1. Conceptual constructs and questionnaire mapping

Analytical construct	Questionnaire section	Key indicators
Acknowledgment of repression	Section A	Recognition of human rights violations, discrimination, lack of freedoms
Evaluation	Section B	Assessment of regime and leadership; disengaged evaluations
Nostalgia	Section C	Interpretation of nostalgia as affective vs. political
Accountability orientation	Section D	Awareness of punishment discourse; responsibility attribution
Engagement / indifference	Section E	Willingness to participate; "not interested" responses
Everyday salience	Section F	Family and social discussion frequency

This mapping ensures coherence between theoretical claims, empirical indicators, and analytical interpretation, and allows the identification of attitudinal configurations rather than isolated responses.

Sample and data collection

The survey was administered anonymously using google form. The sample consists primarily of young adults belonging to a post-communist generation with no direct lived experience of the communist regime. This focus is analytically appropriate given prior research indicating that younger cohorts are especially sensitive to the presence or absence of institutionalized justice, educational narratives, and authoritative public memory (Bernhard and Kubik 2014; Horne 2017). Participation was voluntary, and no identifying information was collected. While the sample is not intended to be nationally representative, it is suitable for exploring patterned orientations toward the past within a cohort whose historical understanding is mediated primarily through institutional and cultural transmission rather than personal experience.

The analysis is primarily descriptive and interpretive. Frequency distributions establish baseline patterns of awareness, evaluation, and disengagement. Particular analytical weight is

given to expressions of indifference or non-engagement, which are interpreted as indicators of patterned relations to an unresolved past. Selected cross-tabulations explore associations between acknowledgment of repression, evaluations of the regime, and attitudes toward accountability and symbolic change. These associations are not interpreted causally but as indicative of broader memory configurations shaped by long-term institutional contexts (Olsen, Payne, and Reiter 2010; Subotić 2009).

Ethical considerations and scope limitations

Given the sensitivity of topics related to dictatorship and repression, the study adhered to standard ethical principles of social research. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. The analysis focuses on perceptions rather than on evaluating the effectiveness of specific transitional justice mechanisms. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting social orientations toward the past rather than as assessments of institutional performance. This scope is consistent with studies emphasizing the importance of examining the societal consequences of justice deficits for democratic culture and accountability norms (Stan and Nedelsky 2015; Sikkink 2011).

RESULTS

Sample overview

The analysis draws on an original online survey of 852 respondents. The sample consists primarily of young adults belonging to post-communist generations. Birth cohorts are distributed as follows in *Table 2*.

Table 2. Sample characteristics (N = 852)

Characteristic	Category	%	n
Gender	Women	78.4	668
	Men	19.7	168
Birth cohort	Before 1990	16.7	16
	1990–1995	21.7	142
	1996–2000	32.0	185
	2001–2005	29.6	273
Survey mode	Online questionnaire	100.0	252

Acknowledgment of repression as a shared baseline

Responses to awareness and acknowledgment items indicate high levels of recognition of the repressive character of the communist regime. On Question A1 ("Have you heard or learned about the communist period in Albania?"), 96.5% of respondents answered

affirmatively. Recognition of substantive repression is similarly high. On Question A2 ("Did serious human rights violations occur during the communist period?"), 92.0% responded "yes," while 5.9% selected "not sure" and 2.1% responded "no." On Question A3 ("Were social groups systematically discriminated against during communism?"), 90.0% responded affirmatively. Perceptions of individual freedom reinforce this pattern. On Question A4 ("Were citizens free to express opinions, choose education, and practice religion?"), 90.8% responded negatively, indicating that a large majority perceived fundamental freedoms as absent during the communist period. Taken together, these items show high levels of acknowledgment of repression across the sample.

Table 3. Core outcome distributions across analytical dimensions (%)

Item	Yes / Negative	No / Positive	Not sure	Not interested
Heard or learned about the communist period	96.5	1.1	2.0	–
Serious human rights violations occurred	92.0	2.1	5.9	–
Systematic discrimination of social groups	90.0	10.0	–	–
Citizens were free to express opinions and practice religion	9.2	90.8	–	–
Evaluation of Enver Hoxha	57.4 (negative)	12.0 (positive)	0.8 (mixed)	29.8
Meaning of "nostalgia for communism"	86.6 (affective longing)	13.4 (political return)	–	–
Willingness to sign decommunization petition	44.2	19.4	–	36.4

Note: "Not interested" responses are retained as analytically distinct categories.

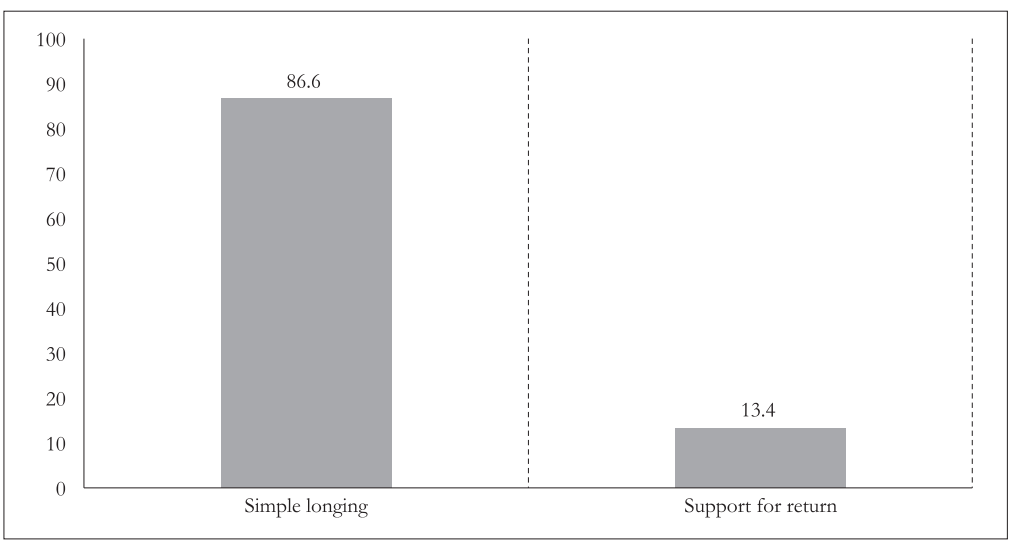
Evaluation of the regime's symbolic center and disengagement

Evaluation of the communist regime's central symbolic figure reveals a differentiated pattern. On Question B2 ("How do you evaluate the figure of Enver Hoxha?"), 57.4% evaluated him negatively, while 12.0% expressed a positive evaluation. A substantial proportion of respondents (29.8%) selected the response option "not interested," and 0.8% provided mixed evaluations. Cross-tabulations indicate that negative evaluation of Enver Hoxha is only weakly associated with willingness to engage in symbolic action related to the communist past.

Table 4. Associations between acknowledgment, evaluation, and engagement (N = 852)

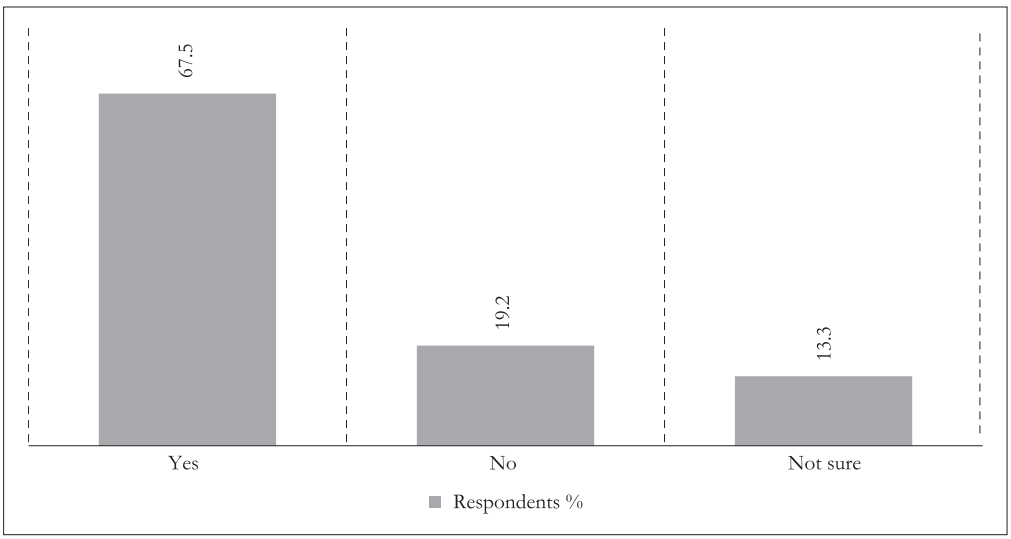
Association tested	χ^2	df	p-value	Cramér's V	N
Acknowledgment of repression × Petition engagement	23.55	4	< .001	0.12	852
Evaluation of Enver Hoxha × Petition engagement	114.97	10	< .001	0.26	852
Exposure to punishment discourse × Petition engagement	28.47	4	< .001	0.13	852

Cross-tabulation analyses reveal statistically significant but generally weak associations between acknowledgment of repression, exposure to accountability discourse, and willingness to engage in symbolic accountability through petition signing (Table 3). The strongest association is observed for evaluation of Enver Hoxha, although the effect remains moderate (Cramér's V = 0.26). Overall, these results show that recognition of repression and negative evaluation of the regime coexist with low levels of engagement in symbolic accountability initiatives.

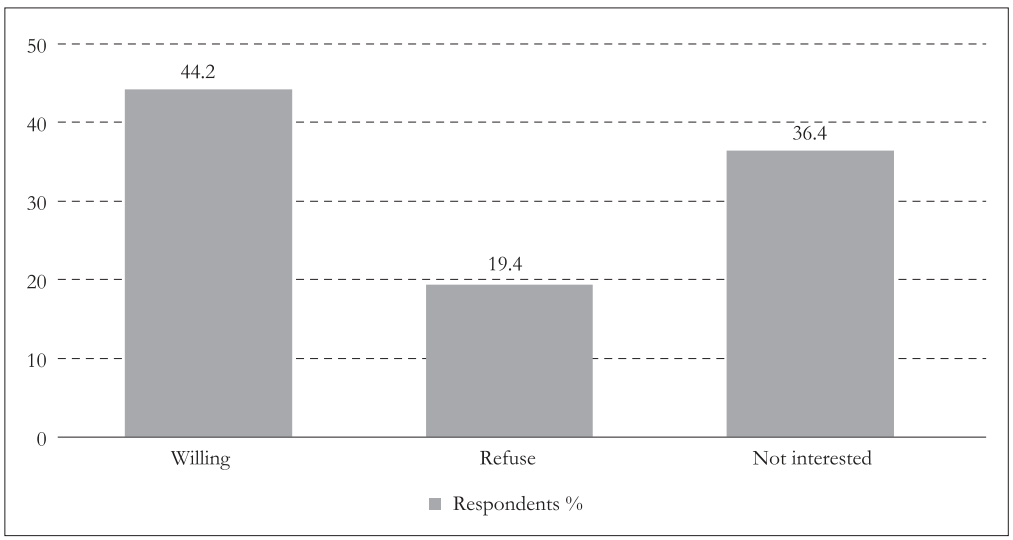


To distinguish affective memory from ideological endorsement, respondents were asked how they interpret claims of "nostalgia for communism." On Question C2, 86.6% selected the option indicating "simple longing for that time," while 13.4% interpreted nostalgia as support for a return to communism.

When asked whether they had heard discussions about the importance of punishing crimes committed during the communist period, 67.5% of respondents answered affirmatively, 19.2% negatively, and 13.3% selected "not sure." However, this exposure is accompanied by comparatively lower levels of engagement. On Question E2, which asked whether



respondents would be willing to sign a petition related to decommunization, 44.2% indicated willingness to engage, 19.4% refused, and 36.4% selected "not interested." Cross-tabulations show weak associations between acknowledgment of repression, exposure to accountability discourse, and willingness to engage in symbolic action.



Indicators of everyday discussion show limited salience of the communist past. Within the family context, 59.6% reported that Enver Hoxha is discussed "a little," 24.2% "not at all," and 16.2% "a lot." In broader social circles, discussion is more limited: 52.6% reported that the topic is "not discussed at all," 39.8% "a little," and 5.8% "a lot."

DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this study support a central claim: in post-communist Albania, widespread acknowledgment of authoritarian repression coexists with sustained disengagement from accountability-oriented and memory-related initiatives. This configuration departs from linear expectations in which awareness of past injustice is assumed to translate directly into demands for reckoning, justice, or institutional reform. Instead, the Albanian case illustrates a durable condition in which repression is recognized, yet its institutional consequences remain weakly articulated in contemporary civic life. High levels of recognition of human rights violations, systematic discrimination, and restrictions on freedom indicate that disengagement cannot plausibly be attributed to historical ignorance or denial. Awareness is present and consolidated. Yet this awareness remains only weakly connected to willingness to engage in symbolic or civic action related to accountability. his decoupling suggests that acknowledgment alone does not translate into sustained mobilization where authoritative institutional judgment is absent, particularly where justice processes are delayed, fragmented, or politically contested (Stan and Nedelsky 2015). Over time, engagement appears to lose normative urgency and becomes discretionary rather than expected.

This dynamic is evident in respondents' evaluations of the communist regime's symbolic center. While a majority assess Enver Hoxha negatively, a substantial proportion disengage from evaluative judgment altogether by selecting "not interested." Moreover, negative evaluation is only weakly associated with willingness to participate in decommunization-related action. Moral condemnation, in other words, persists without translating into civic activation. As Stasa and Dedej (2023) argue, transitional justice in Albania has frequently been instrumentalized as a partisan resource, producing symbolic gestures and polarization rather than credible accountability. Under such conditions, accountability practices risk becoming symbolic rather than mobilizing, as normative claims are instrumentalized rather than institutionally enforced (Subotić 2009). Disengagement should therefore be interpreted not as moral indifference, but as a patterned response to prolonged institutional ambiguity regarding responsibility and consequence.

The findings also refine interpretations of post-communist nostalgia. While nostalgia is often treated as evidence of authoritarian resilience or democratic fragility, the Albanian data point to a more limited and affective phenomenon. The overwhelming majority of respondents interpret "nostalgia for communism" as simple longing for the past rather than support for political restoration. Crucially, disengagement from accountability-oriented initiatives persists independently of nostalgic sentiment. Nostalgia does not function as an alternative political project, nor does it explain weak engagement. By empirically separating affective memory from political orientation, the analysis challenges culturalist explanations that attribute limited reckoning primarily to emotional attachment to the former regime, and instead highlights the role of institutional silence and weak moral signaling. A further insight concerns the relationship between justice salience and engagement. While many

respondents report exposure to public discourse about punishing communist-era crimes, this awareness does not translate into readiness for concrete action. High rates of "not interested" responses when engagement is operationalized suggest that disengagement represents a stable orientation rather than indecision or lack of information. Where accountability remains unresolved, responsibility diffuse, and institutional judgment ambiguous, justice discourse risks becoming normalized background noise. Indifference, in this sense, reflects a socially patterned response to prolonged uncertainty regarding whether engagement can produce meaningful outcomes.

Patterns of everyday memory transmission reinforce this normalization. Limited family and social discussion of the communist past, particularly among younger generations, indicate low everyday salience outside the private sphere. As communicative memory fades, institutional frameworks typically assume greater importance in structuring historical understanding. In Albania, however, delayed development of educational, commemorative, and archival infrastructures has left younger cohorts with few authoritative reference points. The result is not polarized memory conflict, but depoliticization: the past is acknowledged as repressive yet treated as settled, distant, and weakly relevant to present civic life (Bernhard and Kubik 2014).

Situated comparatively, Albania aligns with other post-communist cases characterized by delayed or uneven transitional justice, yet it also displays distinctive outcomes. As elsewhere, early accountability was constrained by elite continuity, institutional weakness, and political contestation (Horne 2017). Unlike contexts marked by enduring memory polarization, however, Albania exhibits relatively low levels of public conflict over the past. This suggests that delayed transitional justice does not generate uniform memory trajectories. In some cases, it fuels polarization or nostalgia; in others, as in Albania, it fosters ambivalence and disengagement rather than sustained polarization. Recent comparative research confirms that where justice remains incomplete, acknowledgment does not lead to closure but to coexistence with unresolved histories and weak civic engagement, particularly among generations without lived experience of repression (Kasmi 2024).

These findings should be interpreted within the limits of the study's design. The data are cross-sectional and non-representative, and causal relationships cannot be established. Orientations toward the past are also shaped by broader structural factors, including political distrust, economic insecurity, emigration, and post-socialist transformation. Nonetheless, the observed patterns indicate that prolonged absence of authoritative reckoning is associated with disengagement that becomes socially routinized rather than morally contested. The Albanian case thus highlights a central paradox of post-authoritarian transitions: societies may remember repression clearly while remaining disengaged from its institutional consequences. In such contexts, the challenge is not to generate awareness, but to confront the long-term effects of justice deferred. Without timely and authoritative reckoning, remembrance persists, but resolution does not.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how the communist past is situated in contemporary Albanian society among generations with no direct experience of dictatorship. The findings show that knowledge of repression and negative evaluations of the regime are widespread, yet they rarely translate into participation in initiatives aimed at accountability, commemoration, or symbolic change. The past is clearly recognized, but it is not treated as a matter that demands action in the present.

The analysis demonstrates that this pattern cannot be explained by nostalgia, denial, or lack of awareness. Instead, disengagement emerges as a stable orientation shaped by the long absence of authoritative judgment and sustained institutional engagement with communist-era crimes. Where responsibility remains diffuse and consequences unclear, involvement in reckoning-related activities appears discretionary rather than expected, even among those who reject the regime morally.

By foregrounding disengagement and indifference as empirical outcomes in their own right, the study broadens how post-authoritarian societies can be understood beyond familiar binaries of confrontation versus denial. The Albanian case suggests that when reckoning is postponed for decades, the relationship between past injustice and present civic life may loosen rather than intensify. This has implications not only for Albania, but for other societies in which delayed responses to authoritarian legacies risk rendering the past socially acknowledged yet politically inconsequential.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN RESOURCES IN THE HERITAGE OF ROMA HANDICRAFTS - WILLOW WEAVING IN GJIROKASTRA

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ABSTRACT

The craft of willow-based weaving among the Roma community of Gjirokastra is an early tradition of historical and identity importance, which is being challenged today. Before the 1990s, Roma had stable employment in the handicraft departments of the "Artistic" enterprise. Today, only 10-15 senior craftsmen/woman are active and work only on sporadic orders without institutional support or structure for human resources. Many factors influence the loss of the weaving tradition. The study is important because it analyzes and advocates for the risk of extinction of a unique cultural heritage and emphasizes the urgent need for institutional and community intervention to preserve the craft of willow weaving in the Roma community of Gjirokastra. The aim of the paper is to contribute to the establishment of a model for changing institutional and community initiatives and policies, which recognizes handicrafts as a source of identity and potential for social and economic development for the Roma community of Gjirokastra.

This study is based on a qualitative exploratory approach, aiming to understand the factors that are leading to the fading of the willow weaving tradition in the Roma community of Gjirokastra, as well as to identify concrete opportunities for the protection and intergenerational transmission of this craft. The selection of participants will be done through deliberate sampling (purposive sampling), aiming to represent the diversity of age, gender and experience. The data will be analyzed through thematic analysis.Recommendations the creation of an intergenerational mentoring program, institutional support for

craftsmen and young people, as well as the integration of crafts into cultural and educational policies to ensure the survival of the Roma artisanal heritage.

Keywords: *artisan, human fertilization, heritage, institutional support, Gjirokastra*

INTRODUCTION

Wicker weaving (baskets/canisters) is one of the oldest forms of craftsmanship, documented as early as 3000 BC in ancient Egypt and later developed throughout Persia, Rome and Europe as a functional technology and cultural expression (Wicker–Wikiwand, n.d.). Over the centuries, weaving skills have traveled across continents, adapting to local ecologies and social structures, while remaining dependent on the transmission of manual knowledge from one generation to the next. Today, despite its global revival driven by consumer interest in handmade and sustainable products (Thorpe, 2025; Godfrain, 2024), traditional craftsmanship faces increasing risks of extinction due to industrialization, migration and low attractiveness to younger generations (WCCE, 2020; Wang et al., 2023).

In Europe, willow weaving historically flourished in Portugal, Spain, France and the United Kingdom, but the craft has declined significantly since the 1960s – France alone has fallen from 15,000 basket makers in the 1950s to around 100 today (Thorpe, 2025). Similar patterns are observed across Central and Eastern Europe, where Roma communities historically played a central role in preserving weaving traditions, yet today face reduced transmission due to socio-economic pressures, stigma and limited market access (Parno et al., 2024; Myroniuk, 2016). Studies highlight that without strong human resources – skilled artisans who can learn, practice and innovate – the craft cannot survive even when raw materials and markets exist (Wang et al., 2023).

In Albania, willow weaving is legally recognized as part of the intangible cultural heritage and traditional crafts (Law No. 70/2016; Law No. 27/2018). However, the sector remains largely informal, unregulated and highly dependent on family transmission – especially within Roma communities (ILO, 2013; Together for Life, 2022). National initiatives to strengthen artisan training and market access exist, but their implementation remains fragmented and short-term. Roma artisans, who historically contributed significantly to local economies through basketry, now experience reduced demand, migration pressures and a lack of ongoing support structures.

Gjirokastra represents one of the last active micro-regions in Albania where willow weaving is still practiced by Roma families, especially in the suburban neighborhood of "Zinxhirës", where the community has lived for several decades. According to data from the Municipality of Gjirokaster (2022), 1,500-2,000 Roma reside in Gjirokaster, although INSTAT (2024) records only 192 individuals – illustrating a significant demographic under-reporting. Oral evidence collected during this study shows that before the 1990s, over 200 Roma artisans practiced willow weaving, forming a strong workforce that supported numerous

state-owned enterprises, including the Forestry Enterprise and the Artistic Enterprise. As former director Petro Ikonomidhi confirms: "Roma families worked seasonally in groups of 15-30 people, collecting and preparing willow for the artistic enterprise, and they were never left without work before the 1990s."

Referring to the "age" of the artisans, most are in their thirties and according to evidence they started weaving at the age of 6-13 and have up to 60 years of experience - however, only a small number of young Roma express interest in continuing the craft. Interviews with 10 older artisans and 5 young artisans show that transmission to younger generations is weakening due to lack of market access, insufficient raw materials, informal working conditions and emigration, mainly to Greece. However, examples such as Aleksi, Dallandyshja or Ramadani and the families of young artisans show that targeted interventions - training, market infrastructure and community support - can stimulate the engagement of young people.

Given this context, the dimension of human resources - knowledge carriers, mentors, apprentices, family networks - is the key factor if willow weaving is to survive in Gjirokastër. This study explores precisely this topic: the role, challenges, and sustainability of human resources in preserving Roma willow weaving as an intangible cultural heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The global context of wickerwork

Wickerwork is one of the oldest craft production techniques in the world, originating around 3000 BC in ancient Egypt, where baskets, chairs and various boxes were found in the tombs of the pharaohs (Wicker – Wikiwand, n.d.). From Egypt the techniques spread to Persia and ancient Rome, where cities such as Pompeii attest to the widespread use of wickerwork (Wicker – Wikiwand, n.d.). In Iron Age Europe, wickerwork also influenced the formation of Celtic motifs. Studies show that the craft declined after the 1960s, largely due to competition from plastics and industrial products, but also due to cultural stigmatization: "the craft was perceived as outdated and 'weird', alienating younger generations" (Thorpe 2025). In France, the number of artisans fell from 15,000 in the 1950s to around 100 today, most of them disconnected from the modern market (Thorpe 2025). At the same time, there is a contemporary revival of weaving, where brands such as Atelier Vime are bringing back traditional techniques by reworking the use of natural materials and reactivating local craftsmen (Godfrain 2024). This shows that weaving, although vulnerable, has the ability to recover when heritage and contemporary design are combined. Published international studies (Novellino & Ertuğ 2019) confirm this: weaving as a technique is an ecological, cultural and symbolic asset, linked to biodiversity, rituals, history and social organization. The loss of craftsmen, deforestation and youth apathy are seen as the biggest global threats.

The European context of crafts and the challenge of intergenerational transmission

The report of the World Council of Crafts – Europe (WCCE 2020) highlights that traditional crafts on the continent suffer from two main challenges: Low interest among young people, due to low wages and lack of economic security.

Lack of professional programs and government support.

According to the report, artisans often "balance production with marketing without specialized skills", while the sector lacks competencies in marketing, self-branding, pricing and use of technology (WCCE 2020). This makes businesses fragile and disconnects them from modern markets.Other studies (Parno et al. 2024) emphasize that "traditional Roma crafts in Europe are on the verge of extinction: "very little has been written about Roma crafts, reflecting their decline". According to them, the preservation of the craft depends on the presence of the grandfather or father as a carrier of the skill, which is in full accordance with the data from Gjirokastra. On the other hand, European literature emphasizes that crafts are identity markers of European culture, representing "heritage, craftsmanship and tradition rooted in history" (WCCE 2020).

The Albanian context and crafts as endangered heritage

In Albania, legislation defines crafts as hand-made products with simple tools (Law 70/2016; Law 27/2018). Likewise, craft traditions are classified as intangible assets that must be preserved and transmitted (Law 27/2018, article 59). However, national studies (Together for Life 2022) show that: weaving crafts are endangered by the lack of labor, Roma artisans work mainly informally, young people do not see the craft as a sustainable profession,there are no state structures for the mass cultivation of willow (unlike in African or Southeast Asian countries).

This overlaps with ILO standards, where artisans are often considered part of the informal economy, without contracts, insurance or institutional access (ILO 2023). This informality makes it difficult for young people to engage in a profession without economic security, jeopardizing their heritage.

The context of Gjirokastra and the Roma community in the "Zinxhira" neighborhood

According to INSTAT (2024), 192 Roma live in Gjirokastra, while the Local Plan for Roma 2022–2025 reports 1,500–2,000 Roma (3.8% of the population). The literature notes that such discrepancies are common in Roma communities due to mobility, seasonal migration and informality (Municipality of Gjirokastra 2022). Historically, weaving has been the most widespread profession of Roma in Gjirokastra, as confirmed by Petrit Ikonomidhi, former director of the Artistic Enterprise (1973–1991), who states that:

- 15–30 Roma families were engaged in the season, the whole family worked, but only the parents were paid";

- Roma were never unemployed before the 1990s,
- willow procurement was carried out near Subashi, often sleeping by the river"

He adds that, *two Roma artisans were employed full-time at the enterprise, while the family products (canisters and baskets) were made "secretly", since the enterprise used quality willow other.*

According to international studies, this form of family organization is characteristic of Roma crafts - where knitting serves as identity, family economy, and heritage (Myroniuk 2016).

EU programmes in Gjirokastër (IRCA 2023; EU Nalas 2023) have opened training courses and a local craft market, initiatives that aim precisely to curb the risk of the craft disappearing, including:

- 10 artisans in marketing and sales training,
- 150 artisans benefiting from traditional market infrastructure,
- construction of a community centre for 80 people.

Theoretical approach: heritage, transmission and human resources

The literature considers craft heritage as specialized human capital, accumulated through physical practices and embodied experience (Dewi 2022). UNESCO emphasizes that crafts constitute "knowledge, creativity and identity" that are transmitted through usta-chirak systems within the family, but today these systems are collapsing due to the lack of students (UNESCO, n.d.). This is directly related to the case of the Roma of Gjirokastra, where our interviews show that:

- old artisans learned the craft at the age of 6–13,
- they inherited it from their grandfather and father,
- today, the young are less interested,
- only a few positive cases (Aleksi, Dallandyshja, Blerina) show possible renewal.

In the literature it is estimated that "if the last artisan leaves without passing it on to anyone, the tradition is lost within a single generation" (Wang et al, 2023). This is the current situation of the Roma artisans of Gjirokastra.

FORMULATION OF STUDY OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

General Study Objective

The general objective of this study is to analyze the importance of human resources – Roma artisans – in the intergenerational heritage of the willow weaving craft in Gjirokastra, assessing the ways of knowledge transmission, current challenges, factors that influence the

continuity of the craft and the role of public and local policies in preserving this precious cultural heritage.

Specific Study Objectives

- To identify the age of the beginning of the craft and the family/community environment where the art of weaving was learned.
- To analyze the role of human resources (artisans) in keeping the tradition alive and in its transmission between generations.
- To evaluate the perceptions of Roma artisans on cultural identity and its connection with the craft.
- To document the current challenges that artisans face in their work (lack of market, lack of interested young people, informality, lack of institutional support).
- To identify the factors that risk the extinction of the craft, with a particular focus on the lack of continuity of the younger generations.
- To analyze the contribution of local and international policies (such as the Roma Inclusion Plan, Poznan Declaration, EU projects) in supporting the craft.
- To suggest practical mechanisms for preserving Roma cultural heritage by strengthening the role of human resources.

Central Research Questions

The study questions are constructed to guide the research process and data analysis:

Main research question:

How do human resources (Roma artisans) contribute to the preservation, development and intergenerational heritage of the willow weaving craft in Gjirokastra?

Supporting Research Questions

- At what age and under what circumstances did the artisans learn the craft?
- Who was the main source of knowledge transmission (grandfather, father, mother, community)?
- To what extent do the artisans consider weaving part of their family and community identity?
- How many years of experience do the artisans have and how do they assess their role in the community?
- Is the craft of weaving in danger of being lost? What are the reasons?
- What are the main challenges affecting the continuity of the craft?

- Have the artisans had the opportunity to transmit the craft to the younger generations? With what result?
- How do local policies, projects and institutional interventions affect the preservation of the craft?

Link between research objectives and questions

These questions were designed to:

- structure the interviews,
- orient the thematic analysis,
- link the individual experiences of artisans to theoretical frameworks and institutional policies,
- clearly demonstrate the role of artisans as the main source of living heritage.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study uses a qualitative approach, which is best suited to understanding in depth the experiences, knowledge, perceptions and practices of Roma artisans working with willow weaving. The qualitative approach enables the analysis of the craft as a social, cultural and family process, focusing on intergenerational heritage and the role of human resources in the survival of this craft.

The qualitative method was chosen for several reasons:

- artisans are a group with a low level of education, who do not easily respond to structured questionnaires;
- the craft of weaving is linked to family, emotional and historical traditions that require narrative explanation;
- the craft practitioners describe the processes through personal stories.

Design type

The study follows a phenomenological design, which aims to understand the lived experience of the artisans. Phenomenology is particularly appropriate when seeking to analyze:

- the ways in which individuals experience the craft,
- the cultural significance attributed to weaving,
- the ways in which knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next,
- perceptions of the risk of the craft disappearing,
- challenges related to human resources and informality.

Because the craft of weaving is part of the collective Roma identity, the phenomenological design enables the discovery of internal dimensions that structural instruments cannot capture.

Research methods used

The main method is semi-structured, individual and family interviews. This method was chosen for several reasons:

- It increases flexibility, allowing for interpretation, clarification, and deepening of questions.
- It adapts to the low educational level of many artisans, who could not complete written questionnaires.
- It reflects the traditional way of transmitting knowledge within the Roma community through, storytelling, conversation, and observation.
- It allows the collection of living narratives, which are essential for the analysis of intergenerational heritage.

The interviews were conducted in the homes, courtyards and work spaces of the artisans, to ensure a natural environment where they felt free and safe. In two cases, the interviews were conducted in the huts, where the artisans continued to work during the interview process.

Research instrument: 7 interview questions

The final instrument consists of 7 main questions, which were created after calibrating an initial set of 14 questions. The questions are designed to:

- measure the dimensions of intergenerational heritage,
- explore the source of knowledge,
- identify professional experience over time,
- identify current challenges in human resource management,
- assess the interest of the younger generation,
- analyze perceptions about the future of the craft.

Instrument Questions (Interview)

- How old were you when you first learned the craft of willow weaving?
- Who taught you the craft of weaving? (grandfather, parent, other family member, someone from the community?)
- Do you consider weaving part of your family and community identity?(Yes/No- Why?)
- How many years have you been working as a craftsman?

- Do you think the craft is being lost today?.(Why yes or why not?)
- What are the biggest difficulties you face today in your craft?
- Have you had the opportunity to teach the young people in your family? If so: how many of them continue the craft?

Table 1. Interview questions and the analytical purpose of each question

NO	Interview question	Analytical purpose / variable being measured	Link to the topic "The Importance of Human Resources"
1	How old were you when you first learned the craft of willow weaving?	Measures the start time dimension (structural variable for inheritance).	It shows the duration of experience, early professional formation, and the critical role of early human resources trajectories.
2	Who taught you the craft of weaving? (grandfather, parent, other family member, someone from the community?)	Measures the start time dimension (structural variable for inheritance).	Identifies the agents of human capital formation (father, grandfather, family) and the structure of knowledge inheritance
3	Do you consider weaving part of your family and community identity? (Yes/No- Why?)	It measures the identity dimension (cultural variable).	It shows the role of artisans as cultural carriers, not just economic ones. It helps to understand the motivation for continuity.
4	How many years have you been working as a craftsman?	It measures experience as an artisan, as an indicator of the human capital of the craft.	It defines the accumulated human capital and the foundation on which today's heritage rests.
5	Do you think the craft is being lost today?.(Why yes or why not?)	Measures the perception of risk to art inherited over the centuries (heritage sustainability variable)	It helps identify threats to human resources and factors that influence youth exclusion.
6	What are the biggest difficulties you face today in your craft?	It measures structural and economic challenges (lack of willow, market, health, migration).	Identifies obstacles that weaken the sustainability of human resources, such as the lack of willow, market, infrastructure.
7	Have you had the opportunity to teach the young people in your family? If so: how many of them continue the craft?	Measures intergenerational inheritance (key variable for human resource management).	It shows whether human resources are being renewed and how endangered the chain of inheritance is.

Why were these 7 questions chosen?

These questions cover the entire cycle of human resource management in crafts:

A. Natural recruitment / entry into the craft (Questions 1 & 2)

- Measures the initial age and source of knowledge.
- Shows the craft as a family and community competence.

B. Professional identity and motivation (Question 3)

- Analyzes the cultural and emotional aspect of the profession.
- Has a direct impact on the continuity of the craft.

C. Experience and human capital (Question 4)

- Measures experience in years, which is related to the quality of production and the ability to train young people.

D. Risk of losing the craft (Question 5)

- Identifies factors that threaten intergenerational heritage.

E. Lack of resources and structural obstacles (Question 6)

- Reveals the barriers that limit artisans: willow, market, informality, age.

F. Transfer of knowledge to the new generation (Question 7)

- The most important indicator for the long-term sustainability of human resources.

Instrument development process

- 14 questions were initially designed.
- They were piloted with 6 artisans (3 men and 3 women).
- They were assessed for clarity, comprehensibility and cultural appropriateness.
- 7 final questions were selected, which showed the highest comprehensibility and produced the most valuable information.

Data collection method

- The interview was conducted in October–November, although the weather conditions were difficult.
- A total of 10 older artisans (5 men, 5 women) were interviewed.
- The interviews were conducted:
  - in their homes,
  - in their yards,
  - in two cases in work huts, where they continued to make baskets.

- The artisans were found through:
  - prior community meetings,
  - references from residents,
  - contacts inherited from local NGOs.
- The interviews were audio-recorded, notes were taken and then transcribed verbatim.

Adaptation to the Roma context in Gjirokastra

Due to the characteristics of the community:

- low educational level,
- advanced age of the artisans,
- difficulties in reading/writing,
- nature of manual work,
- interview was the most appropriate and ethical form of data collection.

Short, clear questions were used, with examples and sufficient time for reflection.

SAMPLE SELECTION

Sample Type

The sample is a purposive sampling, selected with clear criteria:

- to be active artisans or have traditionally worked with willow,
- to be part of the Roma community in the "Zinxhira" neighborhood,
- to represent both generations (old and young).

This type of sample is commonly used in ethnographic studies and handicraft studies, because it aims at specialized knowledge and not statistical representation.

Sample Composition

- 10 old artisans (5 men + 5 women)
- 5 young artisans

Total: 15 participants

Selection criteria include:

- over 15 years of experience (for old artisans),
- recognized role in the community,
- current active practice or recent interruption,
- willingness to be interviewed.

Reason for choosing this sample

- The Roma community in Gjirokastër is small (192 inhabitants according to INSTAT, up to 2000 according to local data), so a small sample is representative for this type of study.
- Willow weaving is a specialized craft, so only active or well-known artisans can provide valid data.
- The study requires depth, not statistical breadth.

DATA ANALYSIS

(based on 7 interview questions and existing answers)

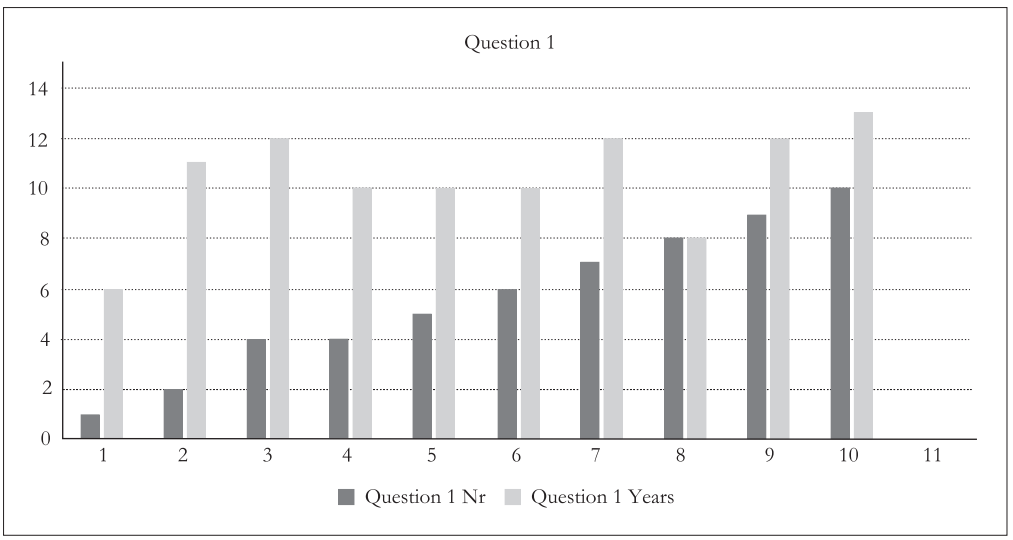
Source: semi-structured interviews with 10 older artisans (5 women, 5 men). The graphs are constructed from transcribed responses; in some questions, mentions may be multiple (e.g. 'grandfather and father').

Question 1. How old were you when you first learned the craft?

The craft is learned very early: the range is 6–13 years (mean ≈ 10.7 years). This shows that weaving was learned as part of family upbringing and everyday life, not as a skill acquired later**.**

Illustrative quotes (selected):

- "I was 6 years old when I took my first steps." — INT.1 Mihane Ahmet (66 years old)
- "I was 8 years old and I started competing with my sister." — INT.7 Vasil Xhemali (71 years old)
- "I was 13 years old when I started doing my first job." — INT.8 Zenepe Jemini (73 years old)



Question 2. Who taught them the craft of weaving?

Transmission is mainly within the family: the father/parent and grandfather emerge as the most frequent teachers. In some cases, the 'neighborhood/community' is mentioned as the environment where the craft was widespread and children learned by observation.

Illustrative quotes (selected):

- "My grandfather taught me weaving... and the neighborhood was engaged in this craft." — INT.1 Mihane Ahmet
- "I learned the craft from my grandfather and father... The neighborhood used to be bustling with willow weaving." — INT.2 Istref Ahmet
- "I was 13 years old when I went with my father and mother to the river." — INT.10 Drita Ajnazi

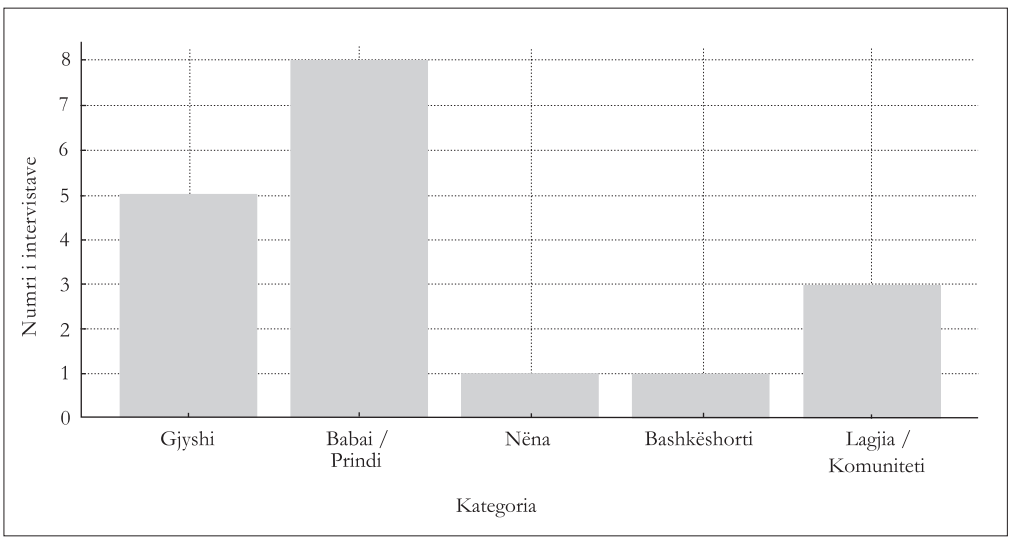


Figure 2. *Kush e mësoi zanatin? (përmendje; mund të jetë më shumë se 1/kund)*

Question 3. Do you consider knitting part of your family and community identity?

The answers reinforce knitting as an element of identity: it is related to tradition, dignity of living, craftsmanship and pride. The graph shows the main themes coded by the answers; one answer may contain several themes.

Illustrative quotes (selected):

- "It is our identity... with two simple tools... we turn production into art." — INT.2 Istref Ahmet
- "We identify with knitting... this craft cannot be done by just anyone." — INT.7 Vasil Xhemali
- "I felt proud... others identified us... as unique masters." — INT.10 Drita Ajnazi

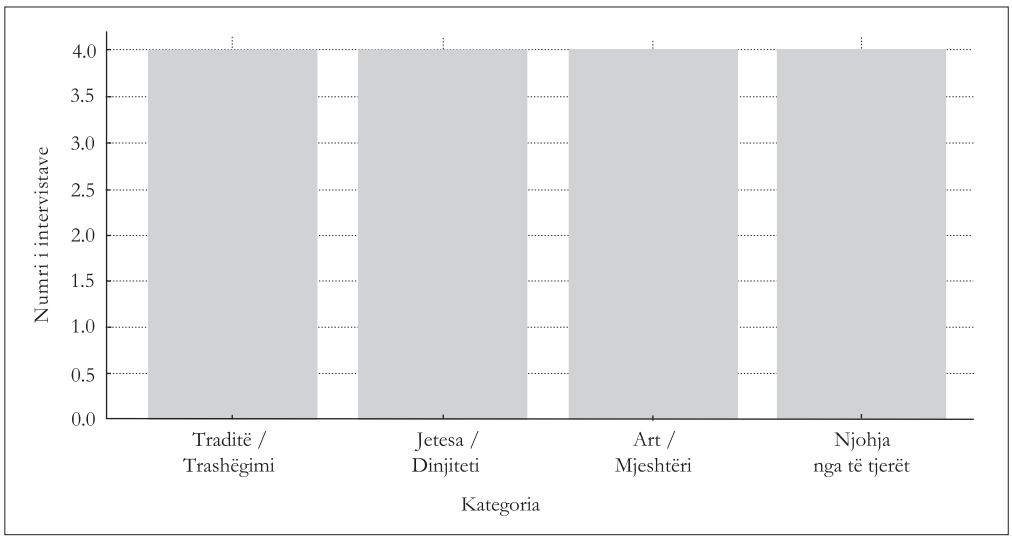


Figure 3. *Thurja si identitet; temat e përmendura (kodim tematik; shumëfish i mundshëm)*

Question 4. How many years have you been working as a craftsman?

The declared experience is long-term: among the reported values, the minimum average is ≈ 48.7 years. This presents the craft as a 'life's work', continued even beyond life changes (other jobs, emigration, etc.).

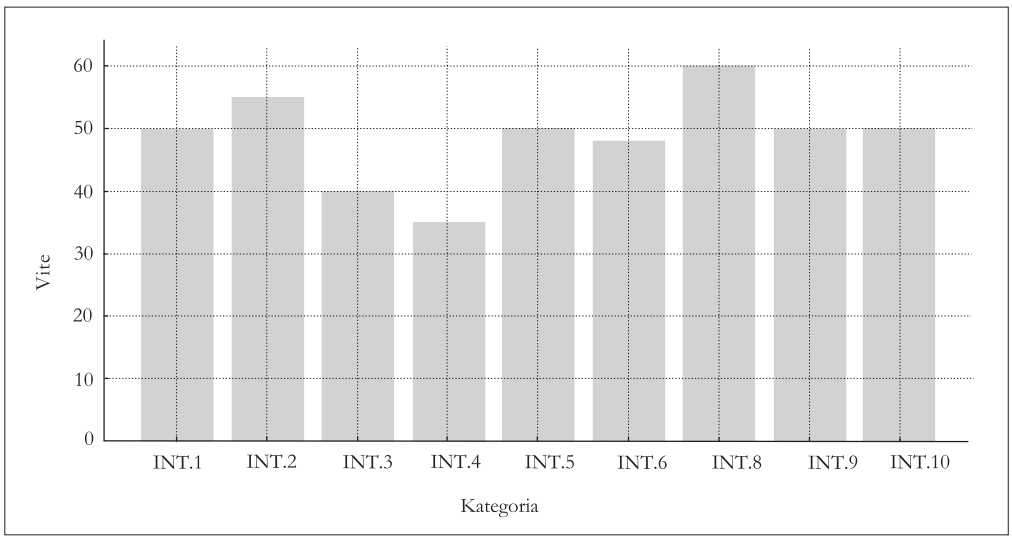


Figure 4. *Vite përvojë si artizan (vlera minimale kur thonë "më shumë se")*

Note: when they say 'more than', the minimum value is taken in the graph. INT.7 does not have a full figure in the transcript provided.

Illustrative quotes (selected):

- "I have been weaving for more than half a century..." — INT.2 Istref Ahmet
- "I have been working with willow for 48 years." — INT.6 Besim Mehmet
- "It has been 60 years since I stopped..." — INT.8 Zenepe Jemini

Question 5. Do you think the craft is being lost today? Why?

In the given part of the interviews for this question (6 answers), the majority see the craft in danger due to lack of interest and emigration.

A more optimistic answer appears, when the craft continues to be kept within the family.

Illustrative quotes (selected):

- "...only one of them is inheriting it, which shows that this craft is in danger of being lost." — INT.1 Mihane Ahmet
- "There is no interest... if it continues like this, this tradition will fade." — INT.2 Istref Ahmet
- "If the state does not intervene... this craft will be lost." — INT.3 Guri Shuaipaj
- "...we have no reason to neglect it." — INT.5 Mustafa Ajnasi

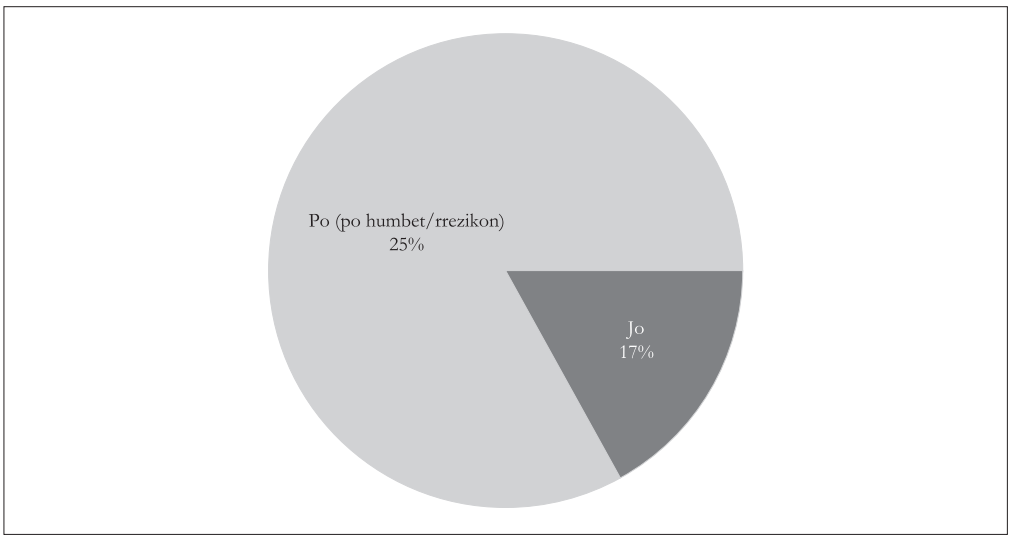


Figure 5. *A po humbet zanati? (bazuar në 6 intervista të dhëna për këtë pyetje)*

Note: the graph is based on only 6 transcribed responses that were given for Question 5.

Question 6. What are the biggest difficulties today?

The dominant problem is the supply of willow (raw material), mentioned by all: lack of quantity, seasonality and physical impossibility to provide it. Slowly, the need for cultivation plots and storage is also emerging, which would make production more sustainable.

Illustrative quotes (selected):

- "The biggest problem... is the supply of willow... age conditions us." — INT.1 Mihane Ahmet
- "The biggest problem is the supply of willow... I am conditioned, I continue to produce." — INT.2 Istref Ahmet
- "I have many requests... but I have a shortage of willow... young unemployed." — INT.6 Besim Mehmet
- "The lack of a large warehouse... Even the rivers are not very safe now." — INT.7 Vasil Xhemali

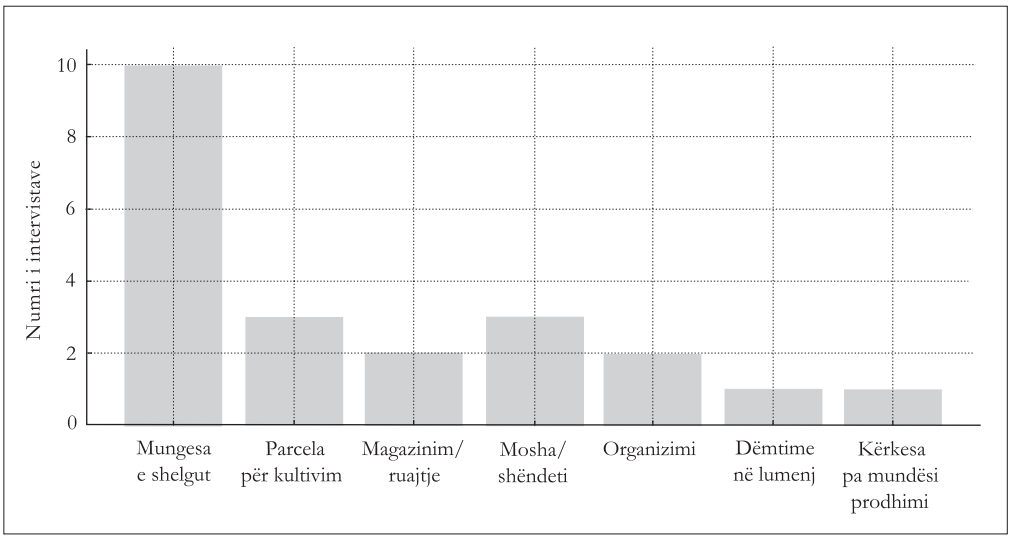


Figure 6. *Vështirësitë kryesore (tema; shumëfish i mundshëm)*

Question 7. Have you taught the young people in the family? How many of them continue?

Continuity among young people is fragile: there are families where no one continues, and families where the continuation is only partial (help, not full-time, marketing). The strongest cases of continuity appear when a young person is taught directly in the family and is practically involved.

Illustrative quotes (selected):

- "Not any of them and this hurts me." — INT.3 Guri Shuaipaj
- "Only one of the boys... but not full-time... the clothing trade with Greece." — INT.2 Istref Ahmet

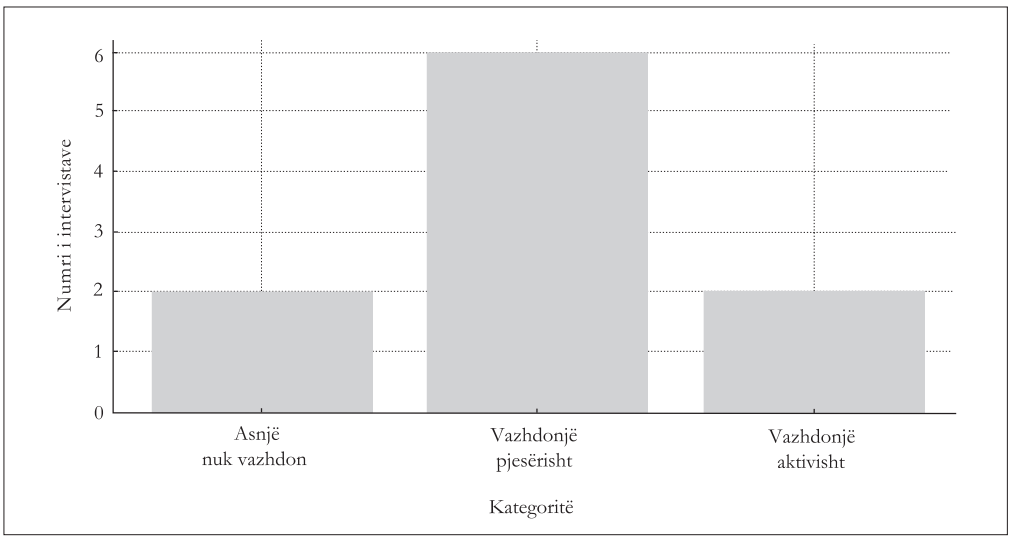


Figure 7. *Vazhdimësia te tue rinjtë (vlerësim nga përgjigjet)*

Note: the categorization 'actively/partially/none' is made based on the content of the responses.

- "There was interest when NGOs applied for projects... these initiatives last a while." — INT.7 Vasil Xhemali
- "The son's daughter-in-law... has become a craftswoman... I am teaching my grandson (Alex)." — INT.8 Zenepe Jemini
- "The grandchildren are interested... they learn from their grandfather and their fathers." — INT.9 Fize Ajnazi

Young artisans

Young artisans are mainly motivated by the desire to preserve tradition and cultural identity. They engage in crafts as a way to preserve their family heritage and contribute to their community.

- "I don't want to leave my country, so I decided to get an education, learn and invest in the heritage of my ancestors."

Their journey is challenging due to the lack of a market and competition with industrial products.

- "The journey is long and the challenges are many, but I want to continue this craft because it is part of our history."

Involvement in programs like the Craft Incubator has helped them increase their self-confidence and professional skills.

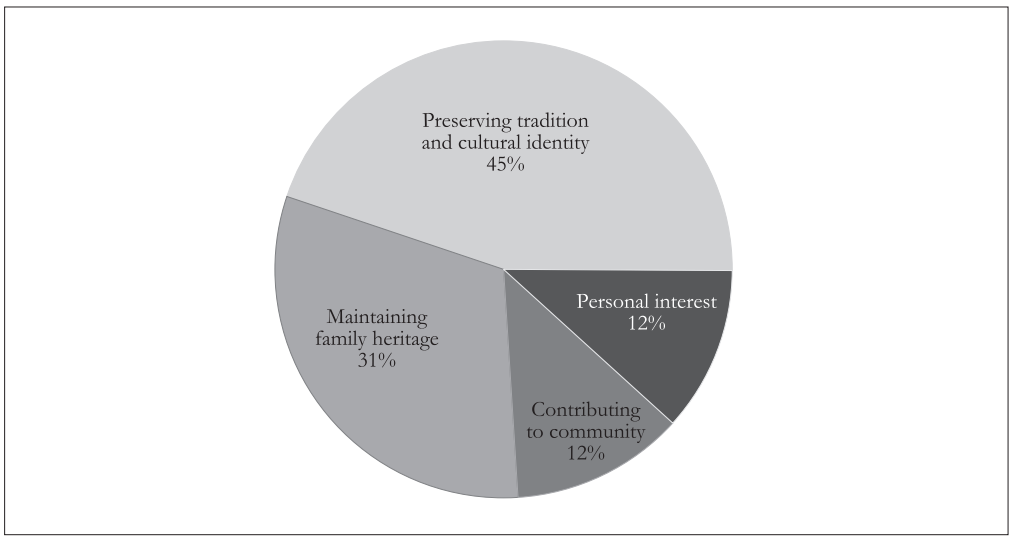


Figure 8. *Motivation of Young Artisans*

- "I became part of the youth group of the Craft Incubator and this has helped me have more confidence in myself."

They aim to bring innovation to their products, while preserving the traditional essence.

- "I want to bring something new, but while preserving what has made us special as a community."

CONCLUSIONS

The study on the importance of human resources in the heritage of the willow weaving craft in the Roma community of Gjirokastra clearly shows that artisans constitute the main axis of preserving this craft, while the process of intergenerational transmission is weakening at a rapid pace. The analysis of 15 interviews (10 old artisans and 5 young ones) draws some clear conclusions:

Knitting is an identity, not just a profession

Almost all the artisans interviewed link the craft to family and community identity. For them, knitting is not just a source of income, but an essential part of their self-understanding as Roma.

- "This is our identity. Without knitting, we are not known." – Istref Ahmet, 70 years old
- "We do not knit… we turn willow into art." – Zenepe Jemini, 73
- "There is no Roma family without a basket made by us. They speak for us." – Vasil Xhemali, 71

Starting at a very young age guaranteed high craftsmanship

Data shows that the craft was usually learned from the age of 8–13, creating a strong intergenerational continuum.

- "I was 6 when I took my first steps." – Mihane Ahmet, 66
- "At the age of 8, it took me a year to make my first end." – Vasil Xhemali

This early start gave children enough time to develop technical skills and a sense of responsibility for the tradition.

Intergenerational transmission is in serious danger

All the old masters express concern about the lack of interest of the young.

- "None of my children are interested… it hurts me." – Guri Shuaipaj
- "We are the last generation… who will we leave this craft to?" – Vasil Xhemali
- "Young people are leaving. This job no longer seems like life to them." – Bukurie Ajnazi

However, there are isolated positive cases:

- "I want to be like my grandmother and become a master like her." – Aleksi, 15 years old
- "I don't want to leave my country, I want to continue the legacy." – Dallandyshja, young artisan

Lack of willow – the biggest technical risk

The lack of natural resources is a common obstacle for all artisans.

- "Willow is our life… but we can't provide it." – Istref Ahmet
- "We have clients, but we don't have raw materials." – Besim Mehmet
- "We need our own plot… otherwise it will disappear." – Zenepe Jemini

Economic changes have weakened the artisan community

The modern economy, emigration, lack of a market, casual jobs and informality make the craft less attractive to young people.

- "We work in difficult conditions… beautiful work, but it impoverishes you." – Ilir Jemini
- "Our baskets are art, but there is no sustainable market." – Blerina Jemini

The role of women is powerful and often invisible

Women not only weave, but also transmit skills, take care of the willow and support the family.

- "I am still in the yard with the willow every day, even today that I am 73 years old." – Zenepe Jemini
- "I learned it from my mother-in-law and now I am in love with the craft." – Blerina Jemini

Artisans seek institutional support – not just short-term projects

Most NGO treatments and programs are temporary.

- "Training is good, but it takes a while… tomorrow we will be out of work." – Vasil Xhemali
- "We need a workshop, a sustainable market, not a one-day visit." – Mustafa Ajnasi

CONCLUSION

The heritage of willow weaving in Gjirokastra is a unique cultural asset, where the knowledge of Roma masters is the most important source for its survival. Without these artisans—without their golden hands, their experience, their memory and their stories—this craft cannot continue.

The data shows that:

Weaving is a symbol of identity and a form of cultural resistance.

Willow scarcity, migration and the informal economy are the main risks.

The heritage is only living thanks to a generation of older artisans.

Young people can only return to the craft if dignified working and market conditions are created.

The craft is at a critical point: either institutions intervene now, or knitting will be lost within a generation — just as the masters themselves warn:

"It will disappear… if we don't react today, tomorrow will be too late." – Vasil Xhemali

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on data analysis, interviews with 10 old artisans and 5 young artisans, academic literature and the national and European legal framework, the following recommendations are presented for the preservation, development and management of human resources that ensure the intergenerational heritage of willow weaving in the Roma community of Gjirokastra.

Creation of a Local Plan for Roma Handicraft Heritage

Problem: Artisans are aging, young people are not inheriting it massively, institutional structure is missing.

Supporting quotes:

- "The masters are aging… who will we leave this craft to?" (Vasil Xhemali, 71 years old)
- "There is no interest from young people… if it continues like this, this tradition will fade." (Istref Ahmeti, 70 years old)

Recommendation:

- The Municipality of Gjirokastër should draft a special plan for Roma artisan services, linked to the Local Plan for Roma and Egyptians.
- Create clear objectives for the preservation of craftsmen, the training of young people and the development of markets.

Opening a "Willow Weaving Heritage Center"

Problem: Artisans produce in difficult conditions, there is a lack of space for work, exhibition and cultivation of willow.

Supporting quotes:

- "We work in yards and huts… at least we had a place to keep the willow." (Blerina Jemini)
- "The lack of willow plots is the biggest problem." (Besim Mehmet)

Recommendation:

- Building a multifunctional center with:
- Collective workshop
- Willow storage space
- Training environment
- Sales point
- Mini-museum for the history of the craft
- This center will serve as a sustainable institution for craft heritage.

Certified training program for young people of the Roma community

Problem: Decline in intergenerational transmission.

Supporting quotes:

- "I have 6 children and none of them are interested, they find it hard work." (Gurije Shuaipaj, 61 years old)
- "I want to become a master like my grandfather." (Ramadan, 15 years old)
- "I want to inherit my grandmother's craft." (Aleksi)

Recommendation:

- Introducing the willow weaving curriculum in the Public Vocational Training Center.
- Establish 6-month programs with professional certification.

- Offer scholarships to interested young people to cover transportation, materials and a symbolic reward for work.

Establish a formal willow supply chain

Problem: The lack of willow is the No. 1 obstacle to production.

Supporting quotes:

- "Willow is the biggest problem… we can't provide the quantities." (Mustafa Ajnasi, 70 years old)
- "When we were young, we used to run along the river… today we don't have the opportunity anymore." (Istref Ahmeti)

Recommendation:

- Establish communal plots for willow cultivation.
- Cooperation agreement with the forestry enterprise.
- Re-activate traditional clearing and pruning practices.
- Use of European models of "willow farms".

Formalize the work of artisans according to ILO standards

Problem: Artisans work entirely informally.

Reference (ILO, 2023):

- "Informal productive activities… are not covered by formal arrangements."

Recommendation:

- Register artisans as independent professionals.
- Inclusion in social and health insurance with subsidy schemes.
- Provide legal assistance for the certification of artisanal activity according to Law no. 70/2016.

Building a marketing platform and local brand "Roma Crafts Gjirokastër"

Problem: Weak market, lack of exposure, competition from industrial products.

Supporting quotes:

- "There is no market… we know how to work, but we don't know where to sell them." (Ilir Jemini)
- "They used to take our baskets for fruits and vegetables, today they are in demand but they don't recognize us." (Bukurie Ajnazi)

Recommendation:

- Creating a certified label for Roma products.
- Local and national e-commerce platform.
- Annual cultural fairs in Gjirokastra.
- Partnerships with the tourism sector (hotels, agrotourism, restaurants).

Building a system for documenting and archiving the craft

Problem: The craft can be lost within a generation.

Literature (UNESCO):

- "If skilled artisans retire without passing on their knowledge, craft traditions can disappear within a single generation."

Recommendation:

- Video recording of weaving techniques.
- Audio-visual interviews of old masters.
- Creation of a public digital archive in cooperation with the University of Gjirokastra.

Encouraging further scientific studies and long-term monitoring

Recommended:

- Periodic studies on intergenerational transmission.
- Monitoring of the craft market and economic impact.
- Specialized anthropological and ethnographic studies.

Financial support through national and European mechanisms

The Municipality and NGOs should apply to:

- IPA Funds
- EU Creative Europe
- UNESCO ICH Funds
- Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)
- Poznan Declaration funds and commitments

This funding should be used for:

- Training
- Infrastructure
- Marketing
- Creation of a craft center
- Provision of raw materials

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TRENDS IN TRANSFUSION-TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS AMONG BLOOD DONORS IN ALBANIA (2016–2024): IMPACT OF SEROLOGY AND NUCLEIC ACID TESTING

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ABSTRACT

Background: Epidemiological data on transfusion-transmitted infections (TTIs) among blood donors are essential for safeguarding blood supply and monitoring the impact of vaccination programs, screening strategies, and population-level epidemiological shifts.

Methods: We conducted a retrospective observational study, analysing blood donations collected at the National Blood Transfusion Center, Tirana, between January 2016 and December 2024. Donations from family and voluntary donors aged 18–65 years were included. Screening for HBV, HCV, and HIV was performed using both conventional serology and nucleic acid testing (NAT).

Results: A total of 203,591 blood donations were collected, representing approximately 70% of all national donations. The number of donations increased significantly during the study period. HBsAg prevalence declined significantly, from 4.90% in 2016 to 2.79% in 2024. Anti-HCV and HIV prevalence remained low and stable, with no significant temporal trends.

NAT screening identified additional HBV infections, including occult cases, highlighting residual transfusion risks not captured by serology alone.

Conclusions: Between 2016 and 2024, TTI prevalence among Albanian blood donors showed a marked decline in HBsAg, while HCV and HIV remained low and stable. The findings emphasize the importance of epidemiological data and confirm the critical role of NAT in complementing serological testing to ensure blood safety.

INTRODUCTION

Measures to prevent the transmission of transfusion-transmitted infections (TTIs) are multidimensional and have evolved over time (Dean, Wade, Roback 2018). Epidemiological data on TTIs among blood donors are crucial for ensuring the safety and adequacy of the blood supply. Temporal trends in infections such as HBV, HCV, and HIV provide insight into the impact of vaccination programs, improvements in screening technologies, and broader epidemiological shifts in the population.

In this context, for many years, serological testing has represented the cornerstone of TTI screening among blood donors in Albania. Up until 2004, this testing was carried out locally in individual blood banks, primarily using rapid tests. To enhance the reliability and quality of screening, a national initiative was introduced in 2004, which centralized all testing activities at the National Blood Transfusion Center (NBTC) in Tirana. Since then, testing has been performed with fully automated methods, ensuring greater accuracy, standardization, and quality control (Seferi, Spahiu, Shano 2020, 126-128). Several years later, in 2016, nucleic acid testing (NAT) was introduced to further improve the safety of the blood supply. NAT enables the detection of viral genetic material and is particularly valuable in identifying donors who are serologically negative but infected during the early window period of infection. In Albania, NAT was implemented for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis C virus (HCV), and hepatitis B virus (HBV). This method, characterized by its high sensitivity and specificity, represented a significant step forward in donor screening (Willi Kurt Roth 2019; Ye X et al 2024).

NAT has been increasingly used in blood donations over the past decade, as reported by recent data (Helen 2024; Kupek, Petry 2014).

Referring to the spectrum of HBV, Occult hepatitis B virus infection (OBI) defined as the presence of HBV DNA of serologically HbsAg negative individuals (Raimondo 2008), still presents challenges in terms of diagnosis (Raimondo 2019). Serological markers characterize occult hepatitis B infection (OBI) as *seropositive* when antibodies against the hepatitis B core antigen (anti-HBc) and/or surface antigen (anti-HBs) are detected. In particular, the presence of anti-HBc is considered a key surrogate marker of OBI, especially in settings where access to molecular assays for HBV DNA detection is limited. This is because

individuals with anti-HBc positivity may harbor low-level HBV replication despite being negative for HBsAg. Several studies have suggested a higher likelihood of OBI among blood donors and patients who test positive for anti-HBc, underlining its role as a practical though indirect indicator of latent infection (Wang 2023). Even though serological markers such as anti-HBc can be useful in identifying potential cases of occult hepatitis B infection (OBI), their diagnostic value strongly depends on the specificity of the assays used. In particular, the detection of anti-HBc requires highly specific tests to minimize the risk of false-positive results, which can otherwise lead to misclassification of individuals as potential OBI cases. This challenge is especially relevant in high endemic areas, where the background prevalence of anti-HBc is elevated and the probability of false positives may be proportionally higher. For this reason, confirmation with nucleic acid testing (NAT) for HBV DNA remains the gold standard for establishing OBI, while serological markers are best considered supportive or surrogate indicators (Fu MX 2024).

In seronegative OBI cases (anti HBc and/or anti HBs negative), which account for 1-20%, the liver biopsy remains the gold standard, although circulating HBV DNA can be identified (Raimondo 2008).

Overall OBI is characterised by a low replication of HBV and intermittently detected in serum/plasma (HBV DNA<200 IU/mL). The lower limit of detection (LLOD), by the assays for NAT used actually is 2–4 IU/mL, but with the performing on minipools of multiple donations, sensitivity significantly decreases (Candotti, Laperche 2018). A lower LLOD of 0.15 IU/mL is recommended in order to improve NAT sensitivity (Candotti 2019). The development of appropriate blood screening strategies to ensure sufficient and safe blood donations remains a crucial point, especially for our Mediterranean country with a high prevalence of HBV and a high prevalence of hemoglobinopathies requiring constant blood transfusion. In this context epidemiological data and TTIs prevalence trends play a crucial role. Accurate prevalence estimates may inform national and regional policies, guiding the allocation of resources for blood safety programs and enabling targeted interventions for high-risk donor groups. Furthermore, longitudinal data help to quantify residual transfusion risk, particularly for infections that may escape conventional serological screening, underscoring the importance of integrating advanced technologies, such as nucleic acid testing, into routine blood safety protocols.

This study aims to report prevalence trends of TTIs among blood donors in Albania during the period 2016-2024 utilizing both traditional serological tests and advanced NAT techniques.

Ethical approval

The study was approved by the Ethical Board of the University of Medicine in Tirana, as stated in the document with protocol number 742/1 dated 18 /03/2024. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout all stages of data collection, analysis, and reporting.

METHODS

Study design

This is a retrospective observational study conducted at the Laboratory of Infectious Agents and NAT Testing, using samples collected at the National Blood Transfusion Center, Tirana. The study included family and voluntary blood donors aged 18-65 years during the period January 2016-December 2024. The results of serological and molecular tests of the participants were reviewed through the EmoWeb electronic system.

Blood Donation Eligibility Criteria

Before donating, all possible donors underwent a medical examination based on the following eligibility criteria:

- Age: Between 18 and 65 years
- Weight: Above 50 kg
- Pulse rate: Between 50 and 100 beats per minute
- Blood pressure: Systolic between 110-180 mmHg, diastolic between 60-100 mmHg
- Hemoglobin level: At least 13.5 g/dl for men and 12.5 g/dl for women
- Body temperature: Between 36-37°C
- Minimum interval between donations: Three months

Donors also answered a questionnaire assessing their lifestyle and medical history. Participants who meet these criteria were eligible for blood donation and signed the written informed consent.

Sample Collection in Blood Donors

During the blood donation process, three samples were collected for laboratory analysis:

- Two 9 ml tubes with K3EDTA: one for immunohematology laboratory tests and the other for NAT testing.
- One 8 ml tube with gel for serological analysis.

In our study, we examined one K3EDTA tube for NAT testing and one gel tube for serology testing. After collection, the samples were centrifuged as follows:

- Serology testing: 3,500 RPM for 10 minutes to obtain serum.
- NAT testing: 3,500 revolutions per minute (RPM) for 15 minutes to separate plasma.

Serological Examination

Serological testing was performed through the chemiluminescent microparticle immunoassay (CMIA) method using the ABBOTT ARCHITECT ci8200 system (Abbott Laboratories, Illinois, USA) to detect the standard marker HBsAg, anti-HCV, HIVAg/Abcombo, and syphilis Ab.

All donor samples that initially tested reactive for syphilis or HIV using the chemiluminescent microparticle immunoassay (CMIA) were subjected to duplicate retesting, in accordance with the National Regulation. Specimens that remained repeatedly reactive were subsequently referred to the reference laboratory at the National Institute of Public Health for confirmatory testing using specific assays. Only those samples confirmed seropositive by the reference laboratory were classified as positive for HIV-1/2 or syphilis.

For hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) and antibodies to hepatitis C virus (anti-HCV), confirmatory testing was not routinely performed. Instead, per national policy, samples were classified as positive for HBsAg or anti-HCV if they demonstrated repeated reactivity (at least twice) by CMIA.

ID-NAT Testing

ID-NAT (Individual Donation Nucleic Acid Testing) is an additional screening test alongside serological testing for detecting HIV-1, HIV-2, HBV, and HCV in blood donations. This method targets viral DNA/RNA, amplifies the target to millions of copies, and detects the presence of bacterial/viral genetic material.

NAT Diagnostic Techniques

Methods to analyse the genetic material of HBV, HCV and HIV include:

Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR)

- Uses the Cobas MPX multiplex qualitative test for simultaneous and immediate detection and differentiation of HIV-RNA, HCV-RNA, and HBV-DNA in a single donation sample.
- Performed on the Cobas 6800 system (Roche Molecular Systems, California, USA).
- Includes a fully automated nucleic acid extraction and purification process based on real-time PCR technology.

For samples that test reactive with **RT-PCR**, further *retesting of Initially Reactive (IR) Samples is performed according to* algorithm:

- If a sample is IR for NAT but negative for HBsAg, it undergoes retesting.
- This retest is performed not on the original donated blood sample but on plasma from the blood unit obtained from the Blood Processing Department before the unit is legally discarded according to procedures.
- Two plasma samples are retained for retesting.

Interpretation of Retesting Results

Both samples (Sample #1 and Sample #2) are reactive → The donation is confirmed reactive, the blood unit is discarded, and the donor is excluded from further donations.

Both samples are non-reactive → The donation is considered negative, and the case is monitored under the follow-up protocol.

One sample is reactive and the other non-reactive → The result is classified as indeterminate or inconclusive.

- In this case, the test is repeated twice more.
- If at least one additional indeterminate result appears in the repeat tests, the blood unit is discarded.

Transcription-Mediated Amplification (TMA)

Uses the Procleix Ultrio Elite Assay, a qualitative in vitro nucleic acid amplification test.

Fully automated on the Procleix Panther System (Grifols, Barcelona, Spain).

Involves three key steps in a single tube:

- Sample preparation and target capture.
- Amplification of HIV-RNA, HCV-RNA, and HBV-DNA.
- Detection of amplification products using the Hybridization Protection Assay (HPA).

For samples that test reactive with TMA, further discrimination testing is performed using the Procleix Ultrio Elite HIV, HCV, and/or HBV assay to determine if the sample is reactive for HIV-RNA, HCV-RNA, HBV-DNA, or any combination.

Comparison of NAT Methods

Both NAT methods (RT-PCR and TMA) are triplex, meaning they simultaneously test for HBV, HCV, and HIV. However, they differ in how viral differentiation is performed:

- RT-PCR: Differentiation occurs in the initial test.
- TMA: Differentiation requires a follow-up test.
- The detection limit (LoD) for HBV-DNA was 1.2–1.7 IU/mL with a target of 1.4 IU/mL for RT-PCR, and 3.8–5 IU/mL with a target of 4.3 IU/mL for TMA, with a detection rate of 95%.

The Cobas and Grifols devices served as back-ups for each other.

Statistical analysis

The results were presented as absolute frequency (percentage) for categorical variables, as mean + SD (standard deviation) for normally distributed continuous variables, and as median (min-max) for non-normally distributed continuous variables. The prevalence of each infection for each year was calculated as number of positive samples/total number of blood donors for each year.

Trends in the TTIs prevalence among blood donors from 2016 to 2024 were evaluated to assess whether changes over time were statistically significant, using Kendall's tau, a non-parametric measure of correlation suitable for detecting monotonic trends in ordinal or continuous data over time. A two-sided p-value <0.05 was considered statistically significant. All analyses were conducted using STATA version 15.0 (Stata Corp, College Station, TX, USA).

RESULTS

Characteristics of the study population

Between 2016 and 2024, a total of 203,591 blood donations were collected at the National Blood Transfusion Center, Tirana, representing approximately 70% of all blood donations at the national level. The number of donations increased significantly over the study period (Kendall's tau =0.6, p-value 0.04) (Tab 1). Among these donations, 76% were from family donors and 24% from voluntary donors, with the majority of family donors being first-time donors.

Screening by serological testing identified 9,647 reactive samples, corresponding to an overall prevalence of 4.74% for transfusion-transmitted infections (TTIs). Nucleic acid testing (NAT) detected 747 HBV DNA reactive samples between all seronegative donors, with a prevalence of 0.38%.

Table 1. The prevalence of TTIs by serological markers in blood donors during 2016-2024

Year	Donors screened	Reactive donors on serology	Confirmed reactive donors on serology	Prevalence of TTIs according to serology	Prevalence of TTIs according to confirmed serology
2016	21306	1320	1270	6.19	5.96
2017	21562	1314	1250	6.09	5.79
2018	23312	1240	1154	5.32	4.95
2019	22775	1170	1085	5.14	4.76
2020	19467	1095	1013	5.62	5.20
2021	22468	1175	1070	5.23	4.76
2022	23029	1022	928	4.44	4.03
2023	24198	1048	963	4.33	3.98
2024	25474	984	914	3.86	3.59

TTIs transfusion-transmitted infections

Prevalence trends over the years

Screening for transfusion-transmitted infections revealed that HBsAg prevalence decreased significantly over the study period, from 4.90% in 2016 to 2.79% in 2024. This declining trend was confirmed statistically, with Kendall's tau = -0.94, p = 0.0006, indicating a strong and significant decrease in HBsAg positivity prevalence. Anti-HCV prevalence showed a modest decline from 0.83% to 0.59%, but the trend was not statistically significant (Kendall's tau = -0.33, p = 0.25). HIV antigen/antibody prevalence remained very low throughout the study period, ranging from 0.02% to 0.06%, with no significant temporal trend (Kendall's tau = -0.17, p = 0.6) (Tab 2, Fig 1).

In addition, NAT screening for HBV DNA revealed an increasing trend in detected cases over the study period, with Kendall's tau = 0.78 (p = 0.005), reflecting the added sensitivity of nucleic acid testing in identifying infections not detected by conventional serology. Occult hepatitis B infection (OBI), assessed through anti-HBc positivity and NAT, showed a slight upward trend (Kendall's tau = 0.22, p = 0.46), though this was not statistically significant (Tab 3, Fig 2).

Table 2. The prevalence of HbsAg, Anti HCV, HIVAg/Ab, Syphilis Ab in blood donors during 2016-2024

Year	Donors screened	HBsAg reactive	Prevalence HBsAg reactive	Anti-HCV reactive	Prevalence Anti-HCV reactive	HIVAg/Ab reactive	Prevalence HIVAg/Ab reactive	Syphilis Ab	Prevalence Syphilis Ab
2016	21306	1044	4.90	176	0.83	14	0.06	36	0.17
2017	21562	1035	4.80	187	0.87	5	0.02	23	0.11
2018	23312	999	4.28	132	0.57	5	0.02	18	0.08
2019	22775	915	4.02	143	0.63	6	0.03	21	0.09
2020	19467	800	4.11	188	0.96	4	0.02	21	0.11
2021	22468	875	3.89	174	0.77	11	0.05	10	0.05
2022	23029	735	3.19	175	0.76	4	0.02	14	0.06
2023	24198	758	3.13	147	0.61	5	0.02	53	0.22
2024	25474	711	2.79	150	0.59	15	0.06	38	0.15

Table 3. The prevalence of HBV DNA, HCV RNA and HIV RNA markers by NAT in blood donors during 2016-2024

Year	HBV DNA NAT IR*	HBV DNA NAT confirmed reactive	Prevalence HBV DNA NAT reactive	HCV RNA NAT IR	HCV RNA NAT confirmed reactive	HIV RNA NAT IR	HIV RNA NAT confirmed reactive
2016	53	33	0.163				
2017	92	56	0.259	1	0		
2018	130	116	0.520				

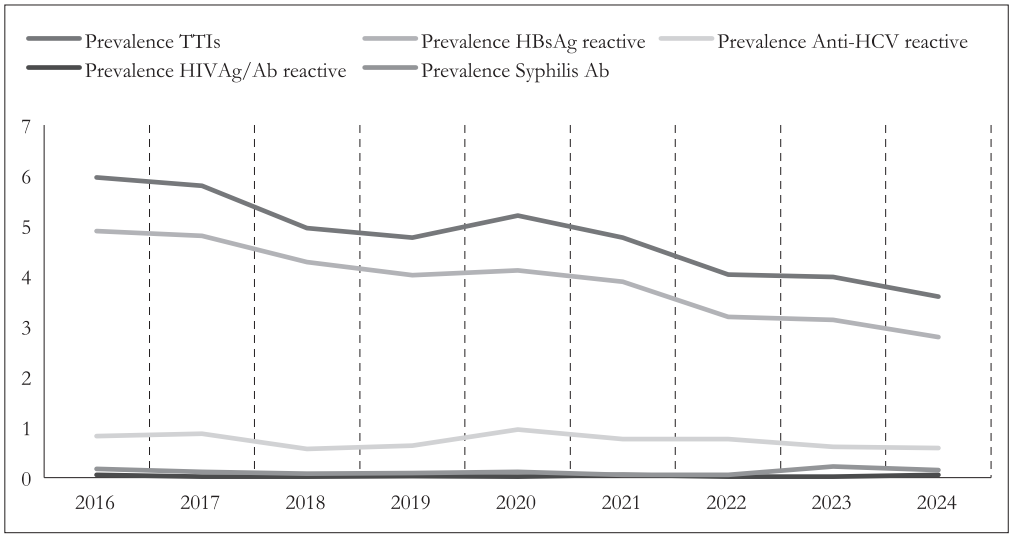


Figure 1. *The prevalence of HbsAg, Anti HCV, HIVAg/Ab, Syphilis Ab in blood donors during 2016-2024.*

2019	100	49	0.224				
2020	115	85	0.455				
2021	144	122	0.565				
2022	151	119	0.534				
2023	143	102	0.435				
2024	177	65	0.255	1	0	1	0

IR* initially reactive; NAT Nucleic acid testing

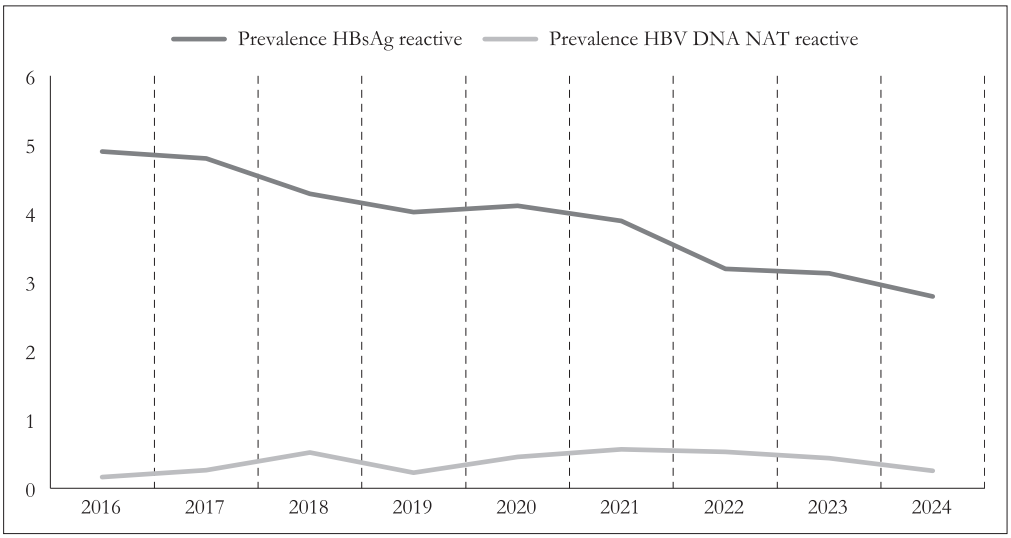


Figure 2. *Prevalence of the HBsAg reactive, HBV DNA NAT reactive (OBI) donors for 2016-2024*

DISCUSSION

This study provides an overview of transfusion-transmitted infections (TTIs) prevalence and trends among blood donors at the National Blood Transfusion Center in Tirana between 2016 and 2024, covering approximately 70% of all national blood donations. Over this nine-year period, a significant increase in the total number of donations was observed, reflecting ongoing efforts to improve blood collection and donor recruitment. The majority of donations were from family donors, with voluntary donors representing a smaller proportion. Notably, most family donors were first-time donors, a factor that has been associated in previous studies with higher TTI prevalence compared to repeat or voluntary donors. Furthermore, research indicates that transfusion-transmitted infections are more common in family/replacement blood donors (9.0%) compared to voluntary non-remunerated blood donors (4.1%), suggesting that donor type influences TTI prevalence (Mohamed 2019).

The overall prevalence of TTIs detected by serological screening was 4.74%, with HBsAg being the most frequently identified infection. Importantly, HBsAg prevalence showed a significant declining trend over the study period, decreasing from 4.90% in 2016 to 2.79% in 2024. This trend likely reflects the impact of national hepatitis B vaccination programs, improved donor selection strategies, and increased public awareness about blood-borne infections. This is in line with a study on blood donors in Albania that reported a decline in HBsAg prevalence from 9.1% in 2006 to 7.9% in 2009, indicating a trend towards reduced HBV infection rates over time (Durro 2011).

Conversely, anti-HCV prevalence demonstrated only a modest decline (from 0.83% to 0.59%) and did not reach statistical significance, suggesting that targeted interventions for HCV may require further strengthening. HIV prevalence remained very low and stable over the study period, consistent with previous reports from the region and reflecting effective HIV prevention and screening measures.

The implementation of nucleic acid testing (NAT) added an important layer of sensitivity to the screening process. NAT identified additional HBV infections that were not detected by conventional serology, highlighting the presence of occult hepatitis B infections and the residual risk of transfusion transmission. Interestingly, while serological HBsAg prevalence declined significantly, NAT screening revealed an increasing number of HBV DNA-positive cases (Kendall's tau = 0.78, $p = 0.005$). This apparent paradox reflects the higher sensitivity of molecular testing in detecting infections that remain undetectable by conventional serology, including occult hepatitis B infections. The divergence between declining seroprevalence and increasing NAT detection underscores that relying solely on HBsAg screening may underestimate the true burden of HBV among blood donors.

An international study found that HBV DNA detectability was 0.7% in over 10 million anti-HBc-positive blood donors from low-endemic countries, emphasizing the global relevance of OBI in blood safety (Fu MX 2025).

These findings highlight the critical role of NAT in identifying residual infection risk and support its continued integration into blood safety protocols. Moreover, they suggest that even in the context of successful vaccination programs and improved donor selection, low-level HBV transmission may persist, necessitating vigilant screening and ongoing monitoring.

The findings of this study have important implications for blood safety policies in Albania. The continued reliance on family/replacement donors, many of whom are first-time donors, may contribute to the relatively higher prevalence of TTIs compared to settings dominated by voluntary repeat donors. Expanding voluntary non-remunerated donation and promoting repeat donations could further reduce TTI risk. The data also support the ongoing use of NAT, particularly for HBV detection, to identify infections that escape serological screening and to minimize the residual risk of transfusion-transmitted HBV.

In conclusion, between 2016 and 2024, the prevalence of HBsAg among blood donors in Albania declined significantly, while HCV and HIV prevalence remained low and stable. NAT has emerged as a valuable tool for detecting otherwise undiagnosed HBV infections, including occult cases, highlighting the need for molecular screening alongside serology. Efforts to strengthen voluntary donation, enhance donor selection, and maintain comprehensive screening remain critical for ensuring the safety of the blood supply.

Overall, these results demonstrate a substantial reduction in serologically detected hepatitis B among donors, stable low prevalence of HIV and HCV, and the increasing contribution of NAT in identifying occult HBV infections, underscoring the importance of combining serology and nucleic acid testing for enhanced blood safety.

CONCLUSIONS

HBsAg prevalence among blood donors in Albania has declined significantly between 2016 and 2024, reflecting the impact of vaccination and improved donor selection, while Anti-HCV and HIV prevalence remained low and stable, with no significant temporal trends. NAT screening identified additional HBV infections, including occult cases, highlighting residual transfusion risk that serology alone may miss. Integration of NAT alongside serological testing remains essential to ensure a safe and reliable blood supply.

Acknowledgment

This study was conducted by the University of Medicine, Tirana, Albania; National Blood Transfusion Center, Tirana, Albania; and University of Rome Tor Vergata.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data presented in this study is available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Additional information

Funding

This study was funded by the Albanian American Development Foundation (AADF), through the Research Expertise from the Academic Diaspora (READ). Fellowship Program.

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THE ALBANIAN LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, DIASPORA AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: THE ROLE OF LINGUISTIC DIPLOMACY IN STRENGTHENING NATIONAL COHESION AND INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE

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ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization and European integration, linguistic diplomacy emerges as a strategic instrument for small nations like Albania to preserve national identity while enhancing their international profile. With over 1.5 million Albanians living abroad, the role of the Albanian language in maintaining cultural continuity within diaspora communities becomes increasingly significant. This paper analyzes how the teaching of the Albanian language contributes to preserving national identity among diaspora populations, examines how linguistic diplomacy operates as a tool of soft power in support of Albania's European integration process, and evaluates the most effective policies and institutional mechanisms promoting the international teaching of Albanian. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the study explores educational programs, cultural initiatives, and state-sponsored policies, including bilateral agreements with over 10 host countries, supporting the teaching of Albanian abroad. Case studies highlight the role of cultural centers in countries such as Italy, Greece, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States, as well as the involvement of diaspora organizations as informal ambassadors of Albanian heritage. The findings suggest that a coherent linguistic diplomacy strategy, integrated within Albania's broader foreign policy framework, can strengthen national cohesion, increase international visibility, and contribute to successful EU accession. Recommendations are provided for policymakers to further institutionalize, fund, and optimize

Albania's linguistic diplomacy efforts in alignment with both national interests and European integration objectives.

Keywords: *Albanian language; diaspora; linguistic diplomacy; national identity; European integration; soft power; cultural diplomacy.*

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and European integration, small states face the dual challenge of preserving their national identity while simultaneously increasing their international visibility and influence. Albania, as a country with a distinctive historical development and a significant diaspora presence, is particularly positioned within this dynamic, especially in the framework of its aspirations for full European Union membership (Council of the EU 2023).

Language remains one of the most enduring pillars of national identity. The Albanian language, as a unique branch within the Indo-European language family, represents a fundamental marker of Albanian cultural distinctiveness (Camaj 1984). Beyond its cultural dimension, it has gained strategic importance as an instrument of public diplomacy, serving both to unify Albanian communities abroad and to strengthen Albania's cultural and political presence internationally (Nye, 2004; Cull, 2009).

Currently, it is estimated that over 1.5 million Albanians live outside of Albania's borders, concentrated primarily in countries such as Italy, Greece, Germany, Switzerland, the United States, and the United Kingdom (INSTAT, 2023; OECD, 2023). These diaspora communities serve not only as sources of economic remittances but also as ambassadors of Albanian culture and identity. Preserving the Albanian language within these communities is essential to ensure intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage and to maintain continuous engagement with Albania (King and Melvin, 1999; Vullnetari, 2012).

In recent years, Albania has undertaken significant steps to institutionalize linguistic diplomacy as part of its national diaspora strategy. The establishment of the National Diaspora Agency, the growing number of bilateral agreements facilitating Albanian language instruction in foreign schools, and the integration of language education into European integration policies demonstrate Albania's continuous efforts to develop a sustainable and long-term approach. In this context, linguistic diplomacy transcends cultural identity preservation and serves as a broader instrument of soft power and foreign policy, positively influencing the country's international image and contributing to its accession into Euro-Atlantic structures.

Linguistic diplomacy -the strategic promotion of language as a tool of soft power -is gaining increased relevance in foreign policy, especially for small states seeking to enhance their international presence without extensive economic or military resources (Spence, 2011; Fitzpatrick, 2011). For Albania, promoting Albanian language education abroad fulfills multiple diplomatic functions: preserving identity within the diaspora, strengthening ties between the state and its diaspora communities, enhancing international cultural reputation,

and supporting European integration processes (Ministry of Diaspora, Albania, 2022). This study aims to analyze the role of linguistic diplomacy in Albania's engagement with its diaspora and its European integration process. The analysis focuses on three core aspects: (1) the impact of Albanian language education abroad on preserving national identity; (2) the use of linguistic diplomacy as an instrument of soft power in international relations; and (3) the most effective policies and institutional mechanisms for promoting international Albanian language education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Foundational theories on nationhood and soft power are relevant here, as illustrated by Anderson (1991), Nye (2004), Aronczyk (2013), and Cull (2009).

Additional research has highlighted the role of small-state linguistic diplomacy in shaping cultural recognition within international organizations. For example, Malta has successfully promoted the Maltese language as one of the official EU languages despite its relatively small population. This shows how proactive policies, anchored in both education and diplomacy, can transform the perception of a minority language into a valuable cultural asset within larger geopolitical unions. Similarly, Iceland has preserved its linguistic uniqueness through targeted programs that support diaspora schools abroad and integrate language learning into tourism and cultural industries. These examples suggest that Albania can leverage international platforms to advocate for the Albanian language not only as a national heritage but also as a European value, aligned with EU multilingualism policies.

In addition to the cases already mentioned, recent scholarship in cultural diplomacy highlights that languages with fewer speakers, such as Icelandic or Maltese, have managed to preserve and expand their visibility by embedding language programs into cultural institutes and leveraging EU frameworks for linguistic diversity. This comparative perspective reinforces the argument that Albania can pursue similar strategies by aligning its language diplomacy with supranational cultural protection mechanisms, thus ensuring both sustainability and broader recognition. Scholars such as Aronczyk (2013) and Mark (2010) emphasize that language initiatives, when tied with nation branding, increase both cultural prestige and diplomatic credibility.

In addition to the Albanian case, comparative experiences provide further insights into the strategic use of linguistic diplomacy. For instance, Ireland has long promoted the teaching of the Irish language abroad as part of its cultural diplomacy, embedding it within cultural institutes and diaspora schools. Israel has institutionalized Hebrew education globally through programs coordinated by the Jewish Agency, ensuring generational transmission among Jewish communities abroad. Armenia, similarly, integrates Armenian language programs into its foreign policy as a way of preserving identity and reinforcing ties with its large diaspora. These examples demonstrate that small states can amplify their international presence by systematically linking language policies with foreign affairs, a lesson highly

relevant for Albania. Furthermore, the European Union itself recognizes multilingualism as a cultural asset, which can provide Albania with an opportunity to align its linguistic diplomacy with broader EU cultural and linguistic protection frameworks.

The concept of public diplomacy has evolved as an extension of traditional diplomacy, expanding its focus beyond intergovernmental relations to include the shaping of a nation's image and influence among foreign audiences. According to Cull (2009), public diplomacy plays a key role in modern international relations by addressing foreign publics directly, while Joseph Nye (2004), who introduced the term "soft power," emphasizes that states can exert influence not solely through military or economic means, but also through culture, values, and attractive policies. Within this framework, linguistic diplomacy emerges as a crucial dimension of soft power, as the promotion of language as an element of cultural heritage enables nations to strengthen their national identity and build bridges of cooperation with international communities (Fitzpatrick, 2011; Spence, 2011).

Language assumes a central role in preserving national identity, particularly among diaspora communities, where cultural continuity across generations heavily relies on the maintenance of the native language (Fishman 1991). In the case of Albania, the preservation of the Albanian language within diaspora communities serves not only as a means of cultural survival but also as a vital link to the homeland (King and Melvin, 1999; Vullnetari, 2012). Anderson (1991) describes nations as imagined communities, sustained through shared elements such as language, history, and culture, while for Albanians abroad, several obstacles complicate language preservation efforts, including the absence of dedicated educational infrastructure, limited financial support, and the gradual assimilation into host country languages (Schiffman, 1996; Vickers and Pettifer, 2009).In the context of Albania's European integration, these challenges are further amplified as the country navigates the balance between preserving cultural identity and adapting to the multicultural norms of the European Union (European Commission 2023). Consequently, the promotion of the Albanian language abroad is no longer viewed solely as a cultural initiative but has become an integral component of Albania's diplomatic strategy aimed at strengthening its international visibility and influence (Ministry of Diaspora 2022). Recent studies in cultural diplomacy emphasize that language functions as a diplomatic instrument through which smaller states can project a positive image within the globalized arena (Mark, 2010; Aronczyk, 2013).

Over the past decade, Albania has institutionalized its diaspora engagement policies by establishing dedicated bodies such as the Ministry of Diaspora and the National Diaspora Agency. These institutions play a central role in coordinating and supporting educational programs for diaspora communities. Initiatives have included the distribution of textbooks, the training of Albanian language teachers abroad, and financial assistance for Albanian language courses in countries with significant Albanian populations, including Italy, Greece, Switzerland, Germany, and the United States (Ministry of Diaspora 2022).

In parallel, Albania has increasingly integrated the promotion of its language into broader international educational collaborations such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe. Several

European universities now offer Albanian language and culture courses, facilitating not only the education of younger generations of Albanians abroad but also fostering greater interest and awareness of Albanian culture among foreign scholars, diplomats, and policymakers (European Commission 2023). These academic partnerships serve to reinforce Albania's presence within international cultural and academic networks, while simultaneously contributing to its broader foreign policy objectives.

Furthermore, as global migration patterns evolve and diaspora communities grow in complexity, Albania faces the imperative to adapt its linguistic diplomacy to the changing sociocultural dynamics of its citizens abroad. The interplay between identity preservation, host country integration, and transnational affiliations requires a more nuanced and flexible approach from Albanian institutions, ensuring that language remains not only a symbol of heritage but also a tool for empowering diaspora communities to actively contribute to Albania's development and its international engagements.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Beyond the mixed-methods approach already outlined, the study adopts a qualitative content analysis methodology to interpret policy documents, bilateral agreements, and institutional reports. Semi-structured interviews were not only conducted with teachers and officials but also triangulated with focus group discussions held within diaspora communities in Italy and Germany. Sampling strategies ensured representation across generations and regions of residence, which allowed for a nuanced understanding of intergenerational language retention dynamics. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality of responses, and sensitivity toward the sociocultural contexts of participants. Limitations include restricted access to some governmental datasets and the reliance on voluntary participation, which may introduce self-selection bias. Nevertheless, the triangulation of diverse sources strengthens the validity of findings.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis with available statistical data to evaluate the role of Albania's linguistic diplomacy in preserving national identity and supporting European integration. In the initial phase of the study, an extensive review of national and international scholarly literature was conducted, covering the key concepts of public diplomacy, soft power, national identity, and language preservation within diaspora communities (Nye, 2004; Cull, 2009; Fishman, 1991; Vullnetari, 2012). This literature review informed the theoretical framework and helped identify existing research gaps regarding the Albanian context.

The empirical data were collected from multiple sources, including reports from official Albanian institutions such as the Ministry of Diaspora and INSTAT (2022–2023), as well as international organizations like the OECD, European Commission, and UN Migration Reports. Additional data were obtained from the annual reports of the Albanian Diaspora Agency, bilateral educational agreements published by the Albanian Ministry of Education,

and reports from networks of Albanian language schools abroad, particularly the Albanian Teachers Associations in the Diaspora (2023). A comparative statistical overview was developed to analyze the number of Albanians in the diaspora, the number of Albanian language schools, teachers, and actively enrolled students in selected host countries.

To enrich the qualitative dimension of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts in cultural diplomacy, representatives of diaspora institutions, and Albanian language teachers operating abroad. These interviews provided in-depth insights into practical challenges faced in teaching Albanian abroad, the role of state policies, and perceptions regarding the impact of linguistic diplomacy on Albania's European integration processes.

As part of the research methodology, a comparative analysis was carried out across several key host countries where the Albanian diaspora maintains a strong presence, including Italy, Greece, Germany, Switzerland, the United States, and the United Kingdom. This analysis aimed to evaluate the differences in policies that support Albanian language teaching, organizational models of Albanian schools, involvement of host country authorities, and the role of bilateral educational cooperation in facilitating linguistic and cultural preservation.

Recognizing the complexity of diaspora dynamics, the study also considered broader sociopolitical factors that may influence language maintenance, such as integration policies in host countries, community engagement, and transnational identity construction. This holistic perspective allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how linguistic diplomacy operates within a multi-layered international environment.

The study primarily relies on publicly available data, which may limit access to more detailed and disaggregated statistics for individual countries. Moreover, ongoing demographic shifts within diaspora communities may contribute to fluctuations in reported numbers. Despite these limitations, the adopted methodology provides a robust and reliable framework for assessing the current state and potential of Albania's linguistic diplomacy in the context of national identity preservation and European integration.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ALBANIAN LINGUISTIC DIPLOMACY IN THE DIASPORA

Empirical insights from the Albanian context are also reflected in studies such as Loloci (2021, 2024), Tartari (2021), and Duka (2022), which emphasize the challenges and opportunities of language education and diaspora engagement in Albania.

Another relevant case is Armenia, which has one of the largest diasporas in proportion to its population. Armenia officially refers to the diaspora as the 'third pillar of the nation,' alongside the state and the church. The Armenian government has long invested in linguistic and cultural diplomacy by funding Armenian schools, supporting cultural centers, and establishing chairs of Armenian language in international universities. Furthermore, Armenia created a Ministry of Diaspora (later integrated into broader government

structures) to coordinate educational programs abroad. This institutional framework illustrates how a small state can transform language policy into a tool of both cultural preservation and political influence. The Armenian diaspora also actively lobbies in host countries such as the United States and France, using cultural and linguistic identity as a diplomatic asset. For Albania, the Armenian model highlights the importance of elevating linguistic diplomacy from scattered initiatives into a structured, state-led strategy that integrates language, culture, and political advocacy.

Moreover, Albania's linguistic diplomacy can benefit from lessons learned in the Western Balkans. North Macedonia, for instance, has institutionalized Albanian as a co-official language, thereby recognizing diaspora needs and reinforcing minority rights. Kosovo has also worked on strengthening its linguistic presence abroad by supporting Albanian language departments in European universities. These regional dynamics demonstrate that linguistic diplomacy is not only a matter of diaspora preservation but also part of broader state-building strategies in post-transition societies. Albania's comparative advantage lies in its transnational diaspora networks, which, if coordinated effectively, can enhance both cultural diplomacy and foreign policy objectives.

A further comparative dimension worth noting is the role of Eastern European states such as Poland and Hungary, which have institutionalized weekend schools abroad as formal extensions of their national curricula. These schools receive direct accreditation from ministries of education and often benefit from host-country funding arrangements. This institutionalization reduces fragmentation and raises teaching standards. Albania could similarly design a model where diaspora schools follow a standardized bilingual curriculum recognized by both Albanian and host-country authorities. Such models demonstrate that sustainability in linguistic diplomacy is achieved when it is not dependent solely on community efforts but integrated within state structures. Moreover, collaboration with pan-European associations of language teachers can elevate Albanian linguistic diplomacy into wider European networks.

When comparing Albania's linguistic diplomacy with other European states, notable differences emerge. For example, Greece invests heavily in the promotion of Greek language education abroad through state-funded programs and partnerships with Orthodox Church institutions, reaching second and third generation diaspora youth. By contrast, Portugal has developed the Camões Institute, which coordinates the teaching of Portuguese worldwide, providing a centralized institutional model Albania might emulate. Additionally, the case of Poland illustrates how diaspora schools can become formal extensions of the national education system through recognition of curricula and teacher accreditation, ensuring sustainability. Albania's current approach, while commendable, remains fragmented and could benefit from adopting best practices of institutionalization, curriculum standardization, and increased collaboration with host country governments.

Based on data collected from institutional reports and international organizations, the Albanian diaspora is widely dispersed across several key host countries, with the largest

communities residing in Italy, Greece, Germany, Switzerland, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The preservation of the Albanian language within these diaspora communities is closely tied to cultural continuity and plays a vital role in safeguarding national identity. The size of the diaspora in these countries varies, with approximately 500,000 Albanians living in Italy, 450,000 in Greece, 350,000 in Germany, 250,000 in Switzerland, 200,000 in the United States, and 100,000 in the United Kingdom. In parallel, the development of Albanian language education has resulted in a growing network of schools, teachers, and students, such as 65 schools in Italy with 120 teachers serving 3,500 students, and proportionally smaller but significant networks in other host countries.

According to INSTAT (2023), more than 30% of Albanians now reside outside the country's borders. OECD (2023) further emphasizes that Albania ranks among the European countries with the highest emigration rates relative to its resident population. While this broad diaspora offers Albania substantial cultural and diplomatic leverage, it also presents serious challenges, particularly with language assimilation across second and third generations. The weakening of language proficiency in younger generations poses risks to the sustainability of national identity, where language serves as a crucial binding element.

Institutional involvement varies considerably across countries. In Italy and Greece, the Albanian Ministry of Education has established bilateral agreements that facilitate the distribution of school textbooks and the recognition of diaspora teachers' qualifications. In contrast, in Switzerland and Germany, cantonal and federal models allow nearly 70% of Albanian language schools to collaborate with local municipalities, creating a hybrid system of state and community management. Meanwhile, in the United States and the United Kingdom, Albanian language schools mostly operate through grassroots community efforts, often with minimal or no state intervention.

However, despite these achievements, multiple challenges continue to affect the quality and sustainability of Albanian language education abroad. One of the primary obstacles remains the absence of a unified curriculum tailored to the needs of diaspora students. Furthermore, approximately 40% of current Albanian language teachers lack formal training in second-language acquisition methodologies, making it difficult to adapt teaching materials effectively for bilingual or multilingual learners who often juggle multiple linguistic environments at home and school.

Encouragingly, there have been emerging positive trends in recent years. In 2022, the Albanian Ministry of Education organized three online training sessions that included participation from over 150 diaspora teachers, indicating increased institutional commitment toward enhancing pedagogical capacities. Additionally, several European universities, including the University of Naples, the University of Bonn, and partner institutions collaborating with the University of Tirana, have integrated Albanian language and culture courses into their academic curricula. These developments contribute not only to preserving the language within diaspora communities but also to raising the visibility of Albanian studies within international academic circles.

Beyond its cultural significance, linguistic diplomacy increasingly functions as an effective tool for advancing Albania's foreign policy and international relations. Through academic exchanges, educational agreements, and international teacher training programs, Albania fosters cooperative bridges with host country educational systems. Such educational diplomacy strengthens bilateral ties, enhances Albania's soft power, and contributes to its broader European integration objectives. In this way, linguistic diplomacy extends beyond identity preservation to serve as a dynamic mechanism for Albania's strategic positioning in the global arena.

Furthermore, as global mobility continues to increase, the Albanian government faces the necessity to develop more comprehensive long-term policies that address not only language preservation but also broader diaspora engagement. Enhanced cooperation between Albanian and host country institutions, continuous teacher training, standardized curricula, and stronger financial and legal frameworks will be essential for sustaining these educational initiatives. This evolving approach would enable Albania to transform its diaspora into a strategic asset, not only for cultural preservation but also for national development, economic collaboration, and diplomatic representation on the international stage.

DISCUSSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Furthermore, migration studies underline that diaspora policies cannot be separated from broader development agendas (Vullnetari 2012).

In addition to these recommendations, Albania should prioritize partnerships with international NGOs and educational foundations to secure grants for diaspora education programs. Establishing a dedicated research institute on linguistic diplomacy could provide empirical data, track progress, and propose policy adjustments based on measurable indicators. Furthermore, cross-border projects with neighboring countries that share Albanian-speaking populations, such as North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo, could strengthen cultural integration across regions. Policymakers should also explore integrating Albanian linguistic initiatives into global digital education platforms like Coursera or edX, thereby positioning the Albanian language within international academic markets and giving diaspora youth access to accredited courses. This would create a modernized framework of linguistic diplomacy, tailored for the digital era.

This perspective also supports the argument that educational policies directly influence the authority and role of teachers, an idea discussed by Hodaj and Billa (2024).

Beyond the measures outlined, three additional recommendations can be emphasized. First, Albania should consider establishing regional Albanian Cultural and Language Centers in major diaspora hubs, which could serve as umbrella institutions for coordinating schools, cultural events, and training. Second, the introduction of scholarship schemes for second- and third-generation Albanians to study in Albania could strengthen intergenerational ties and incentivize language learning. Third, closer collaboration with digital technology firms

could facilitate the creation of open-access learning applications and virtual classrooms, tailored to diaspora youth who may not have access to in-person schools. These expanded measures would ensure that linguistic diplomacy evolves in line with technological change and generational needs.

Policy recommendations must therefore be both visionary and practical. First, the creation of a dedicated Linguistic Diplomacy Fund would ensure sustainable financing of language education abroad, reducing dependence on ad-hoc initiatives. Second, partnerships with UNESCO and the Council of Europe could position Albanian as a protected minority and heritage language, reinforcing Albania's international cultural standing. Third, integrating Albanian into Erasmus+ exchange modules and Horizon Europe projects would enhance its visibility among academic and youth communities. Fourth, Albania could establish a fellowship program for diaspora teachers to receive training in Tirana, thereby strengthening professional networks. Finally, digital transformation should be prioritized: developing a national online platform for Albanian language learning with interactive tools, AI-assisted curricula, and certification systems would expand access globally, particularly for second and third generation diaspora youth.

The data confirm that over 1.5 million Albanians currently reside outside Albania, representing more than 30% of the total Albanian population (INSTAT, 2023; OECD, 2023). This extensive diaspora plays a vital role in preserving national identity and serves as an increasingly important actor in shaping Albania's foreign cultural diplomacy. According to the Albanian Teachers Association in the Diaspora (2023), more than 245 Albanian language schools operate in key host countries, collectively serving approximately 13,300 active students and employing over 440 teachers. However, despite this significant infrastructure, the participation rate remains relatively modest, with only about 9% of school-aged children in the diaspora actively engaged in Albanian language education. This limited participation reflects both the constraints of institutional capacity and varying levels of interest and involvement within diaspora communities themselves.

Albania has to date signed 11 bilateral educational agreements with host countries such as Italy, Greece, Switzerland, Germany, and Austria (Ministry of Diaspora 2023). Nonetheless, the degree to which these agreements are implemented differs considerably depending on the policies and administrative structures of each host country. In Germany and Switzerland, for instance, local authorities support nearly 70% of Albanian language schools through public funding, enabling more systematic integration into local education systems (Swiss Federal Office of Migration, 2022; BAMF, 2023). In contrast, in the United States and the United Kingdom, over 80% of Albanian language schools rely almost exclusively on volunteer-based community initiatives, often without significant governmental assistance or institutional frameworks to ensure long-term sustainability.

One of the most persistent challenges remains the shortage of specialized teacher training. Around 40% of Albanian language teachers currently active in diaspora education lack formal qualifications in second-language pedagogy (Albanian Teachers Association in the

Diaspora 2023). This situation limits the capacity of many educators to adapt curricula effectively for bilingual and multilingual students, who require tailored methodologies that balance both linguistic development and cultural identity reinforcement. Addressing this pedagogical gap is crucial for improving the quality and attractiveness of Albanian language education abroad.

Encouraging developments have nonetheless emerged in recent years, reflecting growing institutional commitment. In 2022, the Albanian Ministry of Education organized three international training sessions, involving over 150 diaspora teachers (MASR 2022). Simultaneously, seven European universities have established Albanian language and culture departments, which not only serve diaspora needs but also promote broader international awareness of Albanian language and cultural heritage (European Commission 2023). These academic collaborations are gradually contributing to the internationalization of Albania's linguistic diplomacy, enhancing the country's visibility in global academic and cultural forums.

Looking ahead, Albania faces both an opportunity and a responsibility to adopt a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to linguistic diplomacy. A National Linguistic Diplomacy Strategy with clearly defined five-year objectives should be developed, aiming to increase the participation rate of diaspora children in Albanian language education to at least 25% by 2030. This would require the creation of standardized curricula designed for intercultural teaching and bilingual competence development, ensuring that diaspora students can balance integration in their host societies while maintaining strong connections to their cultural roots.

Furthermore, the establishment of a dedicated Diaspora Teacher Training Center would provide an institutional platform to certify at least 100 new teachers annually, equipping them with internationally recognized qualifications that address the specific needs of diaspora communities. Expanding bilateral educational agreements should also be prioritized, with the objective of integrating Albanian language programs into the supplementary education systems of at least 10 additional host countries. In parallel, a National Digital Platform for Albanian Language Learning could be developed, aiming to provide online access to Albanian language courses for at least 20,000 diaspora children by 2030, thus overcoming geographical and logistical barriers to language education.

In addition to these structural measures, it is essential that the Albanian government deepens its collaboration with host country institutions to integrate Albanian language education more systematically into existing educational frameworks. Greater engagement with diaspora parents, community organizations, and cultural associations would also help foster a sense of ownership and responsibility among diaspora communities themselves, ensuring that language preservation becomes a collective long-term investment. Strengthening linguistic diplomacy in this way would not only safeguard Albania's cultural identity but also reinforce its diplomatic influence, economic partnerships, and integration processes within the broader European and international arenas.

CONCLUSIONS

Moreover, in order to consolidate these findings, it must be stressed that the success of Albania's linguistic diplomacy depends not only on educational reforms and institutional capacity, but also on its alignment with broader European Union frameworks. The EU continuously promotes linguistic diversity as a fundamental cultural value, and Albania can position itself within this paradigm by highlighting the Albanian language as part of Europe's intangible cultural heritage. In addition, long-term strategies should prioritize the empowerment of the new generations of the diaspora, who often act as cultural and political ambassadors in their host countries. By supporting youth networks, professional associations, and intercultural platforms, Albania can ensure that its linguistic diplomacy extends beyond the classroom into spheres of civic engagement and policymaking. This perspective underlines that language is not only a medium of communication, but also a medium of political participation and identity negotiation in global contexts. A comprehensive approach that integrates education, culture, and diplomacy will therefore guarantee sustainability and international recognition for Albania's efforts in preserving and promoting its language.

Ultimately, the development of a coherent linguistic diplomacy strategy will not only preserve cultural identity for Albanians abroad but also strengthen Albania's political and diplomatic profile in the international arena, ensuring alignment with European integration goals.

In strengthening these conclusions, it should also be emphasized that linguistic diplomacy in Albania is not an isolated cultural phenomenon but an element that directly contributes to state-building and European integration. The diaspora, which represents nearly one third of the Albanian population, has historically influenced the country's political, cultural, and economic development. Today, its role is even more significant because of the need to align national policies with European Union standards. The promotion of the Albanian language abroad is therefore not only about cultural preservation but also about ensuring visibility, credibility, and recognition in the European public sphere. By empowering diaspora schools, investing in teacher training, and building digital platforms, Albania demonstrates its commitment to values of inclusion, diversity, and cultural dialogue, which are also priorities of the EU. This approach secures stronger ties between the homeland and the diaspora, while also positioning Albania as a proactive contributor to Europe's multilingual heritage. Such a comprehensive vision transforms linguistic diplomacy into a strategic asset of foreign policy, ensuring that language, identity, and integration work together as pillars of Albania's future development.

In strengthening the conclusions, it is important to underline that the future of Albania's linguistic diplomacy cannot be detached from broader national strategies on diaspora engagement and European integration. As demonstrated by the cases of Armenia, Ireland, and Israel, a coordinated approach where language policies intersect with education, cultural promotion, and international lobbying generates long-term benefits for both the homeland and the diaspora. For Albania, this means embedding linguistic diplomacy not as an isolated

cultural initiative, but as a central dimension of statecraft and foreign policy. Furthermore, the sustainability of these policies will depend on cross-party consensus and continuity across successive governments, ensuring that investments in language education abroad are not disrupted by political cycles. By viewing the Albanian language as both a heritage to be preserved and a diplomatic tool to be advanced, Albania can transform its diaspora into an active partner of nation-building, European accession, and global cultural dialogue. This integrated vision would not only meet the immediate needs of diaspora communities, but also secure Albania's position as a proactive contributor to multicultural Europe and the global landscape of cultural diplomacy.

In conclusion, this research underlines that Albania's success in leveraging linguistic diplomacy will depend on balancing national identity with international integration. A comprehensive, multi-actor strategy—bringing together government, academia, diaspora organizations, and international partners—can secure the Albanian language's future both at home and abroad. Expanding teacher training, digital platforms, and bilateral cooperation are only the first steps toward building a sustainable model. What sets Albania apart is its capacity to mobilize a large and active diaspora community, which if engaged effectively, can serve as a cornerstone of the country's cultural and diplomatic capital. Looking ahead, the integration of linguistic diplomacy into Albania's EU accession process will not only preserve cultural heritage but also project Albania as a proactive contributor to Europe's multicultural future.

The expanded analysis underscores that linguistic diplomacy is not only a cultural or symbolic practice but a multidimensional strategy for small states like Albania to engage globally. By situating the Albanian case within international comparisons, the study highlights that successful language diplomacy depends on institutional consistency, adequate funding, and cross-sectoral collaboration. The policy implications extend beyond diaspora engagement: strengthening linguistic diplomacy can contribute to Albania's cultural branding, its integration into EU diversity policies, and its positioning as a proactive actor in global cultural governance. Future research could further explore the impact of digital technologies on diaspora language retention, comparative models of teacher training, and the role of youth organizations in sustaining linguistic heritage.

This research has explored the multidimensional role of Albanian linguistic diplomacy as both a mechanism for preserving national identity among diaspora communities and a strategic instrument for enhancing Albania's international visibility within the broader context of European integration. By combining empirical data, institutional reports, and qualitative analysis, the study provides a comprehensive assessment of how language functions at the intersection of culture, education, diplomacy, and foreign policy for a small state navigating the complexities of globalization.

The findings confirm that Albania's diaspora, which accounts for over 30% of the national population, represents not only a demographic phenomenon but also a critical platform for advancing national interests abroad. The presence of more than 245 Albanian language

schools and over 440 teachers serving approximately 13,300 diaspora students highlights important institutional efforts, yet simultaneously reveals persistent challenges related to limited coverage of the diaspora population, varying levels of state involvement across host countries, and significant gaps in pedagogical training and standardized curricula. These findings emphasize that while important steps have been taken, particularly through bilateral educational agreements and teacher training initiatives, a more coordinated and systemic approach remains necessary to secure sustainable progress.

What makes this research particularly significant is its framing of linguistic diplomacy not solely as a cultural preservation tool, but as an emerging component of Albania's broader soft power strategy. In a global landscape where identity politics, migration dynamics, and cultural diplomacy increasingly shape international relations, Albania's linguistic diplomacy offers a case study on how small states can leverage diaspora communities as active participants in nation branding and international engagement. The integration of language policies into foreign policy frameworks allows Albania to project its cultural identity abroad while simultaneously building educational and diplomatic bridges with host countries.

One of the key contributions of this study lies in highlighting the need to expand the role of linguistic diplomacy within Albania's European integration agenda. In this context, the study recommends that Albania actively promote the inclusion of the Albanian language within the European Union's protected small-language heritage framework. Such an approach would not only strengthen Albania's cultural visibility within Europe but would also align with broader EU principles on linguistic and cultural diversity, thus offering a constructive model for harmonizing national identity with supranational integration processes.

To advance these objectives, the study underscores the importance of developing integrated inter-institutional mechanisms that foster synergy between domestic institutions, diaspora organizations, and host country authorities. Investing in professional teacher training programs, standardizing bilingual curricula adapted to diaspora contexts, expanding digital language learning platforms, and negotiating further bilateral agreements remain essential policy priorities. Moreover, the creation of a centralized National Linguistic Diplomacy Strategy — with clearly defined targets and measurable outcomes — could serve as a foundation for Albania's long-term engagement with its diaspora while simultaneously strengthening its position within the European cultural landscape.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the emerging discourse on how small states utilize linguistic diplomacy to assert their presence in the international system. By positioning its diaspora as both cultural ambassadors and partners in state-building, Albania offers an innovative model that intertwines identity preservation with proactive global engagement. As linguistic diplomacy continues to evolve, its strategic potential will likely grow in significance, not only for Albania but also for other nations seeking to balance national identity with the opportunities and challenges of an increasingly interconnected world.

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THE USE OF ALBANIAN STANDARD LANGUAGE BY STUDENT CASE STUDY: KORÇA UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of the Albanian standard language among students at Korça University, focusing on both academic and informal communication within the university environment. In a linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized society such as Albania, the standard language plays a crucial role—not only in preserving linguistic unity and fostering sustainable communicative competencies, but also in institutionalizing the official language within higher education settings. The widespread influence of technology and social openness has led to a noticeable decline in the correct and appropriate use of language, affecting both every day and academic communication. This research aims to identify key challenges in students' use of the standard language and to provide concrete, evidence-based recommendations for improvement. The study employs both quantitative and qualitative research methods and is grounded in a thorough analysis of contemporary literature in the field. Focusing on the case of Korça University, the research utilizes questionnaires to gather data from students across various academic programs. The study explores their knowledge and use of the standard language, the role of dialects, and the extent and context of their use in university life. Based on the findings, the study aims to formulate practical recommendations to enhance the role of the standard language, promote linguistic competencies aligned with normative standards, and meet the academic demands of the university context.

Kewords: *Albanian language, standard language, communication, competencies, university*

INTRODUCTION

The unified Albanian literary language, officially standardized at the 1972 Orthography Congress, has played a fundamental role in the cultural formation and national identity of Albanians. It functions as a nationwide means of communication, transcending dialectal differences and thus constituting one of the core instruments of academic and institutional

communication, ensuring clarity, coherence, and intelligibility in the production and circulation of knowledge. In the university context, the use of the standard language is not limited to formal correctness in writing and speech or to compliance with prescriptive rules; it is also intrinsically linked to the development of academic competence, argumentative ability, and students' integration into the scholarly community. For this reason, students' relationship with the standard language represents an issue of particular importance for linguistic, pedagogical, and sociolinguistic research.

In the Albanian context, this relationship acquires special significance due to the history of the standardization of Albanian and its unifying role in a highly multidialectal society. From its inception, standard Albanian has been constructed over time as a shared norm of public and educational communication, with a clearly integrative and institutional function. Above all, it has played a crucial role at both the national and pan-Albanian levels as a marker of identity. It should be noted that the social developments of recent decades, accompanied by phenomena such as globalization, the intensification of cultural exchanges, and the widespread diffusion of digital communication, have created new conditions for language use, in which the boundaries between formal and informal registers have become increasingly unstable.

In particular, digital environments, platforms, and social networks have transformed modes of writing and communication, especially among young people, favoring concise, economical, and often informal forms of expression. While these practices are highly functional in everyday communication, they raise important questions regarding the ways in which the standard language is used, perceived, and applied by students in the university context. This leads to a legitimate question: does the standard remain a stable norm of academic communication, or is it applied selectively and sporadically, and above all not where and when it is most necessary?

Although Albanian scholarship has extensively addressed the standard language from normative, historical, and cultural perspectives, empirical studies focusing on the actual use of standard Albanian by students in higher education institutions remain limited. In particular, there is a lack of analyses that combine students' perceptions, attitudes, and concrete linguistic practices, taking into account both formal academic communication and informal digital interactions.

Within this framework, the present study aims to contribute empirical evidence by analyzing the use of standard Albanian by students at the University of Korçë through a questionnaire-based empirical investigation. Adopting a descriptive approach, the study examines how students assess the importance of the standard language, their level of awareness, their actual practices in academic and digital communication, the linguistic difficulties they report encountering in their daily use of language, as well as their attitudes toward and recommendations for institutional interventions aimed at improving the use of the standard language at university level.

A review of the literature indicates that, although standard Albanian enjoys a consolidated normative and institutional status, its actual use in educational and university settings is

influenced by multiple factors, including the communicative context, the impact of digital technology, and students' practical linguistic competence. Albanian studies point to a noticeable gap between theoretical knowledge of the standard norm and its rules, on the one hand, and their effective application in academic writing and speech in everyday practice, particularly in electronic and informal communication, on the other. The existing literature remains largely oriented toward normative, cultural, theoretical, and historical analyses of the standard language, while structured empirical data on how students perceive and concretely use standard Albanian language in university life are scarce. This gap underscores the need for a study that focuses systematically and comparatively on students' perceptions, attitudes, and actual practices.

In this context, the methodology of the present paper has been designed to generate empirical data on students' use of standard Albanian language through a structured questionnaire. A quantitative descriptive approach, combined with a qualitative descriptive component (an open-ended question), allows for the identification of dominant patterns of standard language use, reported linguistic difficulties, and attitudes toward the role of the standard language in the university environment. This methodological approach ensures a direct link between the theoretical framework discussed and the empirical analysis presented in the subsequent sections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review situates the present study within Albanian and international studies on standard languages, standardization processes, and academic language use, with particular attention to higher education contexts. It brings together sociolinguistic, language policy, and educational perspectives in order to examine how the standard language is conceptualized, institutionalized, and enacted in practice. The review is structured around three interrelated strands: (i) theoretical and conceptual approaches to the standard language and standardization; (ii) the historical development, functions, and contemporary challenges of standard Albanian; and (iii) research on students' academic communication, focusing on the relationship between normative knowledge and practical linguistic competence. By critically engaging with both normative and empirical studies, and by highlighting the relative scarcity of structured empirical research on students' actual language practices in Albanian higher education, particularly in digital environments, the review identifies the analytical gap that the present study seeks to address.

The standard language and standardization: a conceptual framework

In sociolinguistic research, the term *standard language* is defined as a codified and institutionally legitimized variety, intended for formal and public uses, particularly in education, administration, and academic communication. In the Albanian context, this definition carries particular weight, as the standard is not merely a technical norm of writing

and speech, but also an instrument of cultural consolidation and nationwide communication (Shkurtaj, 2022). In this sense, the standard functions as a *regime* of public discourse: it establishes rules and norms to be applied with precision and coherence, producing a shared communicative model within institutional settings.

In international scholarship, standardization is described as a multi-stage process involving selection, codification, functional elaboration, and social acceptance, through which a linguistic variety is transformed into a public norm (Haugen, 1966). While this conceptual framework also serves as a general point of reference for Albanian, Albanian-language studies emphasize that the standardization of Albanian cannot be understood solely as a "linguistic technique"; rather, it is closely intertwined with the historical, educational, and cultural dynamics of Albanian society (Thomai, 2022). Given that the implementation of the standard constitutes not merely a technical process but also a socially embedded one, the analysis of students' use of the standard in academic environments must be understood simultaneously as engagement with a codified linguistic norm and as adherence to a social norm of discursive behavior. This perspective is further complemented by language policy approaches, which conceptualize the standard as an interaction between institutional planning, social expectations, and speakers' actual practices (Spolsky, 2004; Fishman, 1972). In the case of Albanian, this framework is particularly useful for explaining why acceptance of the standard does not automatically translate into consistent use across all contexts, especially in digital communication. Within this framework, the present study approaches students' use of standard Albanian not merely as an issue of formal correctness, but as an interaction between institutionalized norms and real practices of university, and more broadly, academic communication.

Standard Albanian language: development, function, and contemporary challenges

Standard Albanian is the product of a historical and institutional process aimed at linguistic unity and communicative functionality on a national scale (Demiraj, 1988). In Albanian scholarship, the standard is conceptualized as an integrative norm that enables shared communication beyond dialectal differences, while simultaneously preserving the value of dialects as linguistic and identity resources (Thomai, 2022). From this perspective, language culture and the public use of the standard are viewed as components of civic and professional competence, particularly within educational and academic settings (Shkurtaj, 2022).

At the practical level, Albanian studies on language culture in education and the public sphere emphasize that the standard "lives" through its everyday implementation, not merely through prescriptive regulations. This is why the analysis of the standard at university level requires a dual focus: on the one hand, the codified norms of writing, and on the other, the real conditions of use in academic and institutional communication (Kalemi, 2019). These

approaches are especially relevant in the case of students, as the university constitutes the space in which the standard is expected to function as a tool of precise communication and argumentative discourse, and as a mandatory norm to be applied by all. In recent decades, Albanian studies has identified a range of challenges that may undermine the standard, including the presence of dialectal forms in public communication, lexical borrowing, and the influence of informal registers of everyday language, which frequently penetrate even formally academic environments (Topalli, 2017). In particular, digital communication has intensified pressure on the standard norm, producing rapid, abbreviated writing styles that often place orthographic conventions at risk. In this context, Albanian authors have analyzed electronic communication as an environment in which the standard is directly challenged through abbreviations, graphic symbols, and writing economy (Kurti, 2017). Moreover, studies on youth language in social media suggest that digital spaces favor informal registers, where standard norms are replaced by community-based communicative norms, often described as "platform norms" (Bakiu, 2019). In this line, Xega and Çyfeku (2025) are referenced illustratively with regard to the "culture of abbreviations" and the discourse profile of young people on social networks, while the corresponding citation will be completed by the author of the present study.

The standard and students' academic communication: between norm and competence

In the university context, the standard is not simply a matter of "correct writing," but is closely linked to the ability to produce well-structured academic discourse, characterized by clarity, coherence, appropriate terminology, and argumentative structure. In Albanian scholarship, this dimension is often addressed through two complementary perspectives: the norms of writing and public language use, and language culture as a component of professional formation (Memushaj, 2002). This is particularly important for students, as university education represents the stage at which linguistic competence must move from schematic knowledge of the norm toward sustained and consistent use in academic writing and institutional communication. At the same time, studies in education, including analyses conducted in the Albanian context, indicate that students may possess general knowledge of the standard but encounter difficulties in its practical application, especially in texts produced under time pressure or in informal interactions (Morina, 2020). Such difficulties typically manifest in orthography (e.g., the use of ë/ç), syntactic constructions, and the use of academic vocabulary, elements that directly affect the quality of communication within the university.

International authors serve here primarily as a conceptual frame: the concept of *academic language* emphasizes that academic success is linked to mastery of formal registers and discursive norms, yet this framework must be "translated" into the conditions of Albanian and the concrete practices of the Albanian university context (Snow & Uccelli, 2009). For an Albanian case study, interpretive weight therefore remains with authors and findings

that address standard Albanian both as a system of norms and as a culture of use. In this regard, the present study analyzes not only students' attitudes toward the standard, but also the concrete forms of its use in academic and digital communication.

Actual linguistic practices and the empirical gap: the need for studies in higher education

Albanian literature on the standard language is rich at the normative and cultural levels; however, empirical studies focused on students' actual practices in higher education, particularly in digital contexts, remain limited and often fragmented. In this respect, contributions directly related to higher education are especially valuable, as they shift the debate from "what should be" to "what actually occurs" (Kalemi, 2024). Likewise, research on electronic communication in Albanian enables analysis of the mechanisms through which the standard is weakened in digital writing (e.g., abbreviations, writing economy, graphic substitutions), without framing the phenomenon as "degeneration," but rather as a change in the conditions of text production (Kurti, 2017). Meanwhile, studies on social networks demonstrate that young people operate with multiple linguistic repertoires, and that variant choice is often explained by context and community of practice, rather than solely by "knowledge" of the norm (Bakiu, 2019).

The present study, for its part, employs a questionnaire to generate structured data on students' evaluation of and awareness of the standard language, its use in academic communication, the use of informal variants on social networks, concrete difficulties encountered in writing, and attitudes toward institutional interventions aimed at improving standard language use.

METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methodological framework adopted to understand students' use and perception of standard Albanian language in academic and digital communication. Building on the theoretical and empirical gaps identified in the literature review, the methodology is designed to move from conceptual discussion toward systematic empirical observation. It presents the transition from the theoretical framework to the research design, the research questions, the methodological approach, the research instrument, the study sample, and the procedures for data analysis.

From theoretical framework to methodological approach

As highlighted in the literature review, research on standard Albanian language has predominantly focused on its normative, historical, and cultural dimensions, while empirical analyses of its actual use in higher education remain relatively limited. In particular, there is a lack of structured data on how students perceive, use, and evaluate standard Albanian in

academic and digital communication, as well as on the concrete difficulties they encounter in the practical application of the norm. Addressing this gap, the present study seeks to move from theoretical analysis toward empirical observation of students' linguistic practices, focusing on the relationship between the standard norm, communicative context, and academic linguistic competence. Within this framework, the methodology has been designed to generate descriptive and comparable data on students' attitudes, perceptions, and actual practices in the Albanian university environment. The central research question guiding the study is: *How do students at an Albanian university perceive and use standard Albanian in academic and digital communication, and what are the main difficulties they encounter in its practical application?*

To operationalize this overarching question, the study addresses the following analytical sub-questions: *1- How do students assess the importance of standard Albanian in the university context? 2- To what extent do students report using the standard in formal academic and electronic communication? 3- Which linguistic varieties are most frequently used in informal digital communication (social networks)? 4- What linguistic difficulties do students identify in their use of the standard language? 5- What are students' attitudes toward institutional measures aimed at improving the use of standard Albanian at university level?*

Together, these questions aim to link the normative dimension of the standard language with actual usage practices and to provide an integrated picture of students' relationship with standard Albanian.

Methodological approach

The study adopts a descriptive quantitative approach, which is appropriate for analyzing students' attitudes, perceptions, and linguistic practices within a specific institutional context. To complement the quantitative analysis, the study also includes a qualitative descriptive component in the form of an open-ended question, allowing for the identification of recurring themes in students' suggestions and expressed attitudes. This component does not transform the study into a fully qualitative investigation but serves to enrich the interpretation of the quantitative findings.

*Research Instrument***.** Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, administered anonymously and online. The questionnaire consists of 12 items, designed in accordance with the dimensions identified in the literature review and the objectives of the study. Specifically, the questionnaire addresses:

- students' evaluation of the importance of standard Albanian;
- their level of awareness of the standard norm;
- the use of the standard in academic and electronic communication;
- the use of informal and dialectal varieties on social networks;
- the impact of digital technology on linguistic practices;
- difficulties encountered in using the standard language;
- attitudes toward institutional interventions aimed at improving linguistic competence.

The structure of the questionnaire allows for the collection of data that are both comparable and suitable for statistical analysis, while maintaining coherence with the theoretical framework of the study.

Study sample. The questionnaire was distributed to students at the University of Korçë, enrolled in various study programs, including teacher education, economics, social sciences, and nursing. The questionnaire was completed online by 192 students, and all 192 responses were considered valid and included in the analysis (N = 192). The analysis focuses exclusively on the distribution of responses across questionnaire items, without attempting intergroup comparisons. This methodological limitation is taken into account in the interpretation of the results and does not diminish the descriptive value of the study, which aims to provide a general overview of students' linguistic practices in the university context.

*Data analysis procedures***.** The data were processed and analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis, including:

- absolute frequencies (n) and percentages (%);
- for Likert-type items: mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and median;
- for multiple-choice items: percentages relative to the total number of respondents;
- for the open-ended question: descriptive thematic analysis, focused on identifying recurring themes.

This analytical procedure ensures a systematic and transparent treatment of the data and provides a solid basis for the interpretation of the results presented in the subsequent section.

RESULTS

The analysis of data collected from *192 students* indicates that standard Albanian language enjoys a very high normative status in students' perceptions; however, its practical use appears more complex and strongly dependent on communicative context. At the attitudinal level, the perceived importance of the standard language is exceptionally high, with a mean score of M = 3.72 (SD = 0.52) and a median of 4 on a 1–4 scale, reflecting a strong consensus within the sample. More than four fifths of respondents *(81.8%, n = 157*) consider the use of the standard language "very important," while only a minimal proportion express low evaluations. This suggests that the standard norm is widely legitimized within university discourse.

This high evaluation is accompanied by a predominantly functional and instrumental perception of the standard language. Students primarily associate its use with *professional development (68.2%, n = 131)* and *correct academic communication (61.5%, n = 118)*, rather than with formal obligation or linguistic tradition. This finding indicates that the standard is perceived as an unquestionable necessity directly linked to academic success and

institutional representation. Nevertheless, the level of awareness regarding the importance of the standard language, although high overall *(M = 3.41, SD = 0.63)*, is not entirely homogeneous. A non-negligible segment of students *(8.8%, n = 17)* reports low levels of awareness, suggesting that the internalization of the standard norm is uneven across the sample. This discrepancy becomes more pronounced when the analysis shifts from attitudes to actual linguistic practices.

In *academic electronic communication* (e-mails, university platforms), the reported use of standard Albanian language is more moderate *(M = 3.08, SD = 0.71)*. Approximately one fifth of students *(19.3%, n = 37)* report infrequent use of the standard, indicating that academic digital environments represent a space in which the standard norm is applied with less rigor. This tendency becomes even more pronounced in *informal digital communication*: on social media, *64.6% (n = 124)* of student's report using dialectal variants or informal forms, whereas only *12.0% (n = 23)* report regular use of the standard language. These findings clearly indicate that the choice of linguistic variant is not related to a lack of knowledge, but rather to the social function of the communicative context. The impact of technology on linguistic practices is clearly reflected in students' responses. The most frequently reported effects include the use of abbreviations *(71.4%, n = 137)*, reduced attention to orthographic accuracy (*63.0%, n = 121*), and the mixing of formal and informal registers (*58.9%, n = 113*). These results suggest that technology does not replace the standard norm as an ideal; rather, it challenges its practical implementation, particularly in rapid and institutionally unregulated communicative situations. The difficulties students encounter in using the standard language are primarily technical and structural in nature. The most frequently reported problem concerns *orthography*, particularly the correct use of *ë* and *ç (66.1%, n = 127),* followed by *syntactic construction (48.4%, n = 93)* and *academic vocabulary (41.1%, n = 79)*. These findings indicate that the principal challenge does not lie in the rejection of the norm, but in the lack of consolidated competence in its active use, especially in writing. This uncertainty is also reflected in students' self-assessment of their formal writing. Although the mean level of confidence is relatively high *(M = 3.18, SD = 0.64)*, approximately *15.6% (n = 30)* of students report low confidence, indicating that academic writing remains a problematic area for a segment of the sample. In this context, it is not coincidental that the most frequently requested measures for improving standard language use *include training sessions and specialized courses (62.5%, n = 120*) as well as an increase in *practical academic activities (54.7%, n = 105),* rather than the mere reinforcement of institutional rules.

Finally, the very high willingness of students to participate in activities aimed at improving the use of the standard language *(88.0%, n = 169)* constitutes a key finding. It indicates that, despite practical difficulties, there is a genuine readiness for educational intervention, creating favorable conditions for structured university policies in the field of language education.

DISCUSSION

One of the most consistent findings of this study is students' very high normative evaluation of standard Albanian. This result aligns directly with the analyses of Gjovalin Shkurtaj, who conceptualizes the Albanian standard as a core component of language culture and as an indicator of individuals' cultural and professional formation. In this sense, students' perception of the standard as an indispensable element of academic communication confirms the view that standard Albanian continues to retain its legitimizing function within the university sphere.

However, the fact that awareness of the importance of the standard is not entirely homogeneous suggests that knowledge of the norm does not necessarily translate into equally internalized individual competence. This finding is closely related to the observations of Rami Memushaj, who argues that standard Albanian is often learned as a system of rules but not always acquired as a stable skill of use, particularly in formal writing. The present study supports this perspective by demonstrating that the presence of the norm in educational discourse does not automatically guarantee consolidated linguistic competence.

The results indicating a clear differentiation of linguistic variants according to communicative context can be interpreted in light of the sociolinguistic analyses of Jani Thomai, who emphasizes that the relationship between the standard and dialects is not exclusionary but functional. Within this framework, the use of the standard in formal academic communication and the use of informal variants on social networks do not represent a weakening of the standard; rather, they constitute evidence of speakers' ability to operate with a multiple linguistic repertoire across different contexts.

The influence of digital technology on students' linguistic practices corresponds directly to the analyses of Elida Kurti, who argues that electronic communication creates new conditions of writing, in which economy of expression and speed of interaction affect adherence to the standard norm. The findings of the present study confirm this perspective, showing that the use of abbreviations and reduced orthographic attention are consequences of the communicative medium itself rather than indications of a rejection of the standard.

Similarly, the use of informal and dialectal registers on social networks is consistent with the findings of Donika Bakiu, who analyzes youth language in digital spaces as a form of communication oriented toward community affiliation and group identity. In this context, students' choice of linguistic variant reflects the social function of communication and the internal norms of digital platforms, rather than a lack of knowledge of the standard language.

The reported difficulties in orthography, syntax, and academic vocabulary support the observations of Valbona Kalemi, who highlights that language culture in higher education faces concrete challenges in the practical implementation of the standard norm. Problems related to the use of *ë* and *ç*, as well as uncertainty in the construction of formal written texts, indicate that the primary challenge lies not in attitudes toward the standard, but in the lack of systematic practice and structured pedagogical support.

Finally, students' orientation toward training and practical activities as measures for improving the use of the standard language aligns with Shkurtaj's educational approach, according to which language culture is not built through regulations alone, but through continuous practice and functional awareness. The high level of willingness to participate in such initiatives suggests that universities possess genuine potential to intervene effectively in the development of students' academic linguistic competence.

In conclusion, the discussion of the findings shows that students' relationship with standard Albanian is characterized by strong normative acceptance, context-dependent use, and practical difficulties in the active application of the norm. These results place the study in continuity with contemporary Albanian scholarship and underscore the need for university policies that treat the standard not as a static norm, but as a competence developed through guided academic practice.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This study provides a structured empirical overview of students' relationship with standard Albanian in the university environment, contributing to the filling of a gap identified in Albanian scholarship, which has traditionally focused more on the normative and cultural dimensions of the standard than on the analysis of its actual usage practices.

The findings indicate that standard Albanian continues to enjoy a high normative and symbolic status in students' linguistic awareness. It is perceived as an essential element of academic communication and as an indicator of professional competence. This result confirms the continuity of the unifying and legitimizing role of the standard within Albanian higher education, positioning it as an accepted and desirable norm at the discursive level.

However, the study clearly demonstrates that normative acceptance of the standard is not always accompanied by consistent practical use. The use of standard Albanian is differentiated according to communicative context: it is more consolidated in formal academic communication and noticeably more flexible in electronic communication and on social networks. This functional differentiation suggests that students operate with multiple linguistic repertoires and adapt their choice of linguistic variant in accordance with the social function of communication, without necessarily calling into question the legitimacy of the standard.

A key conclusion concerns the concrete difficulties encountered in the active use of the standard language, particularly in academic writing. Reported problems in orthography, syntactic construction, and academic vocabulary indicate that the primary challenge lies not in the rejection of the norm, but in the absence of consolidated operational competence. This insecurity in writing reflects a gap between theoretical knowledge of the standard and the ability to apply it confidently and consistently in practice.

Within this framework, the study shows that the impact of digital technology should not be interpreted as a factor that delegitimizes the standard, but rather as an element that alters the conditions of its use. Digital environments favor speed, economy of expression, and register flexibility, making strict adherence to the standard norm more difficult, particularly outside formal contexts.

Overall, students' relationship with standard Albanian is characterized by a combination of strong normative acceptance, context-dependent use, and practical difficulties in the active realization of the norm. This combination reflects contemporary tensions between standardization and linguistic diversity in Albanian higher education and underscores the need for more integrated approaches to university-level language education.

Recommendations

On the basis of the study's findings, several recommendations can be formulated with a focus on academic practice and university policies, without exceeding the empirical scope and validity of the data.

First, universities should move from a predominantly normative and regulatory approach to the standard language toward a pedagogical and developmental one. Compliance with the standard cannot be ensured solely through regulations or formal requirements; rather, it requires interventions aimed at building students' practical linguistic competence.

Second, the integration of structured academic writing activities into university curricula is recommended, particularly during the early years of study. Courses, seminars, or dedicated modules on academic writing in Albanian would help students acquire the standard not merely as a theoretical norm, but as a functional tool for effective academic communication.

Third, in light of the impact of digital communication, it is recommended to develop a reflective approach to language use in online environments—one that does not stigmatize informal forms, but instead helps students clearly distinguish between contexts that require adherence to the standard and those in which register flexibility is acceptable.

Fourth, the high level of students' willingness to participate in improvement-oriented activities suggests that universities possess untapped potential for institutional intervention. The organization of training sessions and practical activities focused on language culture and academic writing could make a significant contribution to improving the use of standard Albanian in the university context.

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THE ROLE OF GERMAN PHILOSOPHY IN THE EDUCATION OF FUTURE TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to recall the historical-political factors that have marked and left deep traces in today's Albania dominated by collective thought, in the absence of analytical tendencies and assessments, referring to the foundations of critical thinking. Through the analytical retrospective, the idea of the intersection of philosophy is further deepened, with a main focus on the foundations of German philosophy, which can be applied in any curriculum of the Faculty of Educational Sciences. In this study, the focus is placed on 18 students of the Master's Degree in German Teaching program as a sample of the population of 67 students of the Department of Foreign Languages. The research methodologies used in this study are methods of systematic / active observation and qualitative, as well as through surveys addressed to 10 lecturers of the Department of Foreign Languages. A systematic observation, accompanied by almost unified opinions of the lecturers, have brought the following result: Yes, German philosophy is necessary for a western education for the future teachers of Albania.

Key words: *education,German philosophy, western, Albanian history, society*

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to revisit the historical-political factors that have marked and left deep traces in present-day Albania, dominated by collective thinking but not inclined towards critical thinking. Through a retrospective approach, we delve deeper into the idea of the intertwining of philosophy, with a primary focus on German philosophy, in every curriculum of the education faculty's departments. The ultimate goal of the teacher is to be a mentor, positively influencing the development of students and learners. Being a student at the Faculty of Education, I have encountered, for two academic years of the professional master's program, the tendency of almost all students to focus on acquiring

a university degree. However, having been in contact with students and pupils for 6 years due to practical teaching sessions, the time came to turn this observational process into scientific research. Let us begin by addressing the starting point of our main issue:

A Brief Political-Cultural History of Albania

Albania, a country in Southeastern Europe, is located in the southwestern part of the Balkan Peninsula. Beyond its strategic position and natural wealth, it has played its historical and cultural role in the field of knowledge. Overburdened with continuous invasions, although we may say that it is the fate of small countries to be conquered, the case of the Ottoman occupation (a theme that leaves room for different interpretations) managed to spread its rays of knowledge in Europe and beyond, not only through important figures such as: Gjergj Fishta, Naim Frashëri, Eqerem Çabej, Ernest Koliqi, Fan Noli, Ismail Kadare and many others.

A hero like Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg, valued by Europe but betrayed by his nephew Hamza. A figure like Ismail Qemali, recognized as a prominent personality by Europe, but the opposite happened with his own state.

A writer, a Nobel Prize contender like Ismail Kadare, but betrayed by his own people. "The past is a prologue" says Shakespeare and this strange past of hybrid Albania has made possible the transformation of the current education system. Humiliated by neighboring countries, as in the case of Albanian students and academics, as documented in the book "Isolated", published in Pristina in 2009 that was published for the second time under the patronage of the Council for the Protection of Human Rights and the Helsinki Committee, who in the torture chambers endured the sufferings of hell under the screams: "You are of Illyrian descent, huh?", "You think you're more refined, huh?", "Here's the whip for your origins. And here's one for your Albanian-Illyrian mother who gave birth to you," and until that dark dictatorial period, many writers have described. One of them was Petro Marko, who expressed this about the dictatorial system: "A Mephistophelian contrivance that evokes terror and fear." (Marko 2001)

Socialism, the regime where war was peace, equality was equivalent to poverty, education was ruined, paranoid control prevailed, the contraction/erosion of the Albanian language, and the lack of freedom of thought and action.

For 50 years in a row, this regime brainwashed a whole population, and this brainwashing machine has roots so deep that even today the consequences of this regime are still felt. The denial of the past was one of the principles of socialism, and thus, today, we have the present, which, before it turns into the past, is worth studying. Let us delve deeper by revisiting in more detail some of the prominent figures who contributed to the formation of the Western mindset of Albanians.

The Alphabet and the First Albanian School, the Normal School

A state with a Pelasgian origin, as George Von Hahn writes: "...The connections between the Albanian language and the older names of the gods of Greece that we discovered are the strongest evidence that the Albanians of today are Pelasgian." (2013). The unfortunate fate of Albania was to be occupied for 500 years by the Ottoman Empire, which left the country behind in terms of spoken and written language. With the variety of religions as a consequence of Turkish and Greek occupation, the influence of their schools caused the inhabitants of different regions of Albania to be shaped differently, both in mentality and language.

At the core of civilizations are religious beliefs, as well as language.

While 19th-century Europe had its influence on science and art, Albania needed to wait until 1908 to have its official Albanian alphabet. The Congress of Monastir, which lasted 8 days (November 14-22, 1908), was a scientific congress. The Work of Father Gjergj Fishta

The work of Father Gjergj Fishta was not an easy one, as at that time there were about 6-7 different alphabets, among which four were the most widespread: the Alphabet of Istanbul, the Jesuit Alphabet, the Alphabet of the Union, and the Alphabet of Dawn. On the third day of the Congress of Monastir, Father Gjergj Fishta said: "I have not come here to defend any of these alphabets, but I have come to join you and to adopt the alphabet that the Congress will decide as the most useful for the rise of the people."

In his writing "The Albanian Language" from February 1917, he stated: "The first task, therefore, that is needed in the interest of preserving the Albanian language, is that the Albanian language should be used as the language of instruction in all the primary schools of Albania... Those parents who do not teach their children the first lessons in this language, are, in our opinion, working directly against the interests of Albania." (Fishta 2000)

In his decision-making on the alphabet of the Albanian language, Father Gjergj Fishta said: "The Alphabet of Istanbul is sufficient to meet the needs of the nation, but in order to print books outside Albania and send telegrams abroad, we need to master an alphabet with entirely Latin letters." And his words concluded with: "Long live the Alphabet!"

The Congress of Elbasan in 1909 finalized the creation of the first Albanian school, which would be responsible for the training of teachers, the "Shkolla e Normales" (Normal School). The director of this school was Luigj Gurakuqi. With a staff of intellectual missionaries such as Aleksandër Xhuvani, Sotir Peci, Simon Shuteriqi, Hasan Mejza, Haviz Ibrahim Dalliu, and Peter Dodbiba, and with a secular curriculum, the Normal School accepted students of all religious beliefs.

"The human soul needs knowledge, and being Albanian will come from the language, so that enlightenment may approach the European illumination of the French Revolution." (Kabo 2014)

What Connects Albania with German Culture

Germany, the genesis of modern philosophical DNA, with a high number of intellectual giants, delegated one of them, Prince Wilhelm of Wied, to rule in this small country, freshly emerged from Ottoman occupation, to convert it into a Western society. As Ismail Kadare says: "For Albanians, the sun rises from the West." (2012)

A marked lack of governance by local politicians meant that Albania needed a foreign ruler, a Protestant prince, in a country that had converted to Islam.

Prince Wied was a political product of the Conference of Ambassadors, who undertook a journey from Vienna to Paris to London before stepping into the state he would rule.

On March 7, 1914, Albania became a kingdom with the Protestant Prince Wilhelm Wied at its head.

"The King, the first person he would meet to talk to when he started his duty, would be the Mufti, who warned him: 'The leaders, the bajraktars, the captains, and anyone who approaches will do so for personal gain. The moment they no longer have such a benefit, they will turn their backs on you.' Time proved this prophecy to be true. Before leaving Albania, after six months, Vidi would have to meet the last Mufti and say to him: 'You were right!'" (Kabo 2014)

Esad Pasha Toptani, a prominent figure in the history of Albania, would undoubtedly have been part of Prince Wied's government. This fact is worth noting because, a few months later, this man would lead a rebellion of an entire people against the king.

Among the first encounters of the king with the Albanian people, beyond the diabolization, there was also sincerity and love for the homeland. The impression left by the highlanders was dignified, with a serious appearance, serious demeanor, and attire, showing respect for His Majesty.

"Between the two categories mentioned above: the values represented by the highlanders and the anti-values represented by the anti-Albanians, it is necessary to mention three figures loyal to the king and the homeland: Isa Boletini, Dom Kacorri, and Faik Konica.

'The fate of Albania with a Western orientation and the understanding that the East and Ottomanism were over – this dilemma was our historical crossroads.' (Kabo 2014)

This crossroads is still present in our days, according to the responses in the survey:

(Insert survey with Western and Eastern mindset)

On March 18, 1914, the government cabinet took the oath. The high executive consisted of:

- Turhan Pasha Përmeti - Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs.
- Esad Pasha Toptani - Minister of the Interior and War.
- Aziz Pasha Vrioni - Minister of Agriculture and Commerce.
- Myfid Bey Libohova - Minister of Religion and Justice.

- Hasan Bey Prishtina - Minister of Post and Telegraphs.
- Dr. Mihal Turtulli - Minister of Education.
- Dr. Mehdi Bey Frashëri - Minister of Finance.

In this government, which was made up of a foreign majority who had never lived in Albania. Some of them could not even speak the Albanian language. A state with a king who spoke German, a government that spoke Turkish, and a people that spoke Albanian.

"In April 1914, the king visited the small town of Kavaja. A picturesque landscape and the enthusiasm of the thousands of people who had gathered in the square to greet the royal couple. The city's imam addressed the people with panegyrics about the king. All those present, thanks to this situation and blessings, understood that religious differences no longer made sense in Albania. A pure illusion, one of those usual tricks of the typical conjuncturalism of the anthropo-individual of the converted Albanian. The imam also spoke on behalf of 'his Christian fellow citizens' and 'assured the King that the people of Kavaja would work together for the King and their homeland, as one big family.' Less than a month after this speech, the imam joined the rebels along with all of his loyal followers.

When will that time come, that social and civil climate where the truth is revealed? It would be unbelievable that a person of the Muslim faith would have such a level of culture and enlightenment that, driven by the patriotic ideal, would know how to see beyond the fence of popular fanaticism and find the historical direction of progress.

The King's visit to Tirana, on April 23, 1914, is an event with both comic and dramatic undertones. The journey by horse and carriage lasted six hours. One had to pass through swamps and muddy paths. Everywhere, curious people and children were waiting. The king was passing by, and this didn't happen often! In this historical event, the episode with the politician and 'popular agitator' Dervish Hima stands out. He had gathered people and was teaching them to shout 'Long live the King!' It is noticeable that the people did not have such a civil culture to cheer in an organized way, and they had never even considered that they should say 'Long live the King!' They had cheered for Allah and the Sultan Caliph, even across several generations. All of this showed that Wilhelm Vidi, if not on an impossible mission, was at least on a premature adventure. Were these enslaved and poor people ready to think and cheer for their monarch?" (Kabo 2014)

A few months later, exactly on September 3, 1914, Prince Vidi would leave Albania due to the rebellion of the Albanians against the Protestant prince.

An Albania that did not desire civilization, aristocracy, and the Socratic virtue, thus knowledge.

Through a journey back in time, we come to understand that the mentality of the Albanian people has not changed much.

The same Albania once, and the same Albania today. The Ottoman culture deeply rooted in the DNA of Albanians demands...

Through the survey conducted, we understand that we have a dominance of Eastern mentality, even among the younger generations. 90% of the respondents stated that students have an Eastern mentality. Some of the issues that this mentality still carries and is cultivated in the younger generations, who will be the teachers of the future, will be addressed below.

What is education, and what is meant by education today?

"The word 'education' has its roots in proto-Indo-European languages, in the word 'deuk.' The word came into Latin in two forms: educare, which means 'to nourish' or 'to raise,' and educatus, which translates as education.

Education began as a natural response of early civilizations to the struggle for survival and to thrive as a culture. Adults trained the youth of their society in the knowledge and skills that would be necessary for them to master and eventually pass on.

The evolution of culture and human beings as a species depended on this practice of transmitting knowledge. In pre-literate societies, this was achieved orally and by imitation. Storytelling continued from one generation to the next. Spoken language developed into symbols and written letters. The depth and breadth of knowledge that could be preserved and passed on quickly grew exponentially. As cultures began to expand their knowledge beyond basic skills such as communication, trade, food gathering, religious practices, and so on, formal education and schooling eventually followed." (Based on theoretical foundations of teaching)

Different eras produce generations with different mindsets. If we compare the mission of education in the past with the "mission" that education carries today, we would feel a vast difference.

If we compare Albanian education in the past with the education that exists today, we would notice that the goal of the youth today is to be equipped with a diploma.

I tend to oppose democracy, especially the democratization of educational institutions, as I consider knowledge and the education of an individual to be a categorical imperative for personal well-being and social harmony. From this perspective, as seen through the eyes of a student, the standardization of the university curriculum in the name of democracy has led to quite a few disappointments for students. The cult of the individual has been adapted in Albanian culture in a way that is far from fruitful, unlike in German culture. In German culture and systems of thought, the focus is placed on reasoning and logic. Rationality, a virtue in my opinion, nurtured and cultivated in Europe, is a virtue that is absent in Albania due to the prevailing Eastern mentality that still dominates today. There is daily lobbying for democracy and individual freedom, yet the democracy applied in education comes with

rights but without obligations. This means that today's student has the right to expect a good grade but does not feel obligated to engage in seminars or additional assignments in the context of knowledge. Today, we are dealing with a youth that considers knowledge merely as a diploma that will hang on the wall because the obscure mindset and the desire for money play a very important role in society.

The tendency of obscurantism has taken hold of a very high percentage of young people, giving primary focus to money through mundane work. In a capitalist era where the slogan is "I possess money, therefore I have rights," this mindset has infected education as well. This is the reason why the cult of the individual in Albania comes in a regressive form, as capital without thought leads to an illiterate, consumerist, and degraded society.

Education is sacred and should not be tarnished by any stain of mediocrity. The unity of curriculum, pedagogue, and student should be absolute. Freedom without rules is anarchy, and freedom without rules in education is a catastrophe for a state. The comparison between the education of the past and the present is essential in order to make it possible to recognize the distinguished figures who contributed to Albania, as we live in an era where we celebrate the alphabet without knowing its history.

Young believers celebrate religious holidays without knowing why they are celebrating, simply because it is a tradition, stripping away the importance of critical thinking and personal research. Without realizing it, an invisible censorship has been created as soon as different religious discussions arise, turning the educational institution into a non-secular institution. The university is the house of knowledge, and as a house of knowledge, it is unethical to hear from an academic say: "I want you to be good people, good mothers." (In the lecture hall, the female gender dominates.)

By what right is it expected that a female student should be a good mother in a secular institution? Could this be a sign for Albanian society and intellectuals? An academic concern about education in Albania is also expressed by Artan Fuga in an interview, where he states that, unfortunately, Albanian education is not at the right level compared to the level of education in the West. (A.Fuga, personal communication, November 25, 2024). The same opinion is shared by philosopher Perparim Kabo, whose name many young people may not be familiar with. (P.Kabo, personal communication, December 25, 2024). According to ETF, in 2025, 47% of Albanians over the age of 15 are not be able to read or write.

Research questions/applied scientific methods

This paper addresses two research questions:

1. Why has the level of education in Albania decreased?

2. Why is German philosophy necessary in the university curriculum?

The research methodologies used in this study are methods of systematic / active observation and qualitative, as well as through surveys addressed to 10 lecturers of the Department of Foreign Languages.

Data analysis/main results

According to the survey conducted with 10 professors from the Department of Foreign Languages, we observe the following results:

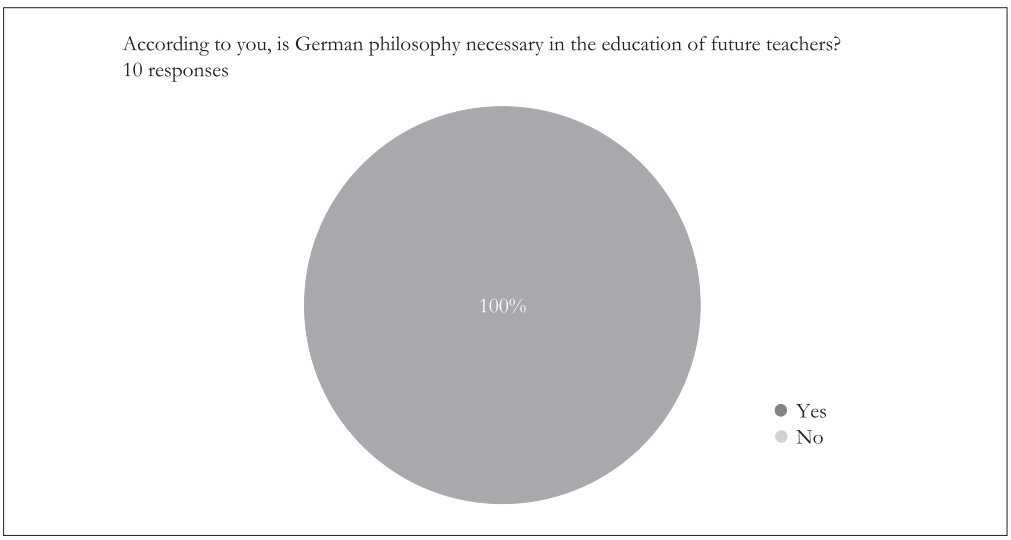


Figure 1. *Results of the question: Is German philosophy necessary in the education of future teachers?*

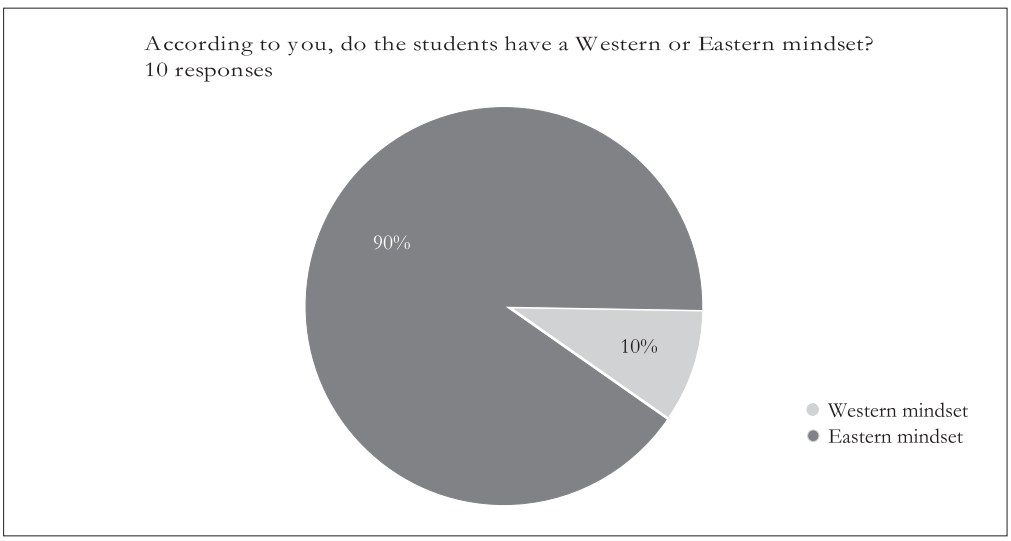


Figure 2. *Results of the question: Do students have a Western or Eastern mindset?*

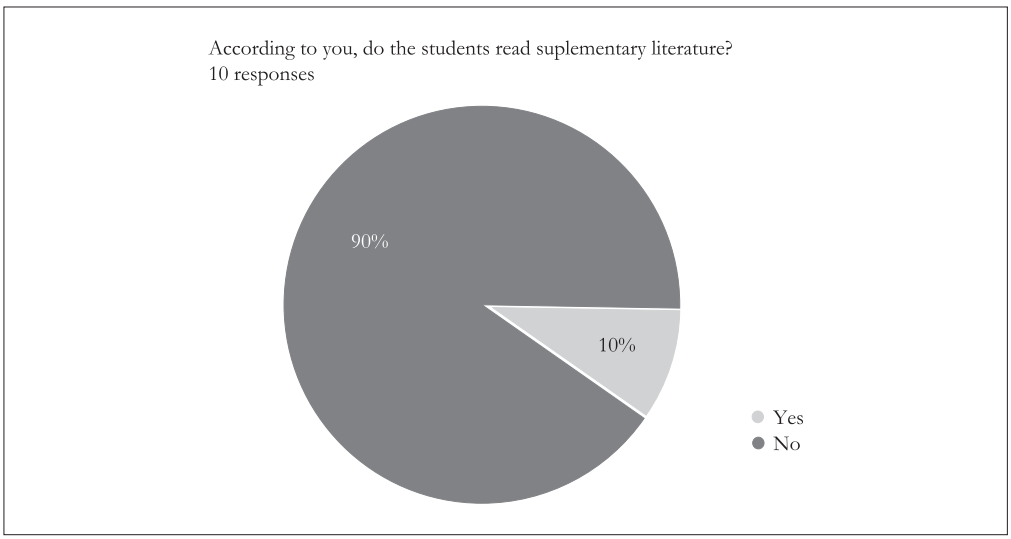


Figure 3. *Results of the question: Do students read supplementary literature?*

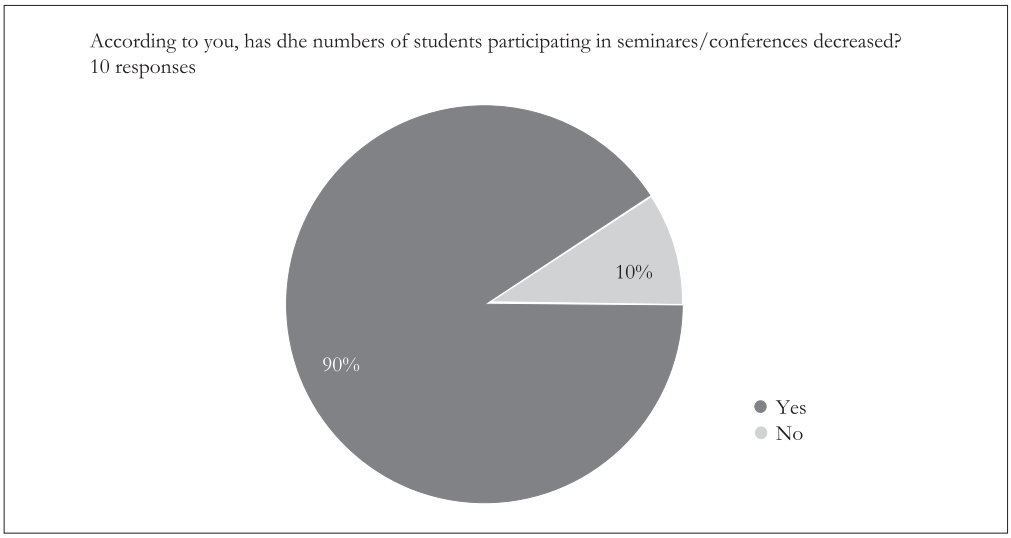


Figure 4. *Results of the question: Has the number of students' participation in seminars/conferences decreased?*

The Division Between a Subject-Centered and a Student-Centered Methodology (50/50):

This division reflects a deep tension between a traditional education system and the younger generation's aspiration for a more personalized approach. Historically, Albanian universities have followed an authoritarian model, where the lecturer dominates and the content is rigid. The fact that half of the students prefer a student-centered approach indicates a growing awareness and a need for more active engagement—one that goes beyond grades and a single textbook.

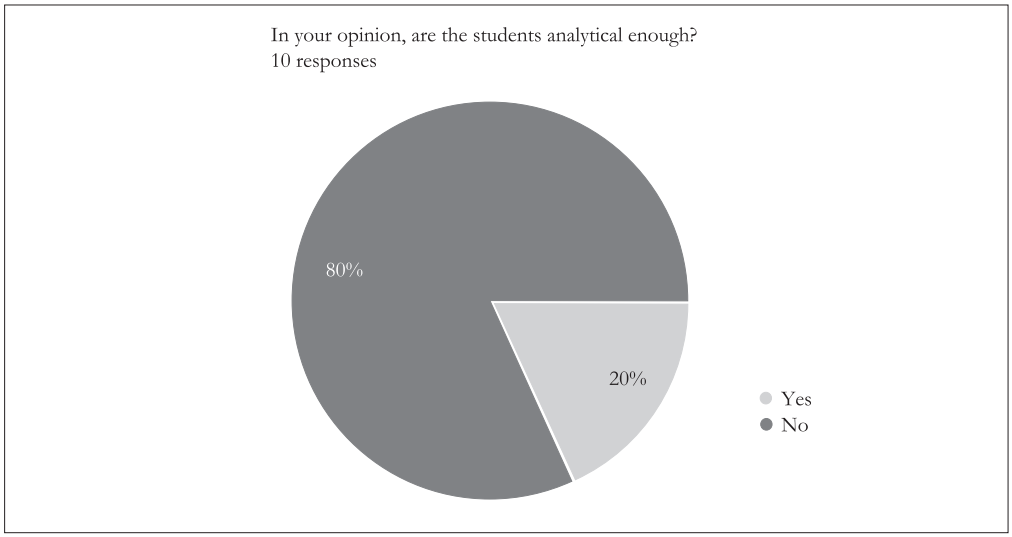


Figure 5. *Results of the question: Are students analytical enough?*

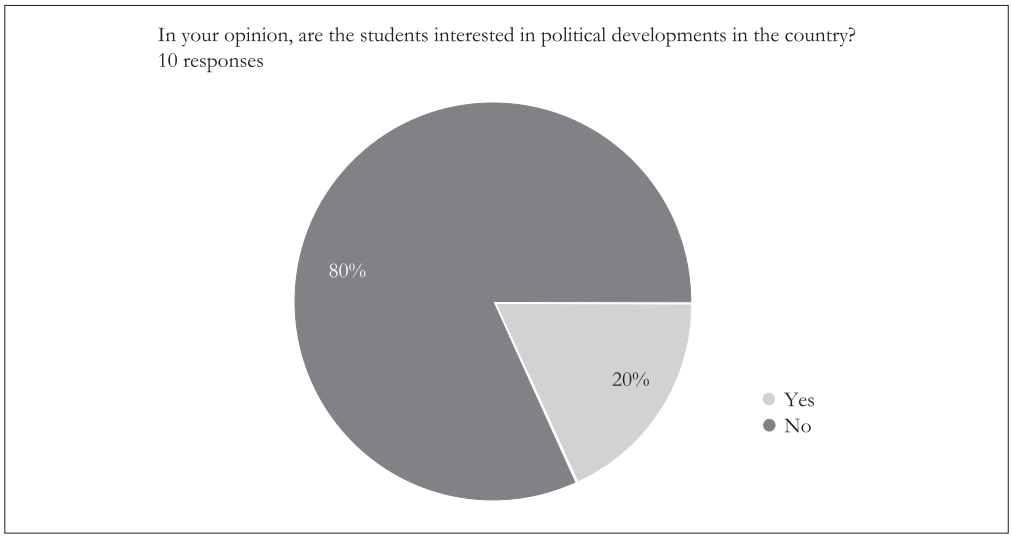


Figure 6. *Results of the question: Are students interested in political developments in the country?*

90% of Students Only Strive for the Diploma:

This is one of the strongest indicators of the crisis in the Albanian education system. In a country where a diploma is often a prerequisite for public sector employment or emigration, the diploma has lost its true academic value and become a status symbol—rather than a sign of knowledge. In Albania, there remains a deep gap between education and the labor market. Many students feel that in-depth learning does not offer any career advantage; jobs are often secured through connections rather than merit. This promotes a culture of formal education that lacks true substance.

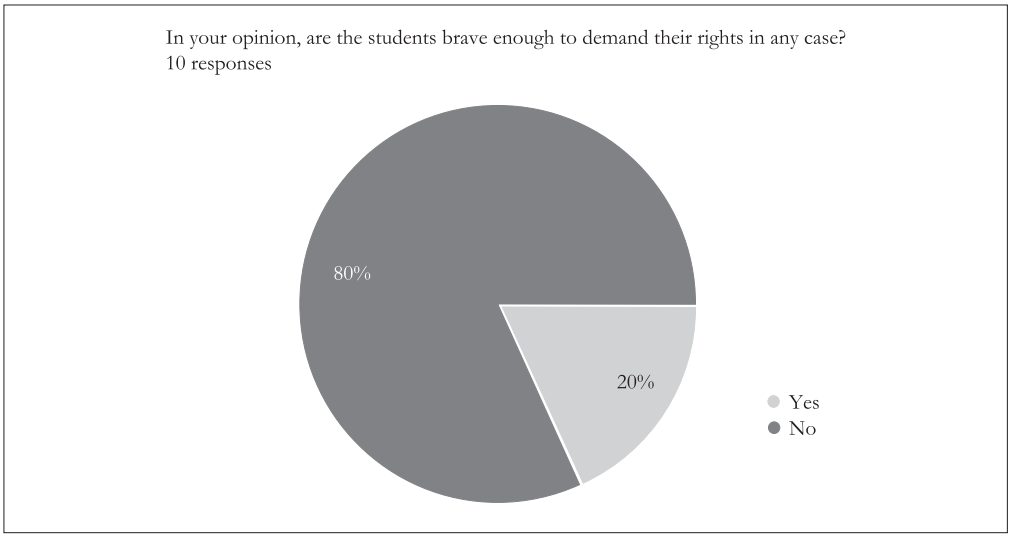


Figure 7. *Results of the question: Are students brave enough to demand their rights in every situation?*

80% of Students Are Individualistic – Lack of Collaboration:

The individualism of Albanian students reflects a society where success is perceived as a personal struggle. Collaboration is often seen as a weakness or as an opportunity for cheating. This stems from a system where grades are highly competitive, and cooperative efforts in group work, projects, or theses are rarely assessed.

Moreover, many academic programs lack group activities, practical tasks, and discussion-based exercises. Even when such methods are used, there is often no objective evaluation of individual contributions.

80% Do Not Read Supplementary Literature:

This shows that the teaching process in Albania is still heavily reliant on the main textbook and often on dictated lectures. The lack of access to quality literature, the absence of functional libraries, and insufficient guidance in using foreign-language resources further worsen the situation.

Many students say: "What the lecturer requires for the exam is enough for us." This attitude also stems from a lack of reading culture, which is not cultivated in high school either, where the focus is mainly on passing the Matura exam.

90% Do Not Participate in Conferences/Seminars:

In Albania, participation in conferences is often seen as "something for lecturers" or "only for excellent students." Conferences are rarely promoted to students, are often paid, and offer no concrete benefit to participants.

Many students don't even know how to apply, where to send abstracts, or how to formulate a research topic. This is the result of a lack of guidance and missing mentorship, which should ideally begin in the first year of study. The number of students participating in conferences and seminars has significantly declined. While I was discussing the conference I'm currently organizing, one of my colleagues (a future teacher) expressed that she sees no point in attending such events. If it's only about a certificate, she said, there's no reason to invest so much effort—she could get another certificate elsewhere that serves the same professional purpose.

80% of Term Papers Are Copied from the Internet:

Plagiarism has become a silent norm. The main causes are the absence of instruction in academic writing, lack of training in citation techniques and referencing, and the absence of an effective plagiarism detection system.

Additionally, students lack positive role models in academic writing, rarely read scholarly essays, and often do not understand the purpose of a term paper.

70% of students in foreign language departments are unable to translate literary works:

This is one of the clearest indicators of the lack of practical application. Many departments fill the curriculum with grammar and theory, while practical translation exercises (literature, essays, film scenes, dialogues) are rarely included.

Foreign language institutes should be creative hubs where students practice translation as both an art form and a means of cultural exchange. However, original texts are often lacking, as are connections to publishers who could benefit from such translations.

Another alarming phenomenon that requires resolution is the submission of young people to every form of injustice. The Albanian student must become aware of the power they possess, as well as the noble purpose their profession entails:

A teacher who does not defend their own rights cannot educate a progressive generation.

80% of students are not willing to give public presentations:

This indicator is highly significant in assessing the self-confidence and communication skills of students in Albania. The lack of willingness to speak publicly often reflects an educational culture that has not sufficiently supported the development of public speaking and debate skills. In many schools and universities, traditional teaching methods dominate, promoting passive listening and rote memorization instead of active discussion and presentation.

In Albania, there is often a lack of activities that encourage students to speak openly and express their opinions. This may be linked to a mindset where questioning authority or

expressing dissenting views is seen as disrespectful. Additionally, the lack of practical experience in presentations and debates makes public speaking a major psychological challenge for many students.

This situation negatively impacts the development of leadership qualities and critical thinking among young Albanians and leaves them less prepared to actively participate in public or professional life, where communication plays a key role.

80% of students do not question the information provided by lecturers:

This fact reveals a strong tendency toward critical passivity within Albanian academic environments. Effective teaching requires not only the transmission of knowledge but also the development of critical thinking and open discourse about the material being taught.

In Albania, the traditional education system is more focused on memorization and authority rather than dialogue and critical analysis. This finding reflects a culture in which lecturers are viewed as untouchable sources of truth, while students accept information without doubt or inquiry.

The lack of critique and debate is problematic, as it limits students' intellectual development and their ability to independently analyze and evaluate information. In a society aiming for modernization and progress, this mindset restricts innovation and advancement.

70% of Students Have an Eastern-Oriented Mindset:

This is a very interesting result and reflects the cultural and historical influences that continue to shape the mindset of Albanian youth. The Eastern mindset typically includes values such as authoritarianism, strong respect for hierarchies, fatalism, and a more conservative view of life and society.

In Albania, historical legacies and influences from the Balkan region, combined with a traditional education system, contribute to this worldview. This partially explains the lack of questioning toward authority and the tendency to accept information uncritically.

At the same time, such an "Eastern-oriented mindset" may limit the development of critical thinking, creativity, and civic engagement—hindering young people from adopting a more liberal and modern attitude.

50% of Students Are Empathetic:

This is a positive finding, showing that despite the challenges, a significant portion of students possess the ability and the emotional sensitivity to understand and empathize with others. Empathy is a crucial trait, especially in a society facing major social and cultural shifts.

In the Albanian context—where family and community play strong roles—it is natural that many young people develop this quality. However, other findings such as lack of collaboration or high individualism (from earlier surveys) make this empathy all the more important as a potential to strengthen social bonds and solidarity.

80% of Students Are Not Interested in Political Developments in the Country:

This finding reveals a serious issue concerning civic engagement and political awareness among young Albanians. The low interest in politics may be linked to disappointment in the political class, lack of high-quality information, or a sense of powerlessness to enact change. Another striking issue is the students' lack of desire to think analytically. The unwillingness to engage in objective analysis signals a regression in the current generation and lays the foundation for a future society devoid of independent thought—a mechanical society focused solely on producing money.

The sum of these phenomena reinforces my conviction that German philosophy is necessary in the university curriculum, with representatives of colossal thought: Friedrich Nietzsche, Immanuel Kant, Hegel, Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, etc., who are essential systems of thought for restoring the brilliance of Albanian education.

RECOMMENDATIONS/CONCLUSIONS

In an era of consumerism and materialism, in a transitional state like Albania, where education is most at risk, we must take the wheel into our own hands — and this time, turn back in time: precisely to Germany of the 17th–19th centuries. Philosophy means the love of wisdom, and German philosophy has had a profound impact on the world. Especially today, it must be seen as a central pillar for the flourishing of Albanian education. Historically, it is clear how, in the past, the Albanian population with its Ottoman orientation reacted to Prince Wilhelm of Wied, who embodied the West. Even today, there is a clear dominance of the Oriental mentality — not only as a way of life in daily routines but also, and more importantly, within the very heart of knowledge: the university. This mentality, combined with a marked lack of desire for knowledge (gnosis), development, and enlightenment, has led to a decline in the quality of teacher training. The chaotic state of Albania's education in the 21st century must be regenerated — through German philosophy. It is often heard, especially from the so-called pedants of academia, that philosophy is an abstract, untouchable, and unnecessary field to be considered as a mediator capable of transforming the university curriculum from chaos into order — whose fruit would be an educated society.

On the other hand, it is clearly observed that a significant number of educators agree, in unison, that German philosophy is essential in the university curriculum.

Albanian anthropology is tied to the historical pathos of Western ideals, and German

philosophy aligns with the ancient determinism of our society. A society suffering from the dualism of idealism and realism resonates with the German source of philosophy in its efforts, as it needs the Hegelian and Kantian touch — and of others — where history is a dialectical process and can be more clearly understood through reason and reflective philosophy. Not only as a gradual rise but also as a confrontation with identity and the depth of knowledge — either as social catharsis or as triumph over loss and anti-Western influences in the spheres of Albanian society. Teaching is a sacred profession, carrying on its shoulders the weight of an entire society's future. And if someone were to ask me how I would like to see Albanian society, I would borrow the words of Friedrich Nietzsche by saying:

"I do not want to see a more moral society, but a wiser one."

In this context, German philosophy appears as an essential tool for cultivating reason and critical thinking. It offers not only a profound conceptual framework for understanding the world and the human being, but also a guide for shaping the future citizen, the conscious educator, and the teacher with a mission. The lack of critical thinking development among the younger generation poses a threat to the intellectual and civic future of Albanian society. For this reason, the integration of German philosophy into the university curriculum becomes an urgent necessity.

Hegel and Dialectics as a Tool for Civic Coexistence:

One of the most prominent representatives of German philosophy, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, must take a central place in this transformation. The Hegelian dialectic (thesis–antithesis–synthesis) has the power to develop a new way of thinking and communicating within Albanian society. In a reality where subjective insistence and the lack of listening to the other often prevail, this dialectic can offer a framework for cooperation, tolerance, and the collective construction of truth. Education cannot function on the basis of closed monologues, but rather through open dialogues that lead to synthesis. As the Hegelian dialectic itself suggests, it is through the conflict of ideas that development and progress are achieved. Therefore, in Albanian universities, Hegel should be taught not merely as a historical figure, but as the philosopher of civic coexistence and of emancipation through reason.

Immanuel Kant and the Moral Reconstruction of Education:

Another pillar of German philosophy that should be present in the formation of teachers is Immanuel Kant — the philosopher of ethical rigor and universal values. At a time when education is often influenced by religious or political beliefs, Kant offers a clear guide for the restoration of secularism and rational morality in schools. The categorical imperative, as a universal principle, helps shape a teacher who acts not based on personal gain or prevailing norms, but according to an ethical law they would wish to become a universal rule: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 1785).

Through this very principle, Albanian educators can cultivate within themselves the sublime spirit of their mission — a spirit that, unfortunately, is fading day by day. Education is not merely a paid profession — it is a commitment that demands integrity, willpower, and ethical responsibility.

Friedrich Nietzsche and the Cult of the Individual: Self-Knowledge as a Philosophical Act:

To complete this triad of German philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche brings the most personal and explosive dimension of education: the cult of the individual and the awareness of the creative power of the self. Nietzsche states: "Know yourself — this is all science. — Man is not known after having known everything else; things are nothing but the boundaries of man" (Nietzsche 2004). In this way, education begins precisely with self-knowledge. A teacher must be able to understand themselves in order to be a true guide for others.

A good educator must be courageous enough to be a missionary. They must be a revolutionary of knowledge, ready to take difficult steps in the name of truth and progress. This kind of educator does not accept mediocrity and is not afraid of institutional or social challenges.

Conclusion: Philosophy as the Core of Educational Reform

In conclusion, German philosophy should not be seen as an academic luxury or a complex subject reserved for a specific elite, but as a necessary tool for the regeneration of Albanian education. It teaches us to think, to listen, to act with reason and ethics. In a society suffering from a lack of ideals and conceptual depth, German philosophy stands as a call for reflection and transformation. Only through it can we build a society not merely more moral in the blind sense of norms, but wiser — a society that knows itself and advances through knowledge.

Philosophy is not just a history of ideas, but an active instrument for the formation of critical thinking and intellectual emancipation. Today, more than ever, we need a generation that does not submit to dogmas, but questions, challenges, analyzes, and creates. And this can only happen through placing philosophy at the heart of the educational system. Germany has shown throughout the centuries that a nation can be built not only on economics or industry, but on thought — on a deep-rooted culture of reason. Why shouldn't we follow that example?

In Albania, the lack of an intellectual identity is a direct consequence of an educational system that has often functioned as a mechanical reproduction mechanism rather than as a laboratory of thought. Universities have become institutions that certify, but rarely shape. If we want to restore the university as a space for the formation of thought and character, philosophy — and especially German philosophy — must take a central role.

Hegel teaches us that development arises through the conflict and tension between ideas. Kant provides us with the tools to build an inner ethic, free from external influences. Nietzsche reminds us that all change begins with the self. These thinkers are not relics of

the past, but guides for the future. It is time to move from an education based solely on transferable knowledge to one that encourages reflection and shapes consciousness. It is time for the teachers of the future to be not just transmitters of facts, but expressions of free thought, justice, moral responsibility, and the courage to challenge the status quo. In this process, philosophy is not merely useful — it is essential.

Therefore, educational reform cannot be merely technical or structural. It must also be philosophical. We need to reconceptualize the meaning of education, the role of the teacher, and the purpose of the school. This cannot be achieved through slogans or superficial programs, but through a fundamental shift in vision. And that vision must be grounded in philosophy.

In an increasingly fragmented and uncertain world, philosophy teaches us to stay connected — to ourselves, to others, and to the truth. In a society that often confuses information with knowledge, philosophy is the bridge that unites the two. It is the foundation upon which we can build an education worthy of the future — a society that not only functions, but understands, questions, and evolves.

In the end, a society that thinks is a society that survives. And more than that — it thrives.

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CHILDREN WITHOUT PARENTAL CARE IN ALBANIA'S NON-PUBLIC RESIDENTIAL INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

While Albania has made notable progress in transitioning from institutional to family- and community-based care, limited data exists on children without parental care placed in non-public residential institutions. This study aims to shed light on this lesser-documented group by developing an initial profile of the children and examining the role of non-public care settings within the broader child protection system.

Using a mixed-methods approach, the research explores child demographics (age, gender, place of origin, sibling status), pathways into care (legal procedures, placement reasons, duration, transfer history), family ties (contact with biological family, custody status, adoption efforts), and special needs (disabilities, chronic health conditions). The study draws from case file reviews, institutional data, and professional insights to construct a baseline understanding of this population.

Findings highlight that non-public institutions accommodate a significant number of children and offer valuable, often flexible models of care. Many demonstrate promising practices in preparing children for family-based or community reintegration yet remain underrepresented in national analyses and reform discussions.

This research does not suggest exclusion from the system, but rather a need for greater visibility and integration of non-public institutions into data systems, monitoring mechanisms, and strategic planning. Recognizing their

contribution and potential, Albania can further advance inclusive reforms that ensure all children, regardless of care setting, are supported in their development and transition toward family- or community-based solutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Albania's Child Protection Reforms

Since the early 1990s, Albania has undergone a profound reform of its child protection system, shifting its reliance from large-scale residential institutions to family- and community-based alternatives. This transition was motivated by both international obligations and a domestic recognition that institutional care often fails to meet children's developmental, emotional, and social needs. Internationally, Albania is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified in 1992, and has endorsed the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, which emphasize the principle that children should grow up in family environments whenever possible. At the regional level, the country's aspiration for European Union membership has driven the harmonization of legislation and policies with European standards, including those of the Council of Europe.

Domestically, this reform process has been articulated through several key legal and policy frameworks. Law No. 18/2017 "On the Rights and Protection of the Child" established a comprehensive system for child rights monitoring and protection, including municipal child protection units. Law No. 121/2016 "On Social Care Services" provided the basis for developing diverse social services beyond institutional care, creating a legal pathway for community-based responses. The National Agenda for Children's Rights (2021–2026), National Strategy on Social Protection (2024-2030) and subsequent strategies reinforced deinstitutionalization as a policy priority, emphasizing prevention of separation, family strengthening, and development of alternative care options such as foster care, kinship care, and small group homes.

As a result of these initiatives, Albania has achieved notable progress in reducing the number of children living in state-run residential institutions. Two public institutions (in Municipalities of Vlora and Korça) have been transformed into community-based services, and investments have been made in preventive services and foster care programs. The most recent deinstitutionalization action plans have set ambitious goals for replacing

public institutional care with more suitable family based and community centered services. Nonetheless, the reform remains a work in progress, with persistent challenges related to uneven municipal capacities, funding gaps, and limited specialized services, particularly for children with disabilities or complex needs.

The overlooked role of non-public institutions

While reforms have focused heavily on public residential institutions, Albania's child protection system also includes a network of non-public residential institutions that remain less visible in official accounts. These facilities are typically managed by non-governmental organizations, faith-based groups, or private foundations. Many were established during the 1990s and early 2000s, often in response to urgent needs when the state lacked adequate resources and structures to support children at risk. Over time, non-public institutions have continued to accommodate a significant number of children, often providing specialized care for those in vulnerable situations. These include children with disabilities, Roma and Egyptian children, unaccompanied or separated migrant minors, children living in poverty, those affected by neglect or domestic violence, and in some cases children with complex medical or psychosocial needs.

Although they play an important role, non-public institutions often receive little attention in policy discussions and national strategies. They operate under different legal and administrative arrangements, some are formally licensed and monitored by the state, while others function with less oversight. Yet, their contribution, whether in filling critical service gaps or in offering innovative models of care, has not been systematically documented. As a result, their role in Albania's deinstitutionalization process remains only partially understood. This lack of visibility creates the risk that a significant part of the alternative care system may be left out of strategic planning, resource allocation, and monitoring frameworks.

Research problem and significance

Although Albania has made tangible progress in reforming its child protection system, the role of non-public residential institutions remains insufficiently examined and often marginalized in research and policy. National statistics on children without parental care are fragmented and rarely disaggregate between public and non-public facilities. In 2020, nine public and eighteen non-public institutions were reported, hosting over 220 children in public care and additional numbers in specialized centers (UNICEF/ASHDMF, 2021). While INSTAT publishes aggregate data on children in alternative care, it does not consistently differentiate between providers (INSTAT, 2022). Oversight mechanisms, such as the People's Advocate, have similarly focused on public institutions (Avokati i Popullit, 2020), leaving the contribution of non-public providers under-documented. As a result, little is known about the children living in these settings, their demographic and social profiles, or the pathways that lead to and from non-public care. This absence of systematic knowledge creates a twofold research problem: first, a knowledge gap, as children in non-

public institutions remain largely invisible in studies, reporting, and policy debates; and second, a policy gap, as the lack of reliable evidence prevents policymakers from adequately designing, regulating, and integrating these institutions into national reform strategies.

Addressing this problem is significant for several reasons. From a child rights perspective, ensuring the visibility of all children in care is fundamental to meeting Albania's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (United Nations General Assembly, 2009). From a policy perspective, comprehensive and disaggregated data are essential for designing inclusive reforms, allocating resources equitably, and aligning with European Union standards as part of Albania's accession process (European Commission, 2021). From a practical perspective, recognizing the contributions of non-public institutions can uncover valuable models of care that complement national deinstitutionalization strategies and initiatives for family reintegration (UNICEF/ASHDMF, 2021; UNDP, 2023).

The present study provides an important baseline for future scholarship and policy development. It highlights not only the vulnerabilities but also the potential of non-public institutions to contribute to a more integrated and effective child protection system. In doing so, the study strengthens the evidence base for inclusive reforms that ensure no child is left outside the scope of national strategies, regardless of the care setting in which they reside.

Research aims and questions

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the situation of children without parental care living in Albania's non-public residential institutions. Its primary objective is to develop an initial profile of these children and to analyze the role of non-public care settings within the wider child protection system. By addressing this critical knowledge gap, the study aims to strengthen the evidence base for more comprehensive and inclusive child protection reforms.

The research is guided by the following questions:

- What are the demographic and social characteristics of children placed in non-public residential institutions in Albania?
- Through which pathways do children enter care, including legal procedures, reasons for placement, duration of stay, and transfer histories?
- In what ways do children in these settings maintain family ties, including contact with biological relatives, custody arrangements, and adoption processes?
- How do non-public institutions support children's preparation for family-based or community reintegration, and what promising practices can be identified?

The study not only aims to provide a baseline understanding of a largely undocumented population but also to inform Albania's ongoing reform trajectory..

LITERATURE REVIEW

Deinstitutionalization in Albania and the Wider Region

The concept of deinstitutionalization (DI) has become central to child protection reforms across Central and Eastern Europe since the 1990s. Driven by the recognition that institutional care fails to meet children's developmental needs, countries in the region have sought to reduce reliance on large residential institutions and develop family- and community-based alternatives. Studies from Romania, Bulgaria, and Moldova show that institutional care is associated with negative outcomes in cognitive development, attachment, and social integration (Browne, 2009; UNICEF, 2010). International donors, including the European Union and UNICEF, have played a critical role in financing and guiding DI processes across the region.

Albania's reform trajectory mirrors this regional trend, though it has unfolded more gradually. In the immediate post-communist period, the country inherited a system of state-run orphanages and residential schools that housed children without parental care, many of whom were not true orphans but placed due to poverty, neglect, or migration (De Waal, 2005). By the early 2000s, Albania began introducing DI policies, supported by international partners. Key milestones included the establishment of Child Protection Units (CPUs) at municipal level and the adoption of Law No. 18/2017 "On the Rights and Protection of the Child," which institutionalized a child-centered approach. The deinstitutionalization agenda has since been reinforced by the National Action Plan on Deinstitutionalization (2020-2023), strategies such as the National Agenda for Children's Rights (2021-2026), National Strategy on Social Protection (2024-2030) and more recent action plans supported by UNICEF and the European Union.

Despite progress, the Albanian DI process faces persistent obstacles. Research indicates that municipal social services remain underdeveloped, foster care is limited in scale, and family support programs are unevenly available across regions (Save the Children, 2021). A 2022 UNICEF report noted that while the number of children in public residential institutions has declined, the overall reliance on residential care remains significant, partly because alternative services have not been sufficiently scaled up. Furthermore, children with disabilities and those from Roma and Egyptian communities are disproportionately represented in institutional care, reflecting broader patterns of social exclusion. In short, Albania has taken important steps toward deinstitutionalization, but the process is incomplete and faces structural challenges. Importantly, much of the policy and research focus has been directed toward public institutions, with relatively little attention to the non-public sector a gap this study aims to address.

The role of Non-Public Care in international debates

Globally, the debate on non-public residential care is framed within the broader discourse on children's rights and alternative care. The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2009) establish that residential care should be a measure of last resort and that

priority should always be given to family-based solutions. However, they also recognize that residential settings can play a role when they are small-scale, family-like, and integrated into the community. Within international debates, non-public institutions are often viewed with ambivalence. On the one hand, faith-based and NGO-run institutions have historically filled critical gaps, particularly in contexts where state systems are weak or under-resourced. They have provided shelter, education, and protection for children who might otherwise have been left without care. On the other hand, concerns have been raised about inconsistent standards, limited regulation, and risks of dependency on donor funding (Delap, 2012).

The European Union's framework emphasizes the need for strong regulation and monitoring of all providers of alternative care, whether public or private. EU accession requirements for candidate countries, including Albania, call for compliance with child rights standards, development of foster care systems, and reduction of reliance on institutional care. The Council of Europe's recommendations similarly stress that private actors must be fully integrated into national child protection systems, subject to licensing, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms. This international perspective underscores two key points relevant for Albania. First, non-public institutions cannot be ignored in reform processes: they are part of the care system and must be subject to the same standards and oversight as public institutions. Second, they may offer innovative practices such as smaller, family-like homes or specialized services for children with disabilities that could inform national reforms. However, the extent to which this potential is realized depends on how well they are integrated into national systems.

Children's demographic and social profiles in residential care

The demographic and social characteristics of children placed in residential care are consistently linked to broader patterns of vulnerability, inequality, and social exclusion. Research shows that children entering institutions are not a random subset of the child population but disproportionately come from families facing poverty, housing instability, parental migration, or family violence (Eurochild, 2015; UNICEF, 2017). Within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, these risks reflect the interplay between individual children and the structural conditions of their environments, underscoring the need to interpret demographic patterns as outcomes of systemic inequities rather than individual deficits (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Across Central and Eastern Europe, the overrepresentation of ethnic minority children, particularly Roma, is a documented trend (FRA, 2016; UNICEF, 2019). Roma families often face structural discrimination, barriers in accessing services, and extreme poverty, which together increase the likelihood of child separation. Albania's pattern, where approximately one in four children in non-public institutions are Roma or Egyptian, mirrors this wider regional dynamic. This suggests that residential care demographics are shaped not only by child protection systems but also by enduring forms of social marginalization.

Another important dimension concerns sibling placements. Literature highlights the protective value of sibling bonds for children in care, emphasizing that they provide continuity, attachment, and resilience in the face of family breakdown (Kosonen, 1996; Shlonsky et al., 2005). The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (UN, 2009) explicitly recommend keeping siblings together whenever possible. Data from non-public institutions in Albania shows that sibling groups are frequently accommodated jointly, reflecting alignment with these international standards.

Children with disabilities also feature prominently in residential care demographics across the region. Guided by the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990), scholars argue that institutionalization often results not from impairment itself but from a lack of accessible, community-based services. International reviews confirm the disproportionate placement of children with disabilities in institutional settings (Lumos, 2017). The fact that approximately 10% of children in Albania's non-public institutions have disabilities or chronic conditions highlights both the specialized role of such facilities and the persistent gaps in inclusive family- and community-based alternatives.

Studies show that girls are more likely to be placed in shelters addressing abuse, exploitation, or trafficking risks, while boys are often overrepresented in institutions linked to delinquency or street involvement (Mulheir, 2012). Albania's slightly higher proportion of girls in non-public institutions, driven by the presence of girls-only facilities, reflects this broader gendered pattern.

Pathways into residential care: legal, social, and institutional dimensions

Children's entry into residential care is shaped by a combination of legal frameworks, social vulnerabilities, and institutional practices. Internationally, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) and the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (UN, 2009) emphasize that institutional placement should be a last resort, authorized through clear legal procedures and for the shortest possible duration. In practice, however, children's pathways into care often reflect the interaction between poverty, child protection interventions, and weak family support systems (Cantwell & Holzscheiter, 2008; UNICEF, 2017).

Legal procedures, particularly court-ordered placements, remain the primary route into institutional care in most European contexts, ensuring that separation from parents occurs only when necessary for the child's protection. Yet research highlights that administrative referrals—from child protection units, police, or health services also play a significant role, especially in urgent cases of abuse, neglect, or abandonment (Bilson & Larkins, 2013). This dual pathway (judicial vs. administrative entry) reflects ongoing debates about due process, accountability, and the best interests of the child.

Reasons for placement are closely tied to structural vulnerabilities. Studies across Central and Eastern Europe show that poverty, parental migration, disability, and domestic violence are leading causes of institutionalization, even when family preservation measures might be

more appropriate (European Commission, 2013; Carter, 2005). These findings align with the "social risk model", which argues that children enter care less because of inherent parental incapacity and more because of systemic failures to support families in crisis (Munro, 2011).

The duration of stay is another critical dimension. The attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and subsequent empirical studies (Dozier et al., 2014) demonstrate the harmful effects of prolonged institutionalization on children's emotional and cognitive development. International standards call for placement reviews at regular intervals, yet research in the Balkans shows that many children remain in institutions for years or until adulthood, reflecting limited exit pathways into adoption, foster care, or family reunification (Lumos, 2017; UNICEF, 2019).

Transfer histories, where children move between multiple institutions, highlight issues of placement instability. The child well-being literature underscores that frequent moves disrupt attachment, schooling, and social integration (Rubin et al., 2007). In contexts where specialized services are concentrated in non-public facilities, transfers may also reflect systemic gaps, as children are shifted to access care for disabilities, trauma recovery, or adolescent transition programs.

Family ties, custody, and adoption in the context of alternative care

Maintaining family connections is widely recognized as a core principle of alternative care. The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2009) emphasize that separation from parents should be temporary whenever possible and that children in care must be supported to maintain regular contact with their families of origin (UN, 2009). The literature on attachment and resilience highlights that family and sibling ties provide emotional continuity and identity, even when children cannot live with their parents (Bowlby, 1969; Kosonen, 1996).

In many Central and Eastern European countries, however, family contact remains uneven. Research shows that while some children maintain regular visits and communication, others experience sporadic or no contact due to parental migration, poverty, or termination of parental rights (Bilson & Larkins, 2013; UNICEF, 2017). In Albania, this challenge is particularly pronounced given the high rates of labour migration and family fragmentation, which often weaken parental involvement after institutional placement (UNICEF, 2019).

Custody arrangements in the region are often fragmented between parental custody, state custody, and kinship guardianship. Scholars note that such legal diversity can create uncertainty for children, with unclear long-term pathways and delays in decision-making (Cantwell & Holzscheiter, 2008; Munro, 2011). In Albania, courts frequently transfer custody to state or municipal authorities in cases of neglect or abandonment, but many children remain under parental custody while being physically placed in institutions. This legal ambiguity reflects gaps in enforcement and coordination within the child protection system (European Commission, 2020).

Adoption remains a particularly challenging pathway. International evidence shows that adoption is rare for older children and sibling groups, who often remain in long-term care (Carter, 2005; Dozier et al., 2014). Albania follows this pattern: while infants and very young children may be legally free for adoption, adolescents and children in sibling groups are rarely adopted, leaving institutional care as their default until adulthood (UNICEF, 2019; Lumos, 2017). Moreover, the legal limbo created when parental rights are not fully terminated but reunification is unrealistic further restricts adoption possibilities.

Reintegration pathways and promising practices in non-public care

The transition from residential care to family-based or community-based solutions is a central theme in international child protection reforms. The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2009) and the Council of Europe Recommendation on the rights of children living in residential institutions (2005) stress that institutions should serve as temporary measures, with a clear focus on reintegration, family reunification, or preparation for independent living.

Globally, research shows that family reunification is the preferred pathway when safe and feasible. Successful reunification depends on both child preparation and family support, including psychosocial assistance, economic strengthening, and parenting programs (Del Valle & Bravo, 2013; UNICEF, 2017). In contexts like Albania, where poverty is a major driver of institutionalization, non-public institutions often complement state services by facilitating contact, providing transportation, and supporting parents materially (UNICEF, 2019).

When reunification is not possible, foster care and kinship care are considered the most suitable alternatives (European Commission, 2013). However, regional studies highlight gaps in foster care availability and training, which leave institutions—especially non-public ones—to act as interim settings where children are prepared for transition (Bilson & Larkins, 2013). This preparatory role includes emotional readiness, trial visits, and gradual transition planning.

For adolescents, the literature increasingly emphasizes the need for independent living preparation and aftercare. Scholars have shown that children leaving care without life-skills training face higher risks of unemployment, homelessness, and social exclusion (Stein, 2006; Pinkerton & Müller, 2012). Promising practices include vocational training, apprenticeships, semi-independent housing, and aftercare support, which non-public providers often pioneer in collaboration with local communities.

Innovative approaches in the region also include small group homes that replicate family environments (Mulheir, 2012), sibling care models that preserve family bonds, and integrated psychosocial services with in-house psychologists and social workers. Partnerships with schools, vocational centers, and NGOs extend care beyond institutional walls and reduce stigma, ensuring smoother reintegration.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employed a quantitative, descriptive research design based on secondary analysis of administrative data collected by the State Social Services (Shërbimi Social Shtetëror – SSS) on children residing in non-public residential institutions in Albania. The choice of this design was guided by the objective of generating an initial national-level profile of children without parental care in non-public settings. Using already-collected administrative data ensured broad coverage, comparability across institutions, and alignment with state reporting systems.

Data Source

The primary source of information was the dataset compiled by the State Social Services, which collects data from licensed non-public residential institutions as part of its monitoring mandate. The dataset includes institution-level and child-level information, reported periodically by service providers and aggregated by the SSS. The analysis focused on the most recent reporting period (year 2025), which reflects the latest available figures on admissions, demographics, family ties, and reintegration outcomes. The dataset covered the following domains:

- Demographics (age, gender, region of origin, presence of siblings).
- Admission and pathways (legal status, referral sources, placement reasons, duration of stay).
- Family ties (records of contact with biological families, custody arrangements, and adoption status).
- Special needs (categories of disability, chronic illnesses, psychosocial vulnerabilities).
- Exit data (where available) (reunification with families, foster care placements, adoption, or transfers to other facilities).

Sampling

The dataset included all children residing in licensed non-public residential institutions in Albania during the reference period, thereby eliminating the need for further sampling. This comprehensive coverage enhances the reliability of the findings and allows for national-level conclusions about the population under study. However, unlicensed or informally operating institutions were not captured, representing a potential blind spot in the analysis.

Data analysis

The dataset was cleaned and coded before analysis to address inconsistencies or missing values. Variables were organized into categories aligned with the research questions:

- Demographic and social characteristics – analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, averages).

- Pathways into care – reasons for placement and legal/custody status were cross-tabulated by age and gender to identify patterns.
- Family ties – measures of parental or sibling contact were summarized, alongside custody arrangements.
- Special needs – disaggregated analysis examined the proportion of children with disabilities or chronic conditions.
- Exit pathways – where available, exit data were reviewed to identify reintegration or alternative care outcomes.

Statistical analysis was conducted using software such as Excel. Descriptive techniques (frequency distributions, cross-tabulations) were applied, given the exploratory nature of the study. Graphs and tables were developed to visualize findings.

Ethical considerations

Although this study relied on secondary administrative data rather than direct interaction with children, ethical safeguards were carefully observed. The dataset provided by the State Social Services was anonymized; no personal identifiers such as names or addresses were included. Data were stored securely and analyzed only for this research.

The study was guided by the principles of confidentiality, data protection, and child rights. Special attention was given to ensuring that the interpretation of data did not stigmatize particular groups of children (e.g., by ethnicity or disability). Findings were framed to support inclusive policy development rather than to evaluate or rank specific institutions.

Limitations

The use of secondary administrative data presents several limitations. First, the dataset reflects only licensed institutions, excluding children placed in unlicensed or informal facilities. Second, the quality and completeness of data depend on the reporting practices of institutions, which may vary. Missing or inconsistent entries (e.g., incomplete records of family contact or adoption efforts) limit accuracy. Third, the dataset primarily captures quantitative indicators, providing limited insight into the lived experiences of children or the qualitative dimensions of care. Fourth, as data are aggregated for monitoring purposes, they may not capture longitudinal pathways (e.g., tracking a child across multiple placements).

Despite these limitations, the dataset offers the most comprehensive and systematic information currently available on children in non-public residential institutions in Albania. Its analysis provides a valuable baseline for understanding this under-documented group and highlights areas where improvements in data collection, disaggregation, and integration with broader child protection systems are urgently needed.

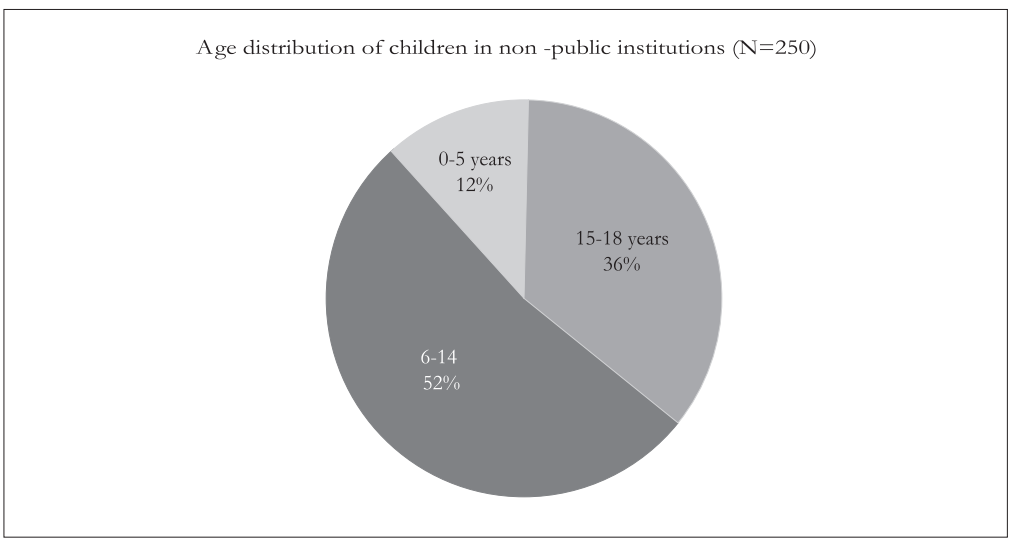
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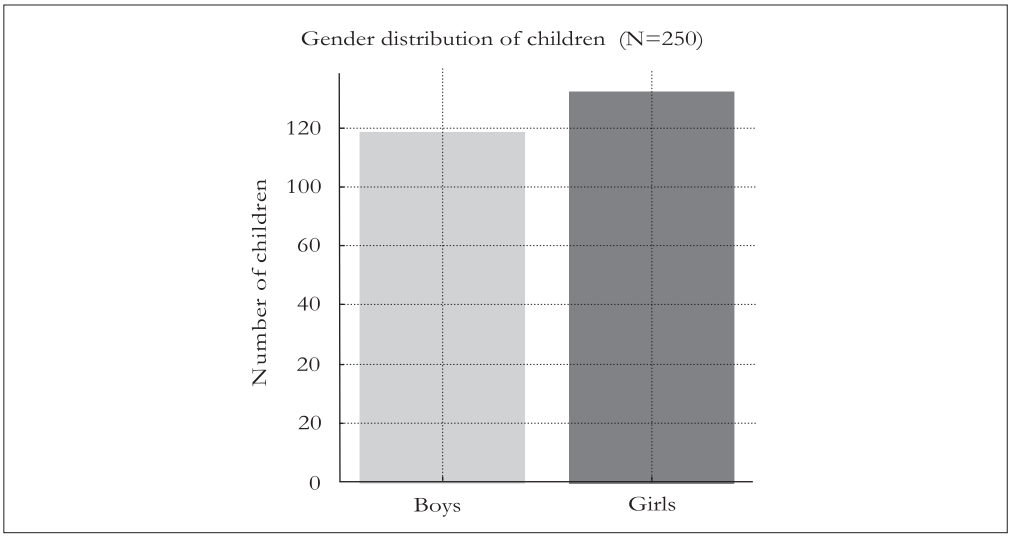
Demographic and social characteristics of children in non-public residential institutions

Across the 20 licensed non-public residential institutions in Albania, 16 reported active placements during the reference period, while four had no current residents. In total, these institutions accommodated approximately **250 children**. Most providers serve school-age children (6–14 years; 16/20 institutions) and adolescents (15–18 years; 13/20 institutions), while fewer are configured for children under the age of five (7/20 institutions). The gender distribution is relatively balanced, with girls slightly outnumbering boys, reflecting the role of several girls-only shelters within the sample. Sibling placements are a recurring feature, with around 30% of children placed alongside brothers or sisters, and at least seven institutions explicitly reporting care for children with disabilities or chronic health conditions. Taken together, these findings portray a sector that is heterogeneous, flexible, and specialized, providing protection to diverse groups of children who cannot remain in their biological families.

Age distribution

Non-public residential institutions in Albania primarily serve school-age children and adolescents. Sixteen of the twenty institutions reported hosting children between 6 and 14 years, while thirteen accommodate adolescents aged 15–18. Only seven institutions admitted children under the age of five, reflecting the limited availability of care for infants and toddlers. Based on aggregate numbers, approximately 12% (≈30 children) are under the age of five, 52% (≈130 children) fall within the 6–14 age group, and 36% (≈90 children) are aged 15–18. This age profile confirms that the non-public sector functions largely as a care solution for older children, who face the most barriers to family reintegration or adoption.





Gender balance

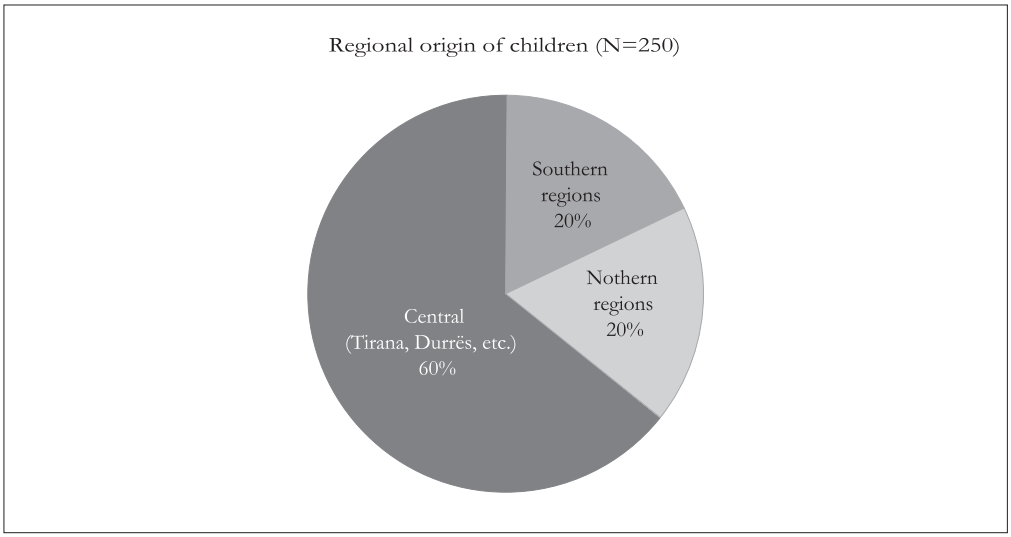
Among the 250 children placed in non-public institutions, the gender distribution is relatively balanced, though girls are slightly more represented. An estimated 47% (≈118 children) are boys, while 53% (≈132 children) are girls. This pattern reflects the existence of several girls-only shelters, which contribute to the higher number of female beneficiaries. The gender balance underlines that while boys and girls are equally vulnerable to placement, non-public institutions play a particularly critical role in providing protection to girls at risk of abuse, exploitation, or trafficking.

Regional origin

Children placed in non-public institutions come from across Albania, but the data show a concentration from urban centers and surrounding municipalities where referral pathways (police, hospitals, child protection units) are more established. Roughly 60% (≈150 children) originate from Tirana, Durrës, and other central regions, while the remainder come from northern and southern municipalities. This uneven distribution suggests that access to institutional placement is linked to the geographic reach of services and referral systems, rather than to a uniform national spread of need.

Sibling groups

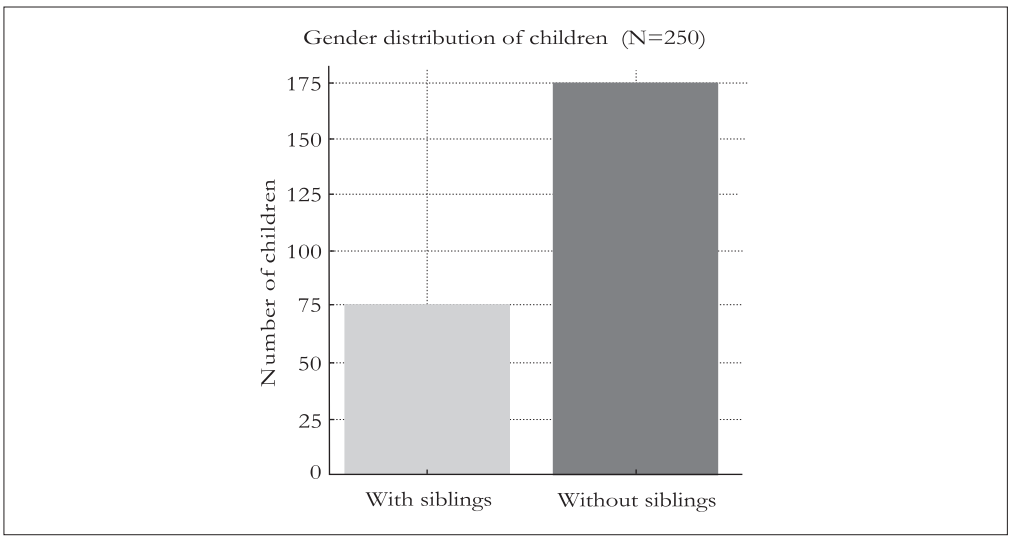
Placement of siblings together emerges as a significant feature of the non-public sector. About 30% of children (≈75 cases) are accommodated with at least one brother or sister. While this practice varies by institution depending on capacity, the effort to keep siblings together is consistent with international standards emphasizing the importance

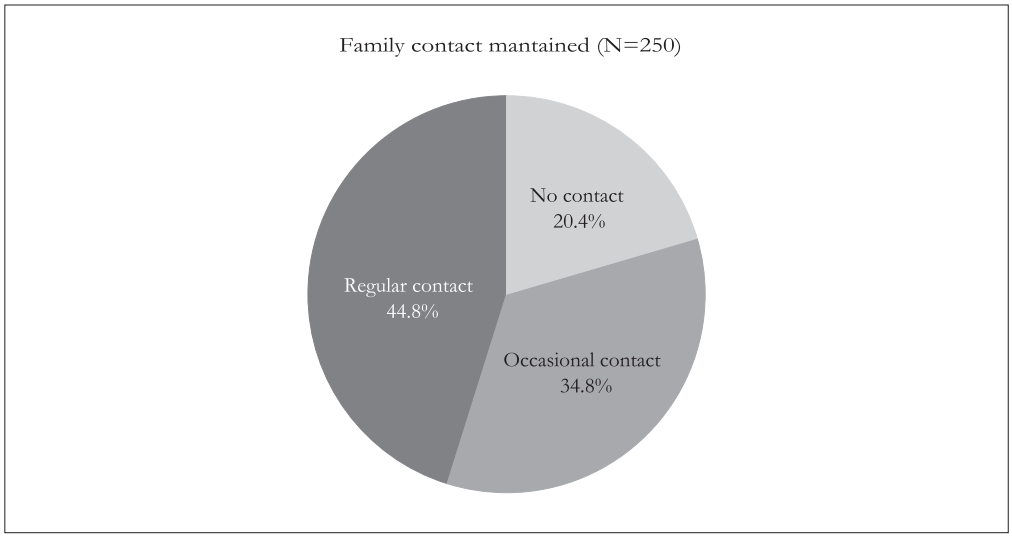


of preserving family bonds. In some cases, sibling groups of three or more are recorded, highlighting both the flexibility and family-oriented orientation of these providers.

Family ties

In addition to sibling care, institutions make deliberate efforts to sustain connections with parents and extended relatives. The records show that around 45% (≈112 children) maintain regular contact with family members through visits or phone calls, while 35% (≈87 children) have occasional contact. A smaller but significant 20% (≈51 children) have no ongoing family ties, often due to abandonment, parental death, or termination of parental

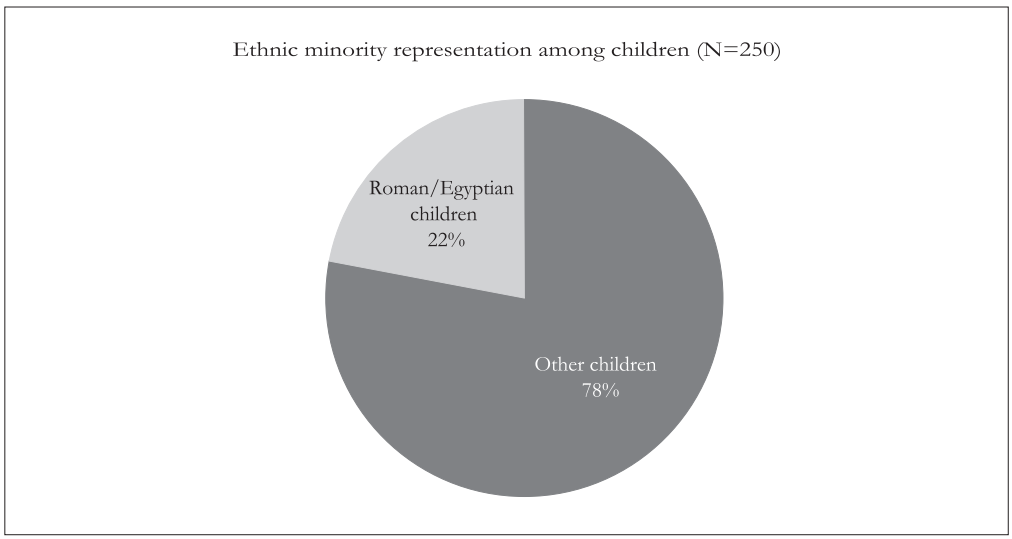


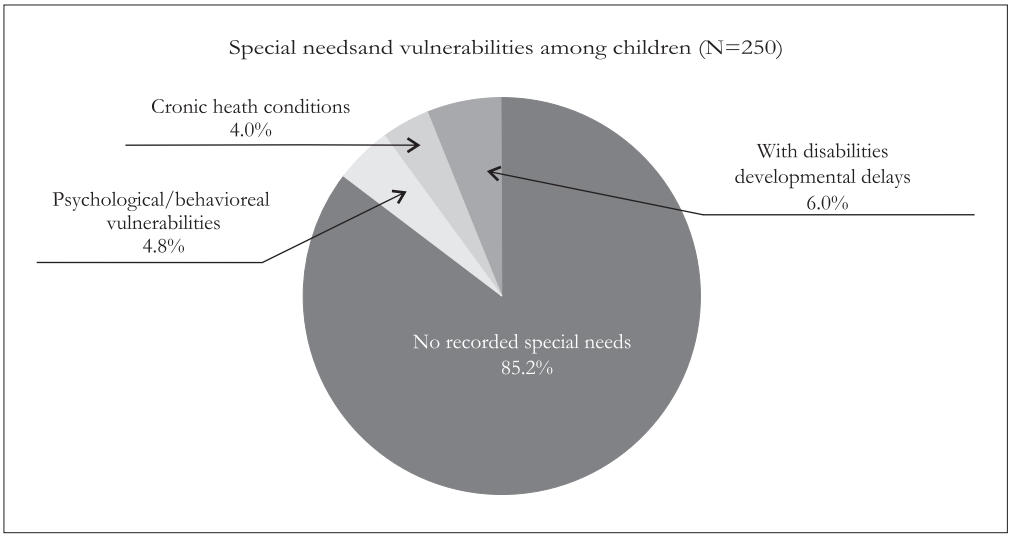


rights. This variation highlights the challenge of reintegration, but also the important role of non-public institutions in facilitating family contact whenever possible.

Special needs and vulnerabilities

Among the 250 children placed in non-public residential institutions, a notable proportion present with special needs or vulnerabilities. Approximately 6% (≈15 children) are identified as having disabilities or developmental delays, while around 4% (≈10 children) live with chronic health conditions that require ongoing medical support. In addition, about 5% (≈12 children) are recorded as having psychological or behavioral vulnerabilities, often linked to past experiences



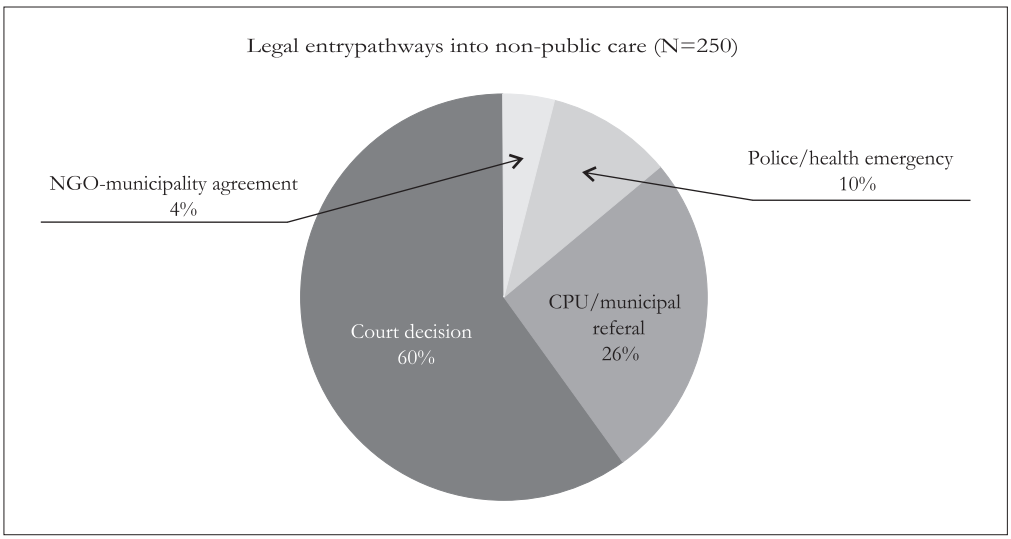


of neglect, abuse, or trauma. The vast majority, about 85% (≈213 children), are reported without specific special needs, although this category may include children whose difficulties are less formally assessed or documented. Although precise numbers are inconsistently reported, estimates suggest that at least 20–25% (≈50–60 children out of 250) are of Roma or Egyptian origin.

PATHWAYS INTO CARE

Legal procedures and referral sources

Children typically enter non-public institutions through formal state channels. The majority (≈60% or 150 children) are placed via court decisions, often initiated by Child Protection



Units (CPUs) after cases of neglect, abuse, or abandonment. Another ≈25% (≈65 children) are admitted through direct CPU referrals or agreements with municipal authorities, particularly when foster families are not immediately available. A smaller portion (≈10% or 25 children) enter through emergency referrals from police or health services in cases of abuse, trafficking, or abandonment at birth. A final ≈5% (≈10 children) are placed via administrative agreements between NGOs and municipalities.

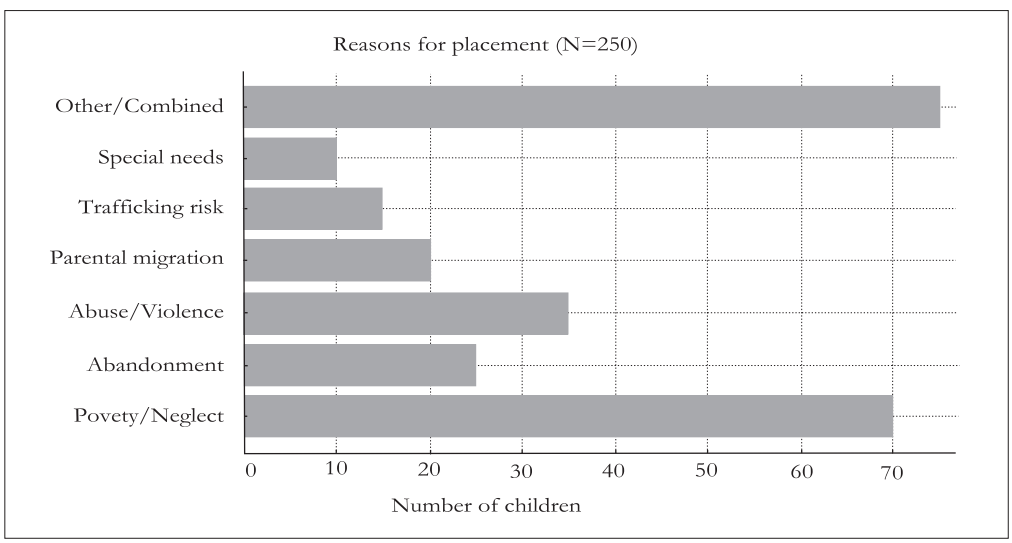
Reasons for placement

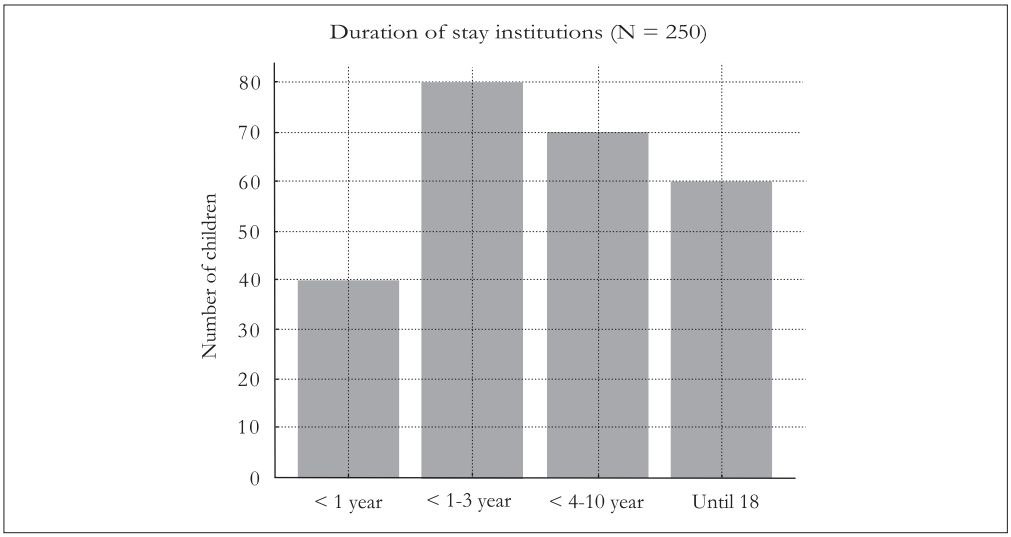
The most common reasons for placement include:

- Poverty/Neglect: ≈28% (≈70 children)
- Abandonment at birth or hospital: ≈10% (≈25 children)
- Abuse/Violence in the family: ≈14% (≈35 children)
- Parental migration with no guardian arrangements: ≈8% (≈20 children)
- Trafficking or exploitation risks (esp. girls, minorities): ≈6% (≈15 children)
- Children with special needs placed for care/support: ≈4% (≈10 children)
- Other/combined reasons: ≈30% (≈75 children).

Duration of stay

The duration of stay varies significantly, some children remain for short-term emergency care (weeks to months), especially in crisis shelters but many stay for medium-term periods (1–3 years).





A considerable number, particularly adolescents, spend longer periods (4–10 years) in institutions, often remaining until they reach adulthood. This indicates that while some non-public institutions serve as transitional settings, others effectively provide long-term substitute care in the absence of family solutions **Very long-term (until 18 years):** ≈24% (≈60 children), especially for adolescents and sibling groups.

Transfer histories

Transfers between institutions are documented, though not the majority of cases. They typically occur when children move from public institutions to non-public institutions, often to access specialized services, sibling groups are relocated together after initial separation and adolescents are moved to facilities oriented toward independent living preparation. However, frequent transfers are disruptive, and some case histories show children experiencing multiple placements across different institutions, reflecting gaps in stability and long-term planning.

FAMILY TIES - CONTACT, CUSTODY, AND ADOPTION

Contact with biological families

Children in non-public institutions maintain varying degrees of connection with their families. Around 45% (≈112 children) have regular contact with parents or relatives, typically through weekend visits, holidays, or frequent phone calls. Another 35% (≈87 children) maintain occasional contact, often hindered by poverty, migration, or strained relationships. The remaining 20% (≈51 children) have no family contact, usually due to abandonment, parental death, or termination of parental rights. These figures show that

while many children preserve links with their biological families, a significant minority remain entirely disconnected.

Custody arrangements

Legal custody situations are diverse. For about 50% of children (≈125 cases), custody has been transferred to institutions or municipal authorities, usually following court decisions in cases of neglect or abandonment. Approximately 35% (≈87 children) remain under parental custody, with children placed temporarily in residential care under social service supervision. The remaining 15% (≈38 children) are under kinship guardianship, where extended family members have custody but cannot provide full-time care. This fragmentation illustrates the legal complexity of child protection in Albania, with non-public institutions often functioning as interim custodians.

Adoption efforts

Adoption opportunities are very limited. Fewer than 10% (≈20 children) are legally free for adoption, almost exclusively infants or very young children. For the majority—especially adolescents and sibling groups—adoption is not a viable pathway. Approximately 70% (≈175 children) are considered not eligible or not referred for adoption, while around 20% (≈55 children) remain in legal limbo, where parental rights have not been terminated but reunification is unrealistic. As a result, long-term institutionalization remains common, particularly for older children.

REINTEGRATION AND PROMISING PRACTICES

Support for family reunification

Non-public institutions actively support children's return to their families where possible. This includes arranging visits, covering transportation costs for parents, and offering counseling or material assistance. Records show that about 25% of children (≈62 cases) were reintegrated with their biological families during or after their stay, most often when poverty rather than abuse was the main reason for placement. This highlights the role of non-public providers as bridges to reunification.

Pathways to alternative family care

Where parental reunification is not possible, institutions collaborate with social services to transition children into foster or kinship care. This involves psychological preparation, trial visits, and social worker supervision. Approximately 10% (≈25 children) were successfully moved into foster or kinship care, showing the potential of non-public institutions to act as transitional settings within Albania's child protection system.

Preparation for independent living

For adolescents, some institutions provide independent living and vocational training programs. Activities include life-skills education, apprenticeships, and semi-independent housing. Around 15% (≈38 children) benefited from such structured preparation, gaining practical skills for adulthood. These efforts are especially important given the large proportion of children who remain in care until 18.

Promising practices identified

From the documentation, several innovative and positive practices stand out across institutions:

- Keeping groups below 12 children to ensure a more family-like environment.
- Making efforts to house siblings together, reducing trauma and easing reintegration.
- Access to in-house psychologists and social workers to prepare children emotionally for reintegration.
- Linking children to schools, youth clubs, and local NGOs to prevent social isolation.
- A few institutions keep in contact with care leavers, offering housing, education, or job placement support.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore the characteristics and experiences of children in non-public residential institutions in Albania

The demographic profile of children in Albania's non-public institutions reflects broader vulnerability and risk frameworks described in the literature. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), children's overrepresentation from Roma and Egyptian minorities and the presence of children with disabilities illustrate how social exclusion and lack of community services shape institutional populations. The frequent placement of siblings together resonates with international best practices (Shlonsky et al., 2005; UN, 2009), suggesting that non-public institutions may be more flexible in preserving sibling bonds compared to public facilities.

Pathways into institutional care are mediated by both legal safeguards and systemic gaps. In Albania, as in other European contexts, the majority of placements occur via court orders, reflecting alignment with the UN Guidelines on the Alternative Care of Children (2009), which emphasize judicial oversight. Yet the high number of cases driven by poverty and neglect confirms critiques of the social risk model (Munro, 2011), which highlights how families in crisis are often unsupported until separation becomes inevitable. Long stays and repeated transfers documented in this study reinforce concerns raised by attachment

theory (Bowlby, 1969) and subsequent research (Dozier et al., 2014) about the negative developmental impact of prolonged institutionalization and placement instability.

The findings show that while nearly half of children maintain regular contact with biological families, a significant minority remain fully disconnected. This mixed picture echoes international studies showing that family ties in institutional contexts are uneven and often disrupted by parental migration, poverty, or unresolved custody cases (Bilson & Larkins, 2013). The fragmentation of custody between parents, institutions, and municipal authorities reflects Albania's legal complexity, creating uncertainty for children's long-term futures. Adoption remains rare, consistent with regional trends (Carter, 2005; UNICEF, 2019), and further limited by the "legal limbo" where parental rights are not terminated but reunification is unlikely. This underscores the gap between policy aspirations for permanency and the reality of prolonged care.

Non-public institutions demonstrate potential as bridges to reintegration rather than permanent destinations. The reintegration of one in four children with families, support for transitions into foster or kinship care, and preparation for independent living among adolescents reflect alignment with international priorities (Del Valle & Bravo, 2013; Stein, 2006). Promising practices such as small group homes, sibling care, and aftercare services echo models described by Mulheir (2012) and Pinkerton & Müller (2012), showing how non-public providers can innovate within Albania's reform context. However, these contributions remain underrecognized in policy, leaving a risk that valuable experiences are excluded from national deinstitutionalization strategies.

The findings demonstrate that Albania's non-public institutions play a dual role: they provide safety and continuity for highly vulnerable children while also piloting practices that support family or community reintegration. Yet, as the literature stresses, their effectiveness depends on systemic integration into child protection reforms. Without robust monitoring, inclusive data systems, and strategic planning, the risk is that children in non-public care remain statistically invisible, undermining the goal of a comprehensive deinstitutionalization process.

A critical insight emerging from this study is the untapped potential of non-public institutions to contribute to Albania's transformation agenda from residential to family-based and community-based care. While public facilities have been the primary focus of reform, the findings here demonstrate that non-public providers already engage in practices that align with the core principles of deinstitutionalisation: maintaining sibling groups, facilitating family contact, supporting reintegration, and preparing adolescents for independent living.

From a systems theory perspective, sustainable reform requires that all components of the child protection system—public and non-public—are integrated into a coherent whole (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Munro, 2011). Excluding non-public institutions from data collection, monitoring, and reform planning not only undermines the principle of

equity but also risks losing the innovative practices and flexibility of response these actors bring. For instance, their smaller size and community partnerships allow them to develop preventive approaches that address family crises before separation becomes permanent, resonating with international models of family strengthening (Del Valle & Bravo, 2013).

Moreover, non-public institutions possess important assets that can be leveraged in reform:

- Experience in reintegration and reunification, with at least one in four children returning to their families.
- Specialized models, such as small group homes and psychosocial services, that could be scaled up nationally.
- Community-based networks with schools, vocational centers, and NGOs that facilitate social inclusion and aftercare.

Recognizing these contributions, national reform should adopt a parity of approach toward public and non-public facilities. Both should be included in monitoring systems, funding mechanisms, and training initiatives to ensure consistent standards and equitable opportunities for children. By integrating non-public institutions into reform rather than treating them as peripheral, Albania can move closer to a genuinely inclusive child protection system in which every child, regardless of placement setting, benefits from the promise of family- and community-based care.

CONCLUSION

This study provides the first consolidated profile of children living in non-public residential institutions in Albania, drawing on administrative data from 20 licensed facilities and covering a total of 250 children. The findings highlight the diversity and complexity of this population and the important, yet often overlooked, role that non-public institutions play in the country's child protection system.

First, the demographic and social profile shows that most children in non-public care are school-aged or adolescents, with a slightly higher proportion of girls. Sibling groups are frequently accommodated together, and about one in ten children have special needs or chronic vulnerabilities. A notable share around one in four come from Roma or Egyptian backgrounds, underscoring the persistent overrepresentation of minority groups in alternative care.

Second, pathways into care reveal that entry is largely driven by court orders and referrals from child protection units, with poverty, neglect, abandonment, and abuse as the main reasons for placement. While some children enter for short-term protection, more than half remain in care for over three years, and many until adulthood, showing that institutions often function as long-term substitute homes despite reform goals.

Third, family ties remain uneven. Nearly half of children maintain regular contact with parents or relatives, while one in five are fully disconnected. Custody arrangements are fragmented between parental, institutional, and kinship care, while adoption remains a rare pathway, limited almost exclusively to very young children.

Finally, non-public institutions are actively contributing to reintegration and transition efforts. About a quarter of children are reintegrated with families, one in ten transitions into foster or kinship care, and a smaller group of adolescents benefit from independent living preparation. Promising practices include small group home models, sibling care, integrated psychosocial support, and aftercare services.

These findings demonstrate that non-public institutions are not marginal actors but critical partners in Albania's child protection landscape. They provide both specialized care and transitional pathways, yet remain underrepresented in national data systems and reform debates. Greater recognition and integration of their role through systematic monitoring, data collection, and strategic inclusion in deinstitutionalization policies will be essential for ensuring that all children, regardless of care setting, can realize their right to grow up in a safe, supportive, and family-like environment.

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GREEN HYDROGEN AS A STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY FOR ALBANIA'S ENERGY SECURITY AND EXPORT POTENTIAL

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ABSTRACT

Albania remains energy insecure despite its abundance of renewable resources. More than 98 percent of domestic electricity generation comes from hydropower, making the system highly vulnerable to seasonal rainfall variability. The country exports electricity during wet years but becomes a costly net importer during dry periods. Although solar and wind deployment is accelerating through competitive auctions, the absence of medium- and long-duration storage now creates new challenges, including curtailment, price cannibalization, and the sale of surplus power at depressed regional prices. This paper examines green hydrogen as a strategic mechanism to mitigate these structural constraints. By converting surplus renewable electricity into hydrogen, Albania can strengthen its energy security, reduce exposure to hydrological fluctuations, and position itself as a regional supplier of renewable energy carriers. The analysis highlights Albania's comparative advantages, including low-cost renewable generation, proximity to European Union's (EU) demand centers, and emerging infrastructure such as ports and hydrogen-ready gas corridors. Potential applications include green ammonia for fertilizer production, hydrogen for strategic electricity generation during dry seasons, and exports to European markets. The paper concludes with a set of institutional, infrastructural, and policy reforms needed to integrate hydrogen into Albania's broader energy transition.

Keywords: *green hydrogen; energy security; hydropower variability; seasonal storage; renewable integration; green ammonia; Albania*

INTRODUCTION

Albania's energy system remains structurally vulnerable despite its exceptional renewable endowment. More than 98 percent of domestic electricity generation derives from hydropower, a configuration that ensures extremely low carbon intensity but exposes the

system to pronounced hydrological variability and economic instability. In wet years, Albania exports surplus electricity to regional markets such as Greece, Serbia, and Slovenia. In dry years, reduced hydropower output forces costly imports that can lower GDP growth by up to one percentage point (IMF, 2023; ERE, 2024). This seasonal dependence on rainfall undermines energy security and complicates both fiscal management and long term planning.

To counter this vulnerability, the government has accelerated diversification through competitive renewable energy auctions supported by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the International Finance Corporation (IFC), and the Energy Community Secretariat. These efforts have delivered the fully operational 140 MW Karavasta solar park and initiated a second 100 MW solar procurement round (EBRD, 2024; Voltalia, 2024). Albania has also awarded 222 MW of onshore wind capacity in its first competitive tender, with projects now progressing through early development (Energy Community Secretariat, 2023; IFC, 2023).

However, diversification introduces new system level challenges. Without medium or long duration storage or flexible offtake, variable renewable generation increases the likelihood of curtailment during low demand periods and amplifies wholesale price volatility. Recent ALPEX market patterns illustrate this dynamic, with daily minimum prices occasionally falling to zero or becoming negative during periods of abundant hydropower and solar output. Such volatility reflects the phenomenon known as price cannibalization (Ruhnau, 2022), which erodes producer revenues and reduces incentives for new renewable investment.

At the same time, the European Union's hydrogen strategy has created substantial regional demand for renewable hydrogen for industry, transport, and long duration energy storage (European Commission, 2020; 2023). Albania's geographic proximity, its connection to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), and its two deep water oil ports at Porto Romano in Durrës and Petrolifera in Vlorë position it well to participate in emerging hydrogen and green ammonia value chains that supply EU markets.

In this context, green hydrogen offers Albania a dual strategic opportunity. Domestically, it provides a medium to long duration storage solution capable of converting surplus hydropower, solar, and wind output into a storable chemical vector that can later serve electricity generation, industrial heat, fertilizer production, or transport needs. Internationally, hydrogen enables Albania to transform intermittent renewable supply into tradable energy molecules, diversifying export revenues beyond wholesale electricity markets. While several EU member states including Spain, Denmark, and the Netherlands have adopted advanced hydrogen strategies (IRENA, 2023; Deloitte, 2023), the implications for smaller hydro dominant systems remain underexplored. Existing hydrogen literature typically emphasizes technical potential and cost modeling in large economies or fossil fuel exporters, with less attention to institutional readiness or infrastructure sequencing in small renewable rich systems (World Bank and ESMAP, 2020; IEA, 2023).

This gap motivates the present study, which evaluates how Albania can enhance its energy security, economic resilience, and export potential through green hydrogen production. It addresses two core questions:

- Can Albania improve energy security and economic performance by transforming surplus hydropower and variable renewable electricity into green hydrogen?
- What institutional, infrastructural, and regulatory reforms are necessary to establish a hydrogen sector aligned with European standards?

By integrating observed electricity price dynamics, infrastructure characteristics, and comparative lessons from leading EU hydrogen producers, the paper develops a country specific value proposition and a phased policy roadmap. It positions green hydrogen as a strategic instrument that can convert Albania's hydrological vulnerability into long term resilience and economic opportunity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions and emissions intensity

"Green" hydrogen is produced via electrolysis powered by renewable electricity, with lifecycle emissions typically below 1 kg CO_2-eq per kg H_2 when powered by verifiably renewable sources (IEA, 2023; Gençer, 2023). Fossil-based routes without carbon capture range from 10–27 kg CO_2-eq/kg H_2 depending on feedstock and process (IEA, 2023). Blue hydrogen can achieve lower intensity under high capture rates and low methane leakage, but these conditions remain challenging at scale. Because of this variability, recent EU and global frameworks emphasize emissions-based certification and temporal/geographic correlation rules (European Commission, 2020; IRENA, 2023).

Global policy and market signals

Hydrogen re-emerged as a priority vector for decarbonizing industry, transport, and long-duration storage. The EU Hydrogen Strategy (2020) and REPowerEU platform target the deployment of large-scale electrolysis and imports of up to 10 Mt of renewable hydrogen by 2030 (European Commission, 2020; 2023). RED III establishes strict additionality, temporal correlation, and traceability conditions for "renewable fuels of non-biological origin" (RFNBOs), shaping export opportunities for non-EU suppliers (Erbach & Svensson, 2023).

IEA's Global Hydrogen Review 2023 documents rapid expansion in electrolyzer manufacturing but slower growth in final investment decisions due to offtake uncertainty and policy fragmentation (IEA, 2023). IRENA's long-term scenarios see clean hydrogen playing an increasingly important role in industrial feedstocks, shipping, and seasonal storage (IRENA, 2022; 2023). Industry assessments similarly project multi-hundred-billion-dollar annual markets by mid-century under supportive policy frameworks (Deloitte, 2023; Hydrogen Council, 2023).

Technology status and cost drivers

Major electrolyzer technologies - alkaline (AEL), proton exchange membrane (PEM), and solid oxide (SOEC) - occupy different positions along the maturity curve. AEL and PEM are commercial at MW–GW scale, with AEL generally lower in capital cost and PEM offering greater ramping flexibility (IEA, 2023; IRENA, 2020). SOEC offers high electrical efficiency when integrated with heat but faces durability and balance-of-plant challenges (Nechache et al., 2021).

Electricity cost and utilization remain the dominant determinants of the levelized cost of hydrogen (LCOH). A realistic operating yield for modern systems is 12–16 kg H_2 per MWh of electricity delivered to the stack, reflecting system efficiencies of roughly 60–70 percent (IEA, 2023; IRENA, 2023). Because electricity typically accounts for 40–60 percent of LCOH, access to low-cost surplus electricity or price-responsive operation is decisive.

Capital costs continue to fall as manufacturing scales, particularly for stacks and power electronics, but balance-of-system components such as water purification, compression, cooling, and safety systems remain substantial and can represent more than half of total installed cost (IEA, 2023). Increasing price competition, especially from Chinese manufacturers, is accelerating downward cost pressure but raises bankability questions for large-scale projects (Collins, 2023).

Storage and logistics constraints

The system value of hydrogen depends heavily on storage and transport economics. Short-duration storage typically uses compressed-gas tanks, while seasonal storage favors geological formations such as salt caverns, which offer significantly lower cost per unit of stored energy and high deliverability (The Royal Society, 2023). Liquefaction supports dense storage and maritime export but carries steep energy and capital costs. Ammonia provides a mature global logistics chain, though with conversion and reconversion losses and safety considerations. Pipeline transport is cost-effective at scale; near-term approaches include blending into natural gas systems and, over time, dedicated hydrogen pipelines (Faye et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2023). These options depend on geography, industrial clustering, and port infrastructure.

Economic role in renewable-rich systems

In systems with rising solar and wind penetration, capture prices often fall during periods of high output and low demand, leading to price cannibalization. Electrolyzers operated as price-responsive loads can raise average renewable capture prices, reduce curtailment, and store energy for later industrial use or reconversion during system stress (IRENA, 2020; IEA, 2023). Hydrogen's medium- to long-duration storage capabilities fill a gap between batteries (intra-day) and pumped hydro (multi-hour to diurnal), especially in hydro-dominant systems that face seasonal precipitation variability.

Relevance to developing and emerging economies

World Bank and ESMAP studies emphasize that resource-rich, capital-constrained countries can leverage low-cost renewables to produce competitive green hydrogen, lower import bills, and stimulate industrial development - provided governance, certification, and permitting risks are managed (ESMAP, 2020). They highlight policy sequencing, targeted pilots, skills development, and early alignment with EU or OECD certification. IRENA stresses the importance of corridor development that integrates production sites with ports, pipelines, and demand hubs, as well as financing instruments that de-risk first-of-a-kind projects (IRENA, 2023).

For small economies, hydrogen can serve two aims: an energy-security hedge and an export diversification strategy. However, infrastructure readiness, certification compatibility, and institutional capacity often determine competitiveness more than resource endowment alone.

Barriers and enabling conditions

International literature identifies several recurring barriers:

- High LCOH at low utilization or high electricity prices
- CAPEX and supply-chain risk for stacks and balance of plant
- Storage and logistics costs, especially where geological storage is limited
- Complex certification requirements for access to premium EU markets
- Institutional capacity gaps in permitting, safety, and data systems

Enablers include well-designed renewable auctions, contracts-for-difference, strategic storage development, port master-planning for ammonia and methanol, and early adoption of EU-compatible certification frameworks (IRENA, 2023; Deloitte, 2023).

Table 1. Barriers and Enablers for Hydrogen Development

Barriers	Enabler
High LCOH due to electricity prices or low utilization	Price-responsive electrolyzer operation; hybrid PPAs; CfDs
High CAPEX and supply-chain uncertainty	Blended finance; modular deployment; scalable procurement
Storage/logistics constraints	Geological storage assessment; port modernization; ammonia carriers
Certification complexity (RED III)	Early adoption of EU-aligned GO and RFNBO systems
Institutional and permitting bottlenecks	Centralized permitting; Hydrogen Department; safety codes

Research gap and originality of contribution

Despite a growing body of research on hydrogen techno-economics and policymaking, small hydro-dominant systems remain largely absent from comparative analyses. Existing studies tend to focus on large EU economies, fossil-fuel exporters with gas grids, or resource-rich markets with established industrial demand (IEA, 2023; IRENA, 2023; ESMAP, 2020). Within the Western Balkans, published work has concentrated on renewable auctions and electricity-market coupling rather than hydrogen integration or storage economics.

After the in-depth literature review, this appears to be the first study to combine:

- Observed wholesale price data,
- National infrastructure mapping, and
- A sequenced policy and investment roadmap aligned with EU certification rules for a small hydro-dominant, EU-adjacent candidate country such as Albania.

This paper addresses that gap by integrating empirical electricity-price variability, hydrological constraints, and infrastructure readiness into a unified assessment of hydrogen's role in Albania's energy transition. It provides the first country-specific framework for medium-duration renewable storage and green-hydrogen sector development in a hydro-dependent Western Balkan economy.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH APPROACH

This study employs a mixed qualitative and quantitative research design that integrates technical analysis, policy evaluation, expert consultation, and documentary evidence. The purpose is to assess whether green hydrogen can enhance Albania's energy security and economic resilience, and to identify the institutional and infrastructural reforms required to support its development. Given the absence of an established hydrogen market in Albania, and the specific characteristics of the national energy system, the methodology combines empirical data with structured expert insights and comparative policy learning rather than relying exclusively on formal modelling.

The analysis draws extensively on national energy data from the Albanian Power Exchange (ALPEX), the Energy Regulatory Authority (ERE), the Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy (MIE), and international datasets from the International Energy Agency (IEA), the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), the World Bank, and Eurostat. These sources provide information on electricity price patterns, hydrological variability, power system constraints, renewable energy deployment, and cost benchmarks for hydrogen production. The economic assessment of the electricity to hydrogen conversion value follows commonly used assumptions in the literature on electrolyzer performance and cost structures reported by IEA, IRENA, and industry sources.

A central component of the methodological approach is the structured inclusion of expert judgment. Between 2022 and 2025, semi structured discussions were conducted with approximately 10 to 15 experts, including World Bank energy specialists, analysts from the Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy, and academic scholars in energy economics at Duke University. These consultations followed a consistent interview protocol that focused on electricity market dynamics, regulatory bottlenecks, infrastructure readiness, and the feasibility of policy instruments such as electrolyzer auctions, contracts for difference, and strategic hydrogen storage. The insights generated from these discussions were used to validate assumptions, refine analytical boundaries, and assess the practical relevance of proposed policy measures within the Albanian institutional context.

The study also incorporates extensive desk research covering EU legislation, regional infrastructure initiatives, and international best practices. Key documents include the EU Delegated Acts on Renewable Hydrogen, the Renewable Energy Directive (RED III), assessments from the European Hydrogen Backbone initiative, guidance from the World Bank and ESMAP on hydrogen in developing economies, and a broad set of technical and economic studies produced by IEA and IRENA. These sources inform the comparative analysis and guide the formulation of a context appropriate institutional roadmap.

Comparative analysis represents another methodological pillar. The paper examines the experiences of Spain, Denmark, and the Netherlands as representative hydrogen frontrunners in Europe. These cases were selected because each reflects a distinct model of state intervention, infrastructure development, and market design. The evaluation follows a structured, focused comparison across four dimensions: renewable resource base, policy instruments for hydrogen, certification and market alignment, and port or pipeline centered infrastructure strategies. The intention is not to replicate large scale EU strategies in Albania, but to extract transferable principles relevant to a small, hydro dependent, state led energy system.

Overall, the methodology combines empirical system data, economic reasoning, structured expert input, and targeted comparative evidence to construct an integrated assessment of Albania's hydrogen potential. This hybrid approach is well suited to a context where quantitative data remain incomplete, formal hydrogen markets do not yet exist, and infrastructure planning must balance technical, economic, and institutional considerations. The result is an evidence based framework that captures the practical realities of Albania's energy system while aligning with international research standards in energy transition studies.

ALBANIA'S ENERGY SYSTEM AND THE NEED FOR LONG-TERM STORAGE

Energy mix and structural features

Albania's energy system continues to be shaped by its exceptional dependence on hydropower and a slowly expanding contribution from non-hydro renewable sources. According to the Albanian Energy Regulatory Authority's latest annual report, total primary

energy supply in 2023 remained dominated by petroleum products, which accounted for approximately 41–43 percent of TPES, reflecting continued reliance on oil for transport and industry (ERE, 2024). Hydropower comprised roughly 32–35 percent of primary energy supply, followed by biofuels and waste at 12–14 percent, and coal at around 5–6 percent. Non-hydro renewables, including solar and wind, remain modest at the primary energy level, contributing approximately 2 percent, though this share is rising steadily (IEA, 2024; Energy Community Secretariat, 2024).

Electricity generation, by contrast, is almost entirely renewable. Hydropower consistently represents between 97 and 99 percent of domestic production, placing Albania among the cleanest electricity systems in Europe in carbon intensity terms (Our World in Data, 2024). Installed generation capacity increased to approximately 2.7 gigawatts in 2024 following the commissioning of new utility scale solar facilities. The state utility KESH continues to operate about half of national capacity, centered on the Drin cascade, with the remainder in the hands of independent producers. These include the fully operational 140 MW Karavasta solar park, a second utility scale solar project under procurement, and early stage wind capacity awarded through competitive auctions.

This extreme reliance on hydropower gives Albania a renewable advantage, but it also creates systemic exposure to hydrological cycles and weather variability. The electricity system is clean, but the macroeconomy is vulnerable.

Hydrological volatility and macroeconomic exposure

The hydrological volatility problem lies at the heart of Albania's energy-security challenge. The same resource that provides nearly zero-emission electricity also exposes the system to rainfall variability that can fluctuate dramatically between years. In wet years, reservoir levels across the Drin River cascade (Fierza, Komani, Vau i Dejës) and tributary plants allow generation surpluses that Albania exports to regional markets such as Greece, Serbia, and Slovenia. In dry years, limited inflows compel expensive imports to maintain supply adequacy.

The planned 210 MW Skavica hydropower plant, currently under development, will increase electricity generation and improve regulation of the Drin cascade and mitigate floods by controlling upstream flows (Bechtel, 2021). However, while Skavica enhances operational flexibility and safety, it does not eliminate the systemic seasonal imbalance between wet-season surpluses and dry-season deficits. The fundamental problem persists: renewable electricity generation peaks when domestic demand is low and prices are depressed, and it falls when imports are most expensive.

The emerging renewable portfolio

To diversify its energy mix, Albania is integrating solar and wind generation at a pace without precedent in its recent energy history. With support from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the International Finance Corporation (IFC),

and the Energy Community Secretariat, the government has implemented a competitive auction framework that is restructuring the renewable sector. The country's first utility-scale photovoltaic project, the 140 MW Karavasta solar park, developed by Voltalia, is now fully operational and connected to the national grid (EBRD, 2024; Voltalia, 2024). Building on this success, Albania has launched a second solar procurement round supported by EBRD for an additional 100 MW, often referred to as the Spitallë solar project, which is currently under evaluation and development (EBRD, 2024; MIE, 2024).

Wind deployment is advancing in parallel. The country's inaugural onshore wind auction resulted in the awarding of 222 MW of capacity to private developers, following a two-phase competitive process supported jointly by EBRD and IFC (Energy Community Secretariat, 2023; EBRD, 2023). These projects are now progressing through permitting and early development stages. Once operational, the new solar and wind installations will significantly increase the share of non-hydropower renewables in Albania's generation mix. This marks an important shift away from near-exclusive dependence on hydropower and represents a critical milestone in the diversification and resilience of the national energy system.

Infrastructure constraints and flexibility deficit

Albania's current system-wide storage and flexibility capacity remains constrained. To date, the country does not operate any pumped-storage hydro plant, and there is no publicly documented deployment of large-scale battery storage. Demand-side flexibility mechanisms remain underdeveloped.

The only major long-duration storage concept under consideration is the proposed PS Moglicë Extension, developed by Statkraft as an upgrade to the existing Moglicë hydropower reservoir. In 2025, a completed feasibility study outlined a potential pumped-storage plant with up to 1,620 MW of installed capacity and storage potential of approximately 28 GWh (Statkraft, 2025). However, as of now this project remains at the approval stage and is not yet under construction.

Because this pumped-storage solution is still prospective, it cannot be counted as active flexibility today. Until such projects materialize, Albania continues to lack a ready, large-scale mechanism for multi-month or seasonal storage - the very kind of storage capacity that would mitigate the hydro system's seasonal and hydrological volatility.

Given this context, chemical storage in the form of hydrogen emerges as a complementary option. Hydrogen offers multi-week to seasonal storage capability, enabling energy generated in wet, windy, or sunny months to be stored and used-or exported-during dry or high-price periods. Geological storage in salt caverns or depleted reservoirs, while requiring site-specific assessment, can deliver energy retention durations unattainable with batteries or conventional hydro storage (The Royal Society, 2023).

The systemic rationale for diversification and storage

Albania's energy transition is now at a crossroads. On one hand, it has achieved enviable decarbonization through hydropower and is expanding solar and wind at competitive cost. On the other, the lack of medium to long duration storage leaves the system economically fragile and operationally inflexible. A sustainable transition requires three pillars:

- Diversification of supply - expanding non-hydro renewables to reduce dependence on precipitation.
- Integration of flexible storage or conversion technologies - particularly hydrogen, which can transform surplus electricity into a storable and tradable asset.
- Market and institutional adaptation - including price signals, auction design, and infrastructure planning that reward flexibility and ensure grid reliability.

In this light, green hydrogen is not an auxiliary technology but a structural complement to Albania's renewable base. It provides an outlet for surplus hydropower and solar generation, stabilizes electricity prices by absorbing excess supply, and supports strategic reserves for dry-year adequacy. Additionally, it lays the groundwork for industrial diversification-linking Albania's renewable resources to value chains in ammonia, metallurgy, and regional energy trade.

THE GREEN HYDROGEN VALUE PROPOSITION FOR ALBANIA

Conceptual rationale: from surplus electricity to storable value

Green hydrogen offers Albania a strategic mechanism to monetize surplus renewable energy while simultaneously enhancing system reliability and advancing decarbonization. Through electrolysis, surplus electricity-particularly during hydrologically abundant periods or when solar and wind generation exceeds demand-is converted into hydrogen, a storable and transportable energy vector. The conversion transforms intermittent renewable output into a chemical energy carrier that can be used domestically for industry and transport or exported to regional markets.

For Albania, this conversion directly addresses two structural challenges: (i) the seasonal imbalance between wet and dry periods that drives volatility in imports and exports; and (ii) the revenue compression caused by low wholesale electricity prices during surplus intervals. Instead of selling hydropower at depressed regional rates or curtailing generation, producers can operate electrolyzers during price troughs, storing energy in hydrogen for later use or sale at a higher marginal value.

This concept mirrors a broader international trend where hydrogen functions as a bridge between the power and molecule economies (IRENA, 2020). For hydro-dominant Albania, where daily storage options are limited but renewable supply is abundant and low-cost, hydrogen constitutes a rare technology capable of providing multi-week to seasonal storage without geographic or rainfall constraints.

The structural price gap[1]: surplus electricity vs hydrogen

Empirical market data illustrate the structural economic case for converting surplus electricity into hydrogen. In 2020, Albania's average electricity export price was approximately €14.3 per megawatt-hour (MWh) (Open Data Albania, 2021), reflecting the recurrent challenge of monetizing hydropower during periods of high inflow and low domestic demand. The same MWh, when supplied to an electrolyzer, would yield around 12–16 kilograms of hydrogen. At prevailing European wholesale hydrogen prices of €3–€6/kg (IEA, 2023; IRENA, 2022), this corresponds to a gross revenue range of €36–€96 per MWh, even before accounting for the higher value of hydrogen-derived products such as ammonia.

Even after subtracting conversion losses, compression, and transport costs, the order-of-magnitude differential between electricity-export revenue and hydrogen-derived revenue remains substantial. This gap becomes more pronounced during wet years, when Albania frequently exports electricity at minimal or even negative value. ALPEX data confirm this volatility: daily minimum clearing prices reached €0.00/MWh in April 2024 and –€500/MWh during a documented oversupply event in May 2024, while March 2025 registered a daily minimum of €1/MWh (ALPEX, 2024; ALPEX, 2025). These episodes reveal that surplus renewable energy can become effectively non-remunerative, or in rare cases a liability, under current market conditions.

The levelized cost of hydrogen (LCOH) is highly sensitive to electricity input prices and electrolyzer utilization rates. Analyses by IRENA (2020; 2023) show that when electricity costs fall below €30/MWh, LCOH can approach €2/kg, a key competitiveness threshold for supplying European industrial users and aligning with EU Hydrogen Bank import price expectations. Albania frequently experiences such low-price intervals due to seasonal hydropower surpluses, making flexible hydrogen production an economically rational hedge against market volatility.

These recurrent low-price windows create a natural arbitrage opportunity for hydrogen facilities that operate dynamically within the day-ahead market. Electrolyzers can ramp production during hours when electricity prices approach zero or fall into negative territory, and reduce operation during price peaks. In doing so, they not only enhance their own economic performance but also help stabilize renewable capture prices, reduce curtailment, and create higher-value export streams. For a hydro-dominant system with rising solar and wind penetration, hydrogen thus provides a mechanism to convert surplus electrons into durable economic value.

System benefits: stabilizing markets and mitigating curtailment

Hydrogen production plays a dual economic and system-stabilizing role. First, it raises average capture prices for variable renewables by creating demand at times when prices

[1] The economic comparisons in this chapter rely on standard electrolyzer efficiency assumptions used in IEA and IRENA cost analyses, including typical stack and balance of plant losses. Exact yields are not central to the argument, which focuses on the structural value gap between electricity sales and hydrogen conversion.

would otherwise collapse. This prevents price cannibalization, improving project bankability for both solar and wind developers. Second, it reduces curtailment, particularly for run-of-river hydropower and future solar farms, by providing an outlet for surplus electricity that cannot be economically exported or stored through batteries or pumped hydro.

The system-level effects include:

- Reduced volatility in day-ahead markets due to added flexible demand;
- Improved grid utilization through temporal load shifting;
- Enhanced security of supply via stored hydrogen inventories available for reconversion during dry or crisis periods; and
- Lower carbon intensity by substituting hydrogen for imported fossil fuels in domestic applications (cement, metallurgy, and fertilizers).

Hydrogen, therefore, complements Albania's renewable profile by functioning as a sink during surplus periods and a source during shortages, effectively smoothing both physical supply and market prices.

Long-duration storage and energy security

Beyond export potential, hydrogen offers Albania a unique pathway for medium and long duration energy storage. During wet periods, when hydropower output exceeds domestic demand and wholesale prices collapse, surplus electricity can be converted into hydrogen and stored for later use. In dry years-when hydropower generation falls and import dependence rises-stored hydrogen can be reconverted into electricity through fuel cells or hydrogen-compatible turbines, partially offsetting high-cost imports and smoothing seasonal imbalances.

Although hydrogen's round-trip efficiency (typically 30–40 percent) is lower than that of batteries or pumped-storage hydropower, its ability to store energy over weeks to months makes it particularly suited for balancing hydrological variability (Robinius et al., 2022; IEA, 2023). Unlike batteries, which are optimized for short-duration balancing, hydrogen can accumulate large volumes during extended surplus periods. Storage would initially rely on pressurized tanks and above-ground vessels, while longer-term opportunities could include integration with industrial hydrogen users, reducing the need for pure energy-storage infrastructure.

Hydrogen also facilitates cross-sector coupling. The same molecule used for strategic electricity generation can support fertilizer production, industrial heat, or mobility applications, improving the economic case for investment and diversifying demand. Given Albania's absence of operational pumped-storage plants and the limited role of batteries in its current grid, hydrogen remains the only scalable technology capable of providing seasonal renewable-energy storage while simultaneously enabling multiple high-value end uses.

Enabling industrial transformation and value-added exports

In addition to system benefits, hydrogen provides a pathway for industrial diversification. Albania's key heavy-emitting sectors-cement, metallurgy, and petroleum refining-currently rely on coal, oil, or imported natural gas. Hydrogen substitution in these sectors can substantially reduce emissions while lowering import dependency.

Moreover, hydrogen-derived products such as green ammonia offer high domestic relevance. Albania imports all its fertilizers, making agricultural productivity vulnerable to international price fluctuations (UN COMTRADE, 2024). Local ammonia synthesis using domestically produced hydrogen could not only stabilize fertilizer prices but also open export opportunities within the Western Balkans.

The combination of industrial feedstock substitution, agricultural integration, and potential exports of hydrogen derivatives positions Albania to capture multiple value streams from a single technological investment.

Investment and scalability outlook

Realizing Albania's hydrogen potential will require navigating the high-CAPEX, low-utilization conditions characteristic of early-stage hydrogen deployment. Contemporary global benchmarks place installed electrolyzer system costs at roughly €700–1,200/kW for alkaline systems and €1,000–1,600/kW for PEM technologies, depending on scale and balance-of-plant configuration (IEA, 2023; IRENA, 2023; BNEF, 2024). Learning-curve analyses indicate that as manufacturing expands and supply chains mature, capital costs could decline by 50–60 percent within the next decade, especially for large standardized units (IRENA, 2023).

Albania's domestic cost environment offers additional advantages. Construction and labor costs remain below EU averages, and access to low-cost renewable electricity-driven by hydropower's near-zero marginal cost and solar capacity-can partially offset early capital intensity. Initial pilot projects co-located with hydropower or solar installations and anchored to credible industrial offtakers, such as fertilizer distributors, port operators, or cement producers, can validate cost structures, optimize operating profiles, and build local technical expertise.

Over time, increasing electrolyzer utilization, growth in EU demand, and alignment with European support instruments-including the EU Hydrogen Bank, the Innovation Fund, and REPowerEU frameworks-will enhance financial viability. As export pathways mature and domestic hydrogen applications scale, Albania can benefit from economies of scale, improved bankability, and declining technology costs. These conditions collectively position the country to transition from small demonstration projects to commercially meaningful hydrogen production.

INFRASTRUCTURE READINESS AND LOCATION ADVANTAGES

Power system modernization and renewable integration

Albania's transmission system spans roughly 2,300 kilometers of high-voltage lines operated by OST. Recent modernization efforts supported by EBRD and KfW have strengthened grid reliability, upgraded substations, and expanded digital monitoring capabilities (EBRD, 2023; ENTSO-E, 2024). These improvements prepare the system for rising solar and wind penetration, but additional flexibility will be required as variable renewable energy expands toward the government's 2030 targets.

Electrolyzers can provide part of this flexibility by acting as controllable loads that absorb power during low-price intervals, support voltage stability, and alleviate congestion. Suitable siting options include nodes adjacent to major hydropower plants such as Komani and Fierza, solar clusters in the Karavasta–Spitalla region, and industrial corridors near Durrës and Fier. According to IRENA's Global Hydrogen Map (2023), co-locating electrolyzers within renewable clusters can reduce interconnection and balance-of-plant costs by up to 15 percent.

Gas infrastructure: TAP and national transmission upgrades

The Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) is Albania's most strategic asset for future hydrogen flows. TAP links Azerbaijan to Italy through Greece and Albania, transporting 10 billion cubic meters of gas annually with an expansion assessment under way. TAP's engineering specifications already allow low-percentage hydrogen blending, and the operator consortium is studying long-term options for hydrogen transport or dedicated parallel lines (TAP AG, 2024; Snam, 2024; Hydrogen Europe, 2024).

Albgaz, the national gas transmission operator, manages approximately 500 km of legacy gas pipelines, many dating back to the 1980s. The company's 10-year investment plan (2023–2033) explicitly mandates hydrogen compatibility for all new infrastructure, reflecting the government's strategic pivot toward low-carbon gases (Monitor, 2023). Planned projects, totaling €748 million, include the Ionian-Adriatic Pipeline (IAP) connection and modernization of compressor stations with hydrogen-blend tolerance. With coordinated support from the Connecting Europe Facility and Energy Community programs, Albania could emerge as an early transit country for renewable hydrogen trading between the Eastern Mediterranean and Central Europe.

Ports and maritime logistics

The deep-water energy ports of Durrës (Porto Romano) and Vlorë (Petrolifera) are central to Albania's export potential for hydrogen derivatives. Porto Romano is being redeveloped as a multipurpose energy terminal with potential future capacity for ammonia or methanol export. Its proximity to the gas grid and logistics corridors positions it as a strong candidate for green-fuel aggregation.

Petrolifera Vlorë already handles petroleum products and could be retrofitted to accommodate ammonia storage and bunkering. Given the International Maritime Organization's 2023 greenhouse-gas reduction commitments, ports equipped to handle low-carbon fuels will gain strategic regional importance (IMO, 2023; DNV, 2024).

The EU's Western Balkans Green Ports initiative has identified these ports as priority sites for green-fuel infrastructure development, citing their deep-water access and established industrial zones. Co-location of hydrogen production and port infrastructure could significantly reduce transport and export costs.

Storage potential and geological considerations

Large-scale hydrogen storage will be essential for stabilizing both domestic supply and export operations. Albania's geology includes salt domes and sedimentary basins that have the potential to host underground hydrogen storage. Field observations that document natural hydrogen seepage in a chromium mine suggest favorable geological conditions in specific formations (Yirka, 2024).

Salt cavern storage remains the most cost-effective and technically mature option for large-scale hydrogen storage, with significantly lower unit costs compared with above-ground tanks (The Royal Society, 2023). The Vlora–Fier region's salt formations merit detailed geotechnical assessment. Depleted gas fields in Patos–Marinza also present opportunities for conversion into hydrogen storage or integration with carbon-capture and synthetic-methane systems. Early feasibility studies could be supported by institutions such as Statkraft, EBRD, and the Geological Survey of Albania.

Cross-border interconnections and regional positioning

Albania's electricity system is linked to Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Greece through multiple 110–400 kV lines, forming part of the Energy Community regional trading framework. These connections already facilitate short-term power exchanges and could support coupled hydrogen-electricity corridors as the region's decarbonization strategies converge.

On the gas side, the Ionian Adriatic Pipeline is expected to deepen connectivity with Croatia and Central Europe. Its feasibility studies incorporate hydrogen-blend design standards consistent with the European Hydrogen Backbone vision (EHB, 2023). Albania's location makes it a natural southern gateway for hydrogen or ammonia flows moving toward Central and Eastern Europe.

Access to EU financing-through the European Hydrogen Bank, the Innovation Fund, and the Green Gateway Initiative-positions Albania well to develop cross-border hydrogen transport and storage infrastructure.

PRIORITY DOMESTIC APPLICATIONS AND MARKETS

Hydrogen's versatility enables integration across several sectors of Albania's economy. As the country diversifies from a hydro-dominant electricity system toward a broader renewable mix, domestic hydrogen use will be essential to anchor early demand, de-risk investment, and justify infrastructure development before export markets fully mature (IEA, 2023; IRENA, 2023). Priority applications include fertilizers, industrial heat, strategic electricity balancing, and heavy transport-areas where Albania faces significant import dependence and decarbonization challenges.

Agriculture and Fertilizer Production

Agriculture contributes roughly 20 percent of Albania's GDP and employs more than 40 percent of its labor force (World Bank, 2024). Despite this importance, the sector depends heavily on imported nitrogen fertilizers, with annual imports exceeding USD 50 million (UN COMTRADE, 2024). The extreme fertilizer price volatility during the 2021–2023 European gas crisis demonstrated the vulnerability of Albanian farmers to global natural-gas market shocks (Blanco & Qorlazja, 2024).

Producing green ammonia domestically using renewable hydrogen via the Haber–Bosch process could stabilize fertilizer supply and reduce import dependence. Medium-scale ammonia plants (50–150 kt/year), sited near ports or agricultural centers, could capitalize on Albania's low-cost renewable electricity and access to nitrogen via air separation units. Cost assessments by Deloitte (2023) and IEA (2024) indicate that Albanian green ammonia could be produced for USD 500–700 per tonne, which becomes competitive with imports once the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) fully applies to ammonia. Green ammonia also has export potential as EU maritime ports increasingly require low-carbon bunker fuels (DNV, 2024; Hydrogen Europe, 2024).

Industrial heat and feedstock Ssubstitution

Industry accounts for approximately 21 percent of Albania's GDP and is dominated by cement, metallurgy, and refining (INSTAT, 2024). These sectors are energy-intensive and heavily dependent on imported coal, fuel oil, and petcoke. Hydrogen offers several decarbonization routes: replacing coal in high-temperature kilns, acting as a reducing agent in metal processing, and serving as a feedstock for cleaner refining.

A modest 10 percent substitution of fossil fuels with renewable hydrogen in cement and metallurgy could reduce energy-related CO_2 emissions by 0.4–0.6 Mt per year, equivalent to 5–8 percent of national emissions (IEA, 2023). Early adoption through targeted pilot projects, supported by grants or investment incentives, would enable learning effects and support future cost reductions (European Climate Foundation, 2024).

Refining also presents opportunities. Although the Ballsh refinery is currently offline, both Ballsh and Fier retain infrastructure that could be retrofitted to use hydrogen for desulfurization or synthetic fuels, helping align Albania's downstream sector with tightening EU fuel-quality and carbon-intensity standards.

Electricity generation and seasonal balancing

Hydrogen's lower round-trip efficiency (30–40 percent) relative to batteries or pumped hydro is offset by its ability to store energy over long durations, from weeks to months. This characteristic is crucial for a system dependent on hydropower and exposed to hydrological volatility.

Simulation studies for comparable hydro-renewable systems in Norway, Chile, and Iceland suggest that deploying 200–300 MW of electrolyzers co-located with hydropower assets can offset 15–20 percent of annual import needs in low-hydrology years while stabilizing wholesale prices (IRENA, 2024). Albania could follow a similar modular approach integrated with KESH assets, providing seasonal balancing that no current domestic technology offers.

Transportation and mobility

Transport accounts for more than 27 percent of Albania's final energy consumption and remains almost entirely dependent on imported petroleum products (IEA, 2025). Hydrogen and hydrogen-derived fuels can play a meaningful role, particularly in heavy transport and maritime sectors where battery alternatives are less practical.

At Porto Romano and Vlorë, green hydrogen and green ammonia bunkering could support emerging zero-carbon maritime corridors aligned with the International Maritime Organization's 2023 GHG Strategy, which calls for a 70 percent reduction in fuel GHG intensity by 2040 (IMO, 2023). On land, establishing hydrogen refueling hubs in Tirana and Durrës could support early deployment of fuel-cell buses and freight vehicles. Pilot projects funded by the European Investment Bank (EIB) or Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) would integrate Albania into hydrogen mobility corridors under development in Greece, Italy, and the wider Western Balkans (EIB, 2024; CINEA, 2024).

COMPARATIVE LESSONS FROM EUROPEAN LEADERS

Although Albania's scale and hydro-dependent system differ from larger EU economies, important lessons can be drawn from countries that have advanced the fastest in hydrogen deployment. Spain, Denmark, and the Netherlands illustrate how renewable resources, regulatory clarity, and targeted public–private coordination can accelerate hydrogen market formation (IRENA, 2023; Hyung-Ja de Zeeuw, 2023).

Spain: Leveraging renewable cost competitiveness

Spain's progress is rooted in abundant low-cost solar and wind resources and a clear regulatory framework. Its *Hydrogen Roadmap* targets 4 GW of electrolysis by 2030, supports industrial adoption, and integrates hydrogen into transport and chemicals. Spain's Guarantee of Origin (GO) system monetizes green hydrogen attributes and provides transparency for buyers (Green Hydrogen Organisation, 2024).

Relevance for Albania: Spain's model shows the value of linking renewable auctions with electrolyzer deployment. Albania can expand its successful EBRD-backed auction framework to include power to hydrogen tenders, ensuring that electrolyzers secure low-cost electricity and operate flexibly around market price troughs.

Denmark: Aligning electrolyzers with policy incentives

Denmark integrates hydrogen development into its offshore wind expansion and long-term climate strategy. The 2022 political agreement on green hydrogen introduces feed-in contracts, state guarantees, and multi-gigawatt tenders for electrolysis, paired with investments in certification systems aligned with RED III standards (REGLOBAL, 2023).

Relevance for Albania: Denmark demonstrates the importance of capacity milestones and certification readiness. Albania should embed hydrogen explicitly in future NECP revisions, set measurable electrolyzer targets, and prioritize EU-compatible certification to secure access to export markets.

The Netherlands: Infrastructure and port-led development

The Netherlands exemplifies an infrastructure-first strategy. Through the SDE++ subsidy-a contracts-for-difference mechanism supporting low-carbon fuels-the government de-risks early hydrogen projects and anchors development in major industrial ports. Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and surrounding hydrogen clusters serve as hubs for production, imports, and industrial offtake (EHB, 2023; Madden et al., 2021).

Relevance for Albania: Albania can adapt this model by designating Vlorë and Durrës as hydrogen-capable energy terminals, prioritizing storage, ammonia handling, and shipping infrastructure. A simplified CfD mechanism (similar to SDE++) could support early hydrogen producers and industrial users, narrowing the cost gap during market formation.

POLICY AND INVESTMENT ROADMAP FOR ALBANIA

Hydrogen development in Albania will not emerge through spontaneous market activity. The institutional and financial characteristics of the Albanian energy system mean that the state must actively shape the early stages of the market. Policies, institutions, and public commitments are therefore not simply facilitators but the primary engines of

market creation. Only after these foundations are established can private actors, donors, and foreign investors confidently participate. The roadmap outlined here recognizes this dynamic and proposes a sequenced, state-led approach aligned with Albania's governance, infrastructure, and economic realities.

A central first step is the creation of a Dedicated Hydrogen Department within the Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy. This institution should hold formal authority to design and coordinate the hydrogen agenda across energy, industry, agriculture, environment, and finance. Its early responsibilities include preparing a comprehensive national hydrogen strategy that identifies priority applications, defines the role of hydrogen within Albania's wider energy system, and establishes clear targets for electrolyzer deployment, hydrogen storage, and industrial integration. The department should also lead the adoption of a national certification and guarantees-of-origin system aligned with European Union rules, which is essential for accessing EU markets for renewable hydrogen and its derivatives.

Because energy markets in Albania remain small and heavily influenced by hydrological fluctuations, the state must also collaborate with the Energy Regulatory Authority and the Albanian Power Exchange to establish clear rules for hydrogen production and trade. Albania has successfully used renewable auctions to bring in large-scale solar and wind investments, and a similar approach should be extended to green hydrogen. Instead of waiting for demand or price signals to arise independently, the government can design competitive tenders that link renewable electricity with electrolyzer capacity, providing predictable revenue streams through a combination of capacity payments and indexed operating support. Publishing a structured series of auctions would help reduce uncertainty for developers and financial institutions, creating a stable environment for the first generation of hydrogen projects.

Since domestic hydrogen demand will not naturally materialize at scale in the near term, the Albanian government must take active steps to create initial offtake. A key tool for doing so is the use of Contracts-for-Difference, which guarantee producers a stable income by compensating for the difference between a reference price and actual market revenues. This approach is especially relevant where no liquid hydrogen market yet exists. The reference price can be indexed to the cost of grey ammonia imports or industrial hydrogen in nearby European supply chains. By anchoring early investments within a predictable revenue framework, CfDs reduce risk and accelerate deployment.

Albania's hydrological dependence also justifies the creation of a Strategic Hydrogen Storage Reserve. This reserve would function as a buffer against dry periods and energy supply shocks. Managed jointly by the transmission and hydropower operators under the oversight of the Hydrogen Department, this mechanism would contract hydrogen producers to maintain part of their output in storage facilities. The reserve would increase energy security and simultaneously create an early guaranteed buyer for hydrogen production, which is vital during the system's formative years.

Financing, both domestic and international, will determine the feasibility and speed of hydrogen deployment. Albania's institutions must proactively position hydrogen projects within European and multilateral funding frameworks. Instruments such as the European Hydrogen Bank, the European Investment Bank's transition facilities, and the Western Balkans Investment Framework can support early infrastructure and demonstration projects. Success in accessing these funds will depend on whether Albania can present a coherent national project pipeline rather than isolated proposals. The Dedicated Hydrogen Department should act as the country's unified interface for international partners, ensuring that donor support is coordinated and strategically aligned.

To complement external funding, Albania could create a national Hydrogen Investment Fund that blends state contributions, donor financing, and participation from strategic private partners. Such a fund would provide risk-sharing instruments that Albanian banks are unlikely to offer, including first-loss guarantees and mezzanine financing. These tools are essential in the early phases of hydrogen development, when capital expenditures are high and revenue streams uncertain. The fund should prioritize projects that combine domestic value creation with the potential to participate in regional or European supply chains.

The successful development of a hydrogen sector also depends on an adequate supply of skills and a strong safety culture. Hydrogen production and handling require specialized knowledge in process engineering, control systems, gas network management, and emergency response. Albania's universities and vocational schools should introduce training programs in hydrogen technologies, supported by partnerships with organizations such as IRENA, GIZ, and the Energy Community. Twinning with regulatory and technical institutions in Spain, Denmark, or the Netherlands would further strengthen institutional competence.

Safety presents a critical dimension of public trust and investor confidence. Albania should adopt international standards such as ISO 14687 for hydrogen quality and ISO 19880-1 for refueling infrastructure. A comprehensive hydrogen safety code, aligned with the EU Seveso III Directive, should govern ports, pipelines, storage, and industrial facilities. Operators in these areas should conduct regular risk assessments and emergency response drills in cooperation with local authorities and civil protection agencies. Building a visible and credible safety regime is not only a technical necessity. It is also an important social and political requirement.

Finally, Albania requires a phased regulatory approach that allows learning and adaptation. In the short term, the government should establish the legal and regulatory basis for hydrogen, authorize a small number of pilots, and create the initial institutional mechanisms for certification, safety, and permitting. In the medium term, Albania should refine regulation based on lessons from early projects, scale hydrogen auctions, and implement full CfD mechanisms. In the longer term, the country can converge with the evolving European hydrogen market framework, develop advanced storage and export capabilities, and fully integrate hydrogen into regional energy and industrial systems.

Taken together, these measures reflect a model in which the Albanian state deliberately creates the conditions for a hydrogen market to emerge. By aligning institutions, incentives, infrastructure, and skills within a unified strategic framework, Albania can move beyond its current constraints and position itself as a resilient, adaptable, and regionally relevant producer of green hydrogen and its derivatives.

Table 2. Summary of the Policy and Investment Roadmap

Time Horizon	Institutional Reforms	Market Instruments	Infrastructure Priorities
Short Term (2026–2028)	Establish Dedicated Hydrogen Department. Develop national hydrogen strategy. Adopt EU-aligned certification and guarantees of origin.	Pilot hydrogen auctions. Introduce initial CfD framework.	Identify sites for first electrolyzer projects. Begin feasibility studies for storage, ports, pipeline integration.
Medium Term (2028–2030)	Refine regulatory framework based on pilot results. Create national Hydrogen Investment Fund.	Scale hydrogen auctions. Implement full CfD mechanisms. Launch Strategic Hydrogen Storage Reserve.	Early port upgrades for ammonia and hydrogen derivatives. Hydrogen-ready upgrades on Albgaz pipelines.
Long Term (2030+)	Full alignment with EU hydrogen market rules. Integrate hydrogen governance into NECP revisions.	Market-based pricing with residual support.	Dedicated hydrogen or ammonia export corridors. Geological storage development. Integration with European Hydrogen Backbone corridors.

RISKS AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

The development of a hydrogen sector in Albania introduces a constellation of risks that span economics, technology, market formation, regulation, environmental management, and social acceptance. Because Albania's institutional landscape is characterized by state-led planning rather than market-driven evolution, these risks require deliberate and pre-emptive public intervention. The following subsections present the major categories of risk and outline mitigation approaches that reflect Albania's governance structure and development trajectory.

Economic and technological risks

The most immediate economic risk relates to the high capital cost of electrolyzers and associated hydrogen infrastructure. Electrolyzer deployment in its early phases also faces uncertainty over utilization rates because hydrogen offtake remains limited and electricity-

price variation can constrain operating hours. Similar challenges have been observed in first-mover hydrogen economies and are widely discussed in the literature (IEA, 2023; IRENA, 2020). Albania can mitigate these risks through blended finance models that combine concessional loans, government guarantees, and private capital, reducing the cost of financing and increasing the attractiveness of early projects. Modular project development, where electrolyzer systems expand in stages as demand grows, can also reduce exposure to uncertain utilization.

A second technological risk arises from the rapid evolution of electrolyzer technologies. Innovations in alkaline, PEM, anion exchange membrane (AEM), and solid oxide electrolyzers have accelerated, creating uncertainty for investors who fear that early investments may become outdated. Studies indicate that technology lock-in is a barrier in emerging hydrogen markets (Nechache et al., 2021; Brauns et al., 2020). Albania can minimize this risk by adopting technology-neutral procurement frameworks that evaluate bids based on performance metrics rather than technology type. Procurement rules that allow for incremental upgrading or hybrid systems can further reduce perceived obsolescence risks.

Market and policy risks

The Albanian hydrogen sector's early years will be defined by limited natural demand. Without clear offtake, producers face uncertain revenues and potential underutilization. This risk can be managed by prioritizing anchor customers in agriculture and heavy industry, where hydrogen or hydrogen-derived ammonia can substitute for imported fertilizers or fossil fuels. Targeted support instruments such as Contracts-for-Difference can bridge the initial cost differential and give industries confidence to transition to green alternatives, a strategy widely employed in early hydrogen markets in Europe (Madden et al., 2021).

Export risks constitute another major category. Access to EU markets for renewable hydrogen requires strict compliance with standards under the Renewable Energy Directive (RED III) and its Delegated Acts, which prescribe additionality, temporal correlation between hydrogen production and renewable electricity generation, and traceability (European Commission, 2023). Failure to meet these criteria would limit Albania's export opportunities. Aligning national certification systems with EU norms and participating in regional initiatives such as the European Hydrogen Backbone can reduce this risk (EHB, 2023).

Regulatory delays also pose a challenge. Investors face significant barriers when permitting processes are fragmented or slow. This problem is particularly acute in sectors that intersect with environmental approvals, land-use planning, and energy regulation. A centralized permitting structure housed within the Dedicated Hydrogen Department can streamline procedures, reduce administrative friction, and coordinate inter-agency responsibilities.

Environmental and social risks

Environmental risks associated with hydrogen production must be evaluated carefully, although Albania begins from a more favorable position than many countries. Electrolysis requires water, but in Albania this requirement is not expected to place significant pressure on national freshwater resources. Albania is one of the most water-abundant countries in Europe, with per capita renewable water availability far above regional and EU averages. The World Bank and FAO AQUASTAT classify Albania as a country with high freshwater endowment, and hydrological data indicate that its river and groundwater systems provide ample supply for both consumption and industrial use. This means that large-scale electrolysis will not meaningfully compete with drinking water or agricultural irrigation at the national level.

Nevertheless, localized pressures may arise in specific basins or during seasonal dry periods. International experience shows that even in water-rich countries, public concern can develop when new industrial uses are introduced without clear planning. For this reason, Albania would still benefit from adopting a precautionary approach that prioritizes non-potable water sources where feasible. Treated municipal wastewater and runoff from industrial processes can serve as suitable feedwater for electrolysis when properly filtered, which is consistent with recommendations from recent technical assessments (Bloom Energy, 2024; NREL, 2023). In coastal areas, desalination can be considered when future hydrogen clusters emerge near ports. The objective is not to address scarcity, but to maintain public confidence, avoid local ecological impacts, and demonstrate responsible resource management.

Beyond water considerations, social acceptance and safety remain central components of environmental risk. Hydrogen's physical characteristics require rigorous infrastructure design, operational monitoring, and emergency preparedness. A strong safety culture is critical, particularly in industrial zones and ports where hydrogen handling, compression, or storage may occur. Lessons from other hydrogen-developing jurisdictions underline the importance of transparent communication, early stakeholder involvement, and regular emergency response training to build trust (DNV, 2024). Albania should adopt international safety standards such as ISO 14687 for hydrogen fuel quality and ISO 19880-1 for refueling systems. A national hydrogen safety code aligned with the EU Seveso III Directive should govern operational practices in production, storage, and transport facilities.

Land-use conflicts may also pose social challenges. Hydrogen projects, especially those involving storage or ammonia conversion, require space and often introduce visible infrastructure. Prioritizing brownfield sites, disused industrial areas, or existing energy corridors can reduce land-use tensions and accelerate permitting. This approach aligns with sustainable land-use practices and minimizes the risk of environmental fragmentation.

Strategic mitigation framework

To respond to these risks in a coherent manner, Albania should adopt a systematic approach anchored in transparent monitoring and institutional coordination. A national Hydrogen Risk Register maintained by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy would

allow continuous assessment of regulatory, financial, technological, and environmental risks. This register would identify mitigation actions, assign institutional responsibilities, and support evidence-based decision-making.

In parallel, a dedicated Hydrogen Safety Authority should be established under the joint oversight of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy and the Ministry of Environment. This authority would oversee compliance with safety standards, coordinate inspection and certification procedures, and manage emergency preparedness. Continuous collaboration with EU regulatory agencies such as the Directorate-General for Energy and the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency would help Albania keep pace with evolving European rules, maintain export eligibility, and align national practices with EU-funded project requirements.

A proactive approach to risk management will enhance investor confidence, reduce uncertainty, and lay the foundation for a resilient hydrogen sector. By treating risk mitigation as a strategic pillar of hydrogen development rather than an afterthought, Albania can ensure that the nascent sector evolves in a manner that is secure, socially accepted, and consistent with long-term national energy goals.

CONCLUSION

Albania's energy system combines very high renewable penetration with structural vulnerability. The country's dependence on hydropower creates large swings in electricity availability, exports, and import costs, which have measurable macroeconomic effects. As solar and wind capacity expands, these hydrological imbalances are increasingly accompanied by curtailment and depressed wholesale prices. The analysis in this paper shows that green hydrogen offers a credible mechanism to address these challenges by converting surplus electricity into a storable and tradable energy vector.

Empirical price data demonstrate that surplus electricity often clears at low or even negative values. Under such conditions, the conversion of surplus power into hydrogen produces an order-of-magnitude increase in economic value relative to exports, even after efficiency and conversion losses. Hydrogen also provides a form of long-duration storage that is currently absent from Albania's power system. This enables seasonal balancing during dry years, reduces exposure to import price spikes, and creates a cross-sectoral energy carrier for agriculture, industry, and transport.

The paper contributes to the literature by offering one of the first integrated assessments of green hydrogen for a small, hydro-dominant, EU-adjacent economy. It combines real electricity-price data, infrastructure mapping, and regulatory analysis to evaluate feasibility at a system level. The findings indicate that Albania's low renewable electricity costs, deep-water ports, proximity to EU markets, and emerging hydrogen-ready gas infrastructure could position the country as a competitive producer of hydrogen or hydrogen-derived products such as green ammonia.

Realizing this potential requires coordinated institutional and policy action. Priority measures include establishing a dedicated hydrogen authority, infrastructure investments, adopting EU-aligned certification frameworks, developing Contracts for Difference to anchor early investment, and progressing port and pipeline planning for future export pathways. Early pilot projects linked to agriculture and industry are essential for building domestic demand, technical expertise, and investor confidence.

This assessment has limitations. It does not conduct a full power-system optimization model, nor does it quantify long-term hydrogen demand under different EU regulatory scenarios. Future work could model hourly dispatch with electrolyzer integration, evaluate spatial siting options through GIS analysis, and assess the economic implications of evolving RED III and Delegated Act criteria. Further research is also needed on geological storage feasibility and cross-border coordination with TAP and IAP operators.

Despite these uncertainties, the evidence presented here supports a clear conclusion. Green hydrogen is not a marginal technological option but a strategic complement to Albania's renewable transition. By acting in the near term to establish governance structures, mobilize investment, and align with European hydrogen standards, Albania can convert its hydrological volatility into long-term energy security, industrial diversification, and a competitive position in the emerging regional market for clean energy carriers.

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IMPROVING FINANCIAL LITERACY IN SOUTHERN ALBANIA: A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH FOR ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

Financial literacy is essential for making informed decisions and improving economic well-being. In southern Albania, many unemployed and marginalized individuals lack access to practical financial education. This project aims to assess the financial literacy levels of farmers, small business owners, and unemployed individuals in the region. The findings will help identify key educational needs and support the development of targeted workshops and curricula on topics such as budgeting, saving, managing debt, and using digital tools like e-banking and online marketplaces. The lessons will use clear language, local examples, and interactive methods to keep learners engaged. Pilot sessions in Gjirokastra will test the effectiveness of this approach in improving financial knowledge and confidence. This model offers a low-cost, flexible solution to strengthen financial literacy in rural communities and support better financial decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

Financial literacy has increasingly become a cornerstone of sustainable economic development and social inclusion, particularly in countries undergoing economic transition such as Albania. In a global environment characterized by rapid digitalization, expanding financial markets, and increasing household responsibilities in long-term financial planning, the ability of individuals to understand and manage financial resources is more critical than ever. Financial literacy not

only enables individuals to make informed decisions about saving, investing, borrowing, and risk management, but it also enhances the resilience of entire communities by promoting responsible financial behavior and reducing vulnerability to shocks.

Southern Albania, especially the region of Gjirokastra, faces structural challenges that make financial literacy even more essential. The region is characterized by rural settlements, declining population due to migration, high unemployment rates, and a labor market dominated by agriculture, small trade, and informal economic activities. These socio-economic conditions limit opportunities for stable income and constrain long-term financial planning. Many adults in the region do not have access to formal financial education, and they rely heavily on informal knowledge, personal networks, or trial-and-error experiences when making financial decisions. This lack of structured financial guidance reinforces a cycle of limited financial capability, persistent reliance on informal borrowing, and insufficient preparedness for financial risks.

Existing research on Albania shows that financial literacy at the national level remains significantly below European averages. Surveys conducted by institutions such as the OECD, the World Bank, and the Bank of Albania reveal gaps in understanding basic concepts such as interest rates, inflation, compound growth, insurance, and digital payments. However, national datasets often fail to capture local nuances, especially the differences between urban and rural populations, and the distinct challenges faced by groups such as farmers, small business owners, unemployed workers, women, and youth. As a result, there is a pressing need for community-based studies that examine financial literacy within specific regional contexts.

This paper addresses that gap by focusing on the Gjirokastra region in southern Albania, an area with limited prior research on financial capability and financial inclusion. The study takes a community-based approach, emphasizing practical, culturally sensitive, and easily accessible financial education. Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all model, the research seeks to understand the lived realities of farmers, unemployed individuals, and small business owners, three key population groups whose financial stability is essential for local development.

A community-based approach acknowledges the importance of local norms, economic activities, and social structures. It assumes that financial literacy programs must be adapted to local needs, designed in simple language, and supported by practical tools that individuals can easily apply in daily life. For instance, farmers often need guidance on seasonal budgeting, cost management, and agricultural insurance; unemployed individuals benefit from training on saving, job-search budgeting, and micro-entrepreneurship; and small business owners require more advanced skills in bookkeeping, cash-flow management, and investment planning. The interaction between these groups and local institutions, such as banks, microfinance organizations, local authorities, and educational institutions, also plays an important role in shaping financial literacy outcomes.

The goal of this research is twofold. First, it aims to measure the current levels of financial knowledge, behavior, and attitudes of the three groups through a structured and statistically validated methodology. Second, it seeks to identify the key determinants of financial literacy and propose practical interventions that can be implemented at the community level. Through survey data, regression analysis, and comparative assessments across groups, the study provides insights into how demographic factors (such as age, gender, education, and experience) influence financial literacy.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the wider academic and policy discourse by offering a model that can be replicated in other rural regions facing similar socio-economic constraints. The findings can inform policymakers, NGOs, local governments, educational institutions, and financial organizations in designing targeted financial education programs that promote economic empowerment and reduce vulnerability.

In summary, this study does not simply measure financial literacy; it offers a pathway for empowering individuals and communities to make better financial decisions, strengthen their resilience, and contribute to long-term economic growth in southern Albania. By combining quantitative data, local context, and community-based recommendations, the paper aims to advance the understanding of how tailored financial education can transform lives and support local development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Financial literacy has become a central theme in contemporary economic and development literature, especially as global financial systems grow increasingly complex. Defined as the combination of financial knowledge, financial behavior, and financial attitudes, financial literacy is understood as a fundamental driver of sound financial decision-making and long-term economic resilience. Numerous studies emphasize that financially literate individuals and businesses are more capable of managing risk, allocating resources efficiently, and avoiding costly financial mistakes. This chapter synthesizes the theoretical and empirical contributions related to financial literacy among SMEs, unemployed individuals, and farmers, three groups that are particularly vulnerable to financial instability and often underserved by formal financial systems.

The academic discourse on financial literacy has expanded significantly in the past two decades. Huston (2010) conceptualizes financial literacy as both "knowledge" and "application," arguing that knowledge alone is insufficient unless it results in effective financial behavior. Lusardi and Mitchell (2014), whose work is widely cited, emphasize the importance of understanding core concepts such as interest rates, inflation, risk diversification, and debt management. Behavioral economists further highlight the role of cognitive biases, time preference, and bounded rationality in shaping financial decisions, illustrating that financial literacy is inseparable from behavioral finance. For example, individuals often display present-bias tendencies, overvaluing immediate consumption

relative to future needs, which can undermine savings and investment plans even when they possess financial knowledge.

International organizations, including the OECD and the World Bank, have contributed robust frameworks for measuring and interpreting financial literacy, underscoring its multidimensional nature. Across these frameworks, a consensus emerges: financial literacy is not merely a personal asset but a socio-economic capability that influences broader economic outcomes, including business sustainability, financial inclusion, and poverty reduction. These frameworks also highlight the role of financial attitudes and confidence, showing that individuals who feel competent in handling money are more likely to take calculated financial risks, engage with formal financial institutions, and invest in long-term opportunities.

SMEs are critical engines of economic growth, job creation, and innovation, yet they face systemic barriers in financing, risk management, and long-term planning. A substantial body of research indicates that SME owners with higher financial literacy demonstrate superior business performance. Wise (2013) finds that financial knowledge significantly increases the likelihood of new venture survival, while Fatoki (2014) shows that financial competence supports better cash flow management, credit evaluation, and planning practices. SMEs with financially literate owners are more likely to develop detailed business plans, implement formal accounting practices, and engage in strategic investment, thereby increasing their resilience to market fluctuations.

Financial literacy also influences SMEs' ability to access external financing. Studies indicate that entrepreneurs with higher financial literacy show greater engagement with formal financial institutions, improved loan application quality, and lower probability of loan delinquency. Cole and Fernando (2008) argue that low financial literacy is a major constraint in credit markets in developing economies, where informal lending often dominates and financial mismanagement is common. Similarly, Drexler et al. (2014) demonstrate that financial training improves bookkeeping, profitability, and decision quality among micro and small enterprises. Importantly, digitally-enabled financial tools such as mobile banking and cloud-based accounting software have created new avenues for SMEs to enhance financial management, though their adoption requires both literacy and technological capability.

Despite its importance, gaps in SME financial literacy remain substantial, particularly in developing and transition economies where informal financial practices dominate and formal training opportunities are limited. Digital financial technologies (FinTech) introduce new opportunities but also require updated forms of financial capability, including understanding digital transactions, cybersecurity, and online credit platforms. Training programs that integrate these digital competencies alongside traditional financial education have shown promising results in improving business outcomes and financial inclusion.

Unemployed individuals are often characterized by financial vulnerability, limited income stability, and restricted access to financial services. Research shows that low financial literacy among unemployed populations is associated with poor budgeting, insufficient savings,

excessive reliance on informal loans, and limited emergency preparedness. Atkinson and Messy (2012) find that strengthening financial capability among the unemployed enhances financial resilience and reduces long-term vulnerability. Financially literate individuals demonstrate higher savings rates, are better able to avoid predatory lending, and can make more informed decisions when accessing government or community support programs.

Financial education interventions have demonstrated measurable improvements. Müller and Weber (2014) show that targeted training reduces financial anxiety and improves budgeting outcomes, while Bernheim et al. (2001) argue that financial education increases long-term saving behavior and economic self-reliance. Furthermore, financial literacy has been linked to labor market outcomes: individuals with stronger financial planning skills exhibit higher job-search activity, more stable economic expectations, and greater readiness for self-employment or entrepreneurial ventures. Tailored interventions, such as community workshops or mentoring schemes, have proven particularly effective when contextualized to local socio-economic conditions, addressing barriers like limited formal education, low digital literacy, or social norms that discourage formal financial engagement.

Farmers face unique financial challenges stemming from income seasonality, climate variability, market fluctuations, and dependence on credit. Research underscores that financial literacy plays a crucial role in farm management, adoption of agricultural technologies, and risk mitigation. Giné et al. (2013) find that low financial literacy is a major barrier to adopting agricultural insurance in low-income rural contexts. Kloeppinger-Todd and Sharma (2010) emphasize that financial capability improves credit use efficiency and reduces the likelihood of default among farmers. Financially literate farmers are more likely to adopt crop diversification strategies, use credit responsibly, plan for adverse climatic events, and optimize input allocation. These practices contribute not only to household resilience but also to regional agricultural productivity.

Empirical studies highlight that targeted financial training programs in rural areas improve input management and long-term planning. For example, programs that combine record-keeping workshops with practical exercises on budgeting and investment have led to measurable increases in profitability and loan repayment rates among smallholders. Yet rural financial education remains underdeveloped, often constrained by geographic isolation, limited digital access, and persistent reliance on informal credit markets. Innovative solutions, such as mobile-based advisory services and cooperative financial education initiatives, have demonstrated potential in bridging these gaps and fostering broader financial inclusion.

In conclusion, the literature consistently demonstrates that financial literacy is a multidimensional construct with profound implications for SMEs, unemployed individuals, and farmers. By enhancing knowledge, skills, and confidence, financial education supports better decision-making, risk management, and resilience, ultimately contributing to economic growth and social well-being. Despite clear evidence of its benefits, substantial gaps persist, especially in developing and transition economies where formal financial

services are limited and informal practices dominate. The integration of traditional financial education with digital tools, context-specific interventions, and community-based programs offers a promising pathway to strengthen financial capability across diverse populations. Future research should continue to explore the long-term impact of financial literacy programs, identify effective methods for reaching marginalized groups, and evaluate the interplay between financial knowledge, behavior, and attitudes in shaping sustainable economic outcomes.

AN OVERVIEW OF FINANCIAL LITERACY IN SOUTHERN ALBANIA

Recent data show that financial education among adults in Albania remains significantly below international standards. Surveys from recent years reveal that a large proportion of the population struggles with basic financial concepts such as interest rates, inflation, risk diversification, and budgeting. Interest rates, for instance, determine the cost of borrowing or the returns on savings, yet many adults are unaware of how small differences can accumulate into substantial gains or losses over time. Inflation erodes purchasing power, but without understanding it, households may fail to plan adequately for future expenses. Risk diversification, spreading investments or savings across different assets, is rarely practiced, leaving individuals vulnerable to losses, while budgeting, the foundation of everyday financial management, is often overlooked. As a result, a significant number of adults find it difficult to apply simple money-management skills in everyday life, which hinders their ability to plan, save, and make informed financial decisions.

These financial challenges are especially pronounced in rural areas, where education levels tend to be lower and access to financial training programs is limited. In these communities, knowledge about basic accounting principles, record-keeping, and financial planning is often scarce, and financial decisions are primarily guided by intuition, habit, or advice from peers rather than formal analysis. The consequences of such limited knowledge are tangible: households may incur unnecessary debt, spend beyond their means, or fail to take advantage of opportunities for savings and investment. Over time, this perpetuates cycles of economic vulnerability and limits the community's capacity to respond to unforeseen challenges.

Farmers and small business owners in the Gjirokastra region are particularly affected. Many farmers operate without a formal financial plan, relying instead on experience and traditional practices. They often lack detailed records of income, expenses, or production costs, which makes it difficult to calculate profits accurately, assess the viability of their operations, or apply for loans. For example, a farmer may not know the exact cost per kilogram of olives produced, which complicates pricing decisions and profit estimation. Similarly, small business owners frequently struggle with cash flow management, underestimating seasonal variations in income and expenses. A shop owner may run out of stock during peak demand or tie up capital unnecessarily during low-sales periods, simply because financial planning

and forecasting are not part of daily operations. The limited use of formal accounting and financial management practices stems from several factors. First, many individuals simply lack the knowledge or skills needed to maintain proper records. Second, access to financial services is uneven: although banks and microfinance institutions operate in the region, many households and small businesses rely on informal borrowing from family, friends, or local moneylenders, often at high interest rates. Third, cultural attitudes and mistrust toward formal financial institutions persist, as many people perceive bank procedures as overly complicated or unnecessary. Finally, awareness of financial products such as insurance, particularly agricultural and business insurance, is extremely low. This leaves households and enterprises exposed to risks such as crop failures, theft, or natural disasters.

Low financial literacy has a direct and measurable impact on economic outcomes. Farmers with limited financial knowledge tend to underinvest in technologies and practices that could enhance productivity. They may struggle to set competitive prices, control input costs, or respond effectively to market fluctuations. Similarly, small business owners with weak financial skills often mismanage inventory, underestimate funding needs, or fail to adapt to seasonal changes. These weaknesses make it harder for local actors to respond to shocks, whether economic, social, or climate-related, thereby reducing the resilience of the regional economy. Over time, this lack of preparedness can limit income growth, reduce employment opportunities, and threaten the sustainability of local livelihoods.

The broader social implications are equally significant. Households that lack financial literacy often make short-term decisions at the expense of long-term security, such as incurring debt without repayment plans or failing to save for education, healthcare, or retirement. Limited access to and use of financial services constrain entrepreneurial activity, reduce investment in business development, and inhibit modernization of agricultural practices. The cumulative effect is a persistent cycle of economic vulnerability, where low financial capability reinforces poverty and limits social mobility.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Targeted financial literacy programs should be implemented for farmers, small business owners, and unemployed individuals. These programs should focus not only on theoretical knowledge but also on practical skills such as record-keeping, budgeting, investment planning, and cash flow management. For farmers, this could include training on calculating production costs, understanding loan terms, and evaluating profitability per crop or livestock unit. For small business owners, modules could cover inventory management, pricing strategies, and seasonal financial planning.

Digital tools and technologies can play a crucial role. Mobile applications that facilitate simple bookkeeping, track income and expenses, or generate automated reports can help bridge knowledge gaps and simplify financial management. For example, a farmer could use an app to log daily sales, track input costs, and generate monthly profit summaries, allowing for more informed decision-making and easier access to bank loans.

Improving access to formal financial services is essential. Microfinance institutions, banks, and cooperative credit systems can offer tailored products for rural communities, including low-interest loans, savings plans, and insurance packages. Complementing these services with educational campaigns that build trust, explain benefits, and clarify administrative procedures can increase uptake and reduce reliance on informal borrowing.

Community-based initiatives and partnerships with local NGOs, educational institutions, and government agencies can help sustain long-term financial literacy efforts. Peer-to-peer learning, workshops, and mentorship programs allow individuals to learn from one another, while institutional support ensures that resources, guidance, and incentives are consistently available.

Improving financial literacy in southern Albania is not just a matter of personal empowerment but also a cornerstone for regional economic development. Farmers, small business owners, and households with stronger financial skills are better equipped to manage risks, plan strategically, and invest in opportunities that promote growth. By combining education, technology, access to formal financial services, and community support, it is possible to strengthen resilience, enhance economic performance, and secure sustainable livelihoods for future generations. Strengthening financial literacy is therefore both a social and economic imperative, and targeted interventions have the potential to transform individual behavior, community practices, and the overall trajectory of local development.

Below, we present a comparison of financial literacy for several countries and various products.

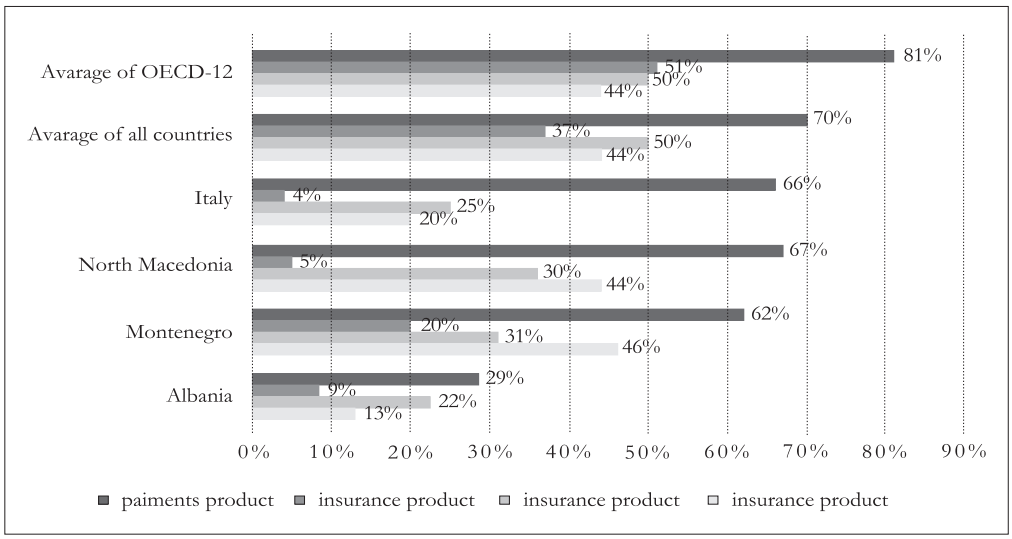


Figure 1. *Financial Literacy Comparison*

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs quantitative research using primary data collected through a structured questionnaire testing financial literacy among small businesses, farmers and unemployed individuals in the Region of Gjirokastra. A total of 240 respondents were surveyed, with 80 participants selected from each category (SMEs, unemployed individuals, and farmers). The survey was administered in person between July-September 2025, supported by local institutions and community networks. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and based on informed consent. Respondents were adults aged 18 and above, residing in the Gjirokastra region.

Data were collected using a 35-item questionnaire designed to measure three major dimensions of financial literacy: (i)Financial Knowledge, assessing understanding of core concepts such as interest rates, inflation, risk diversification, savings, credit, and insurance; (ii)Financial Behavior, measuring budgeting, spending and saving habits, debt management, and record-keeping practices; (iii) Financial Attitude, valuating perception of money and finances. A multiple regression model, using a dichotomous dependent variable, was used to determine the predictive power of financial literacy components.

The financial literacy score was based on a combined score of the three components. Financial knowledge was assessed with questions having right or wrong answers, where correct answers received 1 point and incorrect answers 0. Financial attitude and behavior were mainly measured using questions on a 1–5 Likert scale, where responses of 4 or 5 were scored 1, and all others 0. These three scores were combined to form the overall financial literacy measure.

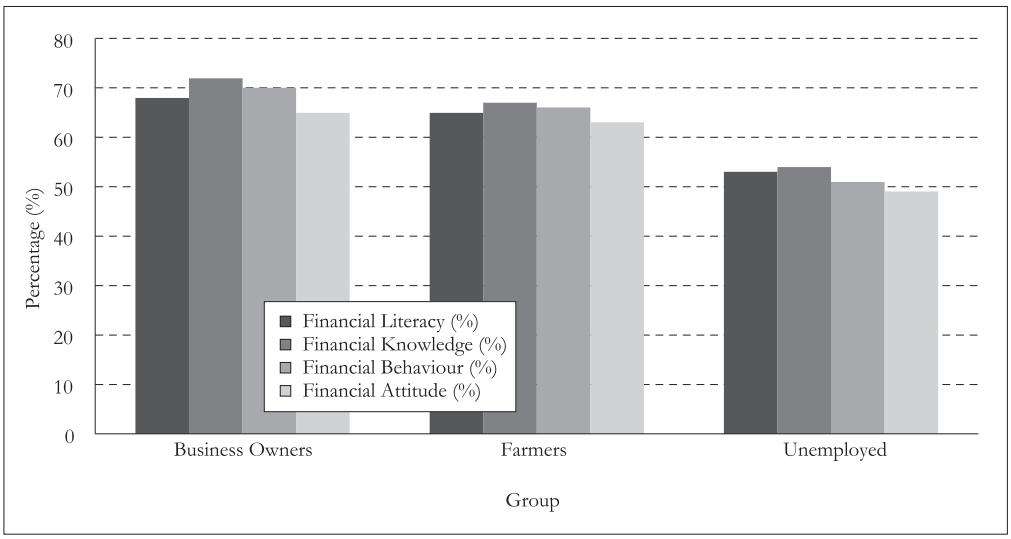


Figure 2. *Financial Literacy Components by Occupation*

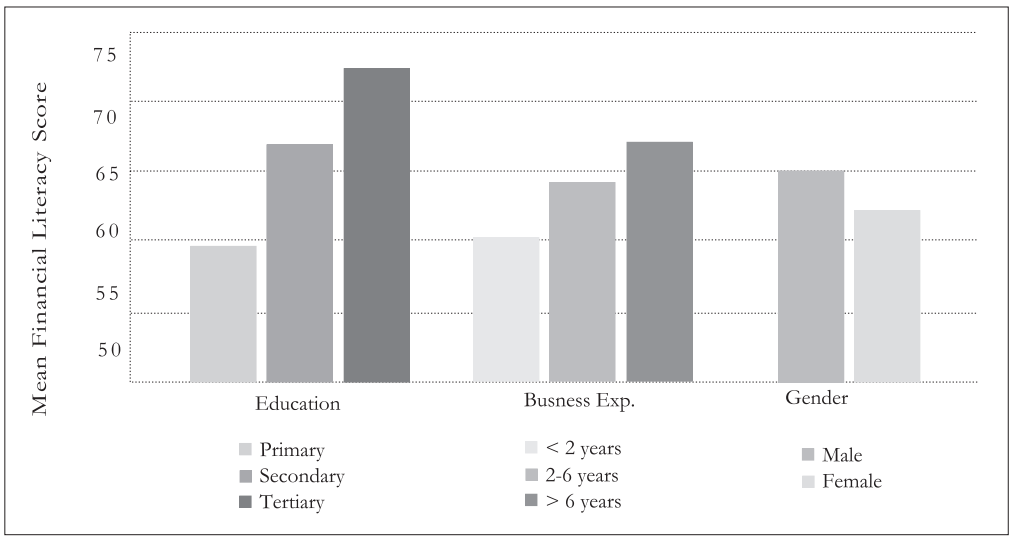


Figure 3. *Financial Literacy by Demographics*

The reliability of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha, which measures how consistent the items are within each subscale and across the entire survey. A value of 0.70 or higher is generally viewed as acceptable (Cavana et al., 2001). Table 1 presents the Cronbach's Alpha results for financial knowledge, financial behavior, financial attitude, and the overall questionnaire.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis

Subscale	Cronbach Alpha	No. of Items
Financial Attitude	0.701	11
Financial Behavior	0.717	8
Financial Knowledge	0.704	15
Overall Survey	0.766	34

The data show that the reliability coefficient for each subsection and for the overall survey is above 0.7 showing a moderately high internal consistency.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The analysis of financial literacy among farmers, small business owners, and unemployed people in the Gjirokastra region shows moderate levels overall. Table 2 below shows that financial knowledge has a mean score of 56.4 (SD = 12.8), with scores ranging from 22 to 89, indicating a fair understanding of financial concepts. Financial behavior is slightly

lower, with a mean of 52.7 (SD = 13.2) and scores between 18 and 87, showing some inconsistency in financial practices. Financial attitude scores are the highest, with a mean of 61.3 (SD = 11.5) and a range of 30 to 92, reflecting generally positive views toward money management. Overall financial literacy, combining these three dimensions, has a mean of 56.8 (SD = 10.7) and scores from 27 to 88, indicating a moderate level across the sample.

Table 2: Financial Literacy Scores by Dimension among Farmers, Small Business Owners, and Unemployed Individuals

Dimension	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Financial Knowledge	56.4	12.8	22	89
Financial Behavior	52.7	13.2	18	87
Financial Attitude	61.3	11.5	30	92
Financial Literacy	56.8	10.7	27	88

Based on the results, financial literacy is moderate across all three groups, but differences exist. Table 3 shows that unemployed individuals have the lowest scores in financial knowledge, behavior, and attitudes, likely due to limited resources, less interaction with financial institutions, and fewer real-life financial decisions. Small business owners have the highest scores, as they regularly manage budgeting, investments, and daily financial tasks. Farmers fall in between, with a moderate understanding of saving, credit, and risk, but their progress is affected by seasonal income and limited access to training.

Table 3. Financial Literacy Scores by Group in Percentage

Group	Financial Knowledge	Financial Behavior	Financial Attitude	Overall
Small Businesses	68.9	67.4	66.1	67.5
Farmers	59.1	56.2	60.8	58.7
Unemployed	50.2	46.5	56.9	50.9

Table 4 below presents the logistic regression results for factors influencing financial literacy. All financial literacy components knowledge, behavior and attitude—positively and significantly predict financial literacy. Results show that financial confidence has the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.063$, OR = 1.07, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher confidence increases the likelihood of being financially literate. People who feel more confident about managing money, such as reading loan terms, making a budget, or planning for the future, perform better in all areas of financial literacy. Education also has a strong positive effect

($\beta = 0.36$, OR = 1.43, $p < 0.001$), showing that higher education improves financial literacy. This highlights the importance of structured financial education.

Regression Equation

$$Logit(FL) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(Knowledge) + \beta_2(Behavior) + \beta_3(Attitude) + \beta_4(Confidence) + \beta_5(Gender) + \beta_6(Education) + \beta_7(SME) + \beta_8(Farmer) + \beta_9(Age) + \beta_{10}(Experience)$$

Table 4. Logistic Regression Data

Predictor	β (Coefficient)	Standard Error	Odds Ratio	p-Value
Intercept (β_0)	-5.31	1.02	-	0.000
Financial Knowledge (β_1)	0.041	0.012	1.04	0.001
Financial Behaviour (β2)	0.052	0.014	1.05	0.000
Financial Attitude (β_3)	0.031	0.010	1.03	0.002
Financial Confidence (β_4)	0.063	0.015	1.07	0.000
Gender (Male=1) (β_5)	0.48	0.21	1.62	0.023
Education (β_6)	0.36	0.09	1.43	0.000
Small Business Owner (β_7)	0.77	0.24	2.16	0.001
Farmer (β_8)	0.29	0.2	1.34	0.145
Age	0.028	0.010	1.03	0.005
Experience	0.035	0.012	1.04	0.003

The regression results also show clear gender differences. Men scored higher than women in financial knowledge and financial behavior, which is also seen in other international studies. Women reported lower confidence in managing finances, less knowledge about financial products, and less involvement in household financial decisions. These results suggest that cultural and social factors may limit women's access to financial information and financial independence.

The study also found that financial literacy increases with age and experience. Older participants, especially those over 45, showed better budgeting skills, stronger awareness of financial risks, and more consistent saving habits. Their experience in managing resources and making financial decisions over time appears to help them. On average, each additional year of experience increases the likelihood of financial literacy by about 3.5%. Younger participants, although more familiar with digital tools, scored lower in long-term planning and responsible financial behavior.

Overall, the results show that financial literacy in Gjirokastra is influenced by employment status, education, gender, confidence, and experience. The findings suggest the need for targeted financial education programs for unemployed individuals, women, and young adults. At the same time, farmers and small business owners would benefit from training and support tailored to their specific needs.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The study shows that financial literacy in the Gjirokastra region is still low, especially among farmers, women in rural areas, and people with low levels of education. These groups face many challenges, such as limited access to banks and financial services, little exposure to financial education, and cultural norms that reduce their role in financial decision-making. As a result, they are less able to budget well, save regularly, or make smart investment decisions. This weakens their financial stability and makes them more vulnerable to economic problems.

Farmers, in particular, often deal with irregular and seasonal incomes, which makes planning for expenses and investments more difficult. Without proper knowledge of budgeting and record-keeping, many farmers cannot accurately assess the costs and profits of their activities, leading to inefficient resource allocation. In addition, access to credit is limited, and many rely on informal loans with high interest rates, further constraining their financial options. Providing specialized financial training and simple digital tools for record-keeping could empower farmers to make better decisions and improve their economic outcomes.

The findings also show that education and work experience strongly influence financial literacy. People with higher levels of education consistently scored better in financial knowledge, behavior, and attitudes. Similarly, individuals with more business experience or more years of work showed stronger financial management skills. This suggests that financial literacy is learned both through formal education and practical experience, meaning that effective programs should combine theory with hands-on training and useful financial tools. Schools, vocational programs, and workplace training could play a crucial role in increasing financial literacy across all age groups.

Unemployed individuals are the most financially vulnerable group. Their low or unstable income, combined with limited financial knowledge, makes it difficult for them to save, plan, or invest. This not only affects their personal finances but also reduces their chances of starting a business or joining formal economic activities, keeping them in a cycle of insecurity. Targeted support, such as financial literacy courses for unemployed people, access to microfinance, and help with starting small businesses, could help reduce this vulnerability. Mentorship programs connecting unemployed individuals with experienced entrepreneurs could also provide practical guidance and increase confidence in financial decision-making.

The study also identifies a clear gender gap. Women scored lower than men in financial literacy. This shows the need for programs that consider gender differences, address cultural barriers, build women's confidence in managing money, and give them better access to financial information and resources, especially in rural areas. Women-focused workshops, peer support groups, and awareness campaigns can play a key role in empowering women to participate more actively in household and business financial decisions.

Additionally, financial literacy tends to improve with age and experience. Older adults usually have better budgeting habits, more awareness of risk, and stronger saving behaviors. Younger adults, even though they are more comfortable with digital tools, often lack long-term planning skills. This highlights the need for financial education earlier in life, such as in schools or youth programs. Introducing practical modules on savings, budgeting, investments, and risk management at the high school or university level could create a generation better equipped to handle financial challenges.

In conclusion, improving financial literacy in Gjirokastra requires several coordinated actions:

- Specialized financial education programs for farmers, unemployed people, women, and individuals with low education.
- Practical, hands-on training that includes real-life examples and business-related experience.
- Better access to formal financial services, including banks, microfinance, and insurance.
- Awareness campaigns and gender-focused programs to reduce inequalities and support women.
- Financial education for young people to help them build strong financial habits early.

Strengthening financial literacy across these groups can lead to better financial decisions, improved resilience to economic shocks, increased productivity, and overall economic development in the region. By addressing the unique challenges faced by each vulnerable group, policymakers and community organizations can create sustainable pathways toward economic empowerment and inclusive growth.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, several targeted policy actions are proposed to improve financial literacy and strengthen economic stability for key groups in the Gjirokastra region. These recommendations are adapted to the specific needs of farmers, small business owners, and unemployed individuals, taking into account their unique financial challenges and opportunities. Implementing these measures can help reduce financial vulnerability, increase income stability, and promote long-term economic development in the region.

Recommendations for Farmers

Farmers in Gjirokastra often face irregular income due to seasonal production cycles, weak record-keeping practices, and limited access to formal financial services. These challenges make it difficult for them to plan expenditures, invest in new technologies, or access credit on favorable terms. To address these issues, several actions are recommended:

Targeted financial training: Practical courses should be designed specifically for farmers, focusing on key skills such as record-keeping, cost calculation, budgeting, and investment planning. Training sessions can use real-life agricultural examples, such as calculating costs for crops, projecting seasonal revenue, and planning for unforeseen expenses. Incorporating group exercises and workshops can also foster peer learning and the exchange of practical knowledge among farmers.

Use of digital tools: Simple mobile applications and digital platforms can greatly enhance farmers' ability to track sales, expenses, and profits. These tools can also provide alerts for loan repayments, market prices, or weather-related risks. By making financial information more accessible, digital tools help farmers make informed decisions and strengthen their financial planning capabilities. Furthermore, digital record-keeping can improve transparency and facilitate access to formal credit, as banks and microfinance institutions can rely on documented financial histories.

Easier access to credit and insurance: Financial institutions, including banks and microfinance organizations, should develop products tailored to small farmers. These may include crop loans with low collateral requirements, flexible repayment schedules, and affordable crop or livestock insurance. By mitigating risks and providing predictable financial support, farmers can invest in productivity-enhancing technologies, diversify crops, and plan for contingencies, ultimately improving income stability and resilience to economic shocks.

Recommendations for Small Businesses

Small business owners are a critical driver of local economic growth but often struggle with financial planning, cash-flow management, and long-term sustainability. Targeted measures to support small enterprises include:

Entrepreneurship and financial training: Workshops and mentoring programs should focus on practical skills, such as budgeting, bookkeeping, investment planning, pricing strategies, and long-term business planning. Training can also include scenario-based exercises to prepare entrepreneurs for market fluctuations and unexpected expenses.

Mentoring networks: Connecting new business owners with experienced entrepreneurs provides access to knowledge, practical advice, and problem-solving strategies. Mentoring can help reduce the trial-and-error period, improve decision-making, and increase the likelihood of business success.

Digital accounting and payment tools: Encouraging the adoption of digital platforms for invoicing, payments, and record-keeping can enhance efficiency, reduce errors, and improve transparency. These tools can also facilitate better interaction with clients and suppliers and help businesses qualify for loans by providing clear financial records.

Tailored financial products: Banks and financial institutions should develop loans with flexible repayment schedules, low interest rates, and minimal collateral requirements. Such products can help small businesses manage cash flow, expand operations, and invest in growth opportunities, contributing to overall economic resilience in the region.

Recommendations for the Unemployed

Unemployed individuals face financial insecurity due to irregular income and limited financial knowledge. Policies should combine financial education with economic empowerment to break the cycle of poverty and enhance self-sufficiency:

Community-based financial education programs: Offer accessible courses on budgeting, saving, credit management, and basic entrepreneurship for both adults and youth. Community centers, local NGOs, or vocational schools can serve as venues for these programs, fostering social support networks and shared learning opportunities.

Integrated job and financial training: Combining financial literacy with job-skills training can improve employability and income potential. For instance, training in trades, digital skills, or small-scale manufacturing can be paired with lessons on budgeting, business planning, and credit use, providing participants with both practical skills and financial knowledge to succeed in the labor market.

Start-up support: Providing small grants, seed capital, or low-interest microloans for participants who complete training programs can incentivize entrepreneurship and self-employment. Support programs can include guidance on business registration, market research, and cost management, helping unemployed individuals transition into sustainable income-generating activities.

Online and mobile learning: For those unable to attend in-person programs, digital courses and mobile-based modules ensure that financial literacy training reaches a wider audience. Interactive e-learning platforms can include quizzes, scenario-based exercises, and practical tools to strengthen financial management skills while promoting engagement and accessibility.

By implementing these comprehensive measures, the Gjirokastra region can foster stronger financial literacy among vulnerable groups, improve economic participation, and enhance resilience against financial shocks. Coordinated efforts between local authorities, financial institutions, and community organizations are essential to ensure that these programs are inclusive, sustainable, and aligned with the specific needs of farmers, small business owners, and unemployed individuals.

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AN ECO-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE ABOUT TOPONYMY IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

Eco linguistics perceives language as an ecological phenomenon, how people think about the living world. If sociolinguistic research has contributed significantly to the understanding of language use in social contexts, Eco linguistics has created awareness of language as an eco-language. The paper presents an Eco linguistics study on aspects of place naming in the Albanian language examined from the perspective of human-biota relationships. Linguistic features in place names in the Albanian language indicate the eco-cultural dimension of a speech community. This research based on descriptive approach aims at investigating the relationship between people, biota, language and place-names. It deals with the lexical and grammatical features of Albanian toponymy from an Eco-linguistic perspective, analysing their semantic relation with biota confirming that historical value, socio-cultural value, and the local wisdom of the society are essential parts in place-naming of the entities.

Keywords: *Eco linguistics, place-naming, lexical features, semantic relation*

INTRODUCTION

The term "ecolinguistics" has been used to describe studies of language interaction and diversity; texts for and about the environment; the relation between the language and the objects in the local environment; the dialects in particular geographical locations, etc. (Stibbe, 2015, 8). The link between ecology and language is that how humans treat each other and the natural world is influenced by our thoughts, concepts, ideas, ideologies and worldviews, and these in turn are shaped through

language. As a new interdisciplinary approach, Ecolinguistics can explore the more general patterns of language that influence how people both think about, and treat, the world, investigating the stories they live by – mental models that influence behaviour and lie at the heart of the ecological challenges they face (Stibbe, 2015).

Economic systems are built through language, despite often being seen to lead to ecological destruction, through language they have resisted, leading to new forms of economy. Based on analysis on Couto's Ecosystemic Linguistics, the Linguistic Ecosystem "consists of a people (P), whose members live in their territory (T) and communicate according to the usual way of communicating in their community (L)" (Couto, 2017, 149). This integral Ecosistem

Since its beginnings in the 1980s and 1990s, Ecolinguistics has grown into a research field in its own right, although the boundaries of what Ecolinguistics analysis is and how one should go about doing Eco linguistics research have not been made explicit by scholars working in the field (Nash, 2013). The linguistic community has also questioned the relevance of Ecolinguistics as a subdiscipline and its theoretical points (Edwards 2008; Owen 2004). Meanwhile several critical voices concerning various aspects of Eco linguistics research has been raised (Goddard 1996; Siegel 1997). Excluding Garner (2005), different scholars have not been explicit enough theoretical scope of Ecolinguistics and its practical implications for general linguistic theory.

According to Nash (2015), Ecolinguistics can be divided into two strands: the first one, often referred to as "eco-critical discourse analysis" or "critical Ecolinguistics" with focus on analysing language used about the environment, particularly in texts, to identify underlying ecological narratives and their implications; and the second one, language ecology, which examines the interactions among humans, mind, and environment. It typically employs lexical-grammatical analysis to study how individuals linguistically adapt to, and conceptualize, their surroundings, including new or foreign environments.

Words reflect the social interaction between people and their environment, toponyms are the signs that humanity created to remember where they interacted with the environment and in what way. The onomastic system is essentially a social and legal fact (De Simone, 1973). Toponyms are the results of interactions between people and their environment through language. Distinct standpoints of language reflect on Couto's Linguistic Ecosystem which can be Natural Ecosystem of Language, Mental Ecosystem of Language and Social Ecosystem of Language (Albuquerque et al., 2018). The multiplicity of approaches arises from different understandings of the concept of "ecology", from a very broad concept of the interaction of some things with other things to narrow concepts such as "related to environmentalism" (Stibbe, 2015: 8).

Consistent with structuralist theory, the linguistic sign is posited as arbitrary (Saussure, 1959). However, toponyms, functioning as specific lexical and grammatical units, are frequently viewed as non-arbitrary because they express an idiosyncratic relational form to a specific referent or location. The interplay between language and the foundational societal narratives that underpin cultures and individual lives is exceedingly complex and actively debated within linguistics and philosophy (Stibbe, 2015, p. 9). This perspective contrasts

with traditional linguistic analysis, which often posits that language can be examined in isolation from its bio-cultural context.

In contrast, Sapir (1921, p. 207) argued that language and culture are intrinsically linked; language is a social heritage that informs actions and shapes the fabric of life. Thus, language fulfils a dual role: it serves as an objective medium for the communication of ideas and as a verbal vehicle for expressing relative cultural values. While traditional linguistic analysis tends to overlook the bio-cultural contexts in which languages operate, Sapir contended from the early twentieth century that language is inextricably tied to culture. It acts as a guiding social heritage that influences actions and beliefs, ultimately affirming that language serves both as a conduit for objective communication and as a means of articulating cultural values.

According to Nash (2015), there is a distinct gap in linguistics and toponymy of a method and theory which outlines how, along with formal structural analysis, the ecological implications of toponyms and their connection to the nexus of place where they develop and exist should be analysed, emphasizing the efficacy of the structural analysis and at the same time accentuating the multitude of cultural and ecological parameters necessary to consider when conducting an Eco linguistics analysis of toponyms.

Research in linguistics has generally focused on linguistic structure decontextualized from the environment in which the language is spoken. In this context, ethnolinguistic research has contributed significantly to the understanding of language use in social context, just as Ecolinguistics has created awareness of language as an ecological phenomenon. This paper aims to address how the relationships involving people, language, place, and names can be characterized empirically in a specific language in a specific environment.

METHODOLOGY

From Ecolinguistics perspective toponyms are important cultural and environmental artefacts and events. As the result there is a need for contextually empirical analyses about interrelationships concerning language, culture, and the natural environment. Philosophical analyses of the relationship between lexicon and environmental management are important in their own right. Analysing toponyms from Ecolinguistics point of view in Albanian language, may result in a more accurate and detailed description of toponyms in their historical, social, and ecological context. This approach highlights the clear relationship between toponymy and ecolinguistics within Couto's Ecosystemic Linguistics, based on its tripartite models: people (P), territory (T), and community language (L), along with the three ecosystems of language (natural, mental, and social), also considering Nash's proposals on interaction, ecolinguistic fieldwork, and ecologically embedded languages, emphasizing the key elements of toponyms—people interacting with their environment in diverse ways, particularly through language (De Albuquerque et al., 2018).

Using model of Pal and Mahamadi (2017) over 300 place names from Albanian toponymy

were selected. The corpus of place names was collected from ethnobotanical field work, and Albanian dialectal and sociolinguistic studies (Haxhihasani, 1975; Shkurtaj 2001, Saraçi, 2010). In the analysis of toponyms, neither their morphological and word-forming structure nor their etymology were taken into account; instead, the focus was on their environmental semantic reference. This reference includes names directly related to the natural environment and those referencing an environment transformed by human activity

Toponym's classification

Nature-driven class	Society-driven class
Natural elements	Agriculture and industries
Topography	Proper names
Fauna and flora	Ethnic groups and clans
Terrestrial materials	Religion related
Colours	Local markets
Celestial phenomena	Numbers

Source: Pal e Mahamadi (2017)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

According to Nash (2015), the idea that linguistic practices are detachable from the world suggests one can distinguish between two prototypical language types: (1) ecologically embedded languages, and (2) disconnected languages. These are idealized types and in reality, most languages are a complex mix between being constructed by their environment and constructing their environment (Mühlhäusler 2003, 2). An understanding of the interrelated phenomena can be achieved by interacting in real-world situations, with members of the respective speech communities living in the actual ecology where the language is spoken and used every day.

Albanian is located in very diverse relieve coastal, plein and mountainous from West to East, with a high biodiversity (Damo et al 2012). As a result of this diversity, it enjoys species diversity as well as spectacular geographic landscape and the category of toponyms includes nature elements, topography and geography, endemic fauna and flora, terrestrial materials, colours, and celestial phenomena. In the following section we will present more details on each sub-category.

Nature-driven class

Natural elements

Albania is located in the Mediterranean region, where natural elements like soil and water are of significant importance to the population. Consequently, a large number of Albanian toponyms (place names) are derived from these elements. Many of these toponyms are related to the productivity of the soil, referring to its capacity to support plant growth. Water

also plays a crucial role in land fertility but can also cause flooding. A considerable number of fields are named based on their water retention. Winds have likewise served to name places, with characteristic winds for a specific location often are nominated from that place.

Natural elements	Toponyms
Soil	Guriçkat (Stony Soil); Humbë (Unproductive Soil), Xhumbat (Bumpy Field); Kërqelnicat (Limestone Soil)
Water	Pellgot/Pellgoza (Little Ponds); Lumkat/ Batanë Lumit (Near the River), Llurje, Llapat/ Llapshe, Llënkat/Llëngat /Dhënkat, Llomi/Llomet, Llokatet (all fields with water- bearing soil)
Wind	Shiroka (town named by the wind); Mulani i Hotit (Hoti's Mulan); Lezhjanaia (Lezha's wind)

Topography

The Albanian relief is very diverse, both on water and land surfaces. Consequently, place names are mainly associated with appellations that indicate the typology of the relief, often followed by a characteristic specific to them (location, size, climatic characteristics, connection to some history).

Topography	Toponyms
Mountain /hill/ valley/pass	Mali i Kuq, Mali i Thatë; Prapamali (Red Mountain/Dry Mountain/Behind The Mountain); Kokogllava (The Head Peak); Qafa e Kazanit (The Pass of Kettle), Dimal (Two mountains), Skampies (The rock); Lugina e bukur(The beautifull valley)
Rood and stream	Përroi i Thatë (Dry Stream); Lumas (Village named by the river)
Pool/puddle	Gjoli i Poradecit (Ohrid Lake); Vala e Madhe (Big Wave -waterfall)
Areas	Ara e Gjatë (The long field); Lëndinkat (Little glades); Ara në mal (The field in the mountain)

Flora and fauna

This category includes those toponyms whose main parts consist of the name of animals or plant sofa all categories. The fauna and flora classification are one of the with most data for Albanian toponyms. Generally, these toponyms are related to places where elements of fauna and flora are found or grow in the wild or cultivated state, or are related to history, beliefs, or rituals associated with them

Flora and fauna	Toponyms
Fauna toponymy	Ulqin (country name by wolf); Guri i Capit (Billy goat's Stone); Bletëz (village name by bee); Gjeraqinë (village name by hawk).
Flora toponymy	Lezhë (Lisus) (country name by oak); Dardhë (village name by pear); Ahishtë (Beach Forest); Selenica e Pishës (Pine's Selenica); Fikas (village name by Fig)

Colours

Colours have served man to determine the type of soil, the type of vegetation, the seasons, hence a series of natural elements that he has used or found dangerous.

Colours	Toponyms
Mountain /hill/ valley/pass	Mali i kuq/ Dheri i Kuq/ Kuqulina (Red Mountean/Soil/Place), Dheri i Bardhë (White Soil); Muzgat, Arat e Zes (Dark Place/Black Field); Lëndina jeshile (Green Glide)
Settlements	Guri i Kuq (Red Stone); Kuç i Zi (Black Kuç); Psar i Zi (Black Psar)

This group of toponyms reflects the natural environment as perceived by man, often derived from distinctive natural characteristics that made a strong impression. Consequently, these places are named after natural elements with a direct impact on human life and perception.

Society-driven class

This category of toponyms includes place names that are directly or indirectly related to human-society interactions and activities involving human-human relationships. They are divided into sub-names related to livelihood, trade, influential people, ethnic diversity, religion, etc., which define a specific aspect of social life.

Agriculture and industries

The main agricultural activities include: plant cultivation, grain milling, livestock raising and handicrafts. Later, industrial toponymy appears, initially for the processing of agricultural and livestock products and then for full-fledged industries.

Agriculture and industries	Toponyms
Agri-toponymy	Vështela; Kodërvreshti; Hardhishta (Little Veyinard/Veyinard Hill/ Grapevine); Te Lamtë, Lëmenjtë (At Winnowing Fields/ Winnowing Fields); Mulliri i Pilos (Pilo's Milling)
Livestock toponymy	Shtrunga e Raqit (Rraqi's Cattle Shed); Stani i Përroit të Qelbësit (The cattle Shed of Polecat Brook)
Industrial toponymy	Ura Vajgurore (town, Kerosene Bridge), Terminali (Terminal); Kombinati (Combine); Birra (Beer)

Proper names

Some villages and settlements, forests, fields and objects are named after people who apparently had influence, owned them, or were associated with a (mostly painful) history.

Most of the place names that indicate ownership are based primarily on male figures, because in the Albanian mentality, the women do not own and inherit property.

Anthroponyms	Toponyms
Unidentified anthroponymy	Vëra e Kopiles (The Bastard Hole); Varri i Plakës (The Old Women grave); Varri i Partizanit (The Partisan Grave); Varret e Francezëve (The French Graves); Ushtari i panjohur (The Unknown Soldier)
Identified anthroponymy	Çukëza e Mulla Aliut (Mulla Aliu's Peak); Pilli i Lolos (Lolo's Forest)

Ethnic groups and clans

Albania is a small country; over the centuries the social structure was based on tribes and clans. The existence of different ethnic groups has had special importance in the economic and social life of the dominant population. Consequently, many settlements are named after these ethnic groups and clans.

Tribe and clans	Toponyms
Administrative/ tribal/clan structure	Dardania (region named by Dardan tribe); Lagjja e çobenve (The shepherd neighborhood); Kuvendi i Dheut të Lurës (a sort of tribe parliament of Lura region): Bajraku i Shalës (administrative structure under a bayractar)
Important objects	Kisha e Vllenjve (Vllah's Church); Varri i evgjitit (Egyptian's Grave); Varri i Magjupit (Roma's Grave)

Religion

Like in all other languages, religion has played an important role influencing the Albanian language and it is reflected in the Albanian folklore, mythology, literature, and plant names. The names of many plants originate from the fact that religions exerted pressure suppressing all sorts of linguistic and cultural practices threw into oblivion a considerable number of folk names of plants, while some unknown plants at a certain point of time were given names related to religion (Saraçi et al. 2023).

Religious	Toponyms
Christian nomination	Shëngjin (town, Saint Johan); Shëngjergj (village Sain George); Te klishka (At Little Church)
Muslim nomination	Xhamia e re (New Mosque); Teqeja e Baba Aliut (Baba Aliu's masjid); Inonishti,
All religion	Vakëfet (region, Shrines); Mali i Tomorrit (a holy mountain)

Local markets

Local weekly markets (bazaar) have played a very important role in the lives and livelihoods of local people. They have offered them the opportunity to trade their goods and products, but at the same time some markets have also served as settlements.

Local markets	Toponyms
Bazar	Pazari i Ri (Old Bazar), Pazari i vjetër (New Bazar); Qafa e Pazarit (Bazar's Pass); Pazari i Bagëtive (Cattle's Bazar)
Other nomination	Markata (Market); Tregu çam (Çam Market); Te shumica (At the Wholesale); Dyqani i Rakos (Rako's Shop)

Numbers

Numbers are part of those toponyms where the quantity of objects or specific relief features in the named places is distinct and easily countable.

Numbers	Toponyms
Administrative unit	Dimal (town-Two mountains); Tre vëllezër (village-Three brothers)
Micro toponymy	Tre lisat (ground -Three oaks); Pesësqepolat (field-Five Chickens Beaks)

The category of Albanian social-driven toponyms is named based on the social relationships people have established with the location through possession or direct alteration. Semantically, the influence reflects a place's perceived belonging or its transformation in terms of usefulness over time and within a specific space. This group of toponyms appeared later and in smaller numbers than the preceding category, primarily due to two factors. First, the toponyms of the earlier group became stratified over a long period (until the early 20th century) reflecting the direct and sustained connection between people and nature. Second, the human transformation of nature was historically dominated by agricultural practices, with industrial development occurring only later.

CONCLUSION

Albanian can be considered an ecologically embedded language, a designation that is useful for empirical analysis. In such a language, the same word may be used to describe both people and other life forms. Furthermore, the lexicon and grammar of spatial relationships often reflect the local topography, and the language as a whole mirrors the historical and contemporary interaction between humans and their environment. Toponyms in any language are crucial for preserving knowledge of a territory's biodiversity. They are not mere carriers of topographical information; rather, they serve to heighten inhabitants'

awareness of their natural surroundings, attuning them to climatic and natural cues and shaping their adaptive strategies.

From an ecolinguistic perspective, toponyms can be viewed as objects and events of significant cultural and environmental importance. This approach allows for the discovery and reconstruction of the toponymic and topographical contours of a landscape. An ecolinguistic examination of toponyms enables interdisciplinary analyses of the relationships between language and the environment, thereby providing a detailed philosophical and conceptual framework for understanding toponyms within their historical and ecological contexts.

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MATHEMATICAL MODELING AND COMPUTATIONAL TECHNIQUES IN THE DETECTION OF MITRAL VALVE PROLAPSE VIA CT

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays the number of diseases is growing and growing. Several factors that contribute to the prevalence of diseases are the lifestyle related to the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, poor diet, air pollution, unsafe drinking water, stress at work, etc. This article represents the study of Mitral Valve Prolapse (MVP) using both mathematical knowledge and the application of Python code. The paper highlights the interaction between mathematics, technology, and medicine. Driven by a profound interest in the fields of cardiac surgery and cardiology, we have consistently engaged in the systematic exploration, review, and critical analysis to the anatomy, function, and pathophysiology of the heart. In the role of scientific researchers of applied mathematics, through this paper, our principal goal is emphasizing the vital function of mathematics in radiology, respectively presenting the applications of the integral concept in medical scanners. Using Python-based simulations in Spyder 3.11 (Anaconda environment), we demonstrate how libraries such as NumPy, Pandas, Matplotlib, and Scikit-learn can process clinical data and model MVP indicators. This application provides the opportunity to collect all pieces of code into a single file format, with the primary goal of representing data in a way that is accessible and easy for everyone to understand and become familiar with. The code used can process the data that has been saved in Python Kernel I. Finally, the data can be analyzed, and everybody has the chance to give these data analysis. The mathematical modeling techniques used in this article are Beer's Law, Regular Back Projection, Filtered Back Projection, Unfiltered Back Projection, Random Transform, Flat Impulse,

Dirac Impulse, Fourier Transform Derivation, Discrete Fourier Transform. Each of these modelling techniques applied in this paper are accompanied by an example of implementation during the article.

Keywords: *Computed Tomography, Mitral Valve Prolapse, Integral Calculus, Image Reconstruction, Python, Medical Imaging, Machine Learning*

INTRODUCTION

Double Integral meaning

Knowing well the meaning of the first integral of the function with one variable, helps to define the meaning of double integral of function with two variables. The integral of the function $f(x)$, written as $\int_a^b f(x)dx$, expresses the area under the graph of the function $f(x)$ and below the horizontal axis $y = 0$. Considering a two-variable function $f(x,y)$, which is defined on a closed rectangle $R:[a,b]x[c,d]$. The function $z = f(x;y)$ is a surface in three-dimensional space, while R is the $xy-plane$. The double integral $\iint_R f(x,y)dA$ represents the volume of the solid, which lies above the rectangle R and below the function $z = f(x,y)$.

$$\iint_R f(x,y)dA$$

How do you calculate the double integral?

Write it as an iterated integral $\int_a^b\int_c^d f(x,y)dydx = \int_a^b(\int_c^d f(x,y)dy)dx$. Firstly, solve the integral of function $f(x,y)$, with respect to variable y from c to d, which is located inside and then solve the other integral of function $f(x,y)$, from a to b.

In a similar way, $\int_c^d\int_a^b f(x,y)dxdy = \int_c^d(\int_a^b f(x,y)dx)dy$

$$\int_a^b\int_c^d f(x,y)dydx = \int_a^b(\int_c^d f(x,y)dy)dx$$

Let's build the graph of the function $f(x)$ in the Cartesian Coordinate Plane and explain the first integral. There is the code of the graph of function with one variable $f(x)$.

```
import numpy as np
from scipy.interpolate import interp1d
```

```
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt
x_values=np.array([1, 2, 3, 4, 5.5])
y_values=np.array([20, 29, 15, 18, 30])
cubic_interpolation = interp1d(x_values, y_values, kind = "cubic")
x_=np.linspace(x_values.min(), x_values.max(), 100)
y_=cubic_interpolation(x_)
plt.plot(x_, y_)
plt.title("The graph of the function y=f(x)")
plt.xlabel("x")
plt.ylabel("y=f(x)")
plt.show()
```

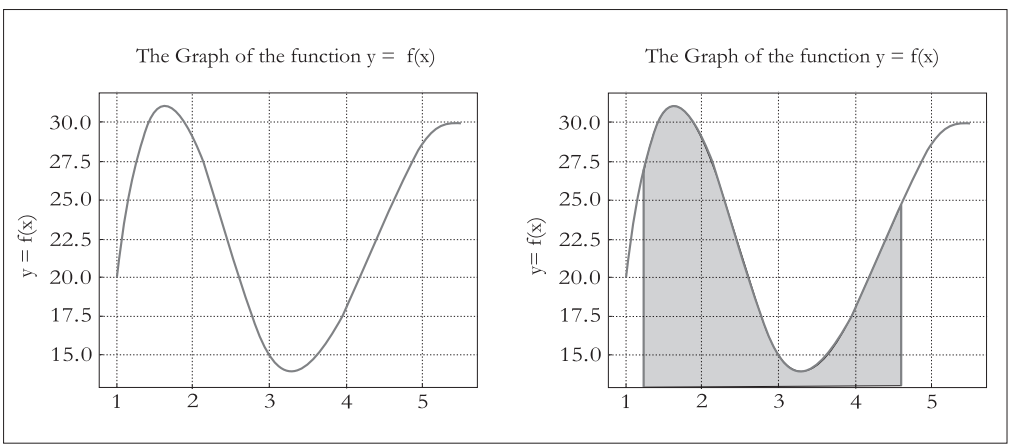


Figure 1. *The graph of the function y = f(x) and the area of trapezoid using first integral*

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

This theorem explains the meaning of double integral and gives a hint to calculate this type of integral. The number that will find after calculating the double integral, will represent the volume of the space under the graph and above the rectangle R. Suppose that there is a continuous function $f(x,y)$ over the region $R = \{x \in (a,b), y \in (c,d)\}$ as rectangular plane, defined by $a \le x \le b$ and $c \le y \le d$. The formula of double integral which express the Theorem of Fubini is:

$$\iint_R f(x,y)\,dA = \iint_R f(x,y)\,dxdy = \iint_R f(x,y)\,dydx$$

Now we are giving an illustration of the volume using double integral over region R, in the application of GeoGebra.

$$\iint_R 4\cos(2x)\,dydx = \iint_R 4\cos\cos(2x)\,dxdy \text{ over the region } R = \begin{cases} 0 \le x \le \pi \\ 0 \le y \le \pi \end{cases}$$

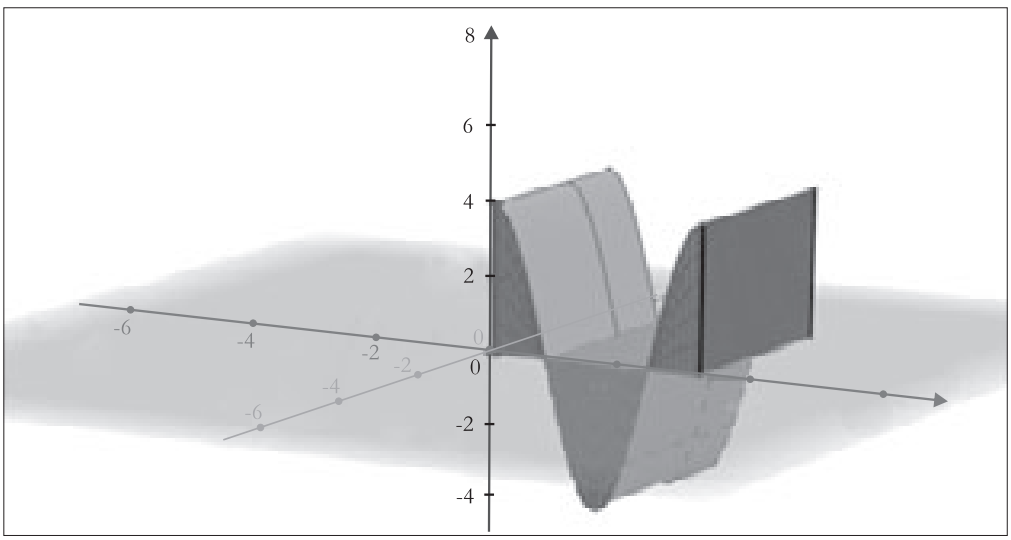


Figure 2. *The illustration of the double integral of the function representing the volume of the space under the function and above the rectangle*

Double Integral in one region

How to integrate a function using double integral in a region?

Case 1: There is the same function $z = f(x,y)$, in the domain $D = \{(x,y) \text{such that } a \le x \le b, g_1(x) \le y \le g_2(x)\}$, where *a, b* are constants, $g_1(x), g_2(x)$ are continuous functions, in the segment (*a, b*). The functions for variable *y*, are the bounds of variable *x*.

$$\iint_D f(x,y)\,dA = \int_a^b \int_{g_1(x)}^{g_2(x)} f(x,y)\,dydx$$

Case 2: There is the same function $z = f(x,y)$, in the domain $D = \{(x,y) \text{such that} c \le y \le d, h_1(x) \le y \le h_2(x)\}$, where *a, b* are constants, $h_1(x), h_2(x)$ are continuous functions in the segment $[c,d]$. The functions for variable *y*, are the bounds of variable *y*. A shadow projection gets to the patient's body. At this moment, the x-rays start to be absorbed by different parts of the organ inside the human body. Computed Tomography helps the doctors to determine the diagnosis of the organ. In this section there is made the applying of double integral and some other concepts of mathematics to be able the CT Scanner to work. There is a CT Scanner in two positions, given in the figure below.

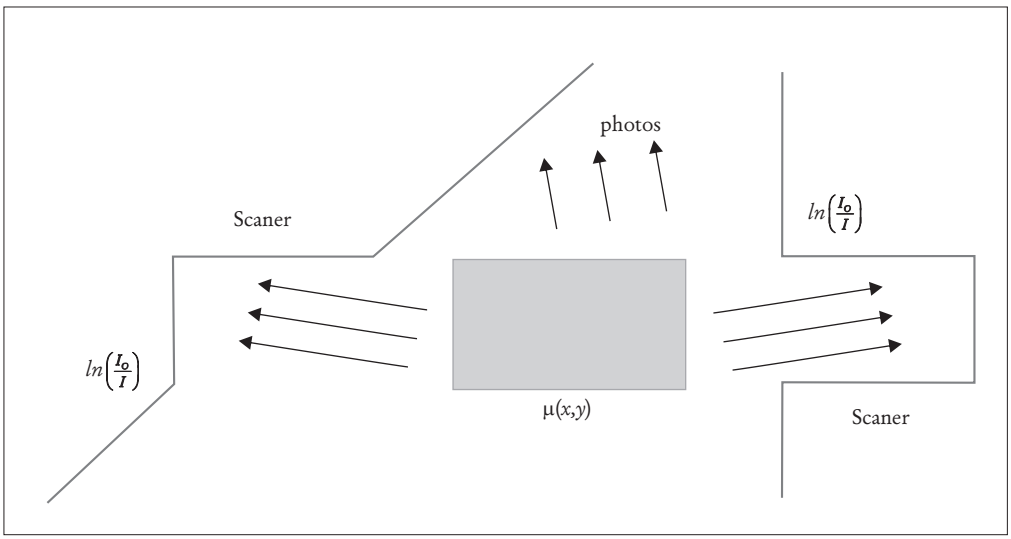


Figure 3. *Computed Tomography Scan in 3D, where scanner 1 is in* $\theta = 90°$ *and the scanner 2 is in* $\theta = -45°$

An important concept from the huge background of mathematical knowledge is natural logarithms. The logarithm of the original intensity divided by me is $\ln(\frac{I_0}{I})$ is. If the value of I decreases, the value of the natural logarithm increases. It is used in optics, to explain how the light intensity is attenuated or reduced. The formula that expresses how strong the material can attenuate the light is $I = I_0 * e^{-\int \mu(x,y)dS} \leftrightarrow \ln\left(\frac{I_0}{I}\right) = \int \mu(x,y)\,dS$, where:

- dS is the straight line through the object.
- I and I_o are the final and initial intensity respectively,
- μ is the attenuation coefficient, expressed in km^{-1}
- x is the distance in km

We can write the equivalent of the formula above and reconstruct to $f(x,y)$ to $p(r,\theta)$

$$f(x;y) = \mu(x;y)$$

$$\ln\left(\frac{I_0}{I}\right) = p(r,\theta)$$

- $\theta \rightarrow$ the position of the scanner
- $r \rightarrow$ How far is it from the center or to the left of the center position of scanner
- If the parameter $\theta = 90°$, the parameter $r = 0$

Table 1: The values of the ratio $\frac{I(x)}{I_0}$

Tissue	$\mu(cm^{-1})$	$I(x)/I_0$ $(x = 1cm)$	Difference to muscle
Air	0.000	1.0	+20
Blood	0.178	0.837	+02
Muscle	0.180	0.835	0
Bone	0.480	0.619	-26

The implementation code for making a sinogram

The application used to make the code, with Python language, is Spyder 3.12 from the package Anaconda Navigator. This app gives the opportunity to collect all the pieces of code in one file format. The main goal is to represent the data in an available way for humans, that everyone can understand and familiarize them with. First, the data has been implemented in the code in Spyder 3.11. Secondly, the code used can process the data, that have been saved in I Python Kernel. Finally, the data can be analyzed, and everybody has the chance to give these data analysis. To begin with the code, we import the libraries and initialize the function *np.ones*() to give the parameters of the matrix, the function *np.diag*() to build the diagonal of the matrix, also to return specified diagonals. In the figure two dimensional, the diagonal returns, from *a* to $a[i, i + offset]$[1] and the function *np.pad*() is used to pad the tensors of an image by adding zeros in the border of the images. Tensors are mathematical objects[2], also to save the pixel of the image, the function *np.linspace*() to return a matrix with same values [*start value*, *end value*], the function *np.meshgrid*() to create a grid of coordinate cartesian system, the function *rotate*() to make the rotation of the image, *np.arange*() function to create an instance of ndarray, *np.diff* (), is used to calculate the difference between successive elements of an array, the function *np.imshow*() can display data as an image. If the object function is rotating for different angles during different times, the object function will create a detector function each time. We can show it graphically as a sinogram.

There is the code to make the sinogram.

import numpy as np

import matplotlib.pyplot as plt

[1] https://numpy.org/doc/stable/reference/generated/numpy.diagonal.html

[2] https://visagetechnologies.com/tensors-in-computer-vision/

```
from scipy.interpolate import RectBivariateSpline
from skimage.data import shepp_logan_phantom
from skimage.transform import radon, rescale, rotate
img = np.ones([120, 120])
d = len(np.diag(img)//2)
img = np.pad(img, pad_width=d+12)
plt.imshow(img)
_ = np.linspace(-1,1, img.shape[0])
x, y = np.meshgrid(_,_)
img[(x-0.1)**2 + (y-0.2)**2 < 0.01] = 2
img_rot = rotate(img, 45)
fig, axis = plt.subplots(1,2,figsize = (30,15))
axis[0].pcolor(x, y, img, shading='auto')
axis[1].pcolor(x, y, img, shading='auto')
plt.show()
thetas_angle = np.arange(0,180,5) * np.pi/180
rs = _
new_theta_angle = np.diff(thetas_angle)[0]
rotations = np.array([rotate(img, theta_angle*180/np.pi) for theta_angle in thetas_angle])
plt.imshow(rotations[2])
```

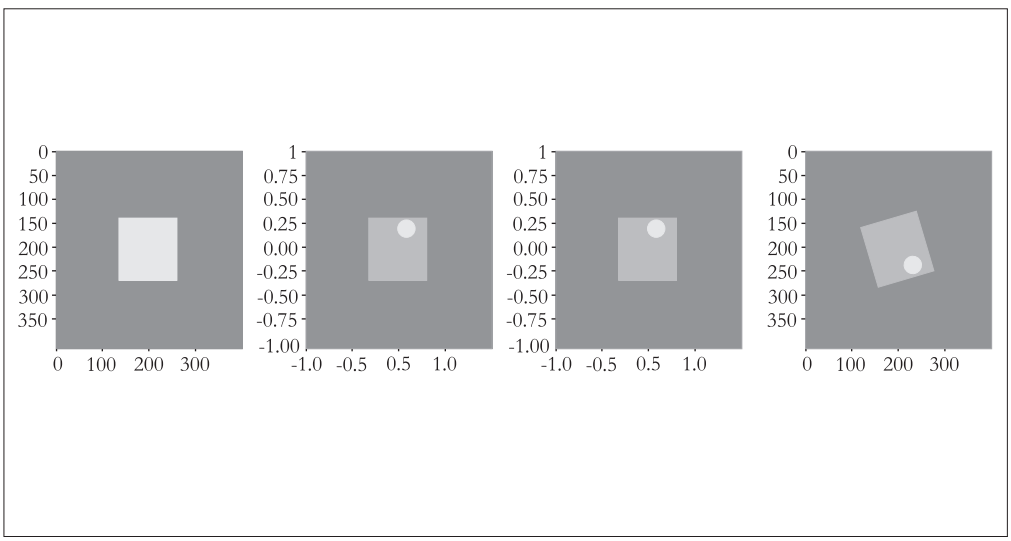


Figure 4. *Three phases calculating the natural logarithm of the ratio*

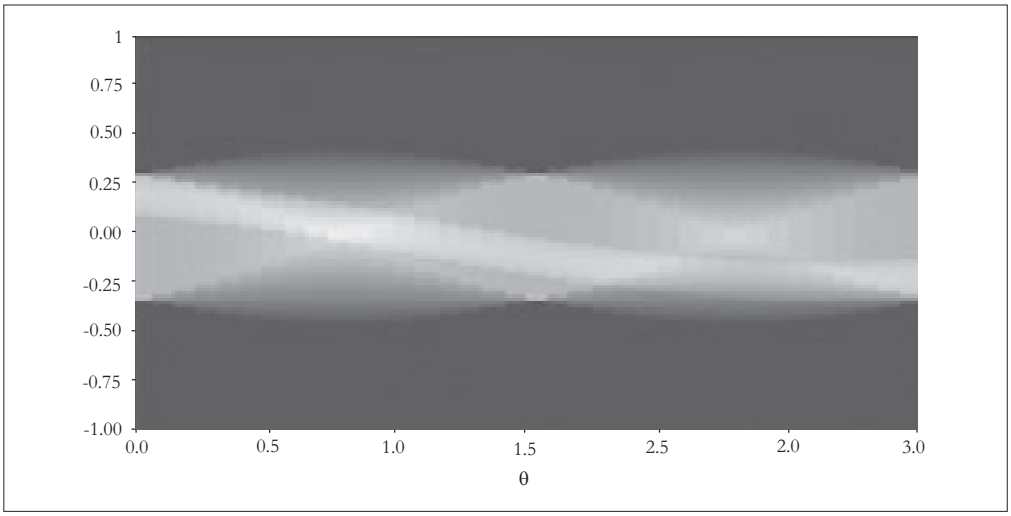


Figure 5. *Sinogram Function for Prolapse of Mitral Valve*

Projection Imaging: Beer's Law

The equation of Beer's Law, in optics, explains how both absorption and scattering make the light less intense passing through a homogenous material (such as glass or water).

$$I(x) = I_0 \exp(-\int(\mu(t)dt)$$

I_0 expresses the fluence of entering the slab and it is the initial $x-ray$ intensity. I(x) express the fluence of leaving the slab and it is the final $x-ray$ intensity. $\mu(t)$ express the linear attenuation coefficient for the type of material

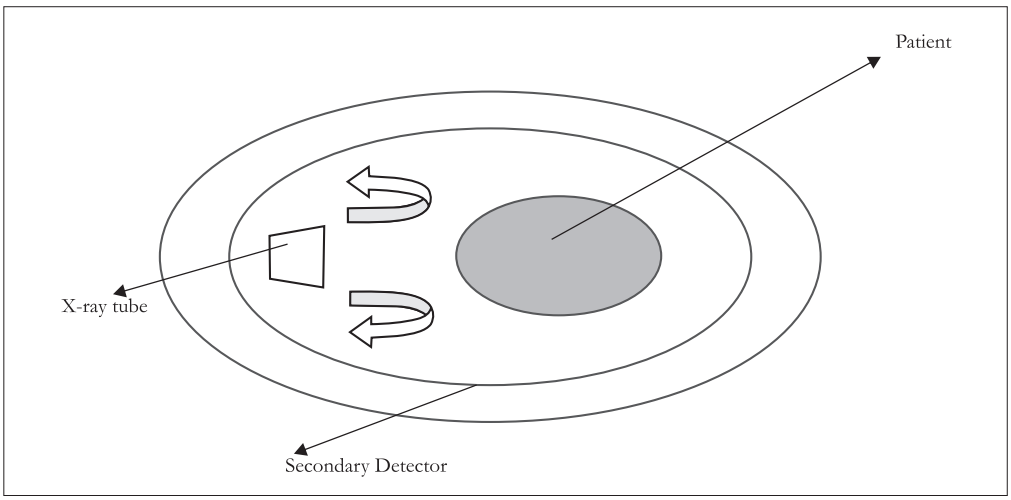


Figure 6. *Projection Imaging presented Beer's Law*

Mathematical Viewpoint of Beer's Law

The detectors measure the $x-ray$ intensity attenuation along multiple beam paths. Beer-s law makes possible that, $x-rays$ projections can be converted to line integrals. The linear attenuation coefficients of the image have been constructed by the function values in CT form. This conversion helps us use Radon Transform to calculate the integral[3].

$$I_d = \int_0^{E_{\max}} S_0(E)\exp\left[-\int_0^d \mu(S,E)ds\right]dE$$

$S_0(E)$ is the ray spectrum and $\mu(S,E)$ is the linear attenuation coefficient.

Projection Measurement

This process is most used in all cases where the radiologist does not define with precision which part of the organ is the defect. The radiologist, who manages the CT Scanner apparatuses, rotates the CT Scanner from different angles, to take as a result a clear image from three-dimensional coordinates in the space, to two-dimensional coordinates in the plane. The process that makes different views of the organ is names as cross-sectional views.

$$I_d = I_0 \exp[-\int_0^d \mu\left(S;\bar{E}\right)dS$$

$$\frac{I_d}{I_0} = \exp[-\int_0^d \mu\left(S;\bar{E}\right)dS$$

I_0 is the value of Ct's air calibration

$$\text{q}d = -\ln(\frac{I_d}{I_0}) = \int_0^d \mu\left(S;\bar{E}\right)dS$$

$-\ln\left(\frac{I_d}{I_0}\right)$ Is the measure quantity

Transmission Measurements

$I_d(x')$ is called the attenuation intensity and it is detected by the detector systems passing through patients.

$$I_d(x') = I_0(x')\exp\left(-\int_{AB}\mu[x,y]dy'\right)$$

[3] O. Taubmann, M. Berger, M. Bogel, Y. Xia, M.Balda, A. Maier, Medical Imaging Systems: An Introductory Guide (2018)

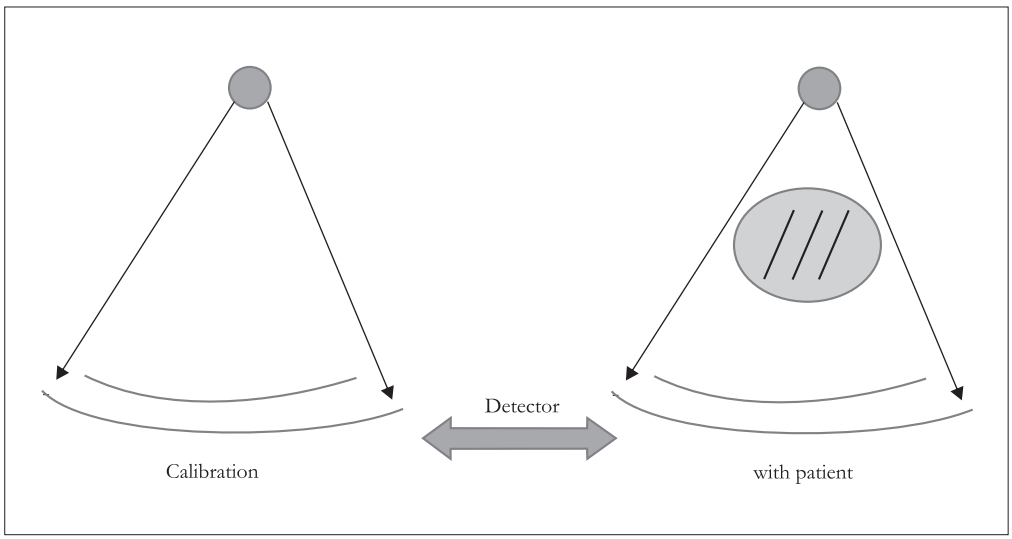


Figure 7. *Measurement of transmission between Calibration and patient*

$\int_{AB}^{\square} \mu(S)dS$ is the line integral

$$-\ln(\frac{I_d}{I_0}) = I_0(x')\exp\left(-\int_{AB}^{\square}\mu[x,y]dy'\right)$$

Parallel Projection

This mathematical concept is useful both in Computer Tomography and in Computer Graphics. Projection maps the view of a three-dimensional body onto the projecting display panel. When the projecting lines emerge parallelly from the *3D* body and incident parallelly the plane *2D*, it is called. The categories of Projection are "Parallel Projection (Orthogonal projection)" and "Oblique Projection (Oblique Projection; Cavalier Projection; Cabinet Projection)".

Orthogonal projection

When the projecting lines emerge parallelly from the *3D* body and incidents are perpendicular to the plane *2D*. The orthogonal projection is divided into two categories: "Multiview projection (Top-view projection; Side-view projection; Front-view projection)" and "Axiomatic projection (Isometric projection; Dimetric projection; Trimetric projection)".

Axiomatic projection

The three-dimensional body is rotating on one more of its axis, during the time that the lines come perpendicular to the two-dimensional plane.

Isometric projection

In the coordinative system there are $x'y'$ rotated coordinates with respect to $x-rays$ source. The $x-rays$ source is placed along the $y'\ axis$, while the detector is placed along the $x'\ axis$. The object has a density expresses with the function $f(x,y)$.

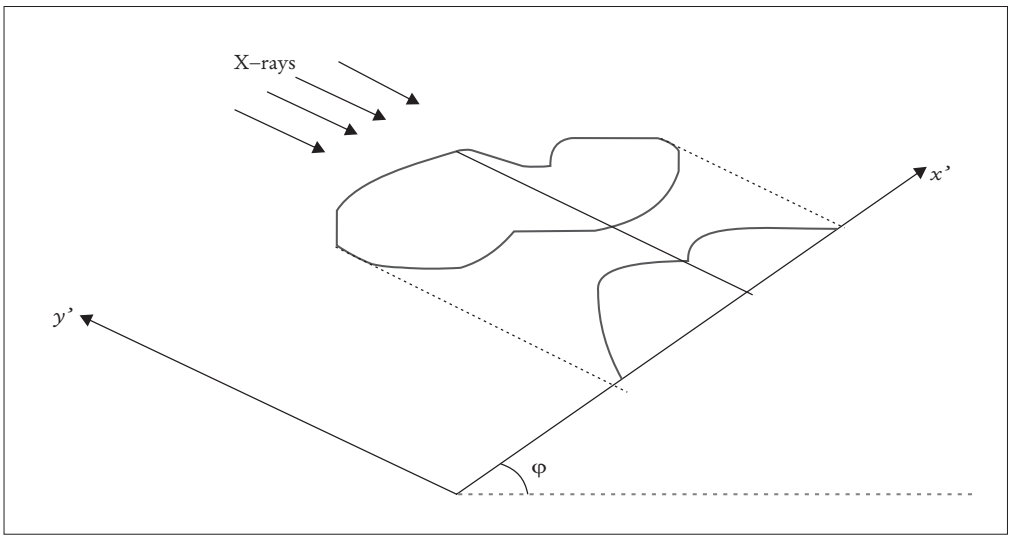


Figure 8. *Parallel Projection in Cartesian Coordinate Plane xoy*

Every $\measuredangle\theta$ displacement *R*. While $P_\theta(r)$ is the Radon Transform. The function of density $f(x,y)$ must be collected for each angle. Theta is the function of Radon Transform.

Double Integral applied in CT Scanner

CT Scanner is used to convert external measurements in two dimensions into a reconstruction of the internal structure in three dimensions. This equipment involves rotating a point source of $x-rays$ around the body to create an image.

To study the use of double integral in CT Scanner we need first to explain three main components: the object function, the angle theta and the $x-ray$ function, that are shown in the figure above.

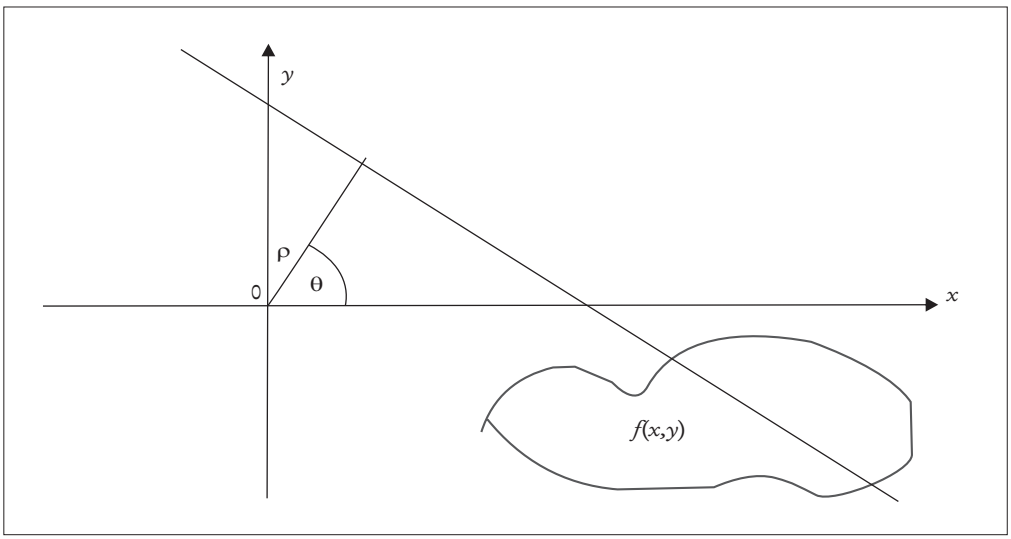


Figure 9. *The line with the equation* $\rho = x * \cos\cos(\theta) + y * sin(\theta)$

The object function

Let the transversal of the heart organ be an object function $f(x,y)$. The angle θ is the angle between $y-axis$ and $x-ray$.

$$L(\theta,t) = \{(x,y) \epsilon\ R\ x\ R : xcos\theta + ysin\theta = t\}$$

$$P_\theta(t) = \int_{L(\theta,t)}^{\square} f(x,y)dS$$

$X-ray$ function is the function $L(\theta,t)$, which characterizes the line $x-ray$.

Applying the code using Python

Scipy.interpolation is a sub-package used for objects which are being interpolated. This sub-package contains spline functions and classes, 1-D and multidimensional interpolation classes, Lagrange polynomial interpolation and Taylor polynomial interpolation. The multidimensional interpolation classes are classified in two groups: multivariate classes and univariate classes. We take hypothetical 3-D data. In the first one, the three variables plotted have a variance and a correlation, while in the second one, the three variables plotted have neither variance nor correlation. The source of code is above[4]: *skimage.data* is used for testing imaging and datasets

[4] https://docs.scipy.org/doc/scipy/reference/generated/scipy.interpolate.RectBivariateSpline.html

Circular Geometry in CT-Scanner

The trajectories of x-ray beam that coming from scanner and entering to the body are straight line and have the equation $ax + by = c$. First, we parametrize the equation of line $ax + by = c$, where a, b, c are constants. in R^2 space, to a set of oriented line with radial parameters $l_{t,\theta}$ in $R\ xS^1$.

The dependence between cartesian coordinative system and polar coordinative system – the special case of the linear line equation

- Plotting the polar coordinative system with the pole O and the polar axis Ox.
- Choosing at the same time the Cartesian coordinative system, in the way that the polar axis of the polar coordinative system coincides with x-axis of the cartesian coordinative system.
- Placing the pole of the polar coordinative system at the origin of the cartesian coordinative system.
- Each point of the cartesian coordinative system can be represented as an order pair (r, θ) in the polar coordinative system. Let be the point $M(r, \theta)$
- The formula that expresses the dependence between polar coordinative and cartesian coordinate are $\left\{\begin{matrix} x = r * cos\theta \\ y = r * sin\theta \end{matrix}\right\}$.
- Squaring each the variables of the equation side by side $\left\{\begin{matrix} x^2 = r^2 * \cos(\theta)^2 \\ y^2 = r^2 * \sin(\theta)^2 \end{matrix}\right\}$ and summing each of them side by side $x^2 + y^2 = r^2 * \cos\cos(\theta)^2 + r^2 * \sin\sin(\theta)^2 \leftrightarrow x^2 +.$ $y^2 = r^2 * \left(\cos\cos(\theta)^2 + \sin\sin(\theta)^2\right) \leftrightarrow x^2 + y^2 = 2r^2 \leftrightarrow x^2 + y^2 = r^2 \leftrightarrow r = \sqrt{x^2 + y^2}$
- Dividing side by side the variables

  $\left\{\begin{matrix} x = r * cos\theta \\ y = r * sin\theta \end{matrix}\right\} \leftrightarrow \frac{x}{y} = \frac{r * cos\theta}{r * sin\theta} \leftrightarrow \frac{x}{y} = \frac{cos\theta}{sin\theta} \leftrightarrow tg\theta = \frac{y}{x}$

  or $tg\theta = \frac{-a}{b} < 0.$

The dependence between cartesian coordinative system and polar coordinative system – the general case of the linear line equation

Let be the linear line with the equation $ax + by = c$, where *a, b, c,* are constants. The dependence between real numbers set and polar coordinative system, which are in a cartesian product, is represented by the diving as follows: $\frac{a}{\sqrt{a^2 + b^2}} + \frac{b}{\sqrt{a^2 + b^2}} = \frac{c}{\sqrt{a^2 + b^2}}$.

- The formula to find the angle is: $\theta = \cos^{-1}(\frac{a}{\sqrt{a^2 + b^2}})$. While the angles are

$cos\theta = \frac{a}{\sqrt{a^2+b^2}}$ and $sin\theta = \frac{a}{\sqrt{a^2+b^2}}$. The ratio $m_1 = tg\theta = \frac{sin\theta}{cos\theta} = \frac{b}{a} > 0$.

- The equation of the distance between the point $M(r,\theta)$ and the origin $O(0;0)$ of the polar coordinative system $r = \overrightarrow{MO}$, is $r = (x,y),(cos\theta, sin\theta) = (x,y), \omega_1$.

Let be the corresponding vector $ax + by = c$ of the line and the corresponding vector ω_2 of the segment $[MO]$. Each of the vectors has their own equations. In the proof of the cases above, we found that the slope of the linear line $ax + by = c$ is $tg\theta = \frac{-a}{b} < 0$ and $m_2 = tg\theta = \frac{sin\theta}{cos\theta} = \frac{b}{a} > 0$. As a result, the production of the slopes $m_1 * m_2 = \frac{-a}{b} * \frac{b}{a} = -1$, that means the lines are also perpendicular and the corresponding vectors of each lines are perpendicular $\omega_1 = (cos\theta, sin\theta)$ and $\omega_2 = (-sin\theta, cos\theta)$. Finally, the parametrization of the line with the equation $ax + by = c$ is $\{l_{t,\theta} = \langle \omega_1 cos\theta, \omega_1 sin\theta \rangle + \omega_2 * (-sin\theta, cos\theta) = \}$. The graph of the circle equation $(x-h)^2 + (y-k)^2 = r^2$ and the line equation of the line $ax + by = c$ using python:

Suppose that there is the line with the equation $ax + by = c$ and the circle with the equation $(x-h)^2 + (y-k)^2 = r^2$. The $x - ray$ is the line, while the gantry of the scanner is the circle with the origin (0; 0) and radius *r*. The code below presents the first moment, where the line starts to pass through the objective (heart organ of human body).

```
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt
import numpy as np
# Define the linear equation
m = -1 # Slope
b = 4 # Y-intercept
x_LinearLine = np.linspace(-4, 8, num=50)
y_LinearLine = m * x_LinearLine + b
#Define the circle equation
h = 0
k = 0
r = 2
theta_angle = np.linspace(0, 2 * np.pi, num=50)
```

```
x_Circle = h + r * np.cos(theta_angle)
y_Circle = k + r * np.sin(theta_angle)
plt.figure(figsize=(6, 8))
plt.plot(x_LinearLine, y_LinearLine, color='navy')
plt.plot(x_Circle, y_Circle, color='black')
plt.scatter(h, k, color='black', label='Center')
plt.xlabel('x')
plt.ylabel('y')
plt.title('The parametrization of lines ax+by=c to lines l(t,theta) in R squared')
plt.grid(True)
plt.legend()
plt.axis('equal') # Equal aspect ratio
plt.show()
```

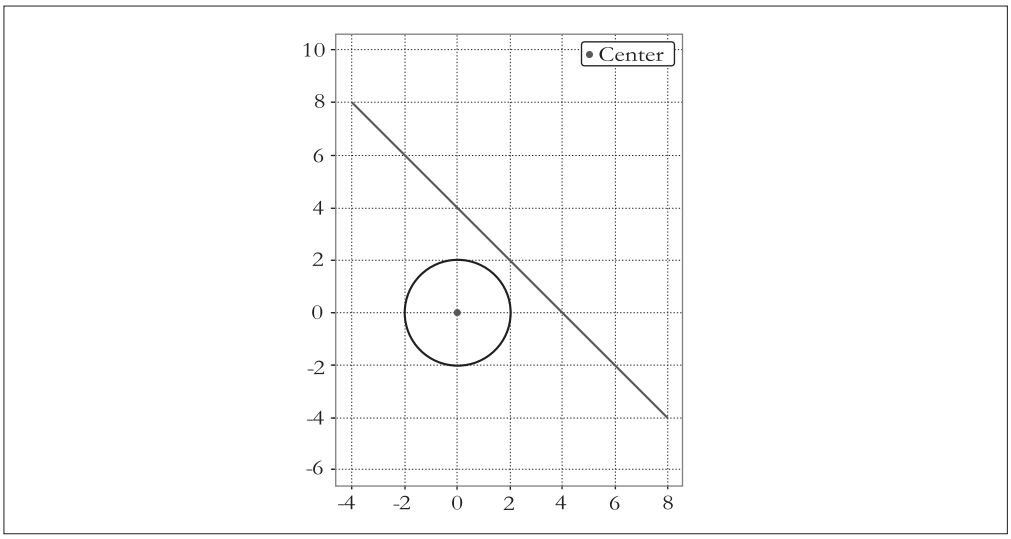


Figure 10. *The parametrization of lines* $ax + by = c$ *to lines* $l(t, \theta)$ *in R squared*

If we change the parameter *b* in the equation of the line, $x - ray$ starts to go through the objective.

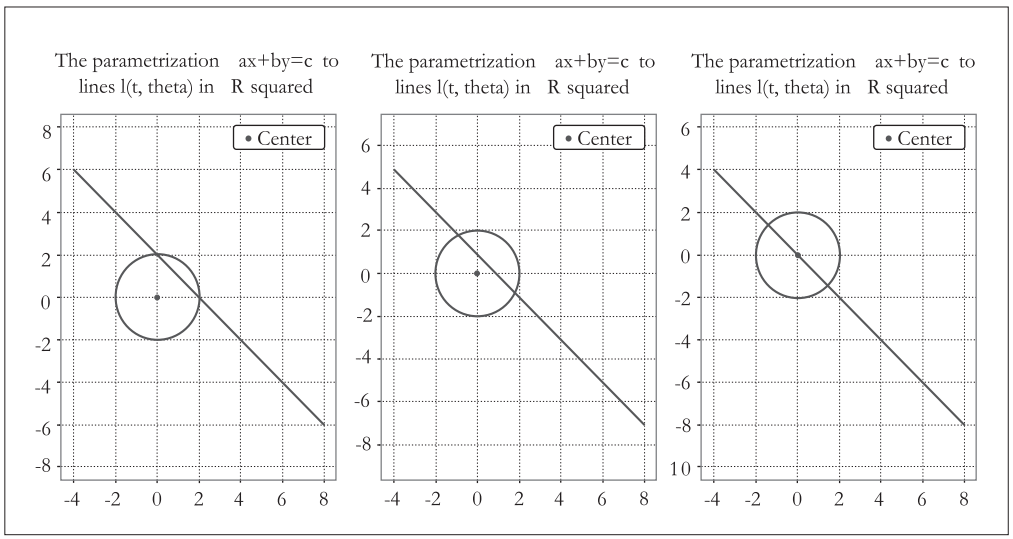


Figure 11. *For different values of the parameter* $-3 < b < 4$*, the line and the circle have two intersections*

Regular Back Projection

Let's be the angle θ and the value of the distance *r*.

$$\int_{BP}^{\square}(x,y) = \int_{0}^{\pi} p(x\cos\theta + y\sin\theta, \theta)d\theta \sim \sum_{i}^{\square} p(x\cos\theta_i + y\sin\theta_i, \theta_i)d\theta_i$$

Above there is the demonstration of the Regular Back Projection

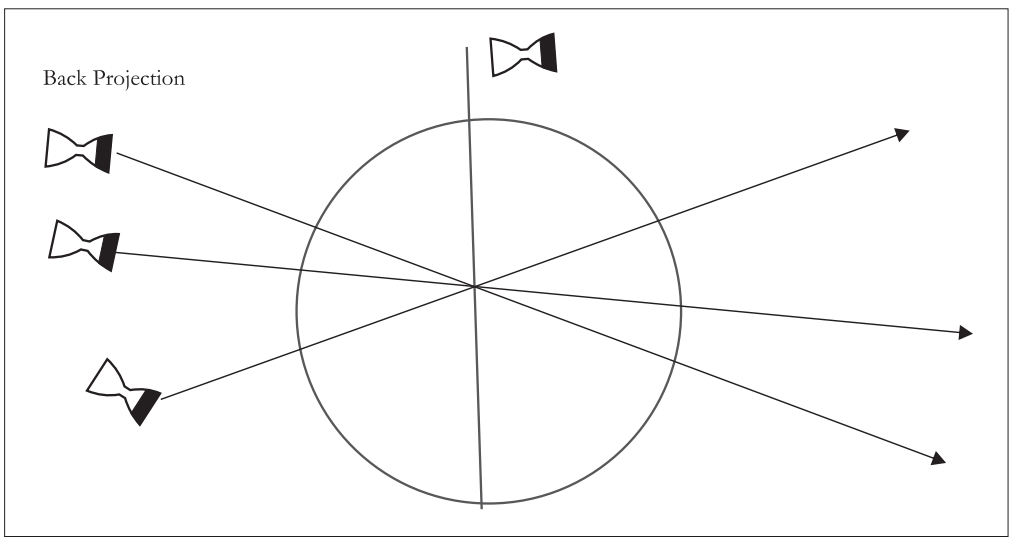


Figure 12. *Back Projection in a CT Scanner*

Filtered Back Projection (FBP)

It is an algorithm that converts the data to the image. Let be a fourth image matrix, each of them is made up by its own pixels. Let's sign some of the matrix's cells.

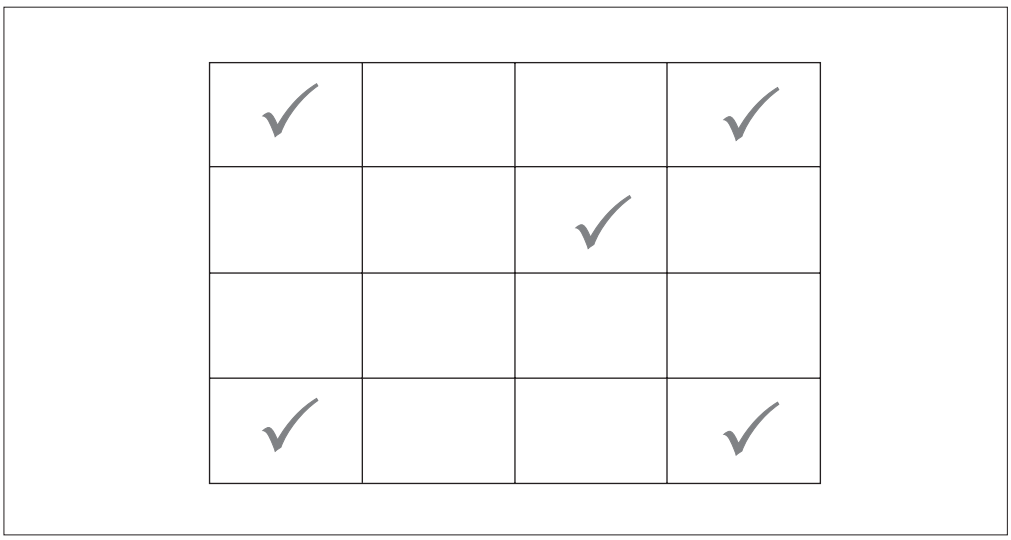


Figure 13. *The matrix presents the rectangle with dimensions*

Imagine there are five detectors before the matrix. If the x-rays are positioned in front of one column, the signals are removed, and all the cells become empty. Then the x-ray changes direction to the second column. All the signals are removed, and the cells become empty again. These are the formulas of FBP.

$$F\left(v_x, v_y\right) = \iint f\left(x, y\right) e^{j2\pi v_x x} e^{j2\pi v_y y} dxdy$$

$$P\left(v, \theta\right) = \int p(r, \theta) e^{j2\pi vr}$$

$$F\left(v\cos\theta, v\sin\theta\right) = \iint dxdy f\left(x, y\right) e^{2\pi jyv\cos\phi}$$

Unfiltered Back Projection

There is the function f in the space R^2 parametrized in the line $l_{t,\theta}$. The Unfiltered Back Projection retains the basic characteristics of $g\left(x, y\right)$ losing contrast and introducing images artifact is defined with the formula.

$$B(f\left(t, \theta\right)) = \frac{1}{2\pi} \int_0^{2\pi} Rf(t, \theta) d\theta$$

The combination of $\varkappa - ray$ source $\varkappa - ray$ with detector position affects the measurement, and both rotate at a high speed around the patient[5]. The tube houses a single $\varkappa - ray\ source$, while the detector unit is equipped with an array of $\varkappa - ray\ detectors$. The heated filament emits electrons by thermionic emission. The filament is made from tungsten material. The electrons are accelerated by high voltage. When the high-speed electrons hit the metal, $\varkappa - rays$ produces: the $\varkappa - ray.$ tube is the $\varkappa - ray\ source$ for transmission imaging.

$$\mu_e(\varkappa, y) = -\frac{1}{2\pi} * \lim_{\varepsilon\to 0}\lim_{\varepsilon\to 0}\int_{\varepsilon}^{\infty}\frac{1}{q}\int_{0}^{2\pi} m_1(xcos\theta + ysin\theta + q, \theta)\, d\theta\ dq$$

l is the distance of the line L from the origin. θ is the angle made with the x-axis by the perpendicular drawn from the origin to L. $m(l, \theta)$ is the integral of μ_e along the line L.

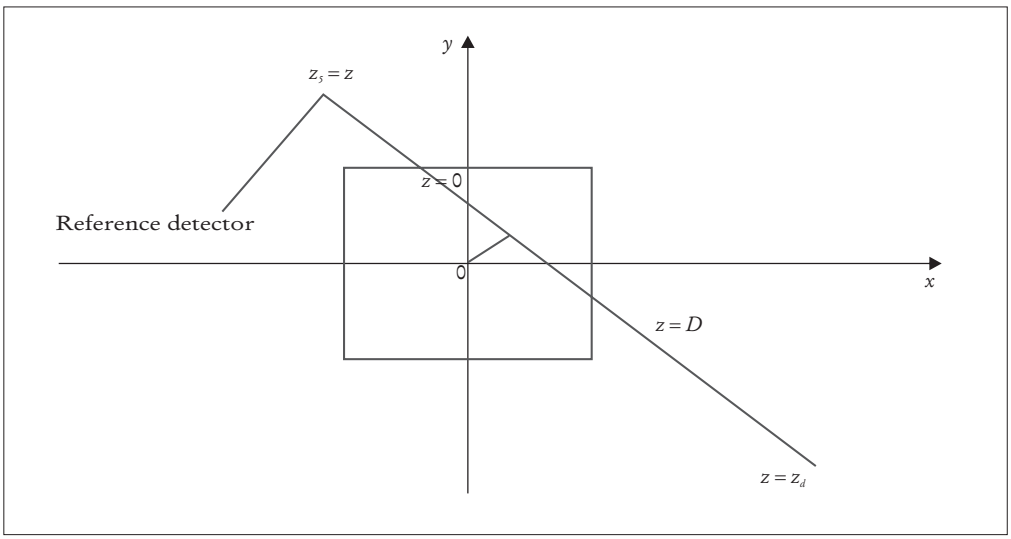


Figure 14. *Data Collection for CT-Scanner*

Radon Transform

It consists in the integral of a function over a straight line. It is usually associated with tomography, which is the creation of an image from the projection data associated with the cross essential scan of an object. Radon Transform data is called as "a sinogram", because the Radon Transform of Dirac Delta is a distribution supported by the graph of a sine wave. The Radon Transform of a few small objects appears graphically as several blurred sine waves with different amplitudes and phases. Let's function as a density. Radon Transform is the projection data obtained as the output of a tomography scan. Let be f some function in R^2, parametrized over the lines $l_{t,\theta}$. Radon Transform $Rf(t, \theta)$ describes the discrete -θ Radon transforms combined, taking the integral over all lines $l_{(t,\theta)}$ in $R \times S^1$, is defined as:

[5] Camazi.B. Imaging and detectors for medical physics (University of Oxford)

$$Rf(t,\theta)=\int_{lt,\theta}^{\square} fdS=\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} f(r\omega_1,s\omega_2)dS=\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} f\left(rcos\theta-sin\theta,tsin\theta+scos\theta\right)dS$$

The function f, which represents the attenuation-coefficient function along a typical line $l_{(t,\theta)}$, will be integrated along a different line, for each pair of values t and θ. So, the inputs are t and θ, while the output is the function f along the corresponding line[6]. We can present it with symbols like input f => output $\left\{(t,\theta)\rightarrow\int_{l(t,\theta)}^{\square} fdS\right\}$. We denote by Rf the corresponding function of t , for the input f. The formula above can be written as $Rf(t,\theta)=\int_{l_{(t,\theta)}}^{\square} fdS=\int_{s=-\infty}^{+\infty} f\left(tcos\theta-ssin\theta\right),\left(tsin\theta+scos\theta\right)dS$, where f is the function of Cartesian Coordinates x and y, while Rf are the functions of Polar Coordinates t and θ. If we treat the function t and θ as rectangular coordinates. There are different data taken by cross-essential plans of the scans. Let's plot the piecewise graphic of the functions

$$z(x,y)=\begin{Bmatrix} 1(x-1)^2+y^2\le 1 \\ 1(x+2)^2+y^2\le\frac{1}{4} \\ 0 \qquad\qquad everywhere \end{Bmatrix}$$

Radon Transform is a Linear Operator. There two functions and the constant . The Linear Operator is written as follows:

$$\hat{A}(f,g)=\hat{A}(f)+\hat{A}(g) \text{ and } \hat{A}c(f)=c\hat{A}(f)$$

$\hat{A}$ is the differentiation of the functions. So, $\hat{A}=\frac{d}{dx}$

$$\frac{d}{dx}(f,g)=\frac{d}{dx}(f)+\frac{d}{dx}(g) \text{ and } \frac{d}{dx}cf=c\frac{d}{dx}(f)$$

Discretized Radon Function have finite numbers of projection angles and finite widths of detectors (Δt).

$$p_i=\frac{1}{\Delta t}\int_{\frac{-\Delta t}{2}}^{\frac{\Delta t}{2}} Rf\left(\theta,t+t'\right)dt$$

[6] Feeman, T.G. (2015). The Radon Transform. In: The Mathematics of Medical Imaging. Springer Undergraduate Texts in Mathematics and Technology. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-22665-1_2

Flat Impulse

Let be I_u the generalized t_d impulse, the duration, U the flat impulse. The formula that relates three quantities is $U = \frac{I_u}{t_d}$.

$$\delta(t) = \lim_{t_d \to 0} \delta(t) \frac{1}{t_d} \left[H(t) - H(t - t_d) \right]$$

$$u(t) = I_u * \delta(t)$$

Consider a limit process with Flat Impulse in which process we progressively shorten the pulse duration, maintain constant the input magnitude.

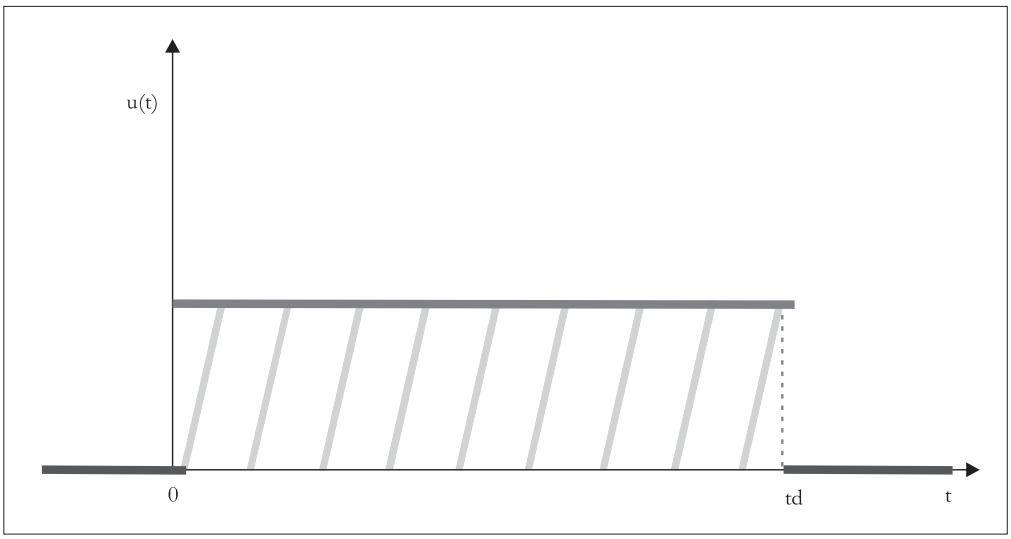


Figure 15. *Graph of flat impulse drawing with the application "Paint"*

Dirac Delta

It is a flat impulse in which we shorten the pulse duration, while maintaining constant the impulse magnitude, so the magnitude increases[7]. If we carry the process to the limit, we have the duration $t_d \to 0$, the area under the $I_u = const$ the ratio $\frac{I_u}{t_d} \to \infty$. The formula is written as below:

$$\lim_{t_d \to 0} \frac{I_u}{t_d} = \infty$$

[7] William L. Hallauer Jr. Dirac Delta Function. Introduction to Linear Time Invariant Dynamic Systems for students of engineering, 2024.

So, we create a function $u(t)$ called the "Ideal Impulse", which is equally with the production $I_u * \delta(t)$. The formula of the "Ideal Impulse" is $u(t) = I_u * \delta(t)$, where $\delta(t)$ is called "Dirac Delta" in the honor of the English mathematical physicist Paul Dirac.

$$\delta(t) = \frac{u(t)}{I_u} = \frac{\lim\limits_{t_d->0}\lim\limits_{t_d->0}\frac{I_u}{t_d}}{I_u} = \frac{\frac{\lim\limits_{t_d->0} I_u}{\lim\limits_{t_d->0} t_d}}{I_u} = \frac{\frac{I_u}{0}}{I_u}$$

$$\delta(t) = \lim_{t_d \to 0}\frac{1}{t_d}\left[H(t) - H(t - t_d)\right]$$

$$\delta(t) = \begin{Bmatrix} \infty & t = 0 \\ 0 & t \neq 0 \end{Bmatrix}$$

$$\int_{-\infty}^{\infty}\delta(t)dt = 1 \text{and } \delta_\tau(t) = \begin{Bmatrix} \frac{1}{2\tau} - \tau < \tau \\ 0 \ everywhere \end{Bmatrix}$$

$$\left\{\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} d_\tau(t)dt\right\} = \int_{-\tau}^{\tau}\frac{1}{2\tau}dt$$

$$\lim_{\tau \to 0}\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} d\tau(t)dt = 2\tau\frac{1}{2\tau} = 1$$

$$\int_{-\tau}^{\tau}\frac{\tau}{2\tau} + \frac{\tau}{2\tau} = \frac{2\tau}{2\tau} = 1$$

Suppose that we have infinity short impulse. Let be $(t - t_\delta)$, where the value of variable t_δ inside the circular brackets is zero $t_\delta = 0$. The realistic physical function $f(t)f(t)$ that is defined over the time interval $t_1 \to t_2$. As a result, the integral is

$$\int_{t=t}^{t=t_2} f(t) * \delta(t - t_\delta)dt = f(t_\delta)$$

If $t > t_\delta$, the integral is written as $\int_{r=t_1}^{r=t>t_\delta} f\tau\ \delta(\tau - t_\delta)d\tau = f(t_\delta) * H(t - t_\delta)$. Firstly, we import the libraries of Python languages. *Numpy* library is necessary to work with data. Cv2 library is used to convert an image from PNG format in NPY format *Skimage* Library is important to define the dimensions, measures and shapes of an image. We initialize the functions *pcolormesh* and *pcolorbar* to study the ratio between colors of an image. The code is shown below together with outputs. Writing the image in a matrix form with numbers inside it. The matrix starts with the number 61 and ends with the number 255.

```
[[[ 61 61 60 255]
 [ 74 73 72 255]
 [ 64 64 64 255]
 ...
 [ 61 61 60 255]
 [ 64 64 64 255]
 [ 61 61 60 255]]
 [[ 64 64 64 255]
 [255 255 255 255]
 [255 255 255 255]
 ...
 [255 255 255 255]
 [255 255 255 255]
 [ 64 64 64 255]]
 [[ 59 66 60 255]
 [255 255 255 255]
 [255 255 255 255]
 ...
 [255 255 255 255]
 [255 255 255 255]
 [ 61 61 60 255]]
 ...
 [[ 61 61 60 255]
 [255 255 255 255]
 [255 255 255 255]
 ...
 [255 255 255 255]
 [255 255 255 255]
 [ 61 61 60 255]]
 [[ 74 73 72 255]
 [255 255 255 255]
 [255 255 255 255]
 ...
[255 255 255 255]
 [255 255 255 255]
 [ 74 73 72 255]]
 [[ 61 61 60 255]
 [ 74 73 72 255]
 [ 61 61 60 255]
 ...
```

To be continued with the code, our aim is to create the graph of "Mitral Valve Prolapse (MVP)" using the image of the heart organ, which has MVP.

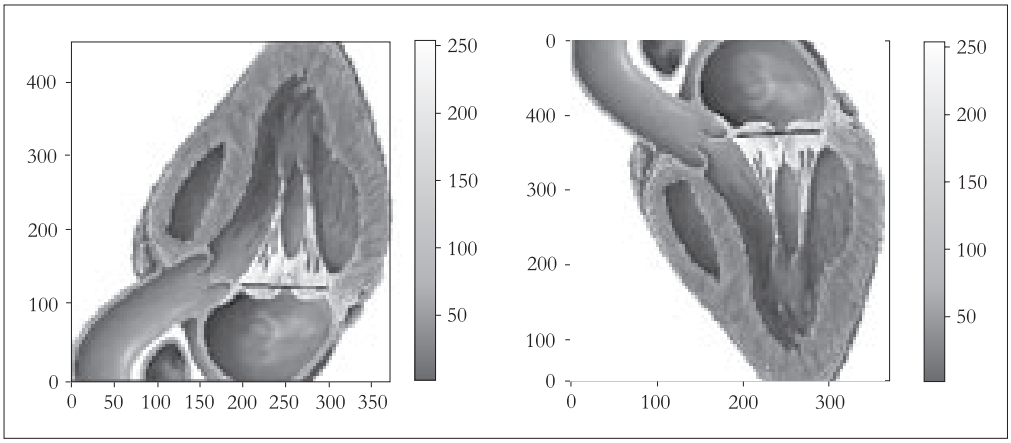


Figure 16. *Image of MVP implemented before applying mask function on it*

The Boolean values True or False taken as an output explain the role of mask function during a segmentation.

```
[[[False False False]
 [False False False]
 [False False False]
 ...
 [False False False]
 [False False False]
 [False False False]]

 [[False False False]
 [ True True True]
 [ True True True]
 ...
 [ True True True]
 [ True True True]
 [False False False]]
 [[False False False]
 [ True True True]
```

```
 [ True True True]
 ...
 [ True True True]
 [ True True True]
 [False False False]]
 [[False False False]
 [ True True True]
 [ True True True]
 ...
 [ True True True]
 [ True True True]
 [False False False]]
 [[False False False]
 [ True True True]
 [ True True True]
 ...
```

```
[ True True True]                    [False False False]
[ True True True]                    ...
[False False False]]                 [False False False]
[[False False False]                 [False False False]
[False False False]                  [False False False]]]
```

Code to show how clearly the resolution of the graph images are.

```
import numpy as np                   cv2.waitKey(0)
import cv2                           cv2.destroyAllWindows()
import os                            print(img.shape)
from skimage import measure          a = np.random.rand(600, 600)
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt      plt.pcolormesh(a)
from matplotlib.colors import LogNorm plt.pcolormesh(img[170])
img = cv2.imread("mitral_valve.png") plt.pcolorbar()
cv2.imshow('Image', img)
```

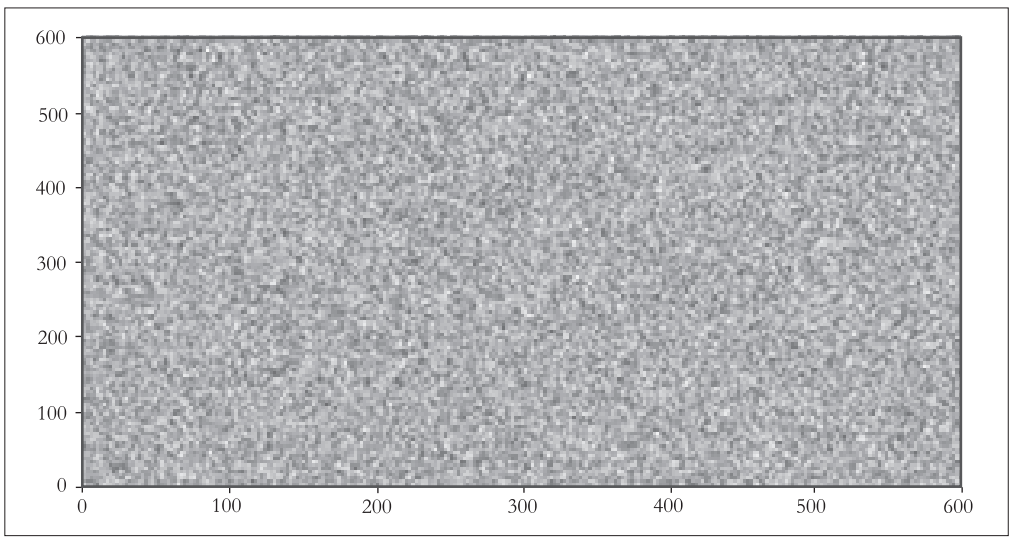


Figure 17. *The image is created by the code pcolormesh (np.random.rand)*

Vascular Contrast has the Hounsfield Unit which comes from 100 to 300 HU[8]. The output of the shape matrix is (455,357,3), where (357,3) determine the two-dimensional matrix in the plane.

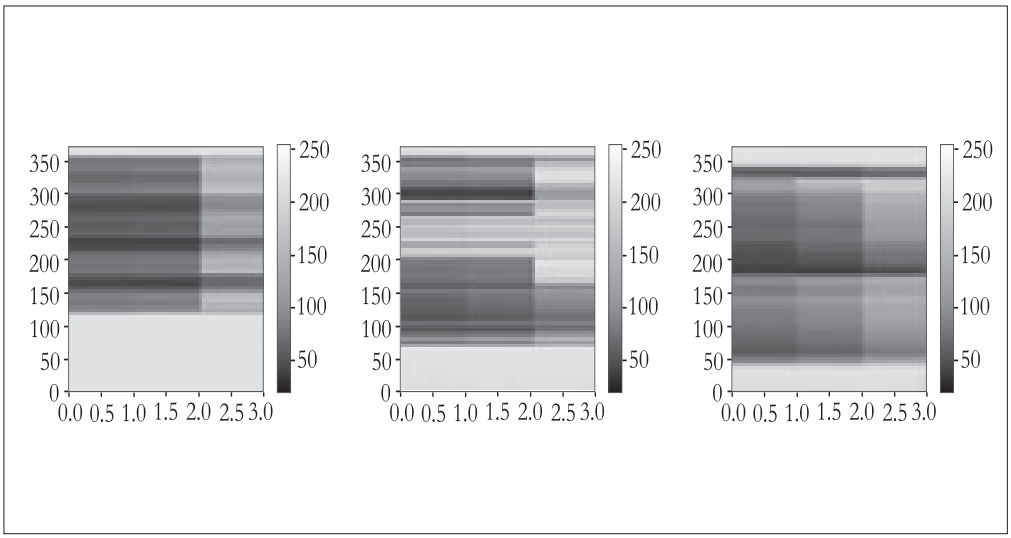


Figure 18. *Different segmentation between 100 to 300 HU*

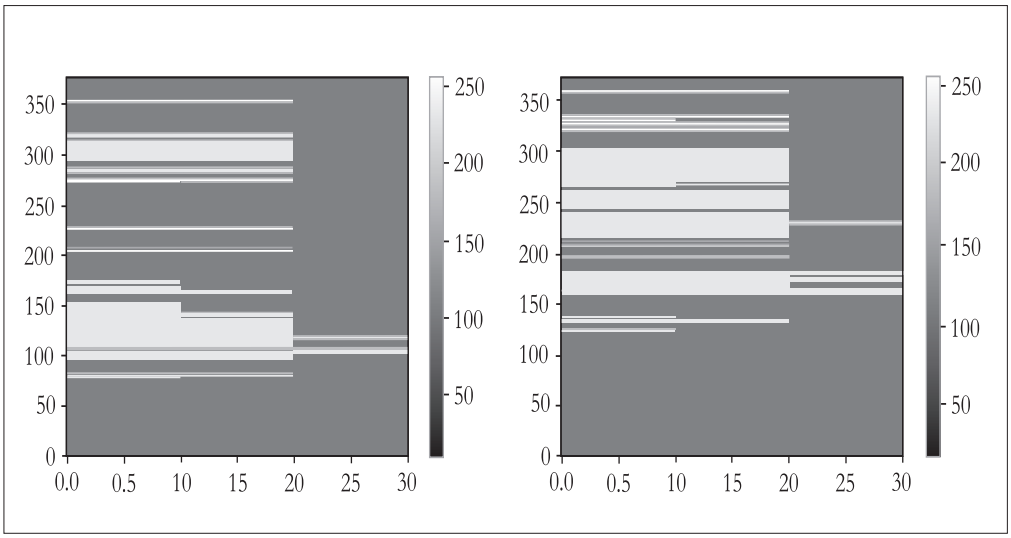


Figure 19. *Image output for mask < 100 and HU = 150 and Image output for mask < 100 and HU = 300*

[8] JM Smyth, DG Sutton, JG Houston, Evaluation of the quality of CT-like images obtained using a commercial flat panel detector system, 2006

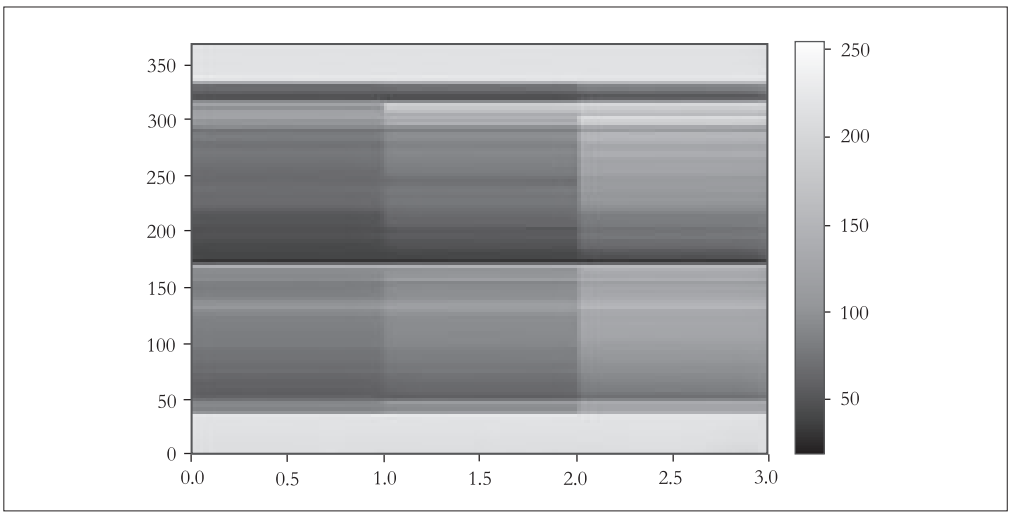


Figure 20. *Image in the scanner using the minimum range of HU*

Fourier Transform derivation

Before explaining the Fourier Transformation Derivation, it is important to make a short summarize of "Measure Space" and the Lebesgue's composition theorem. There is a measure space (X, A, λ), where $\lambda([a,b]) = b - a$ and the variable $\mu : B(R) \to [0; +\infty]$ is continuous if: $\forall A \in B(R), \lambda(A) = 0 \Rightarrow \mu(A) = 0$, is singular if $N \in B(R)$ with $\lambda(N) = 0$and $\mu(N^C) = 0$. There is a measure space (X, A, λ). A measurable function $f : X \to [-\infty; \infty]$is called integrable if $\int |f| d\mu < \infty$. The series of Fourier determine how circuits and systems respond to periodic input signals[9]. Suppose that function f is integrable and function f is piecewise smooth in $[-L, L]$and $\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} |f(x)| dx.$ The expression of a sound wave, or any signal varying over time, as the sum of its constituent sine waves, is known as the Fourier transform of that signal. The periodic function could be expressed as a sum of infinite sines and cosines. The Fourier Transform is an important image processing tool which is used to decompose an image into its sine and cosine components.

$$f(x) = \frac{a_0}{2} + \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} a_n \cos(nx) + \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} b_n \sin(nx)$$

$$FS[f(v)] = \frac{1}{2\pi}\left(\int_{-L}^{L} f(v)dv\right)d\omega = \frac{1}{\pi}\sum_{n=1}^{\infty}\left(\int_{-L}^{L} f(v)\cos\left(\frac{n\pi v}{L}\right)dv\right)\cos\left(\frac{n\pi x}{L}\right) +$$

$$\sum_{n=1}^{\infty}\left(\int_{-L}^{L} f(v)\sin\left(\frac{n\pi v}{L}\right)dv\right)\sin\left(\frac{n\pi v}{L}\right)$$

[9] Johnson.D. Electrical Engineering (2024). LibreText

Fractional Shortening (FS) is a measure used to estimate left ventricular systolic function. Let be a periodic signal $s_T(T)$ with the period T. Firstly we calculate the formula to find the spectrum

$$c_k(T) = \frac{1}{2} * \int_{-\frac{T}{2}}^{\frac{T}{2}} s_T(t) e^{-i\frac{2\pi kt}{T}} dt$$

At least, we calculate the formula

$$P(f) = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} p(t) e^{-i2\pi ft} dt = e^{-(i2\pi f\Delta)\frac{\sin(\pi f\Delta)}{\pi f}}$$

The function presented by graph in figure, is a periodic function which goes up and goes down at the same periodic time $T = 2\pi$. A normal heart is expressed $f(t+T) = f(t) = 4\cos 2t$. If we take the function in the segment $[-1;1]$, what does it happen?

The extremal point is the value $f(t) = 1$. The minimal point is the value $f(t) = -1$. On the other hand, we the cosine function with green color. $g(t) = 3 + 4\cos 2t$ express a prolapse heart. If we take the function in the segment $[-1;1]$, what does it happen? The extremum point is over the value of $g(t) = 1$. The minimal point is under the value $g(t) = -1$. Let summarize both functions together

$$f(t) + g(t) = 4\cos 2t + 3 + 4\cos 2t = \mathbf{8cos2t + 3}$$

If there is another periodic function, the sum of them will be:

$$f(t) + g(t) + z(t) = 4\cos 2t + (3 + 4\cos 2t) + (6 + 4\cos 2t) = \mathbf{9 + 12cos2t}$$

$$f(t) + g(t) + z(t) + h(t) = 4\cos 2t + (3 + 4\cos 2t) + (6 + 4\cos 2t) + (9 + 4\cos 2t) = \mathbf{16cos2t + 18}$$

These are the results. Let's find the formula of the

$$4\cos 2t; 8\cos 2t + 3; 12\cos 2t + 9; 16\cos 2t + 18$$

$$f(t) = (n+4) * \sum \mathbf{cos2t + 3m}$$

There are some types of Fourier Transform.

- Discrete Fourier Transform
- Inverse Transform off Fourier
- The relationship between both "Discrete Fourier Transform" and "Inverse Transform off Fourier"

Now, let's give the formula for each of them.

Discrete Fourier Transform

$$f(x,y)=\frac{1}{MN}\sum_{u=0}^{N-1}\sum_{u=0}^{N-1}F(u,v)*c^{i2\pi(\frac{x_u}{M}\frac{x_u}{N})}$$

Let's look at the mapping of Time Fourier Equation and Frequency Fourier Transform. The formula used to calculate the variable v expresses time per second, so $v=\frac{\omega}{2\pi}(Hz)$.

Time Formula of Fourier Transform is:

$$f(t)=\int_{-\infty}^{\infty}F(v)*e^{-2\pi ivt}dt$$

The graph for the time is

$$f(t)=\sum A(v)*\cos(2\pi vt)$$

$$f(t)=(\mathrm{n}+4)*\sum\cos 2t+3m$$

$$f(t)=\int_{-\infty}^{\infty}A(v)*\cos(2\pi vt)dv=\int_{-\infty}^{\infty}[\cos(2\pi t)+3m]dv$$

If the angle $\theta=\frac{\pi}{4}=>A=\tan\tan\left(\frac{\pi}{4}\right)=1=>$ the amplitude $A=1=>\tan\tan\left(\frac{\pi}{4}\right)=\frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}$

$$A=\sqrt{(\frac{\sqrt{2}}{2})^2+(\frac{\sqrt{2}}{2})^2}=\sqrt{1}=1$$

In this way, the results will be the same:

$$f(t)=-4*cos2t=-4*\cos\cos\left(2*\frac{\pi}{4}\right)=-4*\cos\cos(90°)=-4*1=-4$$

$$f_1(t)=1.5-4*cos2t=1.5-4*\cos\cos\left(2*\frac{\pi}{4}\right)=1.5-4*cos(90°)=1.5-4=-2.5$$

$$f_2(t)=3-8*cos2t=3-4*cos(90°)=3-4*1=-1$$

We have found the value of frequency

$$f(t)=\int_{-\infty}^{\infty}F(v)*e^{-2\pi ivt}dt=\int_{-\infty}^{\infty}\left[\frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}+\frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}i\right]*e^{-2\pi ivt}dt=\int_{-\infty}^{\infty}\left[\frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}+\frac{\sqrt{2}}{2}i\right]*e^{-2\pi ivt}dt=$$

$$x(k)=\frac{1}{T}*\int_0^T x(t)e^{-\frac{i2\pi k}{T}}dt=>\frac{x(t)}{e^{-2\pi ivt}}=x(t)*e^{-2\pi ivt}$$

Frequency

$$F(v) = \frac{\sqrt{2}}{2} + \frac{\sqrt{2}}{2} i$$

$$F(v) = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} f(t) * e^{-2\pi i v t} dt = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \left(\frac{\sqrt{2}}{2} + \frac{\sqrt{2}}{2} i \right) * e^{-2\pi i v t} dt$$

The Inverse Transform of Fourier

$$\hat{f}(\omega) = F^{-1}\left[F\left[f(x) \right](\omega) \right](x) = f(x)$$

$$f(x) = \frac{1}{2\pi} \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} F(w) e^{iwx} \, dw$$

- $f(x)$ is the original function.
- $F(w)$ is the Fourier transform of $f(x)$
- x is the variable of interest.
- w is the frequency variable

The relationship between Inverse Transform Fourier and Fourier Transform Derivation

$$\hat{f}(\omega, r) = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} f(x\ y) e^{-ir\omega x, y} dx dy$$

Fourier Slice Theorem

This theorem gives the relationship between Radon Transform and two-dimensional Fourier Transform. Let be the function f, such as $f : R^2 \to R$. This function expresses the relation between density to brightness. So, in this way this function forms an image. Let's begin with the First Dimensional (1D) of the function $f(x, y)$, which can be expressed by the first integral.

$$P_\theta(\omega) = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} p_\theta(t) e^{-i 2\pi \omega t} dt$$

The Radon Transform of the first dimensional Fourier Transform (1D) in the $L(\theta, t) = \left\{ (x, y) \int R \, x \, R : x \cos\theta + y \sin\theta = t \right\}$ is given as below.

$$p\theta(t) = Rf(\theta, t) = \int_{L(\theta, t)}^{\square} f(x, y) ds$$

After we have given the *1D* Fourier Transform, we can give also the Second Dimensional *2D* Fourier Transform, where the frequency components of Fourier Slice Theorem are η and ζ.

$$F(\zeta,\eta)=\int_{-\infty}^{\infty}\int_{-\infty}^{\infty}f(x,y)e^{-i2\pi(\eta x+\zeta y)}dxdy=\zeta f(x,y)e^{-i2\pi(\eta x+\zeta y)}dxdy=\zeta$$

Using Python, as below:

```
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt
#(x-1)*(x-1) + y*y <1
circle1= plt.Circle((0, 0), 1, color='grey')
#(x-1)*(x-1) + y*y = 1
circle2 = plt.Circle((1, 0), 1, color='pink')
#(x+2)*(x+2)+ y*y = 0.25
circle3 = plt.Circle((1, 0), 0.25, color='yellow')
#(x+2)*(x+2)+ y*y < 0.25
circle4 = plt.Circle((1, 0), 0.2, color='green')
fig, ax = plt.subplots() # note we must use plt.subplots, not plt.subplot
ax.add_patch(circle1)
ax.add_patch(circle2)
ax.add_patch(circle3)
ax.add_patch(circle4)
fig.savefig('plotcircles.png')
```

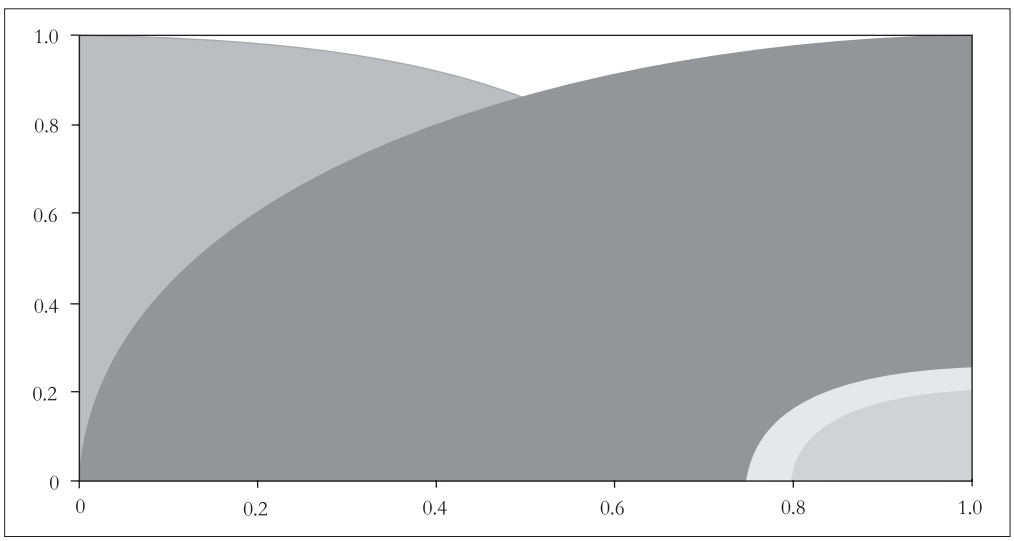


Figure 21. *The piecewise graph of the body function*

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, mathematical concepts like Radon Integral, Fourier Transforms, Back Transform play a great role in the construction and function of Computed Tomography. The results taken from the code with the results taken from the integral solving are same. Both express that in the left part of heart; after doing the CT Scanner, the patient suffers from Prolapse of Mitral Valve. This disease cannot be cured but can be prevented or non-activated. Let's plot the graph of Prolapse of Mitral Valve after creating the code, as below:

```
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt
import numpy as np
x=np.arange(-7.5,10.5,0.001)
y=np.cos(x)
fig = plt.figure()
ax = fig.add_subplot()
ax.plot(x,y,'g.')
y_pi = y/np.pi
unit = 0.25
y_tick = np.arange(-0.5, 0.5+unit, unit)
y_label = [r"$-\frac{\pi}{2}$", r"$-\frac{\pi}{4}$", r"$0$", r"$+\frac{\pi}{4}$", r"$+\frac{\pi}{2}$"]
ax.set_yticks(y_tick*np.pi)
ax.set_yticklabels(y_label, fontsize=15)
plt.show()
```

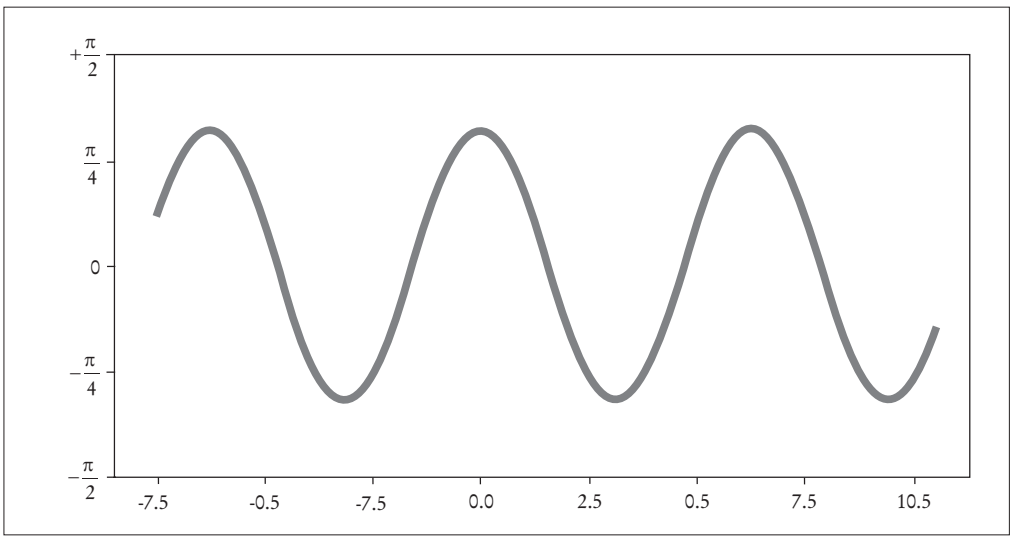


Figure 22. *The cosine curve, which presents the mitral valve of a normal heart organ*

In the next step we are plotting the curve of two cosine graphs. The green curve has the equation $y = -4 * \cos(2x)$ shows Normal Heart Valve. While the curve with red color has the equation $y = 1.5 - 4 * \cos(2x)$ and shows the Prolapse of Mitral Valve. The values are generated inside the half open and half end interval. The start value is zero, while the last value is generated with the function *math* * *pi*, multiplying with the coefficients and the step value is 0.001.

```
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt
import numpy as np
import math
# Creating the parameter t using numpy
t = np.arange(0, 2*math.pi*3.14, 0.001)
# Creating functions from the parameter t
x = 1.5-4*np.cos(2*t)
y = -4*np.cos(2*t)
# Plotting both the curves
plt.plot(t, x, color='red', label='1.5-4*cos(2t)')
plt.plot(t, y, color='green', label='-4*cos(2t)')
# Giving name to the axis
plt.xlabel("t")
```

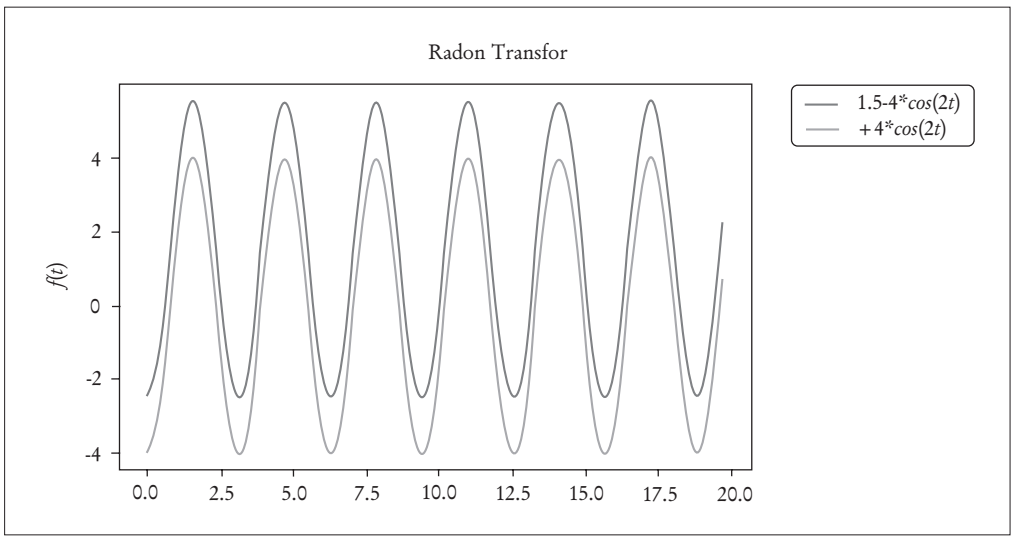


Figure 23. *Radon Transform Graphic Curve, made with Python 3.12*

```
plt.ylabel("f(t)")
plt.title("Radon Transform")
plt.legend(bbox_to_anchor=(1.35, 1),loc='upper right')
# Display the curve
plt.show()
```

Mathematical Calculations

Now, let's make some calculations.

$$f(t) = -4 * cos2t$$

$$f(2.5) = -4 * \cos\cos(2 * (2.5)) = -4 * \cos\cos(5) = -4 * 0.99619 = -3.98$$

$$f_1(t) = 1.5 - 4 * cos2t$$

$$f_1(2.5) = 1.5 - 4 * \cos 4 * \cos(2 * (2.5)) = 1.5 - 4 * \cos\cos(5) = 1.5 - 4 * 0.99619 = 1.5 - 3.98 = -2.48$$

$$f(t) = -4 * cos2t$$

$$f(7.5) = -4 * \cos\cos(2 * (7.5)) = -4 * \cos\cos(9.5) = -4 * 0.9862 = -3.94$$

$$f_1(t) = 1.5 - 4 * cos2t$$

$$f_1(7.5) = 1.5 - 4 * \cos 4 * \cos(2 * (7.5)) = 1.5 - 4 * \cos\cos(9.5) = 1.5 - 4 * 0.9862 = 1.5 - 3.94 = -2.44$$

The cosine wave could represent a repeating cardiac cycle. The coefficient -4 in both functions indicates an amplitude of 4, with a reflection across the horizontal axis. The *2t* inside the cosine means the function completes a full cycle twice as fast as the standard cosine function. At both *t = 2.5* and *t = 7.5*, the cosine values are close to 1, so the function is near its minimum. The small difference between –3.98 and –3.94 reflects the oscillatory nature of cosine—these points are not exactly at the trough but very close. The small variation between –3.98 and –3.94 shows stable rhythm—no erratic behavior. the depth of the dips could raise flags for arrhythmic *MVP (AMVP)* phenotypes—those at higher risk for ventricular arrhythmias. The offset in $f_1(t)$might simulate a baseline correction, often used to remove noise or account for electrode placement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Studying the construction of the scanner, in the future. Using this model to make new other same models for different diseases of heart or other organs. This model can be a research study for everybody who wants to learn more about the magnificent relation between mathematics, coding, and radiology. This article will help both Computer Science and Applied Mathematics, because there are different important concepts.

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BECOMING A MAN WITHOUT A FATHER: MASCULINITY CONSTRUCTION IN ADULT MEN RAISED IN PATERNAL ABSENCE

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ABSTRACT

The absence of a paternal figure during childhood can significantly influence the construction of masculinity by disrupting the availability of a stable role model. According to Lamb (2010)[1], father absence has been associated with an increased risk of emotional problems, difficulties in forming stable relationships, and confusion in the development of masculinity construct. These influencing factors are further shaped by cultural expectations surrounding men and the social roles they are expected to fulfill. This study employs a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews with 20 adult male participants, aged 25–45, all of whom were raised entirely without a father figure. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006)[2] thematic analysis framework, aiming to identify the ways in which participants have coped with the absence of a father and how this has shaped their masculinity construction. Participants were selected to include only those with no sustained contact with a father figure during development. Existing literature highlights various masculine trajectories: compensatory, imitative, or more consciously redefined identities constructed through personal experience, alternative male figures (e.g., grandfathers, uncles), or retrospective reflection on paternal absence. In line with Connell's framework of masculinity as a social construct (Connell&Messerschmidt, 2005)[3], the study emphasizes that masculinity is not a singular or fixed category but is shaped by personal experiences, societal expectations, and gender norms surrounding manhood. The findings aim to help mental health professionals better understand the emotional and identity-related needs of men who experienced father absence and develop more sensitive, contextually informed care approaches.

Keywords: *paternal absence, masculinity construction, gender identity formation*

[1] Lamb, M. E. (2010). *The role of the father in child development* (5th ed.). Wiley. (pp. 150–170)

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[3] Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society,* 19(6), 829–859

INTRODUCTION

The construction of masculinity is a complex developmental process influenced by individual experiences, social norms, and cultural expectations. During childhood and adolescence, parental figures, particularly fathers serve as central models for gendered behavior and identity formation (Lamb, *Father Role*, 195–96; Pleck, *Paternal Involvement*, 127–28)[4]. The absence of a paternal figure has been associated with increased vulnerability to emotional difficulties, challenges in forming stable interpersonal relationships, and ambiguity in the development of masculinity constrution (Amato, *The Consequences of Father Absence*, 1001–02); (Scholz et al., *Masculinity Construction*, 35–36)[5].

While extensive research has examined the consequences of father absence in childhood and adolescence, less attention has been given to how these early experiences shape masculinity in adulthood. Masculinity is not a singular or static construct; rather, it is socially mediated, context dependent, and expressed through diverse trajectories, including compensatory behaviors, imitative adoption of alternative male models, and consciously reconstructed identities (Connell, *Masculinities*, 67–69); (Connell & Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity*, 829–30)[6]. Adult men raised without fathers navigate these pathways in relation to both personal experiences and prevailing social expectations regarding male roles.

In the Albanian context, where traditional gender norms and patriarchal values remain influential, paternal absence may have distinct implications for the development of male identity. Fathers have historically served not only as caregivers but also as cultural and symbolic agents, transmitting societal expectations of manhood (Bakiu, *Absence of Fathers*, 77)[7]. The lack of a paternal figure can therefore create both emotional and symbolic voids, necessitating reliance on alternative male figures, such as uncles, grandfathers, or mentors, or internal reflective processes to construct a coherent sense of masculinity.

This study aims to explore the ways in which adult men raised entirely without paternal figures construct and negotiate their masculine identities. By employing a qualitative design and thematic analysis, the research seeks to illuminate the subjective experiences of these men and the strategies they employ to reconcile personal histories of father absence with broader

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Pleck, Joseph H. "Paternal Involvement: Levels, Sources, and Consequences." *Marriage & Family Review* 21, no. 2–3 (1995): 127–28

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Scholz, Marc, et al. "Masculinity Construction in Fatherless Contexts: Compensatory, Imitative, and Reflective Trajectories." *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 25, no. 1 (2024): 35–36

[6] Connell, R. W. Masculinities. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." Gender & Society 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–30.

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societal expectations of masculinity. Understanding these processes can provide valuable insights for mental health professionals and scholars, informing interventions that are sensitive to the unique identity-related and emotional needs of men who grew up without fathers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is grounded in the field of masculinity studies, with particular reference to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005)[8], who conceptualize masculinity as a socially constructed, multiple, and negotiable phenomenon. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity that is structured by social and cultural norms. At the same time, alternative forms of masculinity may develop as strategies to cope with the absence of paternal models. This theoretical framework allows for the analysis of the relationship between the subjective experience of father absence and societal roles and expectations for men, conceptualizing the masculinity construct as a dynamic process shaped by adaptation, resistance, and the redefinition of meaning in social and personal contexts.

Father Absence and Developmental Outcomes

Research consistently highlights the central role of fathers in the psychosocial development of children. Father absence has been linked to increased risks of emotional difficulties, impaired social relationships, and challenges in identity formation (Lamb et al., "Father Absence," 195–96)[9]. Fathers often provide not only emotional support but also a model for gendered behavior, contributing to the internalization of masculine roles and expectations (Pleck, "Paternal Involvement," 127–28)[10].

Qualitative studies indicate that individuals raised without fathers may develop alternative strategies to construct masculinity (Amato, "The Consequences of Father Absence," 1001–02)[11]. Scholz et al. (2024) found that adult men without paternal figures often rely on compensatory behaviors, imitation of other male models (such as uncles or grandfathers), or reflective processes that consciously reconstruct masculinity construct (Scholz et al., "Masculinity Construction," 35-36)[12]. These strategies illustrate the diverse trajectories that masculinity can take in response to early paternal absence.

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[8] R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–30.

[9] Michael E. Lamb et al., "Father Absence and Child Development: Psychosocial Implications," *Journal of Family Psychology* 24, no. 3 (2010): 195–96

[10] Joseph H. Pleck, "Paternal Involvement: Levels, Sources, and Consequences," *Marriage & Family Review* 21, no. 2–3 (1995): 127–28

[11] Paul R. Amato, "The Consequences of Father Absence for Child Development," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67, no. 4 (2005): 1001–02

[12] Marc Scholz et al., "Masculinity Construction in Fatherless Contexts: Compensatory, Imitative, and Reflective Trajectories," *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 25, no. 1 (2024): 35–36.

Masculinity as a Social Construct

Masculinity is not a monolithic or biologically fixed category; it is socially constructed and context-dependent (Connell, *Masculinities*). Connell (1995) introduces the concept of *hegemonic masculinity*, describing the dominant form of manhood that legitimizes certain behaviors and privileges within society (Connell & Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity," 829–30)[13]. Alternative forms of masculinity emerge as adaptive responses to personal and contextual constraints, including the absence of paternal figures.

This perspective underscores that men's experiences of father absence interact with societal norms and cultural expectations, shaping the ways in which the masculinity construct is negotiated. Men may embrace, modify, or resist hegemonic standards, producing individualized masculinity constructs that reconcile personal history with social demands.

Masculinity Trajectories in the Absence of Fathers

The literature identifies multiple trajectories for masculinity development in fatherless contexts. Compensatory trajectories involve adopting behaviors associated with dominant masculinity to counter perceived deficits (Scholz et al., "Masculinity Construction," 35–36). Imitative trajectories rely on alternative male role models for guidance, including relatives, teachers, or mentors. Reflective trajectories entail a conscious and introspective construction of masculinity informed by personal experiences and critical reflection on paternal absence.

These pathways are influenced by both personal disposition and the social environment. Cultural norms, peer expectations, and societal definitions of manhood can either limit or support the ways men develop their masculinity, showing how individual choices interact with social structures.

Cultural Context and Gender Norms

In Albania, traditional patriarchal values continue to shape expectations of male behavior and masculinity. Fathers historically function as both caregivers and symbolic transmitters of cultural norms regarding masculinity (Bakiu, Absence of Fathers, 77)[14]. Paternal absence, therefore, may not only create emotional voids but also symbolic gaps in cultural transmission. Men raised without fathers must often negotiate these absences by seeking guidance from other male figures or by constructing internally coherent masculine identities that align with or challenge societal expectations. Understanding masculinity within this cultural context is crucial, as it situates individual experiences of father absence within

[13] R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–30.

[14] Bakiu M.F. (2021). Absence of Fathers in Childrens' Lives of Divorced Parents: Impact and Implication. *European Scientific Journal, ESJ,* 17 (32), 77

broader social and normative frameworks, illuminating how identity is co-constructed through personal history and cultural discourse.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to examine how the absence of a paternal figure shapes the construction of masculinity among adult men within the Albanian cultural context. It further seeks to identify the impact of social expectations, gender roles, and alternative male figures on the ways in which these men have developed their masculinity construct in the absence of a father.

Research Objectives

- To analyze how the absence of a paternal figure shapes the construction of the masculinity construct.
- To identify substitute figures and relationships that serve compensatory functions in the absence of a paternal figure.
- To examine the influence of societal roles and expectations for men on the shaping of the masculinity construct in the context of paternal absence.

Research Questions

- How does the absence of a paternal figure during childhood influence the manifestation and practice of masculinity in men aged 25–45?
- Who are the alternative figures and compensatory resources that have influenced the construction of masculinity, and how are these reflected in their current behaviors and perceptions?
- In what ways do societal roles and expectations for men affect the shaping of the masculinity construct in adult men within the context of paternal absence?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative exploratory design to examine the subjective experiences of adult men who were raised without paternal figures and how such absence has shaped their construction of masculinity. Qualitative methods allow for a nuanced exploration of personal narratives, emphasizing the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 45–46)[15]. Due to the sensitive and complex nature of

[15] John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches,* 4th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 45–46

father absence, semi-structured interviews were chosen, offering participants the flexibility to express their personal histories while ensuring consistency across interviews (Creswell & Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 88–90).[16]

Participants

The sample consisted of 20 adult men aged 25–45, all raised without a paternal figure during childhood. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to meet inclusion criteria and represent diverse socio-demographic backgrounds.

Selection criteria included:

- Complete absence of a father figure due to separation, migration, death, or prolonged non-involvement.
- Willingness to participate and capacity to reflect on personal experiences.
- Variation in socio-demographic characteristics, including urban/rural residence, socio-economic status, and educational background.

To include men with varied life experiences, participants were drawn from multiple Albanian regions and diverse educational and socio-economic contexts. This approach prioritizes depth and variation over statistical generalizability (Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 264–66)[17].

Instruments and Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes each. The interview design was informed by existing literature on father absence and masculinity (Connell, *Masculinities*, 67–70; Scholz et al., "Masculinity Construction," 35–36; Pleck, "Paternal Involvement," 127–28) and focused on three thematic areas:

Paternal absence and masculinity construction: Participants perceptions of manhood and the ways they have developed masculinity in paternal absence.

Alternative Male Figures: The role of uncles, grandfathers, mentors, peers, or public figures in providing guidance or modeling masculinity.

Societal Expectations and Gender Roles: The influence of social norms, cultural expectations, and peer pressures on masculinity construction.

Personal Reflections on Future Masculinity Development

[16] John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches,* 4th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 88-90

[17] Michael Q. Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods,* 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2015), 264–66

Interviews were conducted individually in private settings to ensure confidentiality and emotional safety. Participants provided informed consent, and ethical procedures were strictly followed (APA, *Ethical Principles*, 10–12)[18].

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (Braun & Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis," 77–101)[19].

- Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts.
- Initial coding to identify significant text segments.
- Searching for themes by grouping codes based on similarity.
- Reviewing themes to ensure coherence and alignment with the data.
- Defining and naming themes to capture their essential meaning.
- Producing the final report, integrating illustrative quotes with theoretical interpretation.

This approach facilitates systematic identification of patterns and insights regarding the subjective experiences of men negotiating masculinity in the absence of a father.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical standards in research involving human participants (APA, *Ethical Principles*, 15–16)[20]. Participants were informed of the study's objectives, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Consent was obtained directly from all adult participants, and data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes.

RESULTS

This section presents the main findings from the thematic analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 male participants, aged 25–45, who were raised in paternal absence. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (2006), identifying the primary themes and sub-themes related to the impact of father absence on the construction of masculinity.

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[18] American Psychological Association, *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct,* 2017, 10–12

[19] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101

[20] American Psychological Association, *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct,* 2017, 15-16.

The thematic analysis revealed four overarching themes that shows how paternal absence has shaped the construction of masculinity: (1) Paternal absence and masculinity construction, (2) Perceptions of manhood and masculine roles, (3) Alternative male figures and compensatory resources, and (4) Personal reflections on the construction of future masculinity. Each theme encompasses sub-themes that reveal the strategies, perceptions, and negotiations participants employed to manage emotional gaps and integrate societal expectations.

Thematic Coding and Identification of Key Themes

Key Themes	Sub-theme	Examples of participants quotes
Theme 1: Paternal absence and masculinity construction	- Emotional void - Feelings of insecurity and early responsibility - Effects on social and family relationships	"The absence of my father often made me feel fear and insecurity; I had to grow up faster than others."
Theme 2: Perceptions of Manhood and Masculine Roles	- Traditional qualities of manhood - Societal pressure to demonstrate strength - Negotiation between strength and emotions	"There are times when I feel pressure to show strength simply because I am a man, even when I do not feel capable."
Theme 3: Alternative Male Figures and Compensatory Resources	- Alternative role models - Adoption of admirable behaviors - Rejection of negative models - Female figures as compensatory resources	"My grandfather often explained to me how to make difficult decisions; he was the role model I was missing in my father."
Theme 4: Personal Reflections on the Construction of Future Masculinity	- Reflection on past experiences - Strategies for future relationships and parenting - Transformation of absence into personal growth	"I want to be a father who is present, who listens, and who is there."

THEME 1: PATERNAL ABSENCE AND MASCULINITY CONSTRUCTION

Sub-theme 1.1: Emotional Void

Participants frequently described paternal absence as an emotional void characterized by diffuse, sensory, and fragmented memories rather than coherent recollections. Their descriptions suggest that paternal absence was internalized primarily at an affective level, shaping early experiences of security and relational grounding.

> "I remember him as a warm figure, but gone too soon…" (P3, age 27)
> "I was very young when he left. I only have blurry memories… I remember his smell, his voice." (P16, age 38)
> "At the beginning I denied it… it felt like he was at work and would come back." (P9, age 31)

In nearly all interviews, paternal absence was not experienced as a total disappearance, but as the loss of a physical presence that had once contributed to a sense of orientation. This emotional void played a central role in shaping early understandings of security, support, and relational stability, all of which later influenced participants emerging models of masculinity.

Sub-theme 1.2: Feelings of Insecurity and Early Responsibility

Another common pattern was the combination of insecurity with early responsibility. Participants often felt pressured to take on roles associated with adult masculinity, such as protection, strength, and stability, before they were developmentally ready for them.

> "I grew up with the feeling that I had to become a man without having a man nearby." (P1, age 25)
> "I felt like I had to grow up faster, to be stronger for my mother." (P7, age 29)
> "I took responsibility to protect the family at a time when it was most vulnerable." (P12, age 34)

This dynamic shows how paternal absence can accelerate the adoption of adult roles and identity related tasks. Without a paternal model, boys may internalize cultural expectations of masculinity earlier, relying on responsibility or self-reliance as ways to compensate for the perceived gap.

Sub-theme 1.3: Effects on Social and Family Relationships

Participants also described long-term relational effects of paternal absence. They emphasized a heightened need for stability, trust, and consistent presence in their relationships with others, values shaped directly by their early experience of discontinuity.

> "I've always wanted not to be absent for my people, the way it happened with me." (P4, age 28)
> "His absence showed me how heavy a father's presence can be in a boy's life." (P10, age 32)

For many participants, the experience became a reference point that motivated them to build more stable and engaged relationships. This often took the form of conscious efforts to avoid repeating earlier patterns and to develop a model of masculinity based on presence and support.

THEME 2: PERCEPTIONS OF MANHOOD AND MASCULINE ROLES

Sub-theme 2.1: Traditional Qualities of Manhood

Across participants, manhood is described mainly through responsibility, moral integrity, and emotional stability. These qualities come appear as central indicators of what it means to be a man:

> "Being a man isn't about having a beard; it's about keeping your word and protecting your family." (P2, age 26)
> "A man is someone who takes responsibility for his family who faces things calmly."(P8, age 30)
> "Manhood is about responsibility, respect, and composure, not domination." (P14, age 36)

These expressions suggest a gradual movement away from models of masculinity based on authority or physical strength, toward a view grounded in ethical behavior and relational responsibility. In this context, masculinity is understood less as a display of superiority and more as the ability to maintain commitments, regulate one's behavior, and support the well-being of others.

Sub-theme 2.2: Societal Pressure to Demonstrate Strength

Despite this reorientation toward integrity, participants describe a persistent cultural pressure to appear strong, often at the cost of expressing emotions. The following reflections illustrate this tension:

> "You have to look strong, even when inside you're broken." (P5, age 29)
> "Yes, I often feel I need to appear strong even when I'm not." (P11, age 33)
> "When they tell you 'act like a man,' it's their way of imposing strength on you." (P18, age 39)

The expectation to appear strong functions as a social demand, where deviation from expected behavior may lead to judgment or loss of status. Participants identified this as a significant psychological strain, reflecting a gap between what they feel and what they believe they must show publicly.

This creates a persistent conflict: expressing vulnerability may undermine their perceived masculinity, while suppressing it increases emotional distance and isolation. As a result, strength becomes less a genuine personal quality and more a required social performance.

Sub-theme 2.3: Negotiation Between Strength and Emotions

Participants consistently describe efforts to balance cultural expectations of strength with their need for emotional expression. Their statements point to this ongoing negotiation:

"There is a time to be strong, but there is also a time to be human." (P6, age 30)
"I can allow myself to be sensitive, but only with people I feel safe with." (P13, age 35)
"Men can express themselves more freely now, but there is still judgment." (P20, age 40)

This subtheme reflects a central psychological task in the study: the attempt to build a form of masculinity that includes both strength and emotional openness. Participants express interest in a model where vulnerability does not contradict masculinity but contributes to relational maturity.

However, the fact that most of the participants express emotions only in safe or trusted settings suggests that cultural pressures remain influential. The emerging model of masculinity is therefore still in development, partly adopted, partly resisted, and continuously adjusted in relation to social expectations.

THEME 3: ALTERNATIVE MALE FIGURES AND COMPENSATORY RESOURCES

Sub-theme 3.1: Alternative Role Models

In paternal absence, participants identified several substitute male figures, including grandfathers, uncles, cousins, teachers, and sports coaches, who influenced their understanding of manhood:

"An uncle and a sports coach… they weren't perfect, but they were present." (P9, age 31)
"I admired my grandfather, who balanced everything with finesse." (P1, age 25)
"My cousin and a teacher helped me find the balance between strength and reason." (P12, age 34)

These responses show's that masculine identity can develop through multiple relational experiences. Masculinity was not constructed around a single paternal model but through a combination of influences, each offering moral, practical, or emotional lessons. Participants noted that these figures provided guidance while also showing limitations, helping them learn what to adopt and what to avoid. Masculinity, therefore, emerges as a negotiated and cumulative process shaped by exposure to different role models.

Sub-theme 3.2: Adoption of Admirable Behaviors

Participants described selectively adopting positive traits from these alternative figures, particularly qualities related to emotional control, steadiness, and moral orientation:

"They helped me not lose control." (P3, age 27)
"They gave me a sense of direction, so I wouldn't feel completely lost." (P16, age 38)
"I see them as a kind of instruction manual." (P7, age 29)

These reflections suggest that men raised without a father often develop an internal guide composed of the best qualities they observed. This internalization helps them establish personal principles, behavioral boundaries, and a sense of direction, contributing to a stable sense of masculinity.

Sub-theme 3.3: Rejection of Negative Models

Participants also emphasized distancing themselves from behaviors they considered harmful:

> "Some were too harsh. I don't want to be like that." (P5, age 29)
> "From my uncle I learned how a man should not be." (P11, age 33)
> "I want to know how to express love without feeling weak." (P18, age 39)

Participants selectively accepted traits aligned with their values and rejected those that conflicted with their moral or emotional standards. Such differentiation supports the development of a self-defined model of masculinity, combining strength with the ability to express emotions.

Sub-theme 3.4: Female Figures as Compensatory Resources

Almost across all interviews, mothers emerge as the primary compensatory figures, assuming both caregiving and moral leadership roles within the family:

> "My mother has influenced me more than anyone." (P4, age 28)
> "My mother compensated for the paternal role for all three sons." (P10, age 32)
> "My mom taught me that manhood is about being good and honest." (P14, age 36)

Other female figures such as teachers, partners, sisters, also contributed to emotional learning and relational sensitivity. These women did not replace the father but reduced the impact of his absence by providing structure, ethical guidance, and emotional support. Their influence helped shape a masculinity that includes empathy, responsibility, and moral consistency.

Taken together, these findings show that masculine identity develops through a network of male and female influences. Some traits are adopted, some rejected, and others integrated into a personal framework, allowing continuity despite paternal absence.

THEME 4: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF FUTURE MASCULINITY

Sub-theme 4.1: Reflection on Past Experiences

Participants frequently reflected on their upbringing, seeing paternal absence not only as a loss but also as a formative experience:

"It changed everything. I understood that manhood is presence, not words." (P2, age 26)
"His absence made me see the father's role as irreplaceable." (P8, age 30)
"I learned that family is the reason for the greatest sacrifices." (P20, age 40)

These reflections indicate that participants try to understand the absence by incorporating it into their personal narratives. The experience is not solely a source of pain, it also provides insight into responsibility, commitment, and the significance of the paternal role.

Sub-theme 4.2: Strategies for Future Relationships and Parenting

Participants expressed a conscious intention to approach future relationships and fatherhood differently than their own experiences:

"I want not to be absent for my people." (P6, age 30)
"I want to know how to listen, not just command." (P13, age 35)
"To be a respected person, as my father was." (P1, age 25)

Emphasis on listening, presence, and integrity indicates a shift toward more relationally responsive models of fatherhood, where emotional availability accompanies structure and guidance. Masculinity is framed here not as authority alone but as a practice shaped by responsibility, empathy, and consistent engagement.

Sub-theme 4.3: Transformation of Absence into Personal Growth

Participants frequently described paternal absence as a factor promoting psychological growth:

"It made me more careful and maybe more sensitive." (P12, age 34)
"His absence taught me to be more mature." (P16, age 38)

This subtheme shows that paternal absence influenced personal growth. Participants reported that it increased their awareness of others, promoted reflection on their own emotions, and strengthened their sense of responsibility. The balance between vulnerability and strength suggests a form of masculinity that combines emotional awareness with resilience, supporting thoughtful engagement in relationships and a forward-looking understanding of manhood.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the complex ways in which men raised in paternal absence construct their masculinity within the Albanian cultural context. Consistent with Connell's (1995) conceptualization of masculinity as socially shaped and context-dependent, the

participants' narratives indicate that masculinity is not inherited or fixed, but built through adaptation, resistance, and selective learning from available role models. Participants also reported paternal absence as an emotional gap, experienced through fragmented, sensory-based, and often vague memories rather than clear recollections. For instance, one participant said *"I remember him as a warm figure, but gone too soon…" (P3, age 27),* while another noted, *"I was very young when he left. I only have blurry memories… I remember his smell, his voice" (P16, age 38).* This early emotional impact influenced their sense of security and early relationships, highlighting the significance of the parental absence in shaping their experiences.

Alongside emotional gaps, participants reported an early assumption of adult-like responsibilities, often before they were developmentally prepared. One participant expressed, *"I grew up with the feeling that I had to become a man without having a man nearby"* (P1, age 25), while another shared, *"I felt like I had to grow up faster, to be stronger for my mother" (P7, age 29*). Taking on protective and caregiving roles so early reflects the internalization of cultural expectations of masculinity when a father is absent and matches patterns described in the literature (Scholz et al., Masculinity Construction, 35–36). Participants described a sense of urgency to *"take responsibility to protect the family at a time when it was most vulnerable" (P12, age 34)*, suggesting that paternal absence can catalyze a premature confrontation with the social and moral demands of adult male roles. This experience was not the same for everyone, some felt burdened or conflicted, showing that early responsibility often brought tension and ambivalence about caregiving expectations.

The study shows that participants saw manhood less in terms of authority, physical strength, or dominance, and more in terms of ethical behavior, emotional control, and responsibility in relationships. One participant said, *"Being a man isn't about having a beard; it's about keeping your word and protecting your family" (P2, age 26)*, while another noted, *"A man is someone who takes responsibility for his family… who faces things calmly" (P8, age 30).* These statements reflect a view of masculinity focused on moral integrity and caring relationships (Connell, Masculinities; Connell & Messerschmidt, Hegemonic Masculinity, 829–30).

At the same time, participants felt social pressure to appear strong. One said, *"You have to look strong, even when inside you're broken" (P5, age 29),* and another added*, "Yes, I often feel I need to appear strong even when I'm not" (P11, age 33).* This shows the ongoing struggle between expressing emotions honestly and meeting social expectations of masculinity.

Alternative male figures emerged as critical in mediating the effects of paternal absence. Participants identified uncles, grandfathers, cousins, and mentors as significant influences: *"An uncle and a sports coach… they weren't perfect, but they were present" (P9, age 31)*, and *"My cousin and a teacher helped me find the balance between strength and reason" (P12, age 34).* These figures offered guidance while also demonstrating limitations, enabling participants to selectively adopt traits aligned with their values and reject those perceived as harmful (Scholz et al., Masculinity Construction, 35–36). Female figures, particularly mothers, also played compensatory roles, with one noting, *"My mother has influenced me more than anyone" (P4, age 28)*, and another, *"My mother compensated for the paternal role for all three sons" (P10, age 32)*,

fostering the integration of empathy, ethical awareness, and relational sensitivity into the participants constructions of masculinity (Bakiu, Absence of Fathers, 77).

Participants' reflections on their own growth and intentions for the future revealed a conscious engagement with the legacy of paternal absence. Many interpreted their early experiences not only as loss but also as formative, shaping their sense of responsibility, commitment, and ethical orientation. One participant remarked, *"It changed everything. I understood that manhood is presence, not words" (P2, age 26)*, and another, *"His absence made me see the father's role as irreplaceable" (P8, age 30)*. These reflections informed deliberate strategies for approaching relationships and fatherhood differently, emphasizing presence, attentive listening, and moral consistency: *"I want not to be absent for my people" (P6, age 30)*, and *"I want to know how to listen, not just command"* (P13, age 35).

Finally, paternal absence was often reported as a catalyst for personal growth, promoting reflection, emotional awareness, and resilience: *"It made me more careful and maybe more sensitive" (P12, age 34)*, and *"His absence taught me to be more mature" (P16, age 38)*. Taken together, these findings suggest that masculinity in the context of father absence is a dynamic, negotiated construct, shaped by emotional experience, social expectation, and relational modeling. Men actively integrate, modify, or resist traits learned from various figures to develop individualized masculinity, highlighting the importance of reflective processes, relational networks, and cultural context in shaping adult masculinity.

Overall, the findings indicate that Albanian men raised without fathers develop masculinity through multiple interrelated factors, emotional gaps, early responsibilities, negotiation of masculine norms, and guidance from alternative figures, while balancing social expectations with personal experiences. This synthesis addresses the research questions and emphasizes complexity, ambivalence, and context dependency.

SUMMARY

This study explores how paternal absence influences the construction of masculinity among adult men in the Albanian context. Findings indicate that participants experience paternal absence mainly as an emotional gap marked by feelings of insecurity, early responsibility, and a consistent need for dependable relationships. Masculinity is defined less through dominance and more through moral integrity, responsibility, and measured strength, reflecting a continuing negotiation between personal emotions and social expectations. In paternal absence, participants rely on a network of alternative male and female figures, selectively adopting positive traits while avoiding harmful behaviors. Across interviews, paternal absence becomes a prompt for reflection and motivation, encouraging a deliberate effort to build future relationships and fatherhood based on presence, empathy, and ethical conduct. Overall, these findings highlight a process through which men turn early loss into a personal framework. The integration of the experience of paternal loss appears to be facilitated by close family relationships and the consistent, sensitive care provided by relatives to sons who have lost their fathers, reflecting a culturally significant feature of Albanian society.

Limitations

While this qualitative study offers rich insights, it is limited by its sample size and its cultural specificity. Future research could compare experiences of paternal absence across different cultural settings to examine how varying gender norms influence masculine reconstruction. Moreover, the topic of masculinity represents a delicate and emotionally charged issue within Albanian culture. The emotional depth related to paternal absence during key developmental stages, and the enduring sense of this absence, made the interview process complex and affectively demanding, potentially influencing participants' openness and expression.

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VIOLATION OF THE DIGNITY AND IMAGE OF THE CHILD IN THE ALBANIAN MEDIA: BETWEEN THE LACK OF LEGAL REGULATION AND EDITORIAL IRRESPONSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly competitive and intense media environment, influenced by political, economic, and sensationalist dynamics, children in Albania are often subjected to serious violations of their dignity and personal image. This paper aims to critically and analytically address the ways in which the Albanian media, in the absence of a clear legal framework and through editorial irresponsibility, systematically violates children's fundamental rights. Most frequently, these are cases involving children who are victims of criminal events, whose images are often used beyond the scope of public interest and without safeguarding the best interest of the child. The focus is placed on concrete cases of reporting where children are victims of violence, sexual abuse, natural disasters, or family conflicts, where their names, images, and personal circumstances are published without any ethical filter or professional sensitivity, thereby exposing the child and causing harm. Through a content analysis of television media, online portals, and social networks, the paper highlights how sensationalist news violates not only the privacy and identity of the child but also contributes to further traumatization and social stigmatization.

In addition, the paper examines the gaps in Albanian legislation which, although partially aligned with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and international standards, does not provide sufficient mechanisms for the effective protection of minors in the media space. In this context, it draws attention to the lack of a functional regulatory authority for online media and to the ambiguities regarding the roles of AMA (Audiovisual Media Authority) and other responsible structures. The paper calls for ethical self-regulation by editorial offices, continuous training for journalists on sensitive reporting about children, and direct legal interventions to sanction cases of media abuse

involving minors. In conclusion, it emphasizes that the dignity of the child is not an editorial negotiation but a moral and legal obligation of every media entity, journalist, and democratic society.

Keywords: *Child, Rights, Media, Ethics, Guarantees*

INTRODUCTION

Media reporting in Albania often covers highly sensitive issues, where minors themselves are the main subjects. It is not uncommon for shocking events involving child victims to receive extensive public attention. However, in their pursuit of serving the so-called "public interest," the media often further aggravates the situation of these children as victims. Under the guise of informing the public, the media frequently falls into the trap of sensationalism, thereby compromising the dignity and image of the child.

The Albanian legal framework still shows significant gaps in protecting the image of children in the media. Greater responsibility has been placed on media self-regulation a mechanism that, while essential, does not fully guarantee the protection of minors from unnecessary or harmful public exposure. Existing legal approaches remain fragmented and focus primarily on cases involving the broadcasting of violent or pornographic content, leaving aside other equally important aspects related to the child's privacy, dignity, and psychological well-being.

In the Albanian media reality, a part of the information sector still operates in an informal manner, where, in the name of the "public's right to be informed," direct harm is often caused to vulnerable groups such as children. Public authorities responsible for supervising the media set out general principles for broadcasts that should not negatively influence the moral and psychological development of children, but the practical implementation of these principles remains limited.

While the law provides sanctions for the broadcasting of inappropriate content, there is a lack of comprehensive monitoring mechanisms and effective procedures for identifying cases that violate a child's image. In most cases, interventions occur only after complaints are filed by third parties, rather than proactively by the authorities.

One of the key issues addressed in this study is the exploitation of the child's image in the media, a precedent that has not yet been clearly regulated by Albanian legislation. This term refers to the use of children's images in media publications without considering their best interests or the potential consequences such exposure may have on their development and overall well-being. The absence of direct sanctions represents a serious legal gap that calls for thorough analysis and immediate regulatory intervention.

From a broader perspective, the issue of protecting children from media exposure cannot be viewed in isolation from the process of aligning Albanian legislation with the acquis communautaire of the European Union and with the standards of the Council of Europe in

the field of human rights. Instruments such as the European Convention on Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child establish clear obligations for safeguarding the privacy and image of minors, requiring member states including Albania to ensure a balance between freedom of expression and the protection of the child's dignity. This represents an ongoing challenge for the Albanian media and regulatory institutions, calling for a reform of both the legal and ethical approach in accordance with the principles of the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA).

CHILDREN IN THE MEDIA AND THEIR BEST INTERESTS

When we refer to children in the media, we broadly mean any material published through mass communication channels any information, photo, video, or data, whether directly or indirectly related to a minor. Clearly, according to Law No. 18/2017 *"On the Rights and Protection of the Child"*, a minor is defined as*: "A child is any person under the age of 18. In cases where the age of the person cannot be determined precisely, but there is reason to believe that the person is a child, they shall be considered a child, within the meaning of this law, until their age is determined in accordance with the legislation in force."* (Republic of Albania, 2017) Within this legal concept arises the corresponding legal responsibility and the special protection that should compel institutions to effectively address cases involving children particularly their public appearances.

If we focus on children who appear in media programs or environments, we must consider that such exposure may have an impact opposite to what is intended for the minor. The most common instances of children's media appearances apart from entertainment programs, talent shows, or marketing also include situations where they become subjects of media coverage themselves. These typically involve criminal events, where minors appear either as offenders or as victims. In all such cases, the best interests of the child must prevail. According to Article 6 of Law No. 18/2017 "On the Rights and Protection of the Child", "The best interests of the child imply the right of the child to enjoy healthy physical, mental, moral, spiritual, and social development, as well as to live in a family and social environment suitable for the child." (Republic of Albania, 2017). This provision clearly establishes that any matter involving a minor must aim at actions that will necessarily have a positive impact on the child's interests. Accordingly, in cases of media exposure of children, this principle must be strictly observed in their public portrayal especially when the child is a victim of a criminal offense and public exposure may cause harm.

Legally, even in this context, it is the duty of the media and editorial staff to safeguard the interests of the minor who appears in media programs, both directly and primarily. In general, the Republic of Albania has established regulations concerning the protection to be ensured by the media distributor (audiovisual), assigning protective responsibilities also to the parent or guardian in cases involving children under the age of 14. The Audiovisual Media Authority's (AMA) Broadcasting Code (July 10, 2023), in point 4.33, stipulates: "Audiovisual Media Service Providers (AMSPs) may interview a child under the age of 14

only in the presence of a parent, legal representative, or a designated adult, and with the child's consent." (Audiovisual Media Authority, 2023)

The regulation itself specifies a range of protective mechanisms for safeguarding the integrity of the child. However, the degree of discretion it grants is broad, and in several instances, it includes subjective provisions. For example: *"Audio and audiovisual broadcasts for children shall be guided by the best interests of the child. The best interests of the child shall be the primary consideration in any action taken by audiovisual media service providers (AMSPs) that involves or is directed at the child."* (Audiovisual Media Authority, 2023)

In practice, however, what is often observed in the media is that the best interests of the child are, in principle, treated as secondary. In reality, an Audiovisual Media Service Provider cannot be considered a reliable assessor of the "best interests" of children, as it is itself a party that may hold different interests from those of the minor being portrayed. According to the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013, paragraph 4), the best interests of the child must be interpreted comprehensively and without establishing any hierarchy among the child's rights. "The Committee has already emphasized that *an adult's judgment of the child's best interests cannot override the obligation to respect all the rights of the child as set out in the Convention.* It recalls that the Convention establishes no hierarchy of rights; all the rights enshrined in it are in the *'best interests of the child,'* and no right may be compromised by a negative interpretation of this principle." (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013)

Within this interpretive approach, the party with a vested interest in this case, the media cannot be the one to judge whether an interview or public appearance of a minor may have a positive or negative impact. If we look at this issue in practical terms, we can observe that in many cases, underage girls who have been sexually abused are interviewed and shown in the media, even when journalists adhere to the specifications outlined in the Code of Ethics such as altering the voice or concealing the identity. Nevertheless, such publication can still lead, even indirectly, to the identification of the case, causing significant harm to the minor. If we raise the question of why a victim of abuse should be interviewed at all, it becomes evident that the potential benefits are far outweighed by the harm caused.

LEGAL SANCTIONS AND THE ETHICAL CONTEXT OF CHILD PROTECTION IN THE MEDIA

The regulation mentioned above, established by the Audiovisual Media Authority's (AMA) *Broadcasting Code*, concerning the authorization granted by a parent or guardian for interviewing a child under the age of 14, is fundamentally intended to protect the minor from media and public exposure. However, a key concern arises when parents or guardians may not fully understand that such an interview could have harmful consequences, even though the same Code stipulates that explaining the purpose of the interview beforehand is mandatory. In this context, much depends on the conscience and ethical self-regulation of the media itself to take protective measures even when the interviewed individuals or

their legal guardians are unaware of the potential repercussions. Yet the logical question extends further: what happens when the media perceives the case in question as a means to attract audience attention and chooses not to apply the necessary protective mechanisms?

In such cases, sanctions may range from the correction or removal of the published content to administrative measures and, ultimately, the suspension of the broadcaster's license. According to Article 132 of Law No. 97/2013 *"On Audiovisual Media in the Republic of Albania,"* it is stipulated that: *"In cases of violation of the provisions of this law, the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) shall decide to impose: a) a fine; b) temporary suspension of the license and/or authorization; c) reduction of the duration of the license and/or authorization; d) revocation of the license and/or authorization. In its decision, AMA shall take into account the extent and duration of the violation committed."* (Republic of Albania, 2013)

The measures imposed are proportional to the harm caused. However, in Albania, there remains a significant legal gap regarding online media. The country does not have an exact count of the number of online portals currently operating, while every audiovisual media outlet also manages additional online communication channels. According to the report *"Media Ownership Monitor Albania"* (BIRN Albania & Reporters Without Borders, 2023), there are currently over 900 online portals in operation, most of which do not have clearly identified ownership. In this context, the majority of these portals use domains such as *.com*, *.net*, or *.org*, which cannot be effectively monitored by AKEP (the Electronic and Postal Communications Authority) in relation to the news content they publish including precisely those details that, as defined above, are prohibited from publication. This situation reveals a clear legal vacuum in Albania, where minor victims are not fully protected from exposure in online media. Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop a legal framework or an appropriate form of self-regulation to formalize the activity of online media outlets as a mechanism for managing the publication of sensitive cases.

In the 2024 Annual Report of the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA), the institution reports that it has entered into a new agreement with the TikTok platform, within the framework of Directive 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and of the Council**,** which grants the Authority the competence to monitor online platforms for the publication of inappropriate content. The report states: *"From August to December 2024, based on user reports, AMA teams reviewed a total of 743 videos for harmful content and 1,513 for piracy. In cooperation with the TikTok platform, 286 videos containing harmful content, 1,505 videos, and 193 profiles reported for piracy were successfully removed."* (Audiovisual Media Authority, 2025) However, this finding shows that the cases processed were primarily those reported by affected users**,** while proactively initiated procedures by the institution itself remain limited**.** This indicates a lack of institutional capacity for continuous monitoring largely due to the high number of social media users, among whom minors represent a significant majority. From another perspective, the "dark figures" or unreported cases of videos containing harmful content or piracy are likely much higher. Logically, this is because many minors lack the awareness or knowledge needed to report such cases to the relevant authorities.

DYSFUNCTION OF REGULATORY MECHANISMS AND LEGAL VACUUMS (CASE STUDY)

The media should avoid revealing the perpetrator's identity when the victim is a minor. This exception exists precisely because revealing the perpetrator may indirectly lead to the identification of the victim. In recent times, Albanian media outlets have increasingly reported on cases of sexual harassment and abuse within families that is, gender-based or intra-family abuse. While the public disclosure of such cases is often justified under the principle of public interest, it simultaneously violates the best interests of the child, as the consequences of broadcasting such material can be long-lasting and may follow the individual throughout their life. On July 3, 2025, a national media outlet broadcasted an interview with the mother of a 12-year-old girl who had been sexually abused, raising serious ethical and legal concerns regarding the protection of the child's identity and dignity.

The perpetrator was her own father, while the editorial staff did not take care to preserve the anonymity of the case, exposing the images of both parents and the personal data that lead to the identification of the case. The video still remains available on the internet, and this is clearly considered a "trace on the web"[1] which will haunt the minor throughout her psychological and social growth and development. Currently, in the YouTube search engine, the material can be found at the link: (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_3pH_Y-CIY) titled "Shocking! Father abuses daughter: It happened only once in the car… – Shqipëria Live" (Top Channel, 2025). The above case is not merely considered an ethical violation, but rather a breach of all the aforementioned principles. However, if we examine it on another level, the case taken as a study subject also reveals criminal offenses committed publicly, among them *"Disclosure of investigative secrecy"* as provided by *Law No. 7895, dated 27.01.1995, Criminal Code, Article 295/a*, which states: *"The disclosure of data constituting investigative secrecy by a person who has knowledge of such information due to their duty or function, without the authorization of the procedural authority, is punishable by imprisonment of up to three years."* (Republic of Albania, updated to 2024). It must be emphasized that the preservation of investigative secrecy and the responsibility of the media in publishing information from criminal investigations are crucial. In addition to this criminal offense, the media's conduct also violates the *"Presumption of Innocence"*, as seen in the case above. The combination of successive violations ethical, administrative, and criminal within a single case confirms part of the European Commission's 2024 Report on Albania**,** which notes that after the approval of the new *Broadcasting Code (AMA)* in July 2023, *there have been no further legal developments, and it recommends that AMA be provided with sufficient material and technical resources to strengthen its monitoring and reporting capacity. This indirectly affects the implementation of rules for the protection of minors.* (European Commission, 2024)

[1] The footprint on the web is the amount of personal information that remains publicly accessible on the internet about an individual, even after the initial publication has been made by a media outlet or a third party. It includes data, images, videos, articles, or comments related to a person that are indexed by search engines, remaining available for an indefinite period of time even if later deleted from the original source. This digital footprint constitutes a permanent trace of an individual's online identity and is often associated with issues of privacy violation, image, and public reputation.

Looking at the entire picture, it is not clear whether we are dealing with a lack of institutional capacity to identify the case, or a lack of interest in addressing a case involving a national broadcast media outlet. Nevertheless, if we refer only to the part concerning the presentation of the photograph of the suspected perpetrator of the criminal offense in media channels, we are dealing with a case on which the International Court of Human Rights has already ruled. Specifically, the case Toma v. Romania, February 24, 2009, ECtHR: *In this case, the Romanian police had invited journalists and allowed them to film and photograph a person arrested for drug possession, without his consent and with the intention of publishing the images in the media. The following day, a newspaper published his photograph showing signs of violence and labeled him as a "drug trafficker." The European Court found that the actions of the police constituted an unjustified interference with the applicant's private life, violating Article 8 of the Convention, since the publication had no real news value and pursued no legitimate aim of public interest.* (European Court of Human Rights, 2009)

Similarly, in the above-presented case, photos and videos were released, where a partial parallel can be drawn with the Toma v. Romania case. But if we raise the question of why the parallel between the cases is only partial, then we must refer to a situation which, unlike the Toma v. Romania case, involves a matter of public interest. However, indirectly, this public interest overrides the child's best interest by fully revealing the identity of the victim.

EXPLOITATION OF THE CHILD'S IMAGE

The exploitation of a child's image is another element that remains unrecognized in Albanian national legislation. By the term "exploitation," we mean: *"The act of making unfair use of another person, particularly through the use of their image, work, or reputation without consent."* (Black, 2019)

In practical terms, the exploitation of a child's image is carried out for several types of gain whether to attract audience attention, for political popularity, or for financial profit. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, children's rights must be protected by the media and journalists directly, without bias or manipulation. According to the *Global Code of Ethics for Journalists* of the International Federation of Journalists, journalists must avoid exploiting children and must safeguard their rights, even in cases where parents or legal guardians have given their consent. (IFJ, 2019)

When consent has not been given, this constitutes a more dangerous precedent, as stated by the ECtHR. In the case of *Reklos & Davourlis v. Greece* (ECtHR, 2009), a photographer at a private clinic had taken photographs of a newborn without the parents' consent and had retained the negatives. The European Court of Human Rights found that this action constituted a violation of Article 8 of the Convention, emphasizing that the right to one's image is an essential component of personal identity and private life, and that parental consent is necessary for any such interference affecting minors. The Court held that even the mere retention of photographs without consent, regardless of the absence of publication, amounts to an unjustified interference with the child's private life and a failure by the State to provide effective protection of this right. (ECtHR, 2009).

However, such cases are not limited to this. The exploitation of a child's image has also occurred in Albania, including by political actors during electoral campaigns, who, in principle, use children's images for electoral gain. A publicly known case involved a complaint filed with the Central Election Commission against a political leader who, during the campaign period, had featured a 13-year-old child in a political advertisement expressing political opinions, (https://pogradecipress.al/2025/04/24/armand-braho-peleshi-po-ben-krim-elektoral-masiv-perdorimi-i-imazhit-te-femijeve-ne-fushaten-elektorale/). The case was referred through a complaint dated 26 April 2025 to the Central Election Commission and the Ombudsman. However, following an administrative investigation, the institutions in question, by Decision No. 1147 dated 9 May 2025, closed the case on the grounds that the child's parents had provided written authorization for the minor's public appearance in support of a political official during the campaign. Clearly, the absence of a proper legal basis currently leaves open the possibility for the exploitation of children's images for media and political purposes. The same situation was reflected in many other electoral events, where children were publicly present and exposed in support of a political party, resulting in the direct exploitation of their image. These cases were also broadcast in the media without censorship, further deepening this phenomenon in the country.

CONCLUSIONS

- The exposure of children in the media often occurs outside the standards defined by law, risking violations of the child's dignity, privacy, and best interests, as provided in Law No. 18/2017 "On the Rights and Protection of the Child."
- Audiovisual media frequently fails to respect the protective principles of the AMA Broadcasting Code, treating children as objects of information rather than as subjects of rights.
- Concrete cases, such as the broadcasting of stories involving girls who were victims of abuse, demonstrate that identity masking is insufficient to prevent the identification of children and the resulting long-term psychological consequences.
- Law enforcement is selective and reactive the AMA acts only upon complaints, while a proactive monitoring system for the protection of minors is lacking.
- Online media and social networks represent the greatest legal gap: they are not formalized, not licensed, and often publish content without any ethical or institutional oversight.
- Administrative decisions such as that of the Central Election Commission (Decision No. 1147, dated 09.05.2025), which accept the use of a child's image solely on the basis of parental consent, contradict international standards (IFJ, UNICEF, ECtHR), which require an assessment of the impact on the child's best interests.
- The implementation of provisions on the "Disclosure of Investigative Secrets" (Article 295/a of the Criminal Code) and the "Presumption of Innocence" is often lacking, leading to simultaneous ethical, administrative, and criminal violations in the same case.

- The European Commission's 2024 Report confirms the lack of legal developments and institutional capacity within the AMA, particularly concerning the protection of minors in the media and on online platforms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Drafting a special legal package for the protection of children in the media and on social networks, to also include online platforms, blogs, and unlicensed portals.
- Strengthening the competencies of the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) to monitor and sanction violations related to the use of children's images, including in digital spaces.
- Introducing a specific legal provision prohibiting the exploitation of a child's image for political, commercial, or propagandistic purposes, with both administrative and criminal sanctions.
- Revising Article 4.33 of the Broadcasting Code to include not only the formal consent of the parent but also a professional assessment of the potential consequences for the child prior to publication.
- Establishing an inter-institutional mechanism among the AMA, the Ombudsman, the State Police, the Prosecutor's Office, and the Ministry of Education for handling cases of media exposure involving minors.
- Imposing an obligation for the immediate removal of materials that identify minor victims, regardless of the platform on which they have been published.
- Implementing mandatory training programs for journalists, editors, and producers on child reporting ethics and international standards for child protection.
- Including in higher education curricula a dedicated module on *"Media Ethics and Child Protection in the Media"* to strengthen the professional formation of future journalists.
- Promoting cooperation between the AMA and international platforms (TikTok, Meta, YouTube) for the automatic removal of harmful content involving children, through the development of specific reporting algorithms.
- Enforcing the international standard of "the best interests of the child" as a binding legal criterion not merely an interpretative one in all decisions by media editorial boards and administrative authorities.

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ASSESSMENT OF WATER QUALITY OF THE SHUSHICA RIVER BASIN IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

The Shushica River, one of the main tributaries of Vjosa River in southern Albania, is a vital freshwater source for the surrounding ecosystems and the community around. The aim of this study was to assess the water quality of the Shushicë River basin by analyzing physicochemical parameters and microbiological indicators. *Materials and methods:* The sampling has been carried out monthly in different sites along the river. Microbiological analysis using the Most Probable Number (MPN) method detected microbial indicators. Horiba U50 was used to detect temperature, pH, electrical conductivity, and dissolved oxygen, which were measured in situ. *Conclusions:* Seasonal and regional differences were found in the results, with spring and early summer showing the highest levels of microbial contamination. In general, physicochemical characteristics stayed within their natural limits, with seasonal variations that corresponded to fluctuations in flow and temperature. The results underline the necessity of ongoing monitoring and better wastewater management in the Shushicë River watershed, as well as the influence of seasonal dynamics and human demands on water quality.

Keywords: *Shushicë River, Water quality, Microbiological indicators, Seasonal variation, Surface water*

INTRODUCTION

Surface water represents a vital natural resource on Earth and plays an important role in maintaining ecological stability (UNESCO, 2021; FAO, 2020; UNEP, 2016; Allan & Castillo, 2007). Rivers, lakes, and streams regulate hydrological and biogeochemical cycles and at the

same time play an important role in repairing the biodiversity, providing essential ecosystem services that support agriculture, industry, and human livelihoods (Allan & Castillo, 2007; Dudgeon et al., 2006).

However, over the years we notice an intensification of anthropogenic pressures on these ecosystems due to rapid urbanization, industrialization, and agricultural expansion, leading to a progressive decline in the stability of freshwater quality worldwide (Barbosa-Vasconcelos et al., 2018; Dudgeon et al., 2006).

Shushica River, which represents the focus of our study is located in the Kurveleshi region in the southern part of Albania. This district represents one of the richest regions in natural heritage and biodiversity. This area features a unique terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem that includes elements of Mediterranean and mountainous climates. The Kurveleshi region still preserves the characteristics of pristine ecosystems, flora, and fauna typical of the southeastern Mediterranean regions (Shumka et al., 2018). The ecological complexity of Shushica valley is due to geological, pedological, and climatic elements that interact harmoniously with anthropogenic factors (Kiçaj & Bakaj, 2022). This valley is home to endemic and sub-endemic species with a very high conservation value (Kiçaj & Bakaj, 2022) and therefore represents a complex ecosystem. The Shushica Valley is home to a number of species that are protected at an international level. Among them are *Anguilla anguilla* (European eel) and *Neophron percnopterus* (Egyptian vulture) which are both listed as endangered in the IUCN Red List (Shumka et al., 2018; IUCN, 2025). As a result, the Shushica River is equally important ecologically as the Vjosa river which has been acknowledged as one of the last wild rivers in Europe and a biodiversity hotspot.

All these findings show an essential approach for assessing the environmental status of aquatic ecosystems of Shushica river through physicochemical and microbiological analysis. In this way we can understand the impact of anthropogenic factors on the quality of surface water, leading to the evaluation of the ecological condition of an area with high natural, scientific, and touristic potential.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Study area

The Shushica River is relieved 80 km long and has a significant impact on the hydrographic structure of the Vjosa River. This river plays an essential role in conserving the hydrologic and ecological equilibrium of the southwest part of Albania (Graf et al., 2018; Shumka et al., 2018). Shushica River originates in the lower part of Kurveleshi region near Kuç village and flows through various rural populations, including Kallarat, Horë-Vranisht, Gjorm, Kotë, Peshkëpi and finally meets the Vjosa River near Armen village.

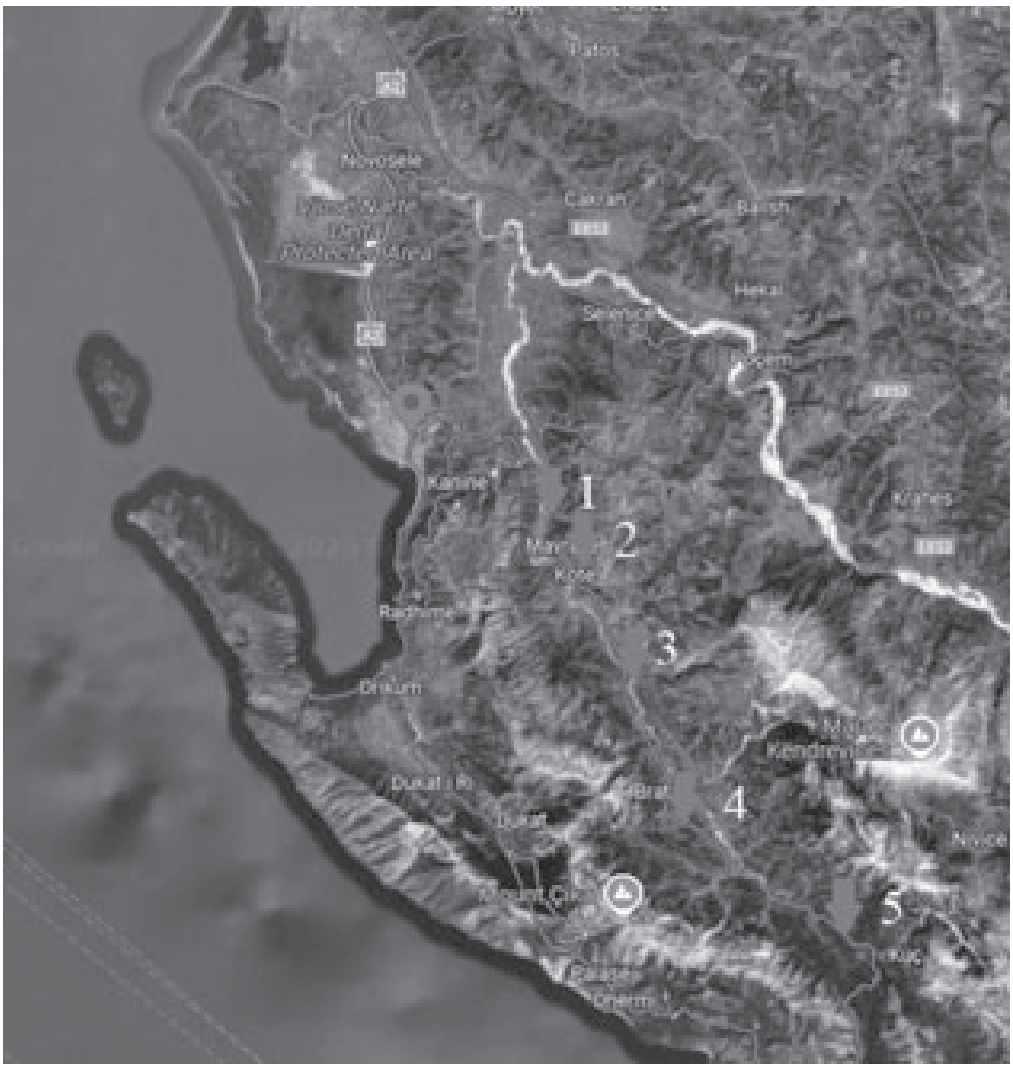


Figure 1: Study area zoomed of Shushica River
(Source: Google maps modified by Bakaj et al., 2025)

Climatic and hidrological characteristic of Sshushica valley

The Shushica Valley is represented by Mediterranean climate, so winters are usually mild and wet, and summers are hot and dry (EEA, 2023; IGJEUM, 2024). In winter and early spring, the river's water flow really picks up because of heavy rain and melting snow in the Lower Kurveleshi mountainous area. This makes the water cloudy and increases sedimentation (Graf et al., 2018; Schiemer et al., 2020). July and August are usually dry, with hot water and low water levels, which means less dissolved oxygen. These conditions make life harder for water ecosystems and change the number of microorganisms, especially near cities and farms (Statement of Scientists, 2021; Climate Change Post, 2024).

In the beginning of September rains become more frequent and more intense, increasing so the water flow and the inert and solid material transport (TSS) increasing so vertical mixing of water layers. This has a high impact in the physic chemical and microbial quality of water body sa all the changes on the temperature and water flow influence in oxygen distribution, pH, and bacterial concentrations (APHA, 2017; Hering et al., 2010). These water changes don't just impact the water body itself; they also change the whole river ecosystem. This is especially true downstream in farming and rural areas, since these spots already have to deal with a lot of human activity like watering crops, farm animals, and sewage. In the hydrological point of view Shushica River's water flow, quality, and shape change a lot with the seasons (Schiemer et al., 2020).

Because of all this, it's a great natural spot to learn about how climate and people are affecting the water ecosystems of southwest Albania (Kiçaj & Bakaj, 2022). The study area is a mix of mountains and hills, with limestone and soil deposits that change the water's chemistry. It's got a Mediterranean climate that feels a bit continental, meaning winters are gentle and wet, and summers are hot and dry. Temperatures usually go from 8°C in January to 26°C in July. Rainfall is about 950–1,100 mm a year (EEA, 2023; IGJEUM, 2024). Because of the weather and land, there are lots of different plants and animals living here, both in and out of the water. But this also means the area is easily affected by things people do, like farming and pollution from cities (Kiçaj & Bakaj, 2022).

The study was performed from January to December 2024. Each month, the samples were taken from five sampling stations eventually distributed along Shushica river. The probe Horiba U50 Water Quality Meter was used to measure the temperature, pH, electrical conductivity, and dissolved oxygen on the spot. The microbiological analysis was performed at the Microbiological Lab of the Biology Department at the University of Vlora, following international water quality standards (ISO 5667-6:2020; ISO 19458:2006; APHA, 2017).

Sampling stations

The typology of sampling stations along Shushica river represent a notable diversity starting from the upper segment of the mountainous segment to the lower agricultural areas. Different factors such as the morphological characteristics of the banks, the surrounding land use, the proximity to potential pollution sources and the geographical representation of the river flow were essential in selecting the sampling stations.

International guidelines for water quality have been used in order to classify the sampling stations (ISO 5667-6:2020; APHA, 2017) and in accordance with the European Union Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC), which recommends systematic monitoring of water bodies for the assessment of ecological status and anthropogenic impact (Hering et al., 2010; EEA, 2023).

According to hydro geography literature for the southern part of Albania (Eftimi, 2010; Eftimi, 2020; Eftimi et al. 2007; Wickel et al. 2017), GPS was used to locate and characterize the sampling stations of the Shushica River on Table 2.1. In addition to GPS, each sampling station's flow,

based on the terrain, position or type of water flow was classified by flow type, or velocity, in accordance with ISO 5667-6 (Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC). The Kallarat and Horë-Vranisht upstream sampling stations had rapid water flows with rocky substrates.

In contrast, the Gjorm sampling station had a moderate water flow with a high percentage of calcium carbonate. Finally, the Kotë and Peshkëpi lower sampling stations had low water flow rates and had an alluvial substrate (Graf et al. 2018; Schiemer et al. 2020; EEA, 2023).

Table 1. Coordinates and typology of sampling stations along the Shushicë River

No.	Station	Longitude (°E)	Latitude (°N)	Elevation (m)	Flow Type	Surrounding Land use	Anthropogenic Impact	Bank Typology
1	Kallarat	19.74705	40.20881	354	Upper segment	Pastoral / Mountainous	Medium	Mountainous – Rocky
2	Horë–Vranisht	19.7244	40.22189	120	Upper segment	Forested / Mountainous	Low	Stony – Forested
3	Gjorm	19.63939	40.33751	95	Middle segment	Agricultural / Forested	Medium	Hilly – Calcareous
4	Kotë	19.60322	40.38647	82	Middle–lower segment	Agricultural / Semi-urban	High	Hilly – Alluvial
5	Peshkëpi	19.74705	40.20811	69	Lower segment	Agricultural / Residential	Medium	Hilly – Alluvial

(Source: field data collected by Bakaj et al., 2024; in accordance with the existing literature on the Vjosa and Shushicë river basins, including Eftimi, 2010; Eftimi, 2020; Eftimi et al., 2007; and Wickel et al., 2017; processed according to ISO 5667-6:2020 and EEA, 2023.)

Using the CORINE Land Cover data (2018) (European Environment Agency (EEA), 2023), we conducted an analysis of land use around the Shushica River. In combination with our field visits, we examined what modifications were made by humans, such as proximity of agricultural areas, residential areas, and transportation routes. Different types of banks along the Shushica River were categorized using the guidelines established by the ISO (5667-6 (2020)) and EEA (2023). These categories include rocky, limestone hills, agricultural use, and non-agricultural use.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLING STATIONS

The placement of five sampling stations reflects the natural environmental gradient of the Shushicë River, starting from the Kurvelesh mountains where it comes from and ending at the Vjosa River, to which it flows. Therefore, this study meets the conditions for an investigation of spatial water quality local impact of human activities across the whole basin, which is the essence of the EU Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC) and ISO 5667-6 (2020) concerning river samples.

Station 1 – Kallarat:

The upper course of the river is where this station is placed, an area characterized by a mountainous region with steep slopes and calcareous substrate. In winter, when the water is highly clear and has a high flow rate, there is a substantial drop in the volume of water in the summer. The primary influence on this section of water is livestock agricultural activity (Graf et al., 2018).

Station 2 – Horë–Vranish:

The station stands for a hilly–mountainous area with rocky banks and a dense vegetation cover. The lack of direct human influence makes this site a reference station when examining physicochemical and microbiological parameters for the rest of the river. The area has the features of a natural ecosystem with high ecological value (Schiemer et al., 2020).

Station 3 – Gjorm:

The middle course of the river, where the terrain gradually becomes flatter and the surrounding land is mainly used for agriculture and forestry, is the location of the station. This area is distinguished by an increase in electrical conductivity (EC) and elevation of pH values, which are the result of water interaction with calcareous geological formations. The agricultural activities in the area may lead to the presence of higher levels of nutrients and microorganisms in the water (APHA, 2017; Hering et al., 2010).

Station 4 – Kotë:

The sampling station is located on the mid to lower section of the river, adjacent to the Vlorë-Tepelenë National Road and suburban developments. The hydrological sampling station has been impacted by both runoff from developed areas and by commercially intensive agricultural land use, which have impacted both microbiological and chemical characteristics of the water sample. Both the left and right banks are characterized by alluvial banks and moderate erosion can be found in this section (EEA, 2023).

Station 5 – Peshkëpi:

The station located farthest downstream on the river is located at or nearest to where the river meets the Vjosa River. This area is primarily made of farmlands and is surrounded by low alluvial riverbanks. This section of the river represents the highest potential risk of diffuse agricultural runoff and organic waste deposits. Fortunately, moderate flow through the area supports the river's ability to clean itself through natural processes (Statement of Scientists, 2021; Kiçaj & Bakaj, 2022).

Microbiological analysis

Sampling for microbiological analysis was done according to the guidelines of the World Health Organization and ISO 5667–6:2020, and ISO 19458:2006).

To collect bacteriological water samples, we used sterile 500 ml bottles and collected 10–30 cm from the water surface for each sample location. After collection, the samples were placed into a thermos-type container and transported to the laboratory within a maximum of two hours (ISO 5667–5:1991). This transport method does not allow for bacterial replication. Water samples were tested on the same day as the collection.

The microbiological testing was done in the Microbiology Laboratory at the Faculty of Technical and Natural Sciences, "Ismail Qemali" Vlora University. Sampling and testing were in compliance with International Standard Methods (ISO 1991; CEC 1978; WHO 1984; ISO 1999; UNECE 1994; Camper et al. 1996). The MPN index was applied for measuring total and fecal coliform in water. Total and fecal coliform were identified by MPN methods and EC media in a combination of 3 tubes (Bakaj et al., 2017; Bakaj et al., 2022). MPN index was determined with the help of MPN statistical tables and is given as the number of organisms per 100 ml (MPN/100 ml).

Physic–Chemical Analysis

The analysis of the samples includes the physical, chemical, and microbiological analysis, and has been conducted using standard methods as outlined in APHA-AWWA-WEF) or (APHA-AWWA-WEF 2005) and in accordance with Directive 2000/60/EC issued by the European Parliament and Council (Council Decision 1977/795/EEC).

Seven physical and chemical parameters were determined for the surface water resources that were selected for analysis in this study, which include the following: pH, electrical conductivity (EC), turbidity, total dissolved solids (TDS), total suspended solids (TSS), and dissolved oxygen (DO). The temperature of the water sample was determined in the field using a thermometer located at a depth of ten centimeters. Data for the other six physical and chemical parameters were collected using the Horiba U50 Water Quality Meter, a water quality probe. The parameters were selected based on the correlation demonstrated between bacteria in drinking water and six of the seven physical/chemical parameters.

Analytical Statistics

The preparation and the organization of the statistical analysis for all the data gathered from physic chemical and microbiological analysis of Shushica river water were obtained using Microsoft Office Professional Plus 2016. The statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics v.26 (Field, 2013; Zar, 1999).

In addition to identifying the correlation between physical chemical indicators, bacterial indicators, and environmental anthropogenic factors that affect the ecological equilibrium of the Shushica river basin, the statistical analysis sought to identify seasonal and spatial variation in the quality parameters (Hering et al., 2010; Bakaj et al., 2022).

This kind of assessment is necessary to support sustainable management of water resources in compliance with the EU Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC) and to comprehend the interactions between anthropogenic and natural factors in water systems.

Results and Discussions

Our goal in this study is to evaluate the Shushica River's water quality using microbiological and physicochemical indicators. There are five sampling points along Shushica river, starting from Kallarat (S1) to Peshkëpi (S5). 60 samples in all were examined between January and December of 2024. Table 2 displays the statistical distribution of fecal coliform at each sampling station.

Table 2: All sampling stations' descriptive statistics (MPN 100 ml-1) are listed in the table

		S 1	S 2	S 3	S 4	S 5
N	Valid	12	12	12	12	12
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		117.50	180.00	311.67	426.67	576.67
Median		110.00	175.00	320.00	445.00	615.00
Mode		80a	90a	410	520	280a
Std. Deviation		40.255	59.544	115.824	146.866	201.509
Variance		1620.455	3545.455	13415.152	21569.697	40606.061
Skewness		.961	.217	-.299	-.276	-.325
Std. Error of Skewness		.637	.637	.637	.637	.637
Kurtosis		.267	-.910	-1.279	-1.329	-1.343
Std. Error of Kurtosis		1.232	1.232	1.232	1.232	1.232
Minimum		70	90	130	210	280
Maximum		200	280	470	630	850

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown
(source: field data collected by Bakaj et al., 2024)

Analysis of microbiological data

The pictorial representation of data from the upstream Station 1 (117.5 MPN/100 mL) to the downstream Station 5 (576.7 MPN/100 mL) allows us to understand the differences between mean and median values. We can see that microbial water quality declines downstream, which is why the mean and median figures increase gradually and clearly.

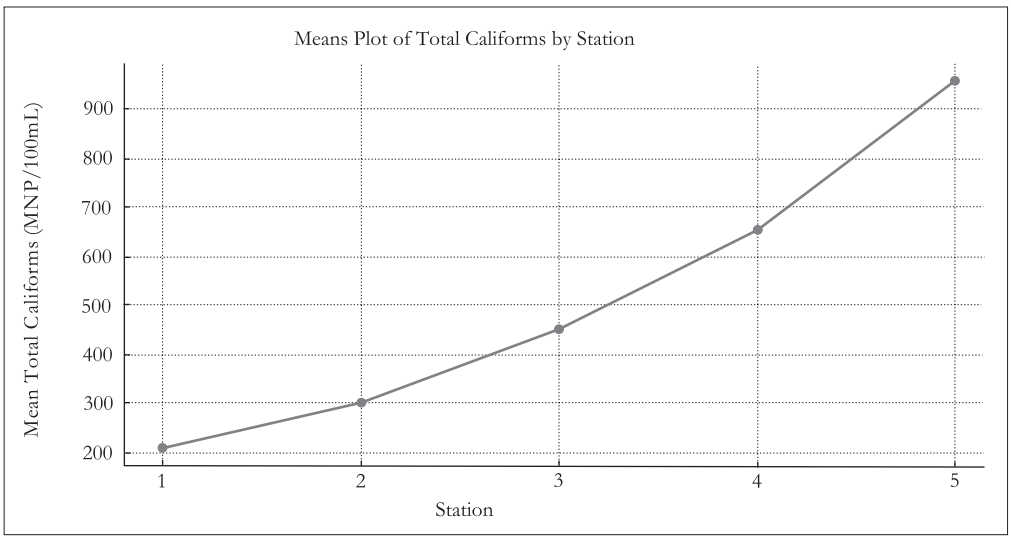


Figure 2. *Mean plot of total coliform*
(source: field data collected by Bakaj et al., 2024)

Chronic and event-driven fecal contamination pressures, which are the most frequently reported types of pressures in river basins impacted by human activity, are also suggested by the gradual increase in mean and median values from to very rapidly increasing variance.

The Vjosa, Buna, and Shkumbin rivers in Albania have also shown similar longitudinal patterns. In these rivers we notice a downstream increase impact of agricultural runoff,

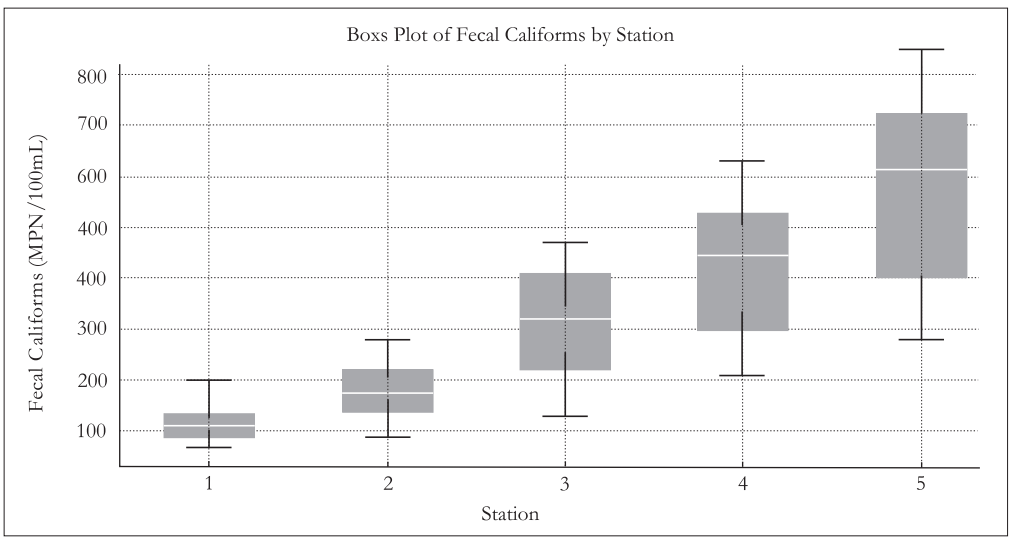


Figure 3. *Box plot of fecal coliform*
(source: field data collected by Bakaj et al., 2024)

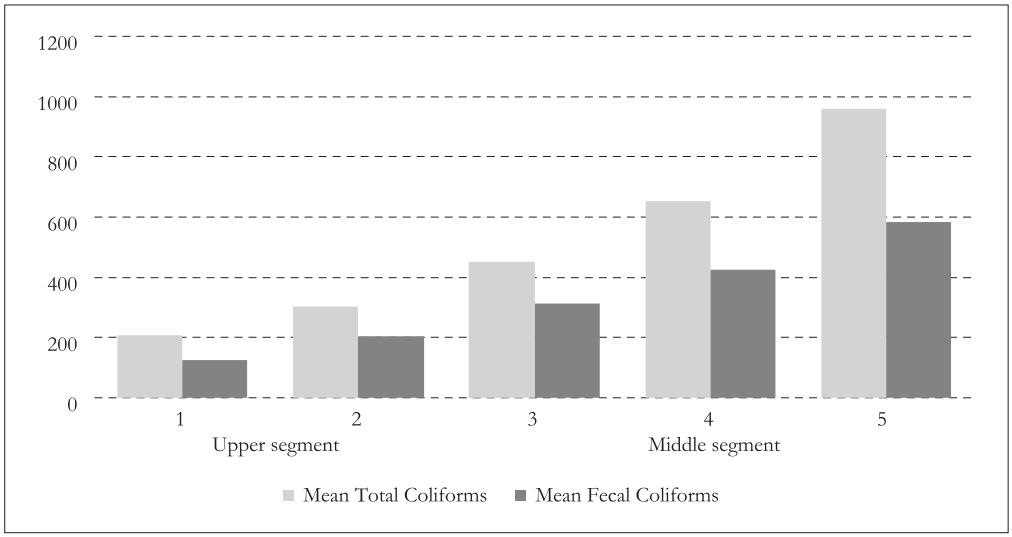


Figure 4. *Flow type*
(source: field data collected by Bakaj et al., 2024)

livestock, and peri-urban wastewater discharges which cause the bacterial indicators to rise further downstream (Shumka et al., 2018; Beqiraj & Kashta, 2015).

The mean plots for total and fecal coliforms at each of the five stations show a distinct pattern: the contamination simply gets worse as you move downstream toward Stations 4 and 5, which are right where the homes and agriculture pick up, but things start out cleaner at Stations 1 and 2 up in the mountains.

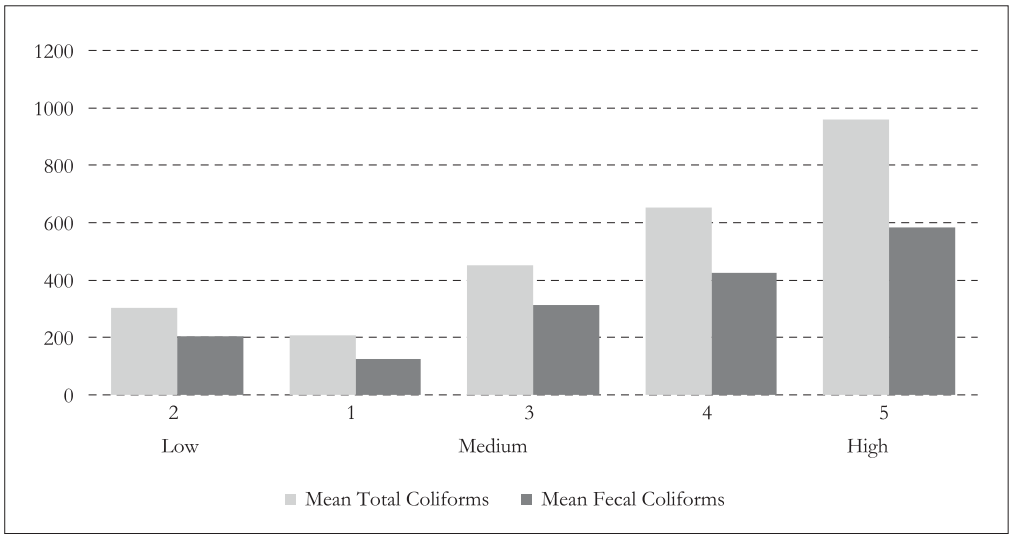


Figure 5. *Anthropogenic Impact*
(source: field data collected by Bakaj et al., 2024)

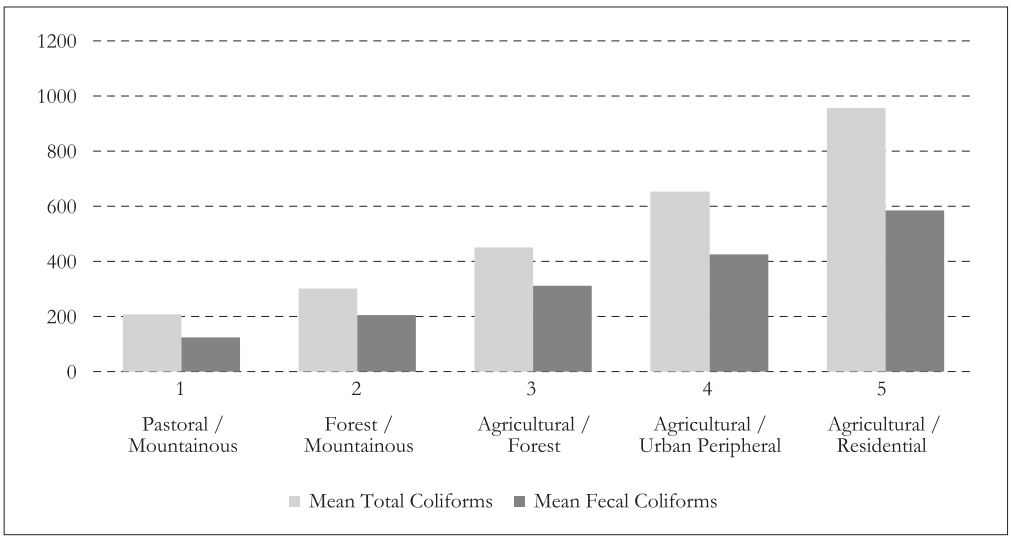


Figure 6. *Land Use*
(source: field data collected by Bakaj et al., 2024)

These findings imply that the initial sources of microbial pollution in the river basin are directly related to human activities, especially those related to domestic wastewater (i.e., wastewater treatment facilities) and agricultural activities (agricultural lands and animals). Studies conducted in Europe that show comparable upstream and downstream patterns in the continent's river basins such as the Danube, Rhône, and Vltava rivers support this. (Farnleitner et al., 2010, Munoz et al., 2015).

There is a noticeable increase in fecal pollution as we proceed downstream, and the box plots for Total and Fecal Coliforms at the five Shushica River stations help to explain why the numbers vary greatly from location to location. This is not surprising when you consider other rivers that have been impacted by a variety of human activities; Shushica fits in perfectly with these regional and global trends. The highest concentrations found here, up to 1250 MPN/100 mL for total coliforms and 850 for fecal coliforms, are comparable to those found in rivers without actual wastewater treatment.

Therefore, when compared to other rivers in the Balkans, Shushica can be considered as a river that has a moderate to high level of negative environmental impact. It's quite characteristic of such rivers: they usually pass through agricultural lands and residential areas, and along the way, the water becomes increasingly contaminated with microbial pollutants, which come from both direct sources and runoff. This is all consistent with the data the research team has found in other Balkan River networks (Dimitrova et al., 2021). The box plots make that pattern hard to miss.

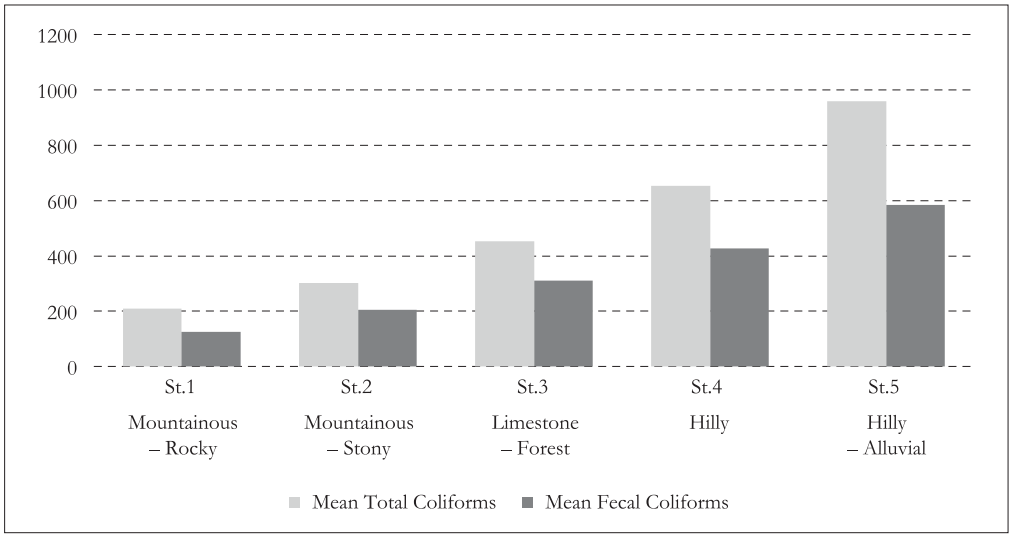


Figure 7. *Bank Typology*
(source: field data collected by Bakaj et al., 2024)

A distinct gradient of increasing microbial contamination from natural to anthropogenically influenced zones can be seen in the spatial distribution of total and fecal coliforms across various land-use categories and bank typologies in the Shushicë River. The highest coliform loads, exceeding 700–1000 MPN/100 mL, are found in agricultural urban peripheral and agricultural residential areas (St. 4–5), suggesting a significant impact from household wastewater, septic leakage, and runoff from cultivated lands pressure

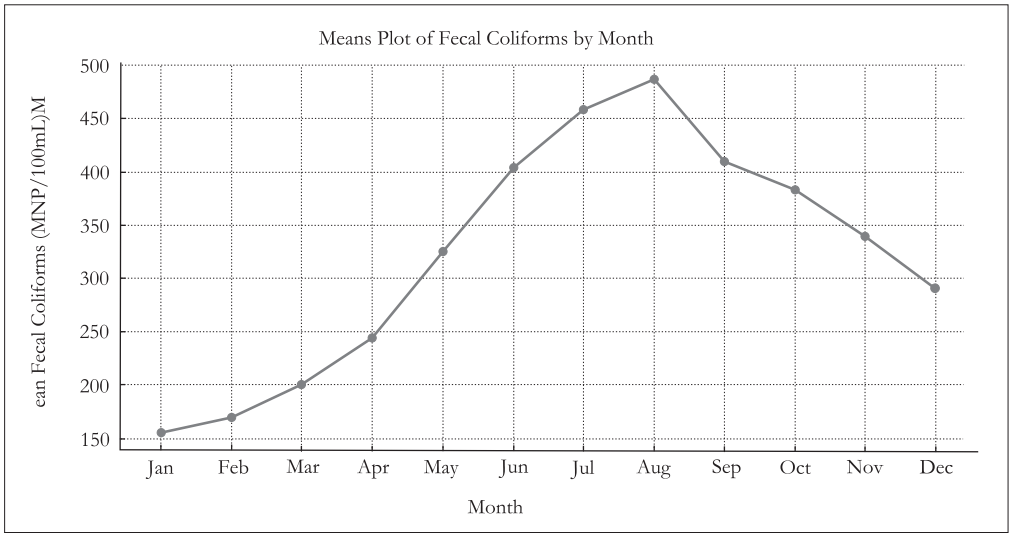


Figure 8. *Means plot of fecal coliform by month*
(source: field data collected by Bakaj et al., 2024)

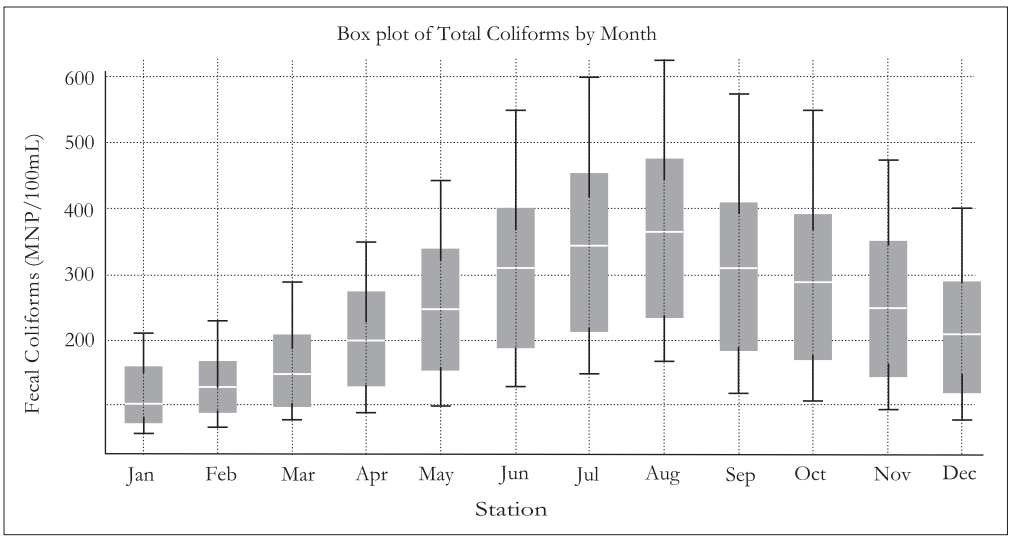


Figure 9. *Box plot of total coliform by month*
(source: field data collected by Bakaj et al., 2024)

factors, which have also been reported in studies of mixed-use river basins worldwide (Rama et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2021).

Bank typology even more clearly shows this trend: the mountainous rocky and mountainous–stony sections have the lowest contamination, while the hilly and hilly alluvial banks which are usually associated with higher settlement density have the highest bacterial levels.

The monthly boxplots of total and fecal coliforms in the Shushicë River show a uniform seasonal pattern. The microbial loads are significantly lower during the winter months (January–March) and gradually increase toward late spring and summer (May–August) followed by a decrease in autumn (October–December). The bacterial growth is very much temperature-dependent and thus agricultural runoff and anthropogenic activities during the dry season, which lower the river dilution capacity, are the main reasons of the observed trend. These are quite common patterns in many other European river systems.

One of such patterns is reported by studies from the Danube River Basin which reveal that coliform concentrations are much higher in summer due to hot temperatures and livestock activities (Kirschner et al., 2017). A study on the Po River, Italy also finds that seasonal microbial peaks are caused by irrigation return flows and river discharge reduction in summer (Poma et al., 2020).

The Shushica River's monthly variation in total and fecal coliforms, with winter minimums and late spring and summer maximums, is consistent with seasonal microbial fluctuations frequently documented in river systems worldwide. Similar to those found in the Loire River (France), where fecal coliforms peaked in warm, low-flow conditions, the notable

increase between May and August is explained by the ideal temperature for bacterial growth, low river discharge, and high agricultural and recreational activities (Servais et al., 2007).

Studies from the Rhine and Elbe Rivers in central Europe demonstrate that summertime low flow conditions and increasing wastewater input led to noticeably greater levels of fecal indicator bacteria (Schmidt et al., 2020). The same thermal dependence is shown in Portuguese rivers like Mondego and Tagus, where summertime peaks are associated with urban effluents and agricultural runoff (Ribeiro et al., 2021).

Shushica River's decline starting in September is consistent with cooling temperatures and hydrological recovery, which is similar to fall declines seen in Scandinavian rivers (Andersen et al., 2018). Therefore, the Shushica River's seasonal pattern is highly consistent with the global rivers microbiological dynamics that are influenced by land-use intensity, hydrology, and temperature.

ANALYSIS OF PHYSICOCHEMICAL DATA

Shushica River dataset's descriptive statistics (N = 60 for each parameter) show a physicochemical profile that is comparatively stable and moderately variable, which is typical of semi-mountainous Mediterranean rivers. Despite seasonal variations, the water temperature (mean = 15.97°C; SD = 4.95) is within the reported range for other Albanian rivers, such as the Vjosa and Drin (14–20°C), indicating natural thermal dynamics with little thermal pollution (Shumka & Grazhdani, 2015; Cullaj et al., 2017).

Table 3: All sampling stations' descriptive statistics of physicochemical parameters

		Station	Month	T (°C)	pH	ORP (mV)	EC (µS/cm)	TDS (mg/L)	TSS (mg/L)	Turbidity (NTU)	DO (mg/L)	DO%
N	Valid	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.00	6.50	15.975	7.715	164.58	366.50	209.75	5.015	3.280	7.270	75.82
Median		3.00	6.50	16.350	7.750	165.00	365.00	210.00	5.000	3.200	7.150	75.50
Mode		1a	1a	10.5a	7.8	165	340	210a	3.8a	3.2	6.5a	74a
Std. Deviation		1.426	3.481	4.9545	.1706	21.457	62.377	35.060	1.1040	.8299	.8746	8.819
Variance		2.034	12.119	24.547	.029	460.417	3890.932	1229.174	1.219	.689	.765	77.779
Skewness		.000	.000	-.121	-.454	-.001	.312	.307	.244	.388	.109	-.114
Kurtosis		-1.308	-1.218	-1.425	-.368	-.575	-.704	-.711	-.805	-.389	-.620	-.716

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown
(source: field data collected by Bakaj et al., 2024)

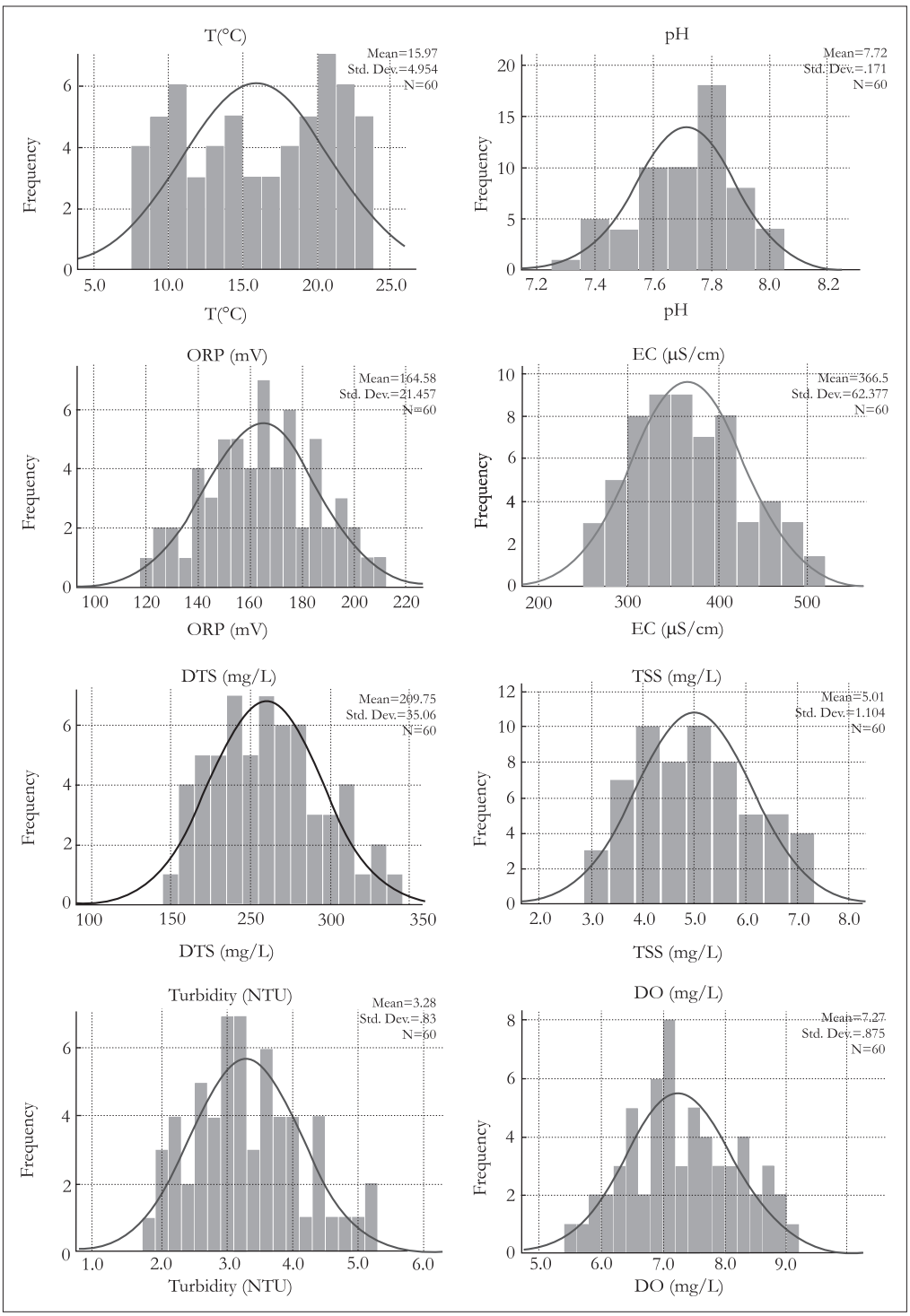


Figure 10. *Histograms of physicochemical parameters*
(source: field data collected by Bakaj et al., 2024)

In line with findings from the Sava and Danube tributaries, where pH normally ranges from 7.5 to 8.3 due to carbonate geology, the pH values (mean = 7.72) stay within circumneutral to slightly alkaline conditions (Marković et al., 2018).

Similar to the Buna and Morača rivers, ORP (mean = 164.6 mV) indicates a moderately oxidative environment with good oxygenation in upstream segments (Hodzic et al., 2020). The TDS (mean ≈ 209 mg/L) and electrical conductivity (mean ≈ 366 μS/cm) exhibit normal distributions consistent with low–medium mineralization; these values are comparable to the Bistrica and Cetina rivers in the Western Balkans, where limestone substrates typically cause EC to range from 250–450 μS/cm (Milačič et al., 2019).

Similar to findings in other semi-mountainous rivers with moderate agricultural pressure, like the Aoos River in Greece, TSS (mean = 5.01 mg/L) and turbidity (mean = 3.28 NTU) also exhibit nearly normal distributions, suggesting minimal sediment disturbance (Skoulikidis et al., 2017).

Similar to DO levels (7–9 mg/L) found in the Velika Morava and Neretva rivers, where favorable hydromorphological conditions support oxygenation even under moderate nutrient loading, dissolved oxygen (mean = 7.27 mg/L), with moderate variation, reflects healthy aeration and ecological functioning in most stations (Bjelanović et al., 2021). Overall, the histogram distributions indicate that seasonality and gradual increases in anthropogenic influence downstream are the main causes of variations in the Shushica River's physicochemical characteristics, which are comparable to those of other comparatively unaltered European rivers.

Highly structured physicochemical and microbiological relationships typical of Mediterranean and Balkan river systems impacted by a combination of anthropogenic and natural pressures are revealed by the correlation matrix. The predominance of carbonate geology and mineral weathering processes is indicated by strong positive correlations between EC, TDS, and ORP ($r > 0.95$). This pattern is also observed in the Vjosa, Drin, and Cetina rivers, where electrical conductivity is closely associated with dissolved solids and redox dynamics (Shumka & Grazhdani, 2015; Milačič et al., 2019).

The findings from the Sava and Danube tributaries, where increased sediment load lowers oxygen saturation and alters redox balance, are consistent with the strong negative correlations between ORP and pH ($r = -0.93$), DO ($r = 0.95$), and turbidity ($r = -0.97$), suggesting that higher acidity and suspended solids reduce oxidative capacity.

The impact of runoff and surface erosion is further highlighted by strong correlations between turbidity, TSS, EC, and TDS ($r = 0.96–0.99$), which mirror sediment-driven conductivity increases seen in the Aoos and Evros rivers (Skoulikidis et al., 2017; Koutrakis et al., 2020).

Microbial indicators display extremely high correlations with mineralization parameters (Total Coliforms with EC: $r = 0.974$; Fecal Coliforms with TDS: $r = 0.964$; Turbidity $r = 0.963$), demonstrating that microbiological contamination increases in parallel with dissolved

solids and suspended particles consistent with river pollution gradients in the Ishëm and Erzen rivers where agricultural and residential wastewater inputs sharply elevate both TDS and fecal contamination (Bajrami et al., 2020).

Table 3: Correlations

	Station	Month	T (°C)	pH	ORP (mV)	EC (µS/cm)	TDS (mg/L)	TSS (mg/L)	Turbidity (NTU)	DO (mg/L)	DO%	Total Coliforms (MPN/100mL)	Fecal Coliforms (MPN/100mL)
Station	1												
Month	0.000	1											
T (°C) 0.201		.400**	1										
pH	.599**	.418**	.822**	1									
ORP (mV)	-.762**	-.378**	-.767**	-.927**	1								
EC (µS/cm)	.833**	0.243	.678**	.864**	-.967**	1							
TDS (mg/L)	.802**	.297*	.685**	.874**	-.957**	.990**	1						
TSS (mg/L)	.885**	0.135	.610**	.833**	-.947**	.984**	.965**	1					
Turbidity (NTU)	.769**	.295*	.746**	.887**	-.972**	.988**	.981**	.966**	1				
DO (mg/L)	-.607**	-.347**	-.873**	-.930**	.949**	-.923**	-.927**	-.884**	-.950**	1			
DO%	-.643**	-.290*	-.856**	-.914**	.953**	-.946**	-.947**	-.911**	-.967**	.992**	1		
Total Coliforms (MPN/100mL)	.798**	.328*	.661**	.829**	-.950**	.974**	.969**	.953**	.969**	-.875**	-.904**	1	
Fecal Coliforms (MPN/100mL)	.800**	.333**	.641**	.815**	-.939**	.968**	.964**	.948**	.963**	-.863**	-.892**	.997**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
(source: field data collected by Bakaj et al., 2024)

The nearly perfect correlation between total and fecal coliforms ($r = 0.997$) confirms that fecal contamination is the primary driver of overall microbial load, a pattern also reported in the Velika Morava and Neretva rivers subjected to similar mixed pressures (Bjelanović et al., 2021).

Increased organic load lowers oxygen availability, as shown by negative correlations between DO/DO% and microbial indicators ($r = -0.86$ to -0.90). This is consistent with well-known biogeochemical processes that have been observed in European rivers under moderate pollution stress (Almeida et al., 2018). Shushica River correlation structure, which shows a shift from upstream natural conditions to downstream physicochemical enrichment and microbiological contamination caused by land use and human activity, generally agrees well with regional and continental studies.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a thorough evaluation of the Shushica River's physicochemical and microbiological dynamics over a 12-month period and five monitoring stations. It reveals distinct seasonal and spatial patterns connected to both increasing anthropogenic pressures downstream and natural processes. Overall, the physicochemical parameters showed generally good upstream water quality, staying within ranges typical of semi-mountainous Mediterranean rivers.

Strong spatial gradients were seen, though: electrical conductivity, TDS, turbidity, and TSS all steadily increased from the upper to the middle segments, indicating increased mineralization and sediment mobilization linked to soil erosion, agricultural activity, and proximity to urban areas.

The most noticeable decline was seen in microbiological indicators. At stations 3–5, total and fecal coliforms showed sharp increases, with summertime peaks matching lower river discharge and higher temperatures. Fecal contamination is the primary source of the total microbial load, as evidenced by the nearly perfect correlation ($r = 0.997$) between total and fecal coliforms. Strong positive correlations between coliforms and EC, TDS, turbidity, and TSS verify that contamination increases in tandem with particulate matter and dissolved solids, which is indicative of livestock proximity, diffuse agricultural runoff, and inadequate wastewater treatment in the middle basin.

These findings align with regional studies across Albania and the Western Balkans, which similarly report worsening microbiological conditions in river sections adjacent to agricultural and peri-urban land use. Therefore, targeted management measures are urgently required, including improved control of agricultural runoff, enhanced wastewater treatment for rural settlements, riparian buffer restoration, and continuous monitoring of microbiological contamination. Addressing these pressures is essential to preserve the ecological integrity of Shushica River and to prevent further degradation, ensuring safe water quality for both ecosystems and human use.

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"LISTENING FOR THE UNHEARD: A DESK REVIEW AND RESEARCH DESIGN FOR STORYTELLING AS A TOOL TO ADDRESS SCHOOL DROPOUT AMONG MARGINALIZED YOUTH"

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ABSTRACT

Significant efforts have been made to prevent school dropout rates among children; yet, numerous impoverished youths in Albania continue to lack adequate support from conventional educational institutions and protective structures. These youths typically remain unrecorded in official statistics because to their failure to re-enroll, relocation, or evasion of the system's oversight. The causes for their dropout and their experiences are largely overlooked in research and policy discussions. This study tackles a substantial gap by first doing a comprehensive desk evaluation of the existing knowledge regarding school dropout and marginalization in Albania. This information is connected to international commitments and national policies, illustrating the systematic neglect of these young individuals. Secondly, it proposes an innovative approach to qualitative research that employs narrative inquiry to engage participants. This design delineates a framework for an upcoming project that will employ semi-structured interviews and audio/video diaries to capture the narratives of marginalized kids, utilizing thematic narrative analysis for data interpretation. The document underscores stringent ethical safeguards, including informed consent and trauma-informed methodologies, to ensure participant safety and dignity. The objective is to provide innovative concepts that facilitate localized interventions and policy recommendations, enhancing the inclusivity of schools and amplifying the voices of the marginalized.

Keywords: *School dropout, marginalized youth, Albania, storytelling, qualitative research, participatory methods, youth voice, educational policy, invisibility, desk review.*

INTRODUCTION

Despite numerous initiatives and commitments from various nations to reduce the incidence of school dropouts among children and adolescents, many youths in Albania continue to lack adequate support from educational and protective systems (UNESCO 2019; Observatori për të Drejtat e Fëmijëve dhe të Rinjve 2021). These disenfranchised youths—often from disadvantaged homes, internal migratory families, or Roma/Egyptian minorities—frequently operate beyond traditional oversight mechanisms. Their absence, whether due to non-attendance, failure to re-enroll, or inadequate support from dysfunctional social services, signifies a substantial systemic issue that fails to identify and assist the most vulnerable population. Worldwide, dropout is regarded as a significant threat to social cohesiveness and economic stability (Helgøy et al. 2019).258.4 million children adolescents, and young adults globally are not enrolled in educational institutions

The upper secondary age cohort is the majority of this concealed demographic, over fifty percent (UNESCO 2019). In Albania, persistent poverty, identified as the primary determinant of school dropout rates, aggravates this situation, further compounded by increased occurrences of abuse and neglect (Çoku 2019; Hoxhallari 2025).

Historically, research and policy responses in Albania have primarily employed quantitative, input-focused models that track deficits, such as enrolment statistics or academic performance, while overlooking the essential relational, emotional, and psychological factors that contribute to disengagement (Sultana 2006). This quantitative bias has led to two major, interrelated policy failures: the Systemic Invisibility of pupils and a Relational Disconnect between vulnerable students and the supportive infrastructure. The Hidden Drop-Out (HDO) Project revealed that numerous students were physically present yet disengaged psychologically and emotionally. They endured an authoritarian "ping-pong" pedagogical approach that failed to engage them (Sultana 2006).

Furthermore, basic local research confirms the considerable vulnerability of this group: youth who have ceased their schooling are significantly greater at risk of physical violence (67%), psychological abuse (75%), and neglect (40.6%) compared to their peers (Çoku 2019). The data revealed a notable paradox: many abused youngsters adopted a "protective stance," justifying the violence and hiding their true anguish from external observation, therefore making traditional surveys inadequate (Çoku 2019). This suggests that the problem goes beyond simple academic deficiency; it represents a deep psychological harm—a "wounded learner identity"—originating from early relationship trauma and a substantial lack of connectivity (Ramsdal & Wynn 2022).

Statement of the Problem and Research Aim: The lack of relational support, coupled with a high incidence of trauma, creates a crisis of shame and silence, leading to the underrepresentation of youth's personal experiences and causes for disengagement in research and policy discourse. This paper aims to address this significant gap in the evidence through two primary objectives: 1) To perform a comprehensive desk review synthesizing the existing empirical evidence and policy shortcomings in Albania concerning marginalized youth and dropout rates, and 2) To propose a novel and rigorous Critical Narrative Inquiry

(CNI) research design, employing storytelling techniques as the essential methodological instrument to reveal the psychological and relational mechanisms underlying exclusion. The primary objective is to gather data that can facilitate policy modifications that are both efficacious and centered on individuals.

This article seeks to establish a robust framework for qualitative research by utilizing a diverse array of sources, encompassing regional studies and global literature on narrative inquiry and thematic analysis. The narrative approach is crucial to this study, functioning as both a research tool and a mechanism for elevating the voices of youth often marginalized in formal discussions. Narrative inquiry thus serves as a transformative instrument that links actual experiences with enduring policy issues.

The issue of school dropouts among marginalized adolescents in Albania has emerged as a significant research focus in recent years. These youths, sometimes excluded from conventional educational possibilities and unaccounted for in official statistics, constitute a demographic that has historically been underserved. In Albania, poverty, ethnic minority status, disability, and other intersecting vulnerabilities can result in marginalization. Conventional educational and social protection institutions are struggling to address these issues. Narrative techniques and innovative concepts have been proposed to assist policymakers and practitioners in formulating more effective interventions by illustrating the lived experiences of these young individuals.

This paper outlines a study framework employing narrative methodologies—consisting of desk reviews, semi-structured interviews, and multimedia diaries—to examine and document the experiences of marginalized youth who have withdrawn from the educational system in Albania. The book provides a thorough analysis of the current desk review component, assessing its merits and identifying notable shortcomings. The research aims to construct a comprehensive understanding that addresses the immediate research question while also informing future educational policies and community intervention strategies through a thorough examination of existing sources, policy documents, academic literature, and quantitative data (Çoku 2019, Duci 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The desk review systematically examines existing literature, incorporating local Albanian studies, worldwide comparative policy analyses, and essential methodological books to justify the need for a new study design.

Historical Context and Current Trends

In recent decades, the Albanian educational system has undergone significant transformation. Following the societal and political transformations of the early 1990s, the nation has endeavored to modernize its education system. Despite considerable progress

in infrastructure and capacity development, many young individuals—particularly from underprivileged communities—continue to encounter systemic obstacles to effective education. National organizations and independent research studies frequently indicate that several instances of student dropout remain unreported due to the lack of interaction with conventional educational and administrative systems (Observatori 2021).

The issues of economic instability, growing urbanization, and evolving job market demands, along with policy changes, have exacerbated the dropout crisis. The interplay between internal challenges and external educational quality benchmarks creates a complex scenario where certain students must reconcile economic responsibilities with their scholastic aspirations. In many instances, the choice to disengage from education signifies deeper underlying problems such as poverty, insufficient transportation, and societal pressures. Such dynamics have prompted scholars to explore various methodologies to examine the interrelationships among these social determinants in greater depth.

Marginalized Groups: Who Are They?

Marginalized youth in Albania have diverse characteristics. Rather, they consist of several categories, including children from low-income households, ethnic minorities (such as Roma and Egyptian populations), and youth with impairments. Despite their significant differences, these groups share a commonality: an educational system that frequently fails to acknowledge or address their needs. The absence of transparency in official data further marginalizes them. Research by Çoku (2019) and Hoxhallari (2025) demonstrates that underprivileged populations encounter unequal access to educational resources. Most public schools are structured for middle-class children residing in urban areas. This implies that children from impoverished homes must navigate challenges independently, increasing their likelihood of discontinuing their education. The absence of culturally responsive pedagogical approaches and insufficient community support exacerbate this inequitable condition. Both factors are crucial for retaining these students in school.

The Need for a Narrative Approach

Traditional quantitative methods often inadequately capture the complexities and depth of the dropout problem among marginalized kids. Attendance rates and test scores serve as measures that provide a statistical overview, although they fail to reveal the personal, social, and cultural aspects underlying these patterns. Narrative approaches facilitate the analysis of personal tales, illustrating the intersection of structural barriers and individual experiences that produce effects sometimes hidden from view. The current research paradigm employs theme narrative analysis to position storytelling as both a research methodology and an intervention tool. This strategy possesses significant potential to uncover the concealed dimensions of systemic exclusion and cognitive dissonance inside the education system, so enhancing our comprehension of the actual experiences of young individuals who

disengage from schooling. Researchers may thus surpass traditional survey methods and create a platform for these youthful viewpoints to be recognized, documented, and ultimately integrated into policy-making frameworks.

Dropout and marginalization in the Albanian context

Albania's educational exclusion problem is directly related to poverty and gaps in the system's ability to handle the problem. The 2021 Typologies of Out-of-School Children report showed that a shocking 82% of the Out-of-School Children (OOSC) who were interviewed came from poor families. This means that socioeconomic marginalization is the main reason for all types of exclusion (Observatori për të Drejtat e Fëmijëve dhe të Rinjve 2021). The problem is not just money; outside evaluations show that conditionality, which uses money to change behavior, is important. This means that just giving money to families is not always enough to make them stop letting their kids work (Bourguignon, Ferreira, and Leite 2003). The Observatori research revealed that about 60% of qualifying impoverished families did not receive assistance, despite the availability of targeted financial aid. The primary cause cited was "Lack of information" (33%), indicating a significant deficiency in institutional outreach and communication (Observatori për të Drejtat e Fëmijëve dhe të Rinjve 2021).

Significantly, Çoku's (2019) empirical research demonstrated that this population encounters abuse and neglect at rates substantially exceeding the average. For instance, 67% indicated experiencing physical abuse, while 75.5% reported psychological violence. This quantitative evidence highlights the necessity of a trauma-informed strategy, supporting the assertion that school disengagement often indicates a substantial relational crisis and insufficient care, rather than a lack of cognitive ability (Ramsdal & Wynn 2022).

Inclusive education: current policies and structural gaps

The policy environment of Albania has been shaped by a history of disjointed structural initiatives. The 2006 Donor Appraisal of the National Education Strategy identified significant issues regarding the government's management capabilities, excessive personnel turnover, and the absence of an efficient Education Management Information System (EMIS). These issues rendered it unfeasible for the government to collect significant qualitative data, such as "reasons for school dropout" (Donor Appraisal 2006). Prior initiatives, such as the Hidden Drop-Out Project (2001-2005), aimed to address academic shortcomings through Minimum Necessary Learning Objectives (MNLO). The project's assessment revealed that despite the innovative design, the prevalence of traditional whole-class teaching methods remained widespread (Sultana 2006, 45). Designating students as "Hidden Drop-Outs" produced an unforeseen detrimental effect: it instilled a perception of inadequacy, undermining their self-esteem, which frequently led to their rejection of assistance and further withdrawal (Sultana 2006, 47). This historical discovery illustrates

that structural and academic improvements are futile if the emotional and relational environment is overlooked.

Recent research confirms the persistent presence of capacity gaps. Despite the legal requirement for schools to integrate all kids (Law Nr. 69, 2012), school leaders and educators frequently lack the necessary knowledge or confidence, particularly for students outside the category of Children with Disabilities (CwD) (Duci et al. 2016; Hoxhallari 2025). Furthermore, the capacity of school leaders to tackle inclusion is considerably hindered by restricted autonomy, overwhelming administrative obligations, and a perceived lack of power to challenge systemic inequities (Hoxhallari 2025). International comparative studies from prosperous Nordic contexts corroborate this argument, illustrating that even well-resourced, targeted structural measures are ineffective as they neglect the non-quantifiable, individualized experiences that lead to non-completion (Helgøy et al. 2019). Because of this, the system does not provide the most important requirement for re-engagement: "establishing a trustful relationship" between the student and a supportive adult (Ramsdal & Wynn 2022, 11).

Storytelling as method and pedagogy

This study advocates for a shift from the limitations of quantitative data and structural policy to a Critical Narrative Inquiry (CNI) framework, rooted on the Critical Paradigm (Pino Gavidia & Adu 2022). This paradigm asserts that dropout is not a human shortcoming but rather a result of power dynamics and socio-political and economic values that promote marginalization (Pino Gavidia & Adu 2022). Narratives are not merely individual experiences; they are societal constructs that illustrate the structure of Albanian society. Narrative Inquiry, as proposed by Clandinin et al. (2010), shifts the perspective on school departure from a "single point in time" to an understanding of it as a "complex set of storied events developed over time," highlighting the relational aspects of Sociality, Temporality, and Place (Pino Gavidia & Adu 2022). It transforms the inquiry from "How many victims exist?" to "What narrative are they experiencing?" Clandinin et al. (2010).

Moreover, storytelling serves as a deliberate educational strategy, aligned with Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and its aim of fostering Transformational Resistance (Cammarota 2024). YPAR formally engages children in critical analyses of their injustices, promoting agency and facilitating students' comprehension of their roles and prospects in history, thus contesting the dominant "banking education" paradigm typically observed in conventional schools (Cammarota 2024). For underprivileged kids, self-representation is crucial for challenging the "wounded learner identity" established via prolonged failure (Ramsdal & Wynn 2022).

Ethical considerations in research with vulnerable youth

Due to numerous reports of abuse and neglect (Çoku 2019), any research involving this population must be thoroughly trauma-informed. The ethical framework must surpass simple administrative assent to include Relational assent, requiring continuous negotiation

and collaboration with the participant and their caregivers (Palmberger 2025). The participant's physical and emotional safety must be prioritized, requiring clear methods for securing psychosocial support in the case of a disclosure. The research design must ensure that participants maintain control over "what they share and its interpretation," seeing this power as vital for fostering agency in marginalized groups (Palmberger 2025).

NARRATIVE METHODS AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

Methodological Foundations and Thematic Analysis

The methodological foundations of this research are informed by established studies, including those by Ahmed et al. (2025) and Byrne (2021), which highlight the significance of thematic analysis in qualitative research. The thematic narrative analysis process consists of several crucial stages:

- Data Collection: Gathering narratives via interviews, diaries, and policy reviews.
- Transcription and Coding: Converting oral and visual narratives into analyzable text, followed by inductive and deductive coding to identify recurring themes.
- Theme Development: Aggregating initial codes into broader thematic areas that reflect critical aspects of the dropout phenomenon.
- Interpretation: Analyzing themes in relation to the broader socio-political and educational context of Albania.

This rigorous approach enables the research to substantiate its findings with comprehensive data. The research seeks to enhance understanding by integrating narrative approach with local data and firsthand perspectives, perhaps informing innovative policy responses and interventions targeted to the needs of marginalized populations.

Overview of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry posits that personal narratives reveal the social, cultural, and emotional aspects of lived experiences. Narrative approaches, grounded in literary theory and social research methodology, enhance the researcher's understanding of the complexities of identity, memory, and agency among study participants. Narrative inquiry serves as a powerful tool in the context of school dropout, illuminating stories that disclose both systemic and individual factors contributing to educational disengagement.

The framework outlined in the research employs multiple qualitative methods, specifically:

- **Desk Review:** A systematic analysis of existing academic literature, policy documents, and gray literature, which sets the stage for the empirical component.

- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Designed to elicit detailed personal accounts and shed light on the contextual factors influencing dropout decisions.
- **Multimedia Diaries:** Incorporation of audio and video diaries allows for real-time, unfiltered narratives that capture spontaneous reflections and emotional responses.

Proposed research design

This section details the design for a future qualitative study aimed at uncovering the deep-rooted, relational drivers of school dropout.

Research Questions

The proposed research will be guided by three main questions:

- How do marginalized youth narrate their experiences of dropping out, particularly concerning the conflict between familial, economic, and institutional responsibilities?
- What specific relational factors (e.g., attachment to parents, peer dynamics, teacher interaction) contribute to the formation of a "wounded learner identity" among this cohort?
- What policy-relevant solutions and forward-looking "stories to live by" are present in the prescriptive narratives of marginalized youth?

Methodology

Approach: The study will use a Critical Narrative Inquiry (CNI) methodology, incorporating elements of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR).

A selective sample technique will be employed to identify 15-20 underprivileged teenagers (ages 14-17) who have disengaged from the nine-year basic or upper secondary school system. The sampling will focus on the specific typologies identified in local research, highlighting youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those with considerable exposure to violence and neglect, and individuals from Roma and Egyptian minority groups (Observatori për të Drejtat e Fëmijëve dhe të Rinjve 2021). Reliable non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and municipal child protection units (CPUs) will assist in recruiting to establish confidence initially. To bridge the digital divide, the project will provide low-cost loaner devices or offline-capable recording tools for participants who lack personal access to technology.

Data Collection Phases: The data collection will happen in two parts:

Phase I: Semi-structured Narrative Interviews (SSNIs): A researcher will conduct initial in-depth, one-on-one interviews, assuming the role of a "caring teacher" to establish a robust foundation of trust (Ramsdal & Wynn 2022; Palmberger 2025). The interview guides will employ techniques such as matching and eliciting to facilitate the narration of

comprehensive, episodic accounts regarding their decision to depart from school and their endeavors for agency (Kendall & Kendall 2012).

Phase II: Audio/Video Diaries (Multimodal): After the SSNIs, participants will have a safe digital way (like a simple smartphone/app interface) to keep multimodal diaries for four weeks (Palmberger 2025). This method allows young people to write down their "narratives, emotions, and reflections on the spot and in real time," which shows how chaotic their daily lives are (Palmberger 2025, 4). This multimodal approach is crucial for marginalized youth who may face challenges with literacy and may find it more accessible to convey intricate emotional experiences, such as trauma or resilience, through visual, auditory, or embodied modalities (Jewitt 2013).

Ethical Considerations and the Role of Empathy

Conducting research with vulnerable populations necessitates a robust framework of ethical guidelines. The study design includes multiple ethical safeguards:

Informed Consent: Ensuring that participants understand the study's purpose and the utilization of their personal narratives.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: Protecting the identities of participants, particularly in contexts where personal revelations may result in further discrimination or harm.

Trauma-Informed Practices: Recognizing that disclosing personal dropout experiences may cause emotional suffering, the research design includes provisions for psychological support and referral mechanisms.

Secure Psychosocial Support: A formal agreement will be made with an outside psychosocial service that is dedicated to providing immediate, free, and private referrals for any participant who reports severe or ongoing harm.

Agency through Modality: Participants can choose how much and how they want to share information through audio and video diaries, which protects their right to speak for themselves. These ethical measures safeguard participants and enhance the study's validity and reliability by fostering an environment where individuals feel secure and unencumbered in expressing their opinions. For narrative inquiry to be effective, it is essential that participants feel at ease sharing their tales. This is due to its direct impact on the depth and authenticity of the acquired data.

Data Analysis Plan

The interview guides will concentrate on eliciting narratives regarding three principal aspects of CNI: Sociality (interactions with family, friends, and educational personnel), Temporality (the trajectory of disengagement, encompassing early childhood experiences), and Place (the impact of home, school, and community surroundings). The diary prompts

will be open-ended and non-judgmental, allowing individuals to reflect on their everyday challenges, joyful experiences, and aspirations for the future.

The data will be analyzed using Thematic Narrative Analysis, employing Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (Byrne 2021; Ahmed et al. 2025). RTA is theoretically flexible, allowing for researcher subjectivity and creativity, which is crucial for ethically interpreting trauma-informed narratives (Byrne 2021). The analysis will be both recursive and iterative, advancing through the six phases of RTA: Familiarization, Coding, Searching, Reviewing, Defining/Naming, and Writing.

The findings will be structured in accordance with the framework proposed by Kendall and Kendall (2012) to classify both the expressions of the youth and the reasoning underlying their narratives:

Tabel 1. Data Collection Model

Analytical Function	Purpose in Research
Experiential	To describe the chaotic, day-to-day reality of exclusion and lack of support.
Explanatory	To capture the youth's own reasons why the system failed them and how they became the "wounded learner."
Validating	To explore their "story to live by," capturing narratives of survival, agency, and Transformational Resistance.
Prescriptive	To extract explicit policy suggestions and forward-looking actions from their narratives.

Source: Author own construct from desk review.

The multimodal data will be examined through a functional lens, focusing on the interaction among text, image, and sound to elucidate the emotional and interpersonal context of the communication (Jewitt 2013). The proposed methodology is very likely to work in a pilot phase in Albania. It is a low-cost, high-impact solution that uses digital tools that are easy to get and can be put into action by working with trusted local NGOs and existing child protection units (Woel & Metaj 2012). Using the Observatori's existing typologies makes it possible to sample in a targeted and efficient way. The research's non-formal, relational approach is specifically intended to circumvent the entrenched bureaucratic and structural obstacles identified in the literature, enabling the study to produce policy-relevant knowledge swiftly.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES AND PRACTICAL PATHWAYS

The proposed Critical Narrative Inquiry is anticipated to produce three fundamental categories of transformative insights that directly guide actionable strategies for institutional reform.

New Insights: The True Reasons for Dropout

The study will clarify the depth of the "wounded learner identity" (Ramsdal & Wynn 2022) and demonstrate a direct link to recorded cases of neglect and abuse (Çoku 2019), elevating the policy discussion from the superficial term "slacker" to the significant reality of the traumatized survivor. Narratives will clarify the divergent, conflicting obligations that youth face (e.g., child labour versus school attendance), providing a nuanced understanding of the economic and opportunity costs of education among Albania's most impoverished families (Bourguignon, Ferreira, and Leite 2003; Observatori për të Drejtat e Fëmijëve dhe të Rinjve 2021). The research will primarily examine the "prescriptive" function of juvenile narratives—their inherent capacity to propose remedies. This would transform the discourse surrounding policy from attributing blame on the youth to empowering them as authorities on their own marginalization (Cammarota 2024).

The four-part analytical framework (Experiential, Explanatory, Validating, Prescriptive) will help us come up with specific policy suggestions that can be put into action in the area that will help make empathy and relational safety a permanent part of the culture.

Tabel 2. Actionable Pathways: Connecting Research to Real-World Change

Intervention Pathway	Actionable Recommendation	Source Justification
Relational & Emotional Safety	Formalize the "Caring Adult" Role: Advocate for a compensated, non-teaching mentorship role attached to the Child Protection Units (CPUs), providing the essential long-term, trusted relationship.	Counteracts the failure of staff turnover and burnout by protecting the teacher's psychological capital needed for high-empathy work (Ramsdal & Wynn 2022; Woel & Metaj 2012; Zhao et al. 2022).
Institutionalizing Empathy	Mandate Collaborative Learning: Integrate required, graded collaborative projects across the curriculum to elevate social responsibility and solidarity to the same level as individual academic performance.	Directly addresses the finding that Albanian schools currently reward individualism over solidarity, countering the structural cause of social isolation and prejudice (Poni 2021).
Grassroots Engagement	Non-Bureaucratic Outreach: Use the identified typologies of OOSC to develop highly localized, non-formal, trauma-informed parent and youth dialogue groups run via trusted local NGOs.	Overcomes the barrier of institutional distrust and failure to deliver aid due to simple lack of information and logistics (Observatori për të Drejtat e Fëmijëve dhe të Rinjve 2021; Duci et al. 2016).

Protecting Teacher Calling	Psychological Support for Teachers: Implement mandated reflective practice and burnout reduction programs for teachers and school leaders, recognizing that high-empathy work requires nurturing the teacher's professional "calling."	Ensures the sustainability of relational reforms by maintaining the essential human capital—the compassionate adult—required to implement trauma-informed care (Zhao et al. 2022).

Source: Author own construct from desk review.

Suggested Stakeholders

The results and suggestions will be aimed at important local and international stakeholders who can make changes:

- Schools and Local Government: The results will give school principals and psychosocial staff (Duci et al. 2016) as well as municipal child protection units (CPUs) useful information on how to make outreach plans that are based on trauma and are specific to each area.
- The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) will use the structural policy recommendations, like making the Caring Adult role official, to make changes to its staff and curriculum design.
- International Partners: UNICEF, UNESCO, and development partners (like AADF) can use the CNI evidence to change how they spend their money, moving it away from ineffective structural inputs and toward relational and participatory methods.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DESK REVIEW: STRENGTHS AND GAPS

A properly done desk review is the basis for the research design because it brings together all of the existing data and literature. The current desk review in the study on narrative methods for addressing school dropout among marginalized youth in Albania exhibits significant strengths and discernible areas requiring further enhancement.

Strengths of the Current Desk Review

The desk review appropriately incorporates several sources pertinent to Albania, including works by Çoku (2019), Duci et al. (2016), Observatori (2021), Poni (2021), Sultana (2006), and Woel & Metaj (2012). This particular emphasis provides critical insights into the Albanian educational system and analyses specific socio-cultural and economic aspects affecting dropout rates. Incorporating these sources ensures that the review is grounded in the local context, hence enhancing its use and relevance (Çoku 2019).

The literature reviewed encompasses a diverse array of subjects, including inclusive education, the socio-economic factors contributing to dropout rates, and the challenges confronting contemporary educational institutions. The assessment examines not only dropouts but also how official data and policy conversations exclude underprivileged youth. This diversity of issues enhances the analysis and provides a more comprehensive understanding of the various factors contributing to the decline in school enrolment among disadvantaged groups.

The integration of methodological insights from Ahmed et al. (2025), Byrne (2021), Jewitt (2013), Kendall & Kendall (2012), Palmberger (2025), and Pino Gavidia & Adu (2022) enhances the review with a solid theoretical foundation. These sources provide guidance on narrative inquiry, theme analysis, and qualitative research, establishing a framework that supports the approach of the current study. This methodological basis is essential for ensuring that the study design is both rigorous and replicable.

The desk review is informed by international studies on school dropout and inclusive education from countries such as Norway, Sweden, and Latin America (e.g., Bourguignon et al., 2003; Durand et al., 2024; Helgøy et al., 2019; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022). These sources provide substantial comparative settings that might clarify the similarities and contrasts between Albania and other locations, thereby improving the analytical framework and suggesting potential intervention strategies.

The table below shows a structured comparison of important research sources, showing what they focus on, how they do their work, and how they relate to the study of school dropouts among marginalized youth in Albania.

Tabel 3. Comparative Data Table on Research Sources

Source	Focus Area	Methodology/ Approach	Relevance
Çoku (2019)	Inclusive education in Albania	Qualitative analysis, case studies	Local context; highlights systemic educational challenges[^Çoku2019]
Duci et al. (2016)	Policy gaps in Albanian educational system	Desk review; policy document analysis	Provides background on policy deficiencies
Observatori (2021)	Statistical trends in dropout	Quantitative data; government reports	Offers disaggregated data on dropout trends
Poni (2021)	Experiences of marginalized youth	Narrative inquiry; interviews	Direct accounts from affected populations
Sultana (2006)	Historical dimensions of dropout	Longitudinal analysis	Provides historical context; needs updating
Ahmed et al. (2025) & Byrne (2021)	Methodological guidance on thematic analysis	Qualitative methodologies, thematic coding	Underpins the research design with robust methods

Palmberger (2025)	Digital storytelling and multimedia diaries	Case studies; digital narrative methods	Validates multimedia diary approach; suggests best practices
Bourguignon et al. (2003)	Economic barriers and conditional cash transfers	Comparative studies; policy analysis	Relevant for linking economic factors to dropout

Table Explanation: This table encapsulates the comparative strengths of various sources, illustrating both regional insights and methodological guidelines crucial for understanding and addressing school dropout among marginalized youth. Each source contributes uniquely, thereby offering a multi-dimensional view of the challenges and potential interventions.

Identified Gaps and Opportunities for Expansion

The current desk review has a lot of good points, but it also has some holes that need to be filled in order to fully understand the dropout phenomenon.

Obsolete Policy Evidence and Disaggregated Data: Current legal studies post-2012 examining the impact of current inclusion laws on non-disabled marginalized groups remain few. The study employs extensive data from 2019-2021; nonetheless, detailed, disaggregated data that clarifies the educational pathways of particular minority groups (e.g., internal migrants versus long-term Roma inhabitants) remains scarce, hindering a complete contextual comprehension. The suggested research primarily relies on multimodal digital diaries (Palmberger 2025) due to a deficiency in digital/media literacy context. The desk study still lacks specific literature or local data assessing the real digital literacy levels, device access constraints, and media consumption behaviours of low-SES and Roma/Egyptian youth populations in Albania. This gap provides the CNI technique an opportunity to evolve and mitigate feasibility risks pre-emptively. Familial Financial Obligations and Economic Strain The study must examine how family coping strategies, such as dependence on remittances or participation in the informal sector, directly contradict educational prerequisites. Poverty is the fundamental factor (Observatori 2021). Expanding this domain would improve the congruence of the prescriptive findings with conditional cash transfer schemes.

The relationship between the "wounded learner identity" (Ramsdal & Wynn 2022) and the increased incidence of abuse (Çoku 2019) is substantiated. However, the review might be improved by incorporating global research on trauma-informed educational policy interventions, broadening the current focus on teacher burnout (Zhao et al. 2022) to directly address student mental health crises. The lack of such studies in the local context, poses a gap and an opportunity for further research.

CONCLUSION

In Albania, underprivileged youth have a significant danger of expulsion from educational institutions. This results from ineffective policies, insufficient financing, and ingrained cultural and social hurdles inside the system. This research has methodically examined the

function of narrative techniques as a potent tool to encapsulate the intricate experiences of dropout adolescents, identifying strengths and highlighting essential areas for improvement in the current desk review framework.

This research demonstrates that the dropout rates of vulnerable Albanian kids do not reflect individual academic motivation deficiencies, but instead represent systemic invisibility, relational trauma, and institutional insufficiency (Çoku 2019; Ramsdal & Wynn 2022; Sultana 2006). The desk review revealed a substantial evidence gap: while quantitative data demonstrates the widespread abuse and poverty affecting this group, existing policy frameworks and research methodologies have failed to adequately confront the silence and shame that obscure the youths' genuine experiences.

Main Findings:

- The current desk review effectively integrates Albania-specific research and international methodological guidance, establishing a solid foundation for comprehending the dropout problem.
- Deficiencies in Policy Evidence and Disaggregated Data: Persistent challenges such as outdated policy texts, inadequate data disaggregation, and insufficient representation of minority groups hinder the acquisition of comprehensive contextual insights. Emerging requirements for digital, economic, and psychological health assessments:
- The insufficient examination of economic barriers, mental health challenges, and constraints in digital accessibility underscores essential areas for further inquiry.
- Recommendations for an Extensive Research Framework: A comprehensive research strategy that integrates narrative inquiry, ethnographic techniques, and community-based participatory research is proposed to improve the academic understanding of dropout occurrences and to inform effective policy solutions.

This study presents a Critical Narrative Inquiry (CNI) research approach utilizing multimodal storytelling, encompassing semi-structured interviews and audio/video diaries. This methodology establishes a framework to connect recorded trauma to substantial policy measures (Cammarota 2024; Pino Gavidia & Adu 2022). This approach positions youth as authorities on their own marginalization, empowering them to act as catalysts for transformative resistance against structural inadequacies. The functional analysis methodology will ensure that the rich subjective data is transformed into clear, practical recommendations. It will institutionalize the "Caring Adult" role and integrate empathy into school practices.

A robust narrative strategy, supported by contemporary policy evaluations and comprehensive disaggregated data, presents much promise in addressing the complex issue of school dropout among vulnerable kids in Albania. By amplifying marginalized perspectives through narrative, the research might facilitate transformative improvements in education that transcend conventional methodologies. It is imperative that future studies

and legislation include these ideas to ensure that all underprivileged adolescents are provided the opportunity to succeed within a more inclusive educational environment.

In conclusion, rectifying the deficiencies highlighted in the desk review and enhancing the research framework would yield interventions that are more inclusive, robust, and attuned to local requirements. This can reverse the trend of student attrition and foster enduring educational and social inclusion among Albania's most vulnerable populations.

This work establishes a crucial foundation for future policy participation. We strongly recommend the immediate testing of this qualitative research approach in collaboration with local NGOs, the University of Tirana, and foreign partners. To disrupt the cycle of invisibility and establish a genuinely inclusive, humane, and effective educational system in Albania, it is imperative to address this evidence gap by including the authentic perspectives of individuals who have remained unheard.

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THE IMPACT OF EU LEGAL REFORMS ON ALBANIAN NATIONALS: EMPLOYMENT, CITIZENSHIP, AND ASYLUM WITHIN THE 2010–2024 IMMIGRATION FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

The European Union in the last decade has implemented important legal reforms aimed at better regulating migration, balancing border security, labour market demands, and the protection of migrants' fundamental rights. These reforms encompass measures regulating the right to employment, access to social and economic benefits, and the procedures for submitting and reviewing asylum applications. The article examines the development of European Union policies on migrants' rights and assesses the impact of these changes on Albanian citizens, who are among the most mobile groups in the Western Balkans region. This paper aims to refer to a comparative legal and policy-oriented approach, focusing on the innovations of European Union legislation, such as the Single Permit Directive, the Qualification Directive, the Return Directive, and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. Alongside the legal analysis, the study also addresses the challenges of policymakers in some EU member states. An additional aspect of the study is Albanians' awareness and understanding of recent changes in and integration. Based on interviews with Albanian migrants and relevant stakeholders, the study highlights a lack of clear communication on European policies, which hinders informed decision-making and creates legal uncertainty. Despite the EU's efforts to unify policies across all member states, its approach remains uneven. Albanian citizens often face difficulties in accessing employment procedures, in regulating their legal status, and in statehood processes. The study offers recommendations for better policies to protect Western Balkan migrants' rights.

Keywords: *European Union, migration, EU directives, integration, asylum policy.*

INTRODUCTION

The surge in Albanian emigration to the European Union between 2010 and 2024 has had a significant impact on the country's demography and social structure, particularly in the Western Balkans region. During this period, our nation experienced an important level of emigration, reaching in 2024 the second-highest rate of negative net migration in Europe, with around 28,800 emigrants, after Türkiye[1]. This development represents a substantial rise from 2014, when the negative net migration level was –21,700[2].

The dynamics can be explained through the "push–pull" theory, which distinguishes between the factors pushing individuals to leave their home country and the factors pulling them toward destination countries, as well as through theories of social and economic integration that help in understanding the adaptation process for migrants[3].

Although existing literature has primarily focused on economic and social aspects, leaving a gap regarding the impact of EU legal reforms on migrants' real experiences, this study addresses the gap by examining access to employment, recognition of qualifications, social integration, and civil rights, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of European policies' effects on Albanian migrants and providing evidence-based recommendations for policymakers in Albania and the EU[4].

The study, therefore, examines the impact of EU legislative reforms on the core aspects of the migrant experience. The study period, 2010–2024, marked by deep transformations in EU migration governance, covers a critical phase from visa liberalization in 2010 to the adoption of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, reflecting significant shifts in European migration policies.[5]

The central research question guiding this study is: How do EU legal reforms affect employment, social integration, civil rights, and asylum procedures for Albanian citizens?

To answer this question, structured questionnaires were used to collect data on migrants' perceptions of EU migration policies, access to employment, recognition of qualifications, social integration, and civil rights.

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[1] Eurostat, *Migration and migrant population statistics* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023), Accessed September 24, 2025. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics explained/index.php?title=Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics.

[2] Indeksonline. "Year 2024: Nearly 80 thousand residence permits for Albanians in EU countries." Accessed October 2025 Year 2024: Nearly 80 thousand residence permits for Albanians in EU countries –Indeksonline.net

[3] Teqja, Eva, and Alketa Marku. "How Immigration Is Managed in Western Europe. Between Harsh Models and Ethical Dilemmas: The Case of Albania as a Sending and Receiving Country for Immigrants." *Public Administration and Regional Studies* 17, no. 2 (2024): 131–48.

[4] European Commission, *New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Legislative Package Adopted by the European Parliament and the Council* (Brussels: European Commission, 2020), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0609.

[5] Lee, "A Theory of Migration," 52.

The findings show that, on the one hand, gaps persist between formal legislation and everyday experiences, including limited access to skilled employment, unequal treatment, and ongoing discrimination. On the other hand, European reforms have contributed to improvements by facilitating employment opportunities, supporting integration, and strengthening the overall protection of Albanian migrants' rights (Migration Policy Institute, 2025).

These results underscore the need for targeted policy measures to address the enduring disparities between the legal framework and migrants' lived realities, particularly in countries such as Greece and Italy.[6]

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Migration has been one of the primary challenges facing the European Union (EU) over the past decade, intensifying due to economic, political, and geostrategic factors.[7] This increase in migratory flows has had a noticeable impact on the Western Balkan countries, where Albanians constitute one of the largest migrant groups.

This chapter of the literature review focuses on analyzing these reforms and their impact on Albanian migrants. By examining the positive effects and challenges posed by these legislative changes, this review provides a detailed overview of how these reforms have affected the improvement of the quality of life of migrants, and how they can contribute to the development of more effective policies to protect the rights of this group of people. In this context, we will also examine the possible changes that these reforms have brought to legal procedures and integration opportunities for Albanian migrants in EU societies.

In conducting this review, particular attention is paid to academic studies, EU policy documents, and international reports addressing migration governance, legal frameworks, and integration outcomes. The aim is not only to synthesize existing knowledge, but also to critically assess how different reforms have shaped the experiences of Albanian migrants, identifying gaps in the literature and potential directions for future research.

KEY LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND IMPACT ON ALBANIAN MIGRANTS

Visa Liberalization (2010)

During the period 2010–2024, the European Union's legal framework underwent significant changes regarding the treatment of Albanian migrants. One of the most important steps

[6] Mai, Nicola, and Cristiana Paladini. 2013. *Flexible Citizenship and Labor Migration: Albanian Migrants' Experiences in Italy and Greece.* In Migration in the Mediterranean, edited by Russell King, 85–104. London: Routledge.

[7] de Haas, Hein. "A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework." *Comparative Migration Studies* 8, no. 1 (2020): 1-18

was the visa liberalization, which marked a key moment for Albania. This change was implemented with the adoption of Regulation (EU) No 1091/2010[8], which amended Regulation (EU) No 539/2001[9], moving Albania (together with Bosnia and Herzegovina) from the list of countries requiring a visa to the list of countries exempt from this obligation (European Union, 2010)[10].

This measure became valid for short stays of up to 90 days within any 180 days in the Schengen area and represents a turning point in the country's process of approximation to the EU. During the period 2010–2024, Albanians living abroad have experienced significant changes, especially in Europe, because of visa liberalization and other EU reforms. Visa liberalization facilitated movement for short stays, giving Albanians more opportunities for travel, family visits, and access to the labor market in the Schengen area. Despite the easing of movement, many Albanians have faced difficulties finding stable jobs and integrating into the host society. Some individuals have taken advantage of visa liberalization to stay longer than allowed or to seek asylum without clear criteria, becoming subject to stronger protection measures and controls from the EU[11].

Finally, visa liberalization for Albania has opened new doors for Albanian citizens, enabling free movement and contributing to their integration into Europe. This step has improved Albanians' access to labor markets and has fostered cultural and economic exchanges with EU countries. However, remaining challenges in the field of migration and integration demonstrate the need for continued engagement by Albanian and European institutions.

Single Permit Directive

After visa liberalization (EU Regulation 2010)[12] a key step was the adoption of Regulation (EU) No 1024/2011 by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, which simplified procedures and guaranteed equal rights for third-country workers[13]. For

[8] European Union, *Regulation (EU) No 1091/2010 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 November 2010,* Official Journal of the European Union L329, 14 December 2010. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32010R1091

[9] Council of the European Union. *Council Regulation (EC) No 539/2001 of 15 March 2001 listing the third countries whose nationals must be in possession of visas when crossing the external borders and those whose nationals are exempt from that requirement.* Official Journal of the European Communities, L 81/1, March 21, 2001. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2001/539/oj/eng

[10] *Regulation (EU) No 1091/2010 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 November 2010 amending Council Regulation (EC) No 539/2001 listing the third countries whose nationals must be in possession of visas when crossing the external borders and those whose nationals are exempt from that requirement,* Official Journal of the European Union, L 329, 14 December 2010, p. 1

[11] INSTAT. *Diaspora e Shqipërisë në Shifra.* Tiranë: Instituti i Statistikave, 2020, 18–19 https://www.instat.gov.al/media/7848/diaspora-ne-shifra-2020.pdf

[12] *Regulation (EU) No 1091/2010 of 24 November 2010 amending Council Regulation* (EC) No 539/2001, Official Journal of the European Union, L 329 (14 December 2010): 1

[13] European Parliament and Council. *Directive 2011/98/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on a single application procedure for a single permit for third-country nationals to reside and work in the territory of a Member State.* Official Journal of the European Union L343, 23 December 2011.

Albanian migrants, a turning point was the adoption of the Single Permit Directive, which merged the work permit with the residence permit. Although visa liberalization gave Albanians the right to travel visa-free for up to 90 days in the Schengen area, they could not work during this period. The Single Permit Directive[14] brought a step forward by facilitating the procedures for long-term legal employment for third-country nationals. This change has significantly reduced bureaucracy and facilitated faster entry into the labor market in the Member State. Before visa liberalization, migrants often faced separate application systems, which created legal uncertainty and opportunities for abuse by employers. The Directive ensured that legally employed Albanian workers had the same rights as national workers regarding pay, working conditions, social security, access to healthcare and public services, and the right to vocational education and training. For Albanians with qualifications and professional experience, this Directive became a key tool for entering the formal labor market in the EU, effectively reducing the legal uncertainty that existed after visa liberalization[15].

Qualification Directive

The Qualification Directive (Directive 2011/95/EU), adopted by the European Parliament and Council on December 13, 2011, and entering into force on January 20, 2012, established harmonized standards for granting refugee status and subsidiary protection across the European Union, replacing Council Directive 2004/83/EC[16]. Its primary goal is to ensure a consistent and rights-based approach to international protection for third-country nationals and stateless people, in line with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU[17]

This Directive replaced the earlier version (European Union 2004) [18], aiming to harmonize the standards for recognizing the status of refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection across the European Union. A core principle of the Directive is the principle of *non-refoulement*, that is, the absolute prohibition on returning refugees or asylum seekers

[14] European Parliament and Council, *Directive 2011/98/EU of 13 December 2011,* Official Journal of the European Union, L343/1, December 23, 2011, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32011L0098.

[15] Fragomen, "Albania: New Single Permit Available for Digital Nomads and Others," January 10, 2022, https://www.fragomen.com/insights/albania-new-single-permit-available-for-digital-nomads-and-others.html.

[16] European Parliament and Council. *Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast).* Official Journal of the European Union L337, 20 December 2011, 9–26.

[17] Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Qualification Directive, "The Qualification Directive respects the fundamental rights and observes the principles recognized in particular by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union... this Directive seeks to ensure full respect for human dignity and the right to asylum," accessed September 28, 2025, https://charter.humanrights.at/manual/qualification.

[18] Council of the European Union, *Council Directive 2004/83/EC of 29 April 2004 on minimum standards for the qualification and status of third country nationals or stateless persons as refugees or as persons who otherwise need international protection and the content of the protection granted,* Official Journal of the European Union L304, 30 September 2004, 12–23.

to a country where they may face persecution, torture, or inhuman or degrading treatment. This principle is enshrined in Article 33 of the 1951 Geneva Convention[19] relating to the Status of Refugees and is a cornerstone of international refugee protection.

This directive requires member states to ensure effective protection by prohibiting refoulement and reinforces the international legal obligation to respect fundamental rights, even in the face of national migration restriction policies[20]. A significant innovation was the move from fragmented, inconsistent national procedures to a single application process, which allows for more efficient and uniform decision-making and generally facilitates quicker access to the labor market and social integration for those granted protection. Additionally, the Directive clearly delineates the rights of beneficiaries, encompassing employment, education, healthcare, housing, and protection against arbitrary removal (Lambert 2014)[21]

For most Albanians, who did not qualify for refugee status because Albania is considered a "safe country," the main impact of the Qualification Directive was procedural: asylum applications were processed more quickly and consistently, and in the rare cases where Albanians faced risk or discrimination in their country of origin, the Directive provided a stronger legal basis for protection[22]. Although the Directive harmonized the law, some scholars point out that in practice, Albanians are often excluded from international protection, as Member States use the concept of "safe country" to reject claims, limiting their access to legal protection and leaving them vulnerable. The designation of "safe countries of origin" is a key aspect of EU asylum law, allowing Member States to streamline the processing of asylum applications. However, the criteria for such designation must be rigorously justified and subject to judicial oversight to comply with EU and international law. This was underscored by the Court of Justice of the European Union in its landmark judgment on August 1, 2025, in the joined cases C-758/24 [Alace] and C-759/24 [Canpelli][23].

In this decision, the CJEU emphasized that any designation of a third country as "safe" must be based on transparent data and accessible sources, ensuring both applicants and the judiciary can fully assess the validity of such designations. The Court highlighted that effective judicial review is essential to uphold the rights of asylum seekers, ensuring that no group within the designated country is left unprotected.Recent decisions by the Court of

[19] United Nations, *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees,* 28 July 1951, United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 189, p. 137, Article 33.

[20] Cathryn Costello and Michelle Foster, "Chapter Title," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Refugee Law,* ed. Cathryn Costello, Michelle Foster, and Jane McAdam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 88.

[21] Hélène Lambert, *Seeking Asylum: Comparative Law and Practice in Selected European Countries* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 93.

[22] Peter William Walsh and Kotaro Oriishi. "Safe Country Concepts and Refugee Status Determination in Europe." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 35, no. 3 (2022): 451–475

[23] Court of Justice of the European Union, "Judgment of 1 August 2025 in Joined Cases C-758/24 [Alice] and C-759/24 [Capelli]: International protection and the designation of a third country as a 'safe country of origin'," Luxembourg, 2025

Justice of the European Union have emphasized that any designation of a "safe country" must be carefully justified and subject to proper judicial review to ensure compliance with EU and international law (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2025)

Asylum Procedures Directive

The Asylum Procedures Directive (Directive 2013/32/EU)[24] establishes common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection across EU Member States, aiming to ensure fairness, transparency, and efficiency in asylum decision-making. Its purpose is to harmonize national procedures, reduce disparities, and safeguard the procedural rights of all applicants, regardless of nationality[25].

The Asylum Procedures Directive establishes minimum standards that ensure access to the asylum procedure, including the right to legal assistance, personal interviews, and the right to an effective remedy against negative decisions (Lambert 2014)[26]. It introduces special safeguards for vulnerable applicants, such as unaccompanied minors and individuals with specific needs, thereby providing additional support throughout the process[27]. For Albanian nationals whose applications often undergo accelerated or border procedures due to Albania's "safe country" designation the Directive requires that such designations be properly justified and subject to judicial review. This mandate has been reinforced in recent decisions by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU)[28] and national courts, ensuring that procedural fairness is upheld and that the rights of asylum seekers are protected through legal oversight.

Reception Conditions Directive

The Reception Conditions Directive[29] sets common EU standards to ensure that asylum seekers, including Albanian migrants, are treated with dignity and humanity. It mandates

[24] European Parliament and Council, *Directive 2013/32/EU of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast),* Official Journal of the European Union L180, 29 June 2013, 60–95, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2013/32/oj/eng.

[25] European Parliament and Council, *Directive 2013/32/EU of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast),* Official Journal of the European Union L180, 29 June 2013, 60–95. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:180:0060:0095:EN:PDF

[26] Lambert, Hélène. *Seeking Asylum: Comparative Law and Practice in Selected European Countries.* Leiden: Brill, 2014.

[27] Peter William Walsh and Kotaro Oriishi. "Safe Country Concepts and Refugee Status Determination in Europe." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 35, no. 3 (2022): 451–475.

[28] Court of Justice of the European Union. "Judgment of 1 August 2025 in Joined Cases C-758/24 [Alace] and C-759/24 [Canpelli]: International protection and the designation of a third country as a 'safe country of origin'." Luxembourg, 2025. https://www.mazzeschi.it/is-italy-albania-asylum-deal-compatible-with-eu-law-insights-from-the-ecj-and-recent-eu-updates/

[29] European Parliament and Council, *Directive 2013/33/EU of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast),* Official Journal of the European Union L180, 29 June 2013, 96–116, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2013/33/oj/eng.

access to adequate housing, food, healthcare, and education, providing special support for vulnerable groups such as children, pregnant women, and trauma victims. For Albanian migrants, this directive primarily enhances procedural protections by harmonizing reception conditions across Member States, thereby reducing disparities and ensuring a more predictable and secure framework during the asylum process. This directive aims to guarantee that applicants live in decent conditions while awaiting their asylum decisions, thus protecting their fundamental rights and facilitating their eventual integration into society. By focusing on the minimum living conditions and social protection, it complements the Qualifications Directive and the Procedures Directive, which focus on criteria for status and examination procedures, respectively. For Albanian migrants, the directive has a primarily procedural impact, improving their legal protection and guaranteeing that they are treated fairly and humanely across EU Member States. By harmonizing reception conditions, the directive helps reduce disparities in treatment and provides Albanian asylum seekers with a more predictable and secure framework during the application process. It aims to ensure that applicants live in decent and humane conditions while their asylum applications are examined, safeguarding their fundamental rights and facilitating their eventual integration into society. This directive completes the European Union's harmonization of the treatment of asylum applicants, focusing primarily on minimum living conditions and social protection, in contrast to the Qualifications Directive and the Procedures Directive, which focus respectively on the criteria for status recognition and the examination procedure (European Union 2013; European Union 2004; European Union 2013a)[30]. According to the ECRE Information Note, while the recast Reception Conditions Directive has raised the standards and improved access to reception conditions for applicants for international protection, it leaves considerable flexibility to Member States in the actual implementation of these standards. This latitude can lead to significant disparities in protection quality and the unequal distribution of asylum seekers across the EU[31].

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) emphasizes that asylum applicants should receive clear, comprehensive, and timely information about their rights and obligations within 15 days of submitting their application. The lack of understandable

[30] European Union, *Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast),* Official Journal of the European Union, L 180 (29 June 2013): 96–116.

European Union, Council Directive 2004/83/EC of 29 April 2004 on minimum standards for the qualification and status of third-country nationals or stateless persons as refugees or as persons who otherwise need international protection and the content of the protection granted, Official Journal of the European Union, L 304 (30 September 2004): 12–23.

European Union, Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast), Official Journal of the European Union, L 180 (29 June 2013): 60–95.

[31] European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), *Information Note on Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast)* (Brussels: ECRE, 2015), 6, https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Information_Note_Reception-2015.pdf.

information, particularly when not provided in a language the applicant understands, can significantly hinder their ability to exercise their rights[32]. ECRE also underscores the need for special protection for vulnerable groups such as children, trauma victims, and unaccompanied minors. They recommend tailored communication, specially trained authorities, and child-friendly procedures to ensure these applicants receive adequate support. Finally, ECRE expresses concern about the broad legal grounds for detention outlined in the directive, warning that this could lead to abuses and human rights violations, especially in Member States with limited resources or under high migratory pressure.[33]

ECRE highlights the importance of timely and clear information for applicants, recommending that Member States provide comprehensive and understandable details about rights and obligations within 15 days of lodging an asylum application. In practice, insufficient or unclear information sometimes not provided in a language the applicant understands has negatively affected applicants' ability to exercise their rights[34].

New Pact on Migration and Asylum

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (April 2024)[35] strengthens border management, harmonizes asylum procedures, and promotes solidarity among Member States. Regarding to this Pact all entrants are registered and screened through the expanded Eurodac system, while rejected applicants face efficient returns and reintegration support[36]. The Pact simplifies and standardizes asylum procedures, including mandatory border processing for certain applicants, and ensures fair treatment across the EU[37]

For Albania, the Pact has significant implications: Albanian migrants rejected in EU countries are now more likely to be returned quickly, emphasizing the importance of bilateral agreements such as the 2024 Italy–Albania[38] deal. However, concerns persist regarding

[32] European Union Agency for Asylum. "Section 4.9 Access to Information." *EASO Asylum Report 2021*. Accessed September 30, 2025. https://euaa.europa.eu/easo-asylum-report-2021/section-49-access-information.

[33] European Union Agency for Asylum. "4.1.2. Ensuring applicants' rights and obligations." *EUAA Asylum Report 2025*. Accessed September 30, 2025. https://euaa.europa.eu/asylum-report-2025/412-ensuring-applicants-rights-and-obligations.

[34] European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). *Information Note on Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast)*. Brussels: ECRE, 2015.

[35] *New Pact on Migration and Asylum*. Brussels: European Commission, April 2024.

[36] European Commission, *New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions,* COM(2024) 90 final (Brussels: European Commission, April 2024)

[37] Bernd Riegert, "EU Migration Pact: A Long Road to Agreement," *Deutsche Welle,* April 2024; UNHCR, "UNHCR Welcomes the Adoption of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum," accessed September 2024 UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency | UNHCR

[38] Government of Italy and Government of Albania, *Agreement on Strengthening Cooperation in Migration Management,* signed in Rome, November 2023, entered into force in January 2024.

secondary movements and potential human rights risks associated with accelerated return procedures[39]. Overall, the Pact signals stricter border controls, accelerated returns, and more coordinated EU-wide migration management.

ADVANTAGES OF THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR ALBANIAN MIGRANTS

The literature indicates that the reforms of the European Union in migration and asylum have significantly improved legal protection and integration prospects for Albanian migrants. Key directives, such as the Single Permit Directive[40] and the Qualifications Directive[41] have facilitated access to employment, social services, and professional recognition. At the same time, the literature highlights ongoing challenges, such as limitations on access to international protection due to the concept of 'safe country' and differences in the implementation of rules by Member States.[42]

One of the most important advantages of the EU directives has been the strengthening of legal protection for migrants, including Albanians. Before the entry into force of this legislation, migrant workers often faced exploitation in low-paid sectors and precarious working conditions. The Single Permit Directive (2011/98/EU) guaranteed equal treatment with national workers, including wages, social security benefits and access to healthcare. This standard has helped Albanian workers, especially those engaged in agriculture, services or healthcare, to secure fairer working conditions and legal protection against discrimination.

The Single Permit Directive (2011/98/EU) has significantly improved the legal standing of Albanian migrants by guaranteeing equal treatment with national workers, including wages, social security benefits, and access to healthcare[43] However, some limitations persist regarding full access to social assistance, as clarified in the Court of Justice of the European Union's decision in *Job center Krefeld v. JD* (Case C-181/19), where the court emphasized the discretion of member states in granting certain non-contributory benefits.[44] This standard

[39] International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Implications of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum for Western Balkan Countries* (Geneva: IOM, 2024).

[40] Government of Spain, "The New Single Permit Directive: Simplifying Residence and Work Permits in the EU," *La Moncloa,* May 14, 2024, https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/gobierno/news/paginas/2024/20240514-single-permit-directive.aspx.

[41] European Parliament, "The Qualification Directive," accessed September 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/151/the-qualification-directive.

[42] Peter William Walsh & Kotaro Oriishi. "The Impact of the EU Qualification Directive on International Protection," EUROPEAN LEGAL NETWORK ON ASYLUM, October 2008, 7, https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ECRE-The-Impact-of-the-EU-Qualification-Directive-on-International-Protection_October-2008.pdf.

[43] European Commission, "Single Permit Directive," Official Journal of the European Union L 343, (2011): 1-10, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32011L0098.

[44] Court of Justice of the European Union, *Jobcenter Krefeld v. JD,* Case C-181/19, ECLI:EU:C:2020:794, October 6, 2020, https://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?text=&docid=230123&pageIndex=0&doclang=EN.

has helped Albanian workers, especially those engaged in agriculture, services, or healthcare, to secure fairer working conditions and legal protection against discrimination.

In the same vein, the Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU) has strengthened the social rights of migrants, enabling wider access to social protection, training and professional development in host countries.[45] For Albanians, this has created opportunities for professional advancement and more sustainable integration into the labor market. The recognition of qualifications and diplomas through this directive has been particularly important for professionals in sectors such as health and education, enabling them to contribute effectively to both socio-economic integration and meeting the needs of the EU labor market. In this way, the directives have not only simplified bureaucratic procedures but have also created a clear and strong legal framework that empowers Albanian migrants in exercising their rights and increases the possibilities for long-term integration.

MIGRATION INTEGRATION IN THE EU: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Before the adoption of the Single Permit Directive (2011/98/EU), Albanian migrants in Greece and Italy were overwhelmingly concentrated in low-wage, insecure jobs, often lacking formal contracts and access to social security systems. Reports consistently highlighted high levels of informality, with Albanians working predominantly in sectors such as agriculture, construction, tourism, and housekeeping—fields known for poor labor protections and exploitative practices[46].

However, some reforms have encountered difficulties in implementation. The Return Directive (2008/115/EC), which sets standards for the return of illegally staying third-country nationals, has been criticized for its harsh approach and uneven implementation across Member States (Guild et al., 2022). Albanians often face expedited deportation procedures without sufficient opportunities for appeal or legal alternatives. The European Commission presented the New Pact on Migration and Asylum in September 2020, with the aim of finding long-term and sustainable solutions for managing migration. The Pact created a legal framework that balances solidarity and responsibility among Member States, providing a comprehensive approach for the effective and fair management of migration. But after this pact, migration flows continued to increase in member states, bringing new challenges that needed to be addressed by a well-thought-out EU policy, creating the need to consolidate a fair policy for managing the increasing migration flows. In 2023, asylum applications in the EU increased to levels similar to 2015–2016, with countries offering more protection, and 4.3 million beneficiaries of temporary protection were registered since

[45] European Parliament and Council. "Directive 2011/95/EU on Standards for the Qualification of Third-Country Nationals or Stateless Persons as Beneficiaries of International Protection." Official Journal of the European Union L 337, (2011): 9-26. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32011L0095.

[46] Eda Gemi and Thanos Maroukis, "A New Typology of Crisis Albanian Irregular Migration to Greece: Policy Implications for Greece and the EU," IRMA Background Report – Albania, ELIAMEP, 2013, 6–7.

the beginning of the Russian invasion[47]. On 10 April 2024, the European Parliament voted in favor of the new migration rules, followed by formal adoption by the EU Council on 14 May 2024[48], allowing the EU to address complex issues with determination. The innovation brought about by this pact was the establishment of new integrated procedures conducted at the border to make decisions simpler and faster. Also, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (2020/2024), although aimed at European solidarity, has fueled debates on the balance between the responsibility of member states and the guarantee of migrants' rights. Accelerated border procedures may violate the right to asylum and limit Albanian migrants' access to effective protection. Recent studies show that Albanians have significantly benefited from legal facilitations for employment and integration but remain exposed to structural discrimination and unequal approaches in different EU countries[49]. In some countries, they are considered low-skilled workers and face social barriers, while in others, they are recognized as qualified professionals. This reflects not only the differences in the implementation of EU policies but also the influence of local political and economic factors on the integration of migrants.

RESEARCH GAPS

While the literature acknowledges significant EU reforms that have improved legal frameworks for Albanian migrants, challenges remain, particularly with uneven policy implementation across member states. Empirical studies are scarce, especially those capturing the concrete experiences of Albanians in diverse EU contexts and assessing the long-term social and economic impacts of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (2020/2024). For instance, while some countries like Germany have facilitated smoother integration for second-generation migrants through robust local policies and social networks[50], others lag behind due to differing local economic and political climates[51].

This suggests that harmonizing EU policies may not fully address structural discrimination and local disparities. Additionally, the externalization of migration management, exemplified by agreements such as Italy-Albania, raises concerns about exacerbating existing gaps rather than resolving them[52]. Scholars also warn that the New Pact's focus on border security might

[47] European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), *Asylum Report 2023,* July 2023, https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2023-07/2023_Asylum_Report_EN _0.pdf, p. 4 .

[48] European Union Council, *The Council adopts the EU's pact on migration and asylum,* 14 May 2024, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/05/14/the-council-adopts-the-eu-s-pact-on-migration-and-asylum/.

[49] Vathi, Zana. "Migration: The Legal, Educational and Socio-Political Challenges and Opportunities for Albania." University of New York Tirana, 2024.https://unytold.unyt.edu.al/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Z.Vathi_Abstract_Bio.pdf

[50] Vathi, Zana. 2021. "Transforming Paths of Integration for Kosovo-Albanian Migrants and Their Descendants in Germany and Switzerland." European Journal of Migration and Law, 23(4): 345-367.

[51] Guild, Elspeth et al. 2022. "The Implementation of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Challenges and Opportunities." Migration Policy Review, 11(2): 197-215.

[52] Heinrich Böll Stiftung, "Migration Policy: European Union Increasingly Outsources Responsibility," (2024), paras. 2–4, 9–13.

undermine fundamental rights, especially in countries where accelerated border procedures compromise the right to asylum and limit access to effective protection[53]. Therefore, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive empirical research, including longitudinal surveys and comparative policy analyses, to better understand these dynamics and develop tailored solutions. Indicators for monitoring policy implementation, legal protections, and respect for human rights should be established to ensure that EU reforms translate into tangible improvements for all migrants.

In conclusion, the literature suggests that EU reforms have created a clearer and more comprehensive legal framework for Albanian migrants, improving working conditions and integration. However, an important challenge remains the uneven implementation of migration policies and the risk that border security measures clash with human rights. The legal bases for this include the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Return Directive (2008/115/EC), which ensures humane standards and the right to appeal. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum (2020/2024) emphasizes the respect for fundamental rights during integrated border procedures.[54]

The main gaps in the literature relate to the lack of empirical studies on the concrete experience of Albanians in different EU countries and the long-term impact of the New Deal on their social and economic integration. Uneven implementation across countries has led to different procedures, including rapid deportations, a lack of appeal possibilities, and limited access to social and legal protection.[55]

Structural discrimination and different treatment from country to country reflect not only differences in the implementation of EU policies, but also the influence of local economic and political factors.[56] Accelerated border procedures can compromise the right to asylum and limit access to effective protection. The literature suggests the need for greater harmonization of policy implementation, strengthening legal protection, monitoring respect for human rights, and developing comparative studies to address social barriers and structural discrimination.

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

This study used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative interviews. Over 122 structured interviews were conducted to assess Albanian migrants' level of integration, knowledge of legal procedures, and readiness for social and economic adaptation.

[53] SVR Migration, *Position Paper on EU Migration and Asylum Policy* (2024), 8, 58–60, 63.

[54] European Commission, *Pact on Migration and Asylum,* 2024, Section: "Respect for fundamental rights in border procedures."

[55] SVR Migration, *Position Paper on EU Migration and Asylum Policy* (2024), 8, 58–60, 63

[56] SVR Migration, *Position Paper on EU Migration and Asylum Policy* (2024), 8, 58–60, 63.

The methodology employed in this study was primarily quantitative, focusing on participants' general knowledge of asylum-related documents and their understanding of different types of employment opportunities.

The methodology of this format has been adapted according to the commonly used methods in the field of research. It has been aligned with the methodologies of Western universities, such as King's approach to migration. Quantitative study is essentially the collection and analysis of numerical data to explain a specific phenomenon or research question using quantitative methods.[57]

The interviews included approximately 20 questions covering topics such as the participants' age group, the European country in which they reside, the number of years since emigration, their current employment, and other information related to their migration experience. The questionnaire also assessed their knowledge and understanding of relevant documents and procedures associated with asylum and migration.

The questionnaire used in this article was conducted online, as the respondents are widely dispersed. The sample included individuals aged 20 to 55 and was a stratified random sample, primarily consisting of asylum seekers.

DIFFICULTIES -BARRIERS OF THE STUDY

During this study, several disadvantages were encountered.

Dispersed Sample: The participants in this study were geographically dispersed across various locations, which posed significant challenges for data collection. Coordinating responses and ensuring timely participation required considerable effort, as the distance between participants limited direct contact and the ability to observe non-verbal cues that could enrich the data.

Online Data Collection: The study relied on online instruments for data gathering rather than face-to-face interviews. While online surveys and questionnaires are efficient for reaching a larger audience, they inherently restrict the depth of interaction. Unlike in-person interviews, online tools limit opportunities for follow-up questions, clarification of ambiguous responses, and capturing nuanced information that may arise through conversational exchange.

Participant Accessibility: Accessing the specific group of asylum seekers was particularly challenging. Many potential participants were reluctant to engage due to fear, mistrust, or the sensitive reasons behind their migration. This barrier required additional effort to establish trust, provide reassurances about confidentiality, and communicate the purpose and safety of participation in order to collect meaningful and reliable data.

[57] Ago ,Silvana , January, 2020 *RINTEGRIMI I TË RINJVE MIGRANTË NË SHQIPËRI; SFIDAT DHE PROBLEMET QË AI SHFAQ NË ARSIMIN E LARTË PUBLIK DHE JOPUBLIK,* Publications ,uet.edu.al European University of Tirana ,Accessed. https://uet.edu.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Silvana-Ago.pdf page 101

Another significant barrier was of a legal nature. Due to complex legal procedures, many migrants refused to respond, as some had been advised by their lawyers not to provide information. This limited access to certain participants and affected the comprehensiveness of the data collection. Ensuring transparency, accountability, and respect for human rights is not only a legal and ethical obligation but also a strategic prerequisite for maintaining credibility and fostering regional cooperation. The Albanian case may serve as a model, illustrating how non-EU states can engage with EU operational frameworks while navigating complex migratory and legal challenges.[58]

DATA ANALYSIS

The collection of data for this study required over three months of fieldwork, during which interviews were conducted with Albanian migrants residing in various European countries. This extended period enabled the research team to reach a geographically dispersed sample and to capture a diverse range of experiences concerning migration, integration, and knowledge of legal procedures. As illustrated in Figure 1, Albanian migrants are spread across Europe, with the largest concentrations found in Italy and Greece.

Based on the survey results from approximately 130 respondents, 76.6% were female and 23.4% were male. The age range of the participants varied from 20 to 55 years, representing the primary working-age population among Albanian migrants.

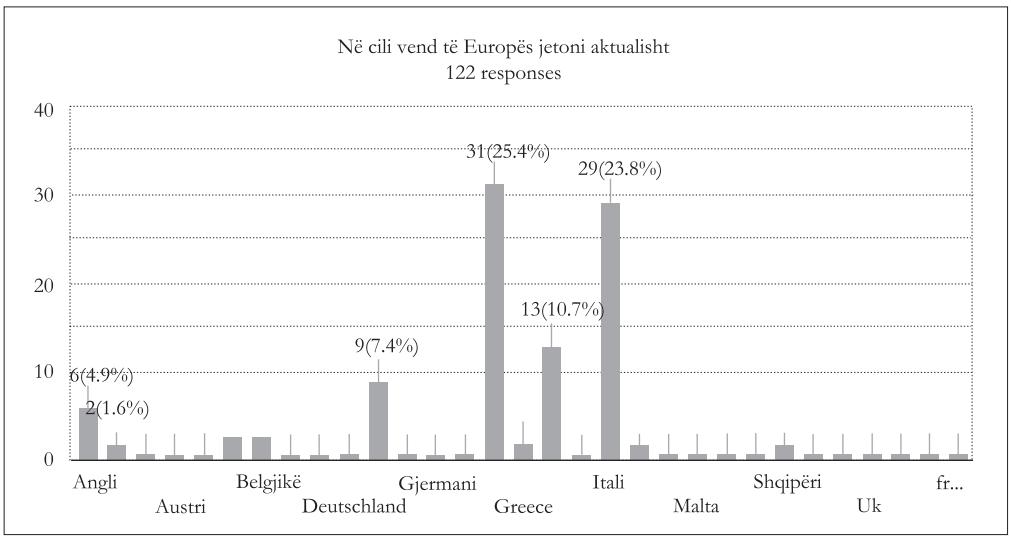


Figure 1. *Countries Where Respondents Currently Live*

[58] Petriti, Besmira, June 2025, *Cooperation between Albania and Frontex: Balancing Border Security, Human Rights, and European Integration,* Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development, file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/Cooperation_between_Albania_and_Frontex_Balancing_.pdf, Junepdf:307-308

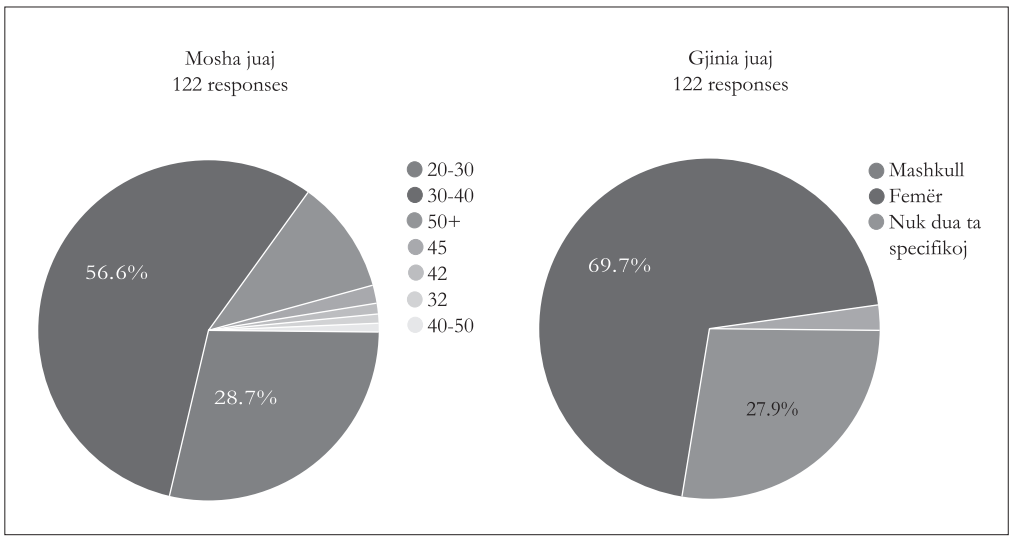


Figure 2. *Demographic Profile of the Survey Sample*

Additional data that proved useful were responses to questions regarding the duration of migration and the participants' level of knowledge about the relevant procedures. These questions helped assess how well-informed the migrants were about legal and administrative processes in the host countries.

Based on the results from 122 interviews, 26.2% of respondents had been living abroad for more than 15 years, approximately 40.2% for more than 5 years, and 9% for over 10 years. The remaining participants had migrated for 3, 4, or 5 years.

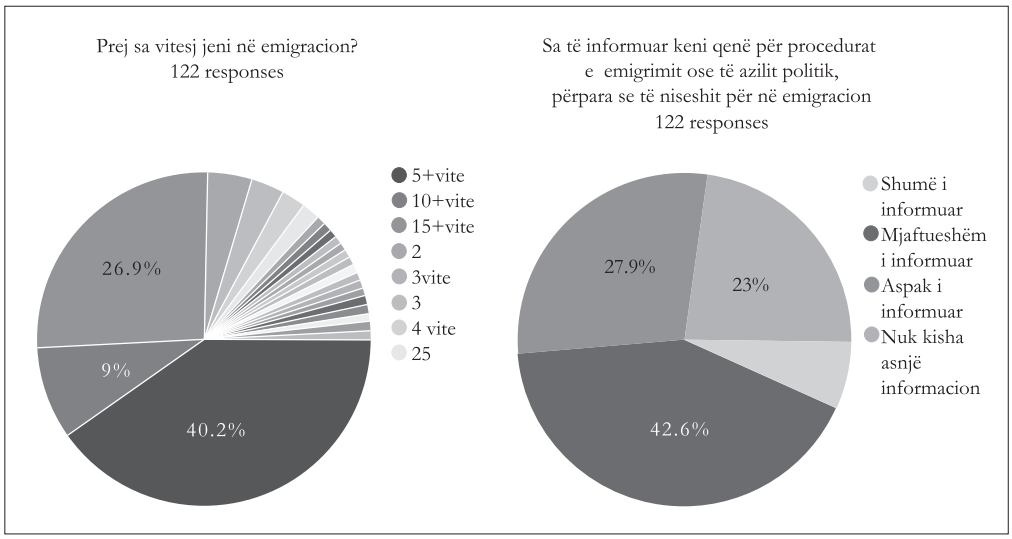


Figure 3. *Illustration of years of residence and procedures*

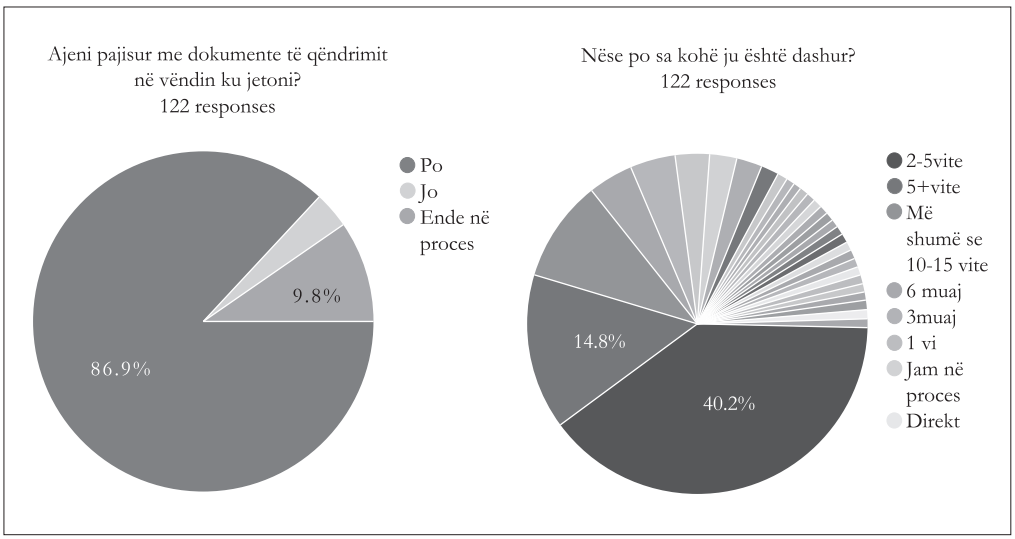


Figure 4. *Respondents' Access to Required Documents*

Regarding their level of information about migration procedures, 42.6% of respondents reported having sufficient knowledge to obtain the necessary documents before leaving. Interestingly, 23% did not know how to acquire the required documentation before departure, while 27.9% reported being completely uninformed.

From the quantitative methodology, the results show that approximately 86.9% of respondents had obtained the necessary documentation. Around 40.2% had acquired this document within the first five years of their migration.

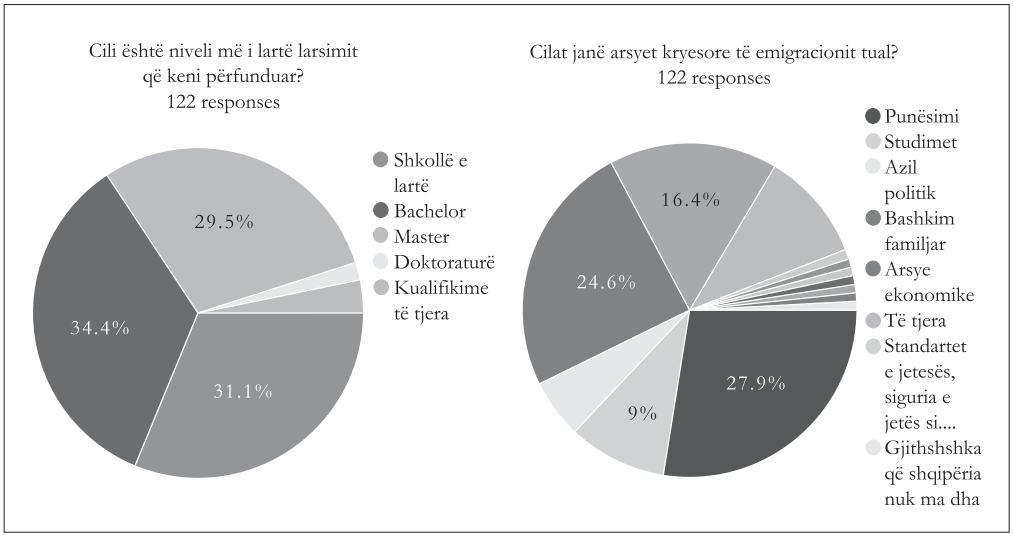


Figure 5. *Educational Background and Migration Motivations.*

The data collected regarding the education and training of the surveyed migrants indicate that a significant portion of them are well educated. This suggests that the reasons for migration are closely related to the opportunities and prospects offered by their home country, highlighting limitations in employment and career advancement within Albania.

Preliminary results indicate that approximately 34.4% of respondents hold a bachelor's degree, 29.5% a master's degree, and the remaining 31.1% have completed secondary education. When compared with responses to questions regarding the reasons for migration, it is evident that economic factors, political asylum, living standards, and employment opportunities are predominant motivations. This suggests that the desire to integrate and live in Europe, particularly after the visa liberalization, has been strong and sustained.

MIGRATION INTEGRATION IN THE EU: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES. RESULTS AND ADVANTAGES

However, some reforms have encountered difficulties in implementation.

The Return Directive (2008/115/EC), which sets standards for the return of illegally staying third-country nationals, has been criticized for its harsh approach and uneven implementation across Member States (Guild et al., 2022). Albanians often face expedited deportation procedures without sufficient opportunities for appeal or legal alternatives.

The European Commission presented the New Pact on Migration and Asylum in September 2020, with the aim of finding long-term and sustainable solutions for managing migration.

The Pact created a legal framework that balances solidarity and responsibility among Member States, providing a comprehensive approach for the effective and fair management of migration.

But after this pact, migration flows continued to increase in member states, bringing new challenges that needed to be addressed by a well-thought-out EU policy, creating the need to consolidate a fair policy for managing the increasing migration flows.

In 2023, asylum applications in the EU increased to levels similar to 2015–2016, with countries offering more protection, and 4.3 million beneficiaries of temporary protection were registered since the beginning of the Russian invasion (European Union Agency for Asylum [EUAA], 2024, p. 4). On 10 April 2024, the European Parliament voted in favor of the new migration rules, followed by formal adoption by the EU Council on 14 May 2024 (European Commission, 2024), allowing the EU to address complex issues with determination.

Based on the directives and the data we collected, we attempted to provide our own analysis of the findings. The results show that the majority of respondents have been able to secure employment in the countries where they migrated.

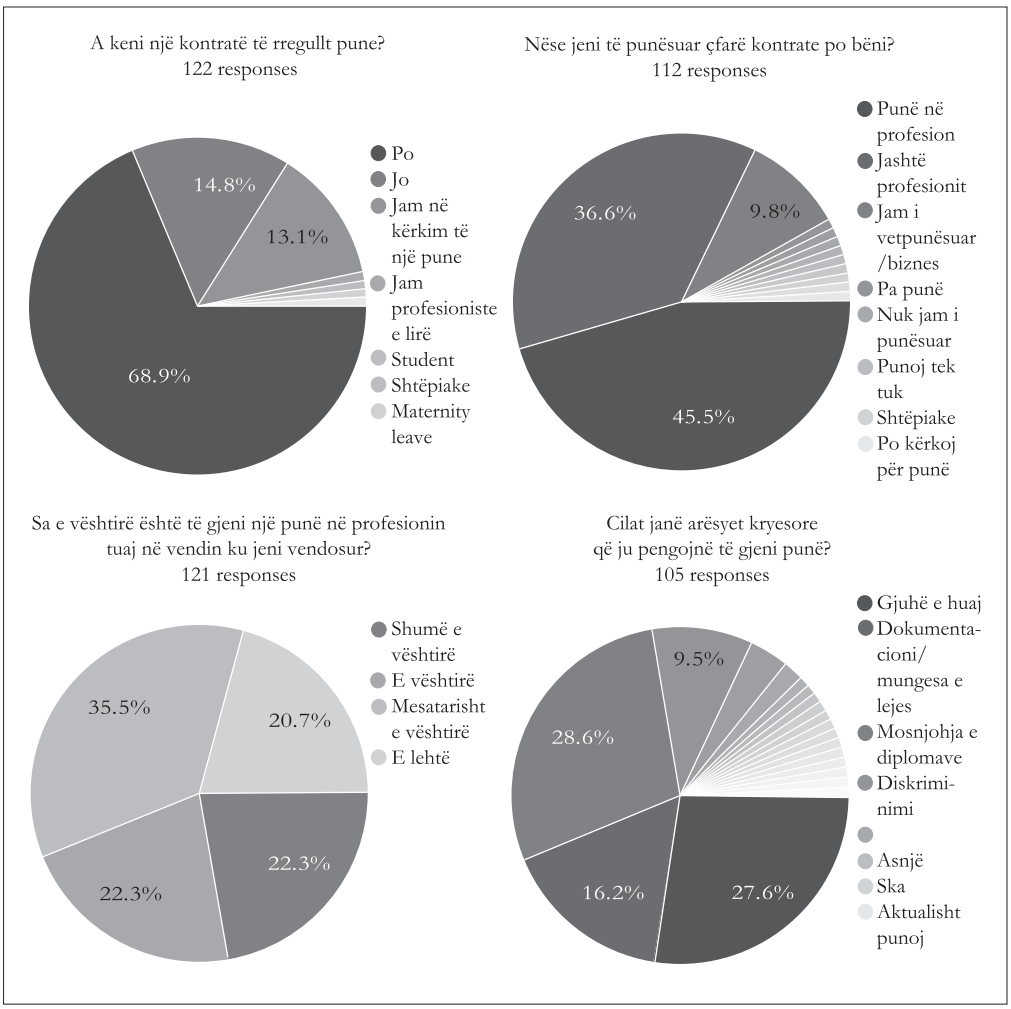


Figure 6. *Migrants' Success in Finding Employment*

Approximately 70% reported that they have founded a job, and around 45.5% are employed in professional occupations.

This is a positive indicator, demonstrating that integration procedures are favorable and that recent legal changes in the EU have facilitated access to these new opportunities.

The innovation brought about by this pact was the establishment of new integrated procedures conducted at the border to make decisions simpler and faster. Also, the (Commission, Pact on Migration and Asylum 2024) although aimed at European solidarity, has fueled debates on the balance between the responsibility of member states and the guarantee of migrants' rights (Triantafillou & Mantanika, 2022). Accelerated border procedures may violate the right to asylum and limit Albanian migrants' access to effective protection (EUAA, 2024).

Recent studies show that Albanians have significantly benefited from legal facilitations for employment and integration but remain exposed to structural discrimination and unequal approaches in different EU countries (Vathi, 2021). In some countries, they are considered low-skilled workers and face social barriers, while in others, they are recognized as qualified professionals. This reflects not only the differences

in the implementation of EU policies, but also the influence of local political and economic factors on the integration of migrants.

Referring to EU data and studies from 2020–2022, we observed that the trend for asylum seekers has been relatively low, as asylum procedures are lengthy and the motives are very specific. According to the responses obtained in this study, only 11.2% of migrants applied for asylum.

The primary reasons for seeking asylum were mainly political and social, indicating that the implementation of EU policies has allowed these individuals to have better opportunities for integration.

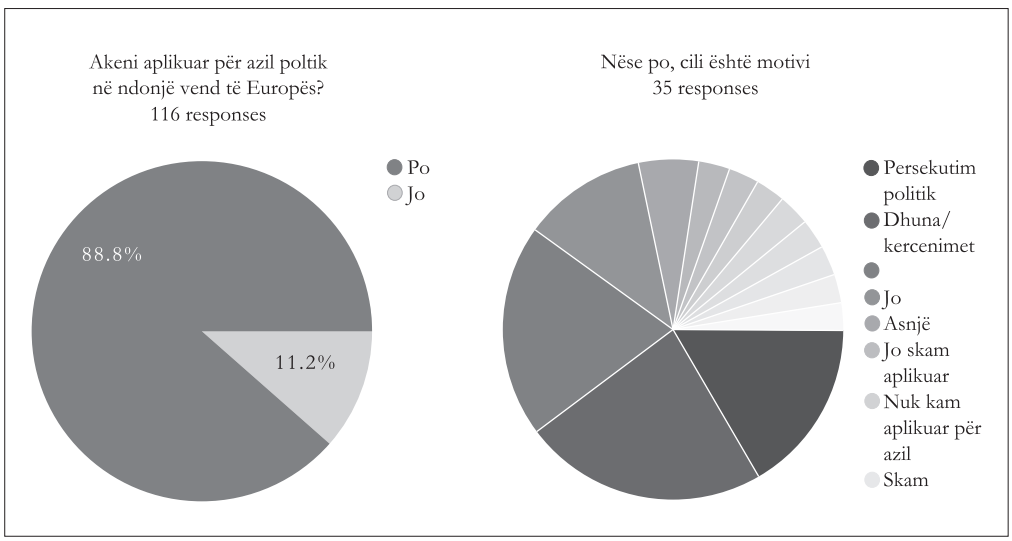


Figure 7. *Description of motivations for political asylum*

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the effects of EU legal reforms on Albanian migrants, demonstrating both progress achieved and persistent limitations. The Single Permit Directive (2011/98/EU) and the Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU) have significantly contributed to the development of a more coherent legal framework, enhancing access to equal treatment, social protection, and professional opportunities. Nonetheless, uneven implementation across member states has resulted in fragmented protection standards and

constrained integration outcomes, underscoring the disjunction between legislative ambition and practical reality.Future progress depends on three interrelated priorities: greater policy harmonization to ensure consistent protection of rights across the Union; systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess both intended and unintended outcomes; and more empirical research that captures the lived experiences of Albanian migrants. Such research, ideally combining longitudinal and comparative methods, would strengthen the evidence base for more effective interventions. At the same time, important limitations remain. The scarcity of detailed studies on Albanian migration both in international and Albanian-language scholarship restricts the comprehensiveness of current analysis. Moreover, the interaction between migration governance and border security measures raises unresolved questions about potential tensions with human rights obligations. These gaps indicate a pressing need for sustained academic and policy engagement.

In conclusion, EU reforms have provided Albanian migrants with a clearer and more comprehensive legal framework, improving working conditions and opportunities for integration. Yet the unevenness of implementation and the limited empirical literature highlight the need for further inquiry. By addressing these barriers, future research can contribute not only to the effective integration of Albanian migrants but also to broader debates on the social and legal architecture of migration within the European Union. Furthermore, as a final conclusion, it can be stated that this study reaches the finding that the interviews and questionnaires were developed as recommendations intended to support the migrants themselves. What this study strongly supports is precisely the review of the legal framework, based on EU standards, as well as their full recognition by the Albanian state, with the aim of supporting Albanian migrants, whether they are asylum seekers or regular migrants.

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JUSTICE ON A WARMING PLANET: RETHINKING HUMAN RIGHTS THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

The humanity is facing for several decades' global environmental crises particularly on climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. These are intensifying global inequalities and exposing fundamental limitations in classical human rights frameworks. Those least responsible for ecological degradation are disproportionately affected by its consequences, including climate-induced displacement, public health risks, and loss of livelihood. This paper explores how moral philosophy, particularly environmental ethics, can offer a deeper and more coherent foundation for integrating social justice with ecological responsibility. Drawing on thinkers such as Hans Jonas, John Rawls, Martha Nussbaum, and Val Plumwood, the paper argues that rights and justice must be reframed to account for ecological limits, intergenerational duties, and systemic environmental harms. Jonas's principle of responsibility, Rawls's theory of justice and intergenerational fairness, Nussbaum's capabilities approach, and Plumwood's critique of human exceptionalism provide a theoretical basis for this ethical expansion. The paper concludes that human rights must be understood not only as protections against political oppression but as moral claims grounded in ecological reality. A rights-based ethical framework that includes responsibility to future generations and environmental justice for the present can support more equitable responses to the moral challenges of the Anthropocene.

INTRODUCTION

The environmental crises of the twenty-first century are reshaping the moral and political foundations of modern societies. Unlike previous centuries, when environmental change unfolded slowly and could be perceived as background to human history, today's climate and ecological transformations are immediate, global, and profound. Climate change, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, and resource depletion are not isolated environmental

concerns but interconnected systemic disruptions with direct consequences for health, economic stability, security, and human rights. Rising temperatures, melting ice caps, disrupted hydrological cycles, and mass extinction events are no longer distant scientific projections but are lived realities that shape human well-being, migration patterns, public health outcomes, and the stability of political institutions.

These planetary disruptions expose a crucial blind spot in classical human-rights frameworks. Emerging from the post-war era, modern human-rights discourse was shaped around the protection of individuals from political oppression, violence, and discrimination. While subsequent developments expanded its scope to include social, economic, and cultural rights, these frameworks were conceived in an era that assumed stable environmental conditions. Nature, in this legal and moral architecture, was treated as an abundant and reliable backdrop to human activity rather than as an active participant in shaping the possibilities of justice. This assumption no longer holds. Environmental degradation undermines the very foundations upon which rights are exercised.

The Anthropocene, as a proposed geological epoch defined by the unprecedented scale of human impact on the Earth's systems, forces us to confront this blind spot. Human activity has become a dominant geological force, transforming atmospheric composition, altering biogeochemical cycles, and driving biodiversity loss at a pace unseen in human history. The distribution of these impacts is deeply unequal: those least responsible for emissions and environmental degradation are often the most affected by droughts, floods, food insecurity, displacement, and health crises. This global asymmetry is not only a scientific fact but also an ethical and political challenge that demands a rethinking of the moral responsibilities that underpin human rights.

Philosophically, this challenge requires revisiting some of the most influential moral frameworks. Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics, with its emphasis on duty and the categorical imperative, provides a powerful lens for understanding moral responsibility toward both present and future generations. A Kantian interpretation would hold that humanity has a duty to act only on maxims that can be universalized, which implies that environmental degradation, if universalized, would lead to the destruction of the very conditions of rational agency. Environmental destruction is, therefore, morally impermissible on deontological grounds. Kant's idea of treating humanity as an end can also be extended intergenerationally: future persons must be considered moral subjects, not mere means to present prosperity.

From a utilitarian perspective, the climate crisis represents an immense failure to maximize well-being. The logic of utilitarian ethics by seeking the greatest good for the greatest number, forces us to account for both the vast number of people affected and the scale of suffering imposed by environmental harm. The disproportionate impact on vulnerable communities, combined with the intergenerational consequences of climate inaction, demonstrates that a narrowly short-term, growth-oriented utilitarianism is insufficient. Instead, a broadened, long-term consequentialism is needed, one that recognizes the future as morally significant and weighs ecological damage as a determinant of collective welfare.

Ecofeminist philosophy, particularly through the work of thinkers such as Val Plumwood, adds another dimension by revealing how the dualistic structures underpinning modernity, human versus nature, man versus woman, culture versus environment, legitimize both environmental exploitation and social domination. Ecofeminism critiques the patriarchal and anthropocentric hierarchies that treat nature as passive and subordinated, much as women's voices and agency have historically been marginalized. This perspective demands a relational, non-hierarchical ethics that recognizes mutual dependence between human and more-than-human worlds, emphasizing care, reciprocity, and responsibility. (Val Plumwood, "Feminism and the Mastery of Nature" (London: Routledge, 1993).)

In this context, the traditional understanding of human rights as protections from state violence or civil and political exclusion is insufficient. If the biosphere itself, the foundation of human survival and flourishing, is destabilized, then rights such as access to food, water, health, and shelter become impossible to guarantee. Environmental instability is, in this sense, a rights crisis. The climate emergency demands that we broaden the conceptual and ethical scope of human-rights discourse to account for ecological interdependence and temporal responsibilities to future generations.

This article proposes a normative reframing of human rights through environmental ethics. Drawing on the ethics of responsibility articulated by Hans Jonas, the intergenerational fairness of John Rawls, the capabilities approach of Martha Nussbaum, Val Plumwood's ecofeminist critique of human exceptionalism, as well as Kantian and utilitarian moral reasoning, it argues for an ecologically bounded conception of justice. This framework integrates human rights with planetary boundaries, placing ecological limits at the core of political and moral reasoning. It moves beyond anthropocentrism, emphasizing not only the protection of present rights-bearers but also the responsibilities owed to future generations and non-human life.

Such a reframing is both ethically necessary and politically urgent. The planetary crises of the twenty-first century are not temporary disruptions that can be solved through technological fixes or incremental reforms. They mark a profound transformation in the conditions of human existence. Recognizing the ecological basis of justice is a prerequisite for ensuring the durability of human rights in an era of environmental upheaval. This paper thus positions environmental ethics not as an auxiliary field but as a foundational lens for reimagining the moral architecture of rights and responsibilities in a warming world.

THE ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE

Ecological justice names a broad ethical project: to reconceive what we owe to one another and to the morethanhuman world,under conditions of planetary change. It does not merely add "the environment" to preexisting moral theories; rather, it reframes the basic architecture of duty, right, and responsibility by taking biophysical limits and systemic interdependence as starting points. Three features define the terrain:

- Ontological interdependence. Human agency is ecologically embedded. The goods protected by rights (health, security, livelihood, participation) presuppose functioning earth systems. Justice, therefore, cannot be intelligible apart from the conditions that make life possible.
- Temporal extension. Climate and biodiversity dynamics unfold across decades and centuries. Ethical reasoning must therefore treat future persons as genuine addressees of duty and integrate precaution, irreversibility, and longtail risk into its core.
- Moral community and standing. The moral circle cannot be restricted to present humans alone. A credible account of ecological justice must attend to the standing of nonhuman beings and ecosystems, at minimum as bearers of moral considerability and often as subjects of legal protection.

Within this terrain, ecological justice can be analyzed along complementary dimensions:

- Distributive (allocation of limited carbon budgets, water, arable land, and restoration capacity),
- Procedural (who participates, who decides, and whose knowledges count in environmental governance),
- Recognitional (acknowledging historically marginalized communities, Indigenous sovereignty, and morethanhuman interests),
- Intergenerational (fair terms of cooperation through time, savings of ecological capital, and duties under uncertainty), and
- Transformative (revising economic models, property forms, and institutional designs so that societies operate within ecological ceilings).

This section develops a pluralistic foundation for ecological justice by drawing on and carefully reinterpreting major traditions:

- A responsibilityfirst ethics that calibrates duty to the scale of technological power and longrange effects,
- A fairnessbased account that treats ecological limits as constraints on the terms of social cooperation across generations,
- A capabilities perspective that links human flourishing to ecological preconditions,
- Ecofeminist and relational critiques that unsettle human exceptionalism and expose the dualisms underwriting domination,
- A renewed deontological grounding in universalizable maxims and respect for persons (present and future), and
- A consequentialist insistence on minimizing aggregate harm across time and species.

The result is not a single master theory but a method of integration: each framework illuminates distinct aspects of the same moral problem, and together they yield criteria for evaluation and action (duty, fairness, flourishing, care, and outcomes) that can guide law and policy. The subsections that follow elaborate these strands: responsibility (Jonas), intergenerational justice (Rawls), capabilities (Nussbaum), ecofeminist critique (Plumwood), and the contributions of Kantian and utilitarian reasoning, so as to ground a coherent, philosophically rigorous account of ecological justice.

Hans Jonas and responsibility toward the future

Hans Jonas's imperative of responsibility is one of the earliest and most profound articulations of intergenerational ethics in the face of technological power. He argues that the capacity of human action has outgrown traditional moral frameworks, creating new kinds of risks and duties. Technological civilization grants humanity the power to alter planetary systems, thereby imposing a moral obligation to safeguard conditions necessary for life. Jonas's imperative: "*Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life on Earth*", compels ethical reasoning to extend into the future. This future-oriented duty shifts the ethical subject from the individual to humanity as a collective agent.

John Rawls and intergenerational fairness

John Rawls's theory of justice, though not explicitly environmental, provides powerful tools for conceptualizing ecological obligations. His just savings principle establishes that each generation must preserve sufficient resources and institutional stability for future generations. Behind the veil of ignorance, rational agents would not accept ecological depletion that undermines their successors' basic rights to well-being. This idea of fair intergenerational cooperation aligns closely with principles of sustainability and climate justice, turning environmental protection into a requirement of justice rather than charity. (John Rawls, "A Theory of Justice" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).)

Martha Nussbaum and capabilities within planetary boundaries

Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach reframes justice not merely as the distribution of material resources but as enabling individuals to achieve basic human capabilities. These include health, bodily integrity, participation in community life, and connection to the natural world. Environmental collapse directly threatens these capabilities, particularly for vulnerable populations. By embedding capabilities within planetary boundaries, Nussbaum's framework affirms that environmental conditions are not peripheral to justice but constitutive of it. (Martha C. Nussbaum, "Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).)

Val Plumwood, ecofeminism, and the critique of human exceptionalism

Val Plumwood's ecofeminist critique exposes the deep cultural dualisms, human/nature, male/female, mind/body, that justify both environmental exploitation and social domination. Ecofeminism challenges the anthropocentric logic that treats the natural world as inert and subordinate to human aims. It emphasizes relationality, care, and interdependence as moral principles. This perspective broadens the moral community to include non-human beings, aligning with Indigenous and relational ontologies that understand humans as embedded within ecological systems. (Val Plumwood, "Feminism and the Mastery of Nature" (London: Routledge, 1993).)

Kantian duty and universalizability

Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy contributes an important deontological dimension to ecological justice. The categorical imperative requires that we act only according to maxims that can be universalized without contradiction. If environmental destruction were universalized, it would undermine the very conditions for rational agency and human flourishing, rendering such action impermissible. Moreover, Kant's principle of treating humanity as an end can be extended intergenerationally, grounding duties to future persons as moral subjects.

Utilitarianism and the calculus of ecological harm

Utilitarianism, with its emphasis on maximizing overall well-being, underscores the moral urgency of climate action. Environmental harm affects billions of people across time, causing suffering through displacement, disease, hunger, and conflict. A long-term consequentialist perspective forces ethical consideration of future populations and non-human life. In this view, strong climate mitigation and ecological stewardship are required to minimize harm and maximize collective flourishing.

A pluralistic foundation for ecological justice

Taken together, these frameworks provide a pluralistic foundation for ecological justice. Jonas emphasizes responsibility toward the future, Rawls stresses fairness across generations, Nussbaum links justice to environmental preconditions for human flourishing, Plumwood critiques anthropocentrism and highlights relationality, Kant provides a universal moral duty, and utilitarianism highlights the aggregate consequences of inaction. Together they offer complementary ethical resources capable of responding to the complexity of the Anthropocene.

This pluralistic approach avoids relying on a single moral framework, recognizing that the scope and scale of the climate crisis demand multidimensional ethical reasoning. It allows for the integration of duty, fairness, capabilities, care, and consequences by creating a comprehensive moral architecture for ecological justice that acknowledges human responsibility, ecological limits, and intergenerational obligations.

HUMAN RIGHTS BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

Traditional human-rights frameworks have historically emerged within an intellectual and political context that viewed the environment as a passive backdrop to human activity rather than an active determinant of justice. This anthropocentric orientation by placing human interests at the center of moral and legal reasoning, has long shaped modern legal systems, philosophical discourse, and development paradigms. However, the accelerating climate and ecological crisis reveal the limitations of this worldview. Human rights, as traditionally conceived, are dependent on stable ecological systems that provide the material and biological conditions necessary for their realization.

Anthropocentrism and its limitations

Anthropocentrism assumes that humans are separate from and superior to nature, and that non-human life has primarily instrumental value. This assumption has guided economic systems focused on resource extraction, legal systems that treat environmental degradation as an externality, and political institutions that prioritize short-term human interests over long-term planetary health. Yet the Anthropocene has exposed the fragility of this model: when ecosystems collapse, the very conditions that support human life including food security, clean water, breathable air, and disease regulation are undermined. Without ecological stability, rights to health, housing, education, participation, and even life itself become precarious.

Reframing rights in ecological context

To move beyond anthropocentrism, human-rights discourse must be reconceptualized within an ecological framework. This means recognizing that rights are not exercised in isolation from the natural world but depend on the integrity of ecosystems and planetary processes. An ecologically grounded conception of rights recognizes the interdependence between human well-being and the health of the biosphere. This reframing shift human rights from being anthropocentric entitlements to being relational responsibilities situated within ecological systems. This transformation also requires expanding the temporal and spatial scope of rights. It is not enough to guarantee the rights of those living today. Justice must encompass future generations who will inherit the consequences of environmental degradation, as well as the more-than-human world, whose survival is entangled with human flourishing. In this sense, ecological justice demands that human rights be embedded in a broader ethic of planetary care.

Beyond human exceptionalism: philosophical and legal shifts

Challenging human exceptionalism means recognizing that humans are part of a larger community of life. Philosophically, this requires drawing on ecofeminism, deep ecology, Indigenous worldviews, and relational ontologies that emphasize interdependence and

mutual responsibility. Legally, it suggests expanding the boundaries of moral and legal consideration to include non-human entities, an idea increasingly reflected in legal innovations such as the recognition of the rights of rivers, forests, and ecosystems in some jurisdictions.

This shift represents not a diminution of human dignity but an expansion of moral vision. By embedding human rights within ecological relations, we strengthen their resilience and meaning. A right to health, for instance, becomes inseparable from the right of ecosystems to function. A right to life becomes meaningless in the absence of breathable air, drinkable water, or stable climate systems.

Integrating ecofeminist and relational ethics

Ecofeminism provides critical tools for understanding how anthropocentrism and patriarchy intersect. The same hierarchical dualisms that have subordinated women reason/emotion, culture/nature, male/female, have also legitimized the exploitation of the environment. Ecofeminist ethics emphasizes care, interdependence, and reciprocal responsibility, challenging both human exceptionalism and patriarchal domination. Relational ethics derived from ecofeminism and Indigenous thought centers responsibility not only between humans but across species and generations.

From anthropocentric to ecocentric governance

Moving beyond anthropocentrism also involves structural change in governance. Ecocentric governance recognizes the intrinsic value of non-human life and seeks to integrate environmental protection directly into human-rights frameworks. This may include recognizing legal standing for natural entities, adopting climate adaptation policies informed by ecological limits, and integrating environmental stewardship into constitutional and international law.

A new foundation for human rights

By decentering the human, human rights gain greater ethical and ecological grounding. They become part of a shared planetary ethic, anchored in interdependence, responsibility, and ecological stewardship. This reframing does not abandon the moral centrality of human dignity but contextualizes it within the fabric of life that sustains it. In doing so, it makes human rights more robust, meaningful, and capable of responding to the existential challenges of the Anthropocene.

Ultimately, moving beyond anthropocentrism is not merely a philosophical exercise - it is a practical necessity. Without stable ecological systems, the legal and moral architecture of rights will collapse. Reframing human rights as part of a broader ecological ethic ensures their durability and relevance in a rapidly changing world.

PLANETARY BOUNDARIES AND JUSTICE

The concept of planetary boundaries provides one of the most compelling scientific frameworks for understanding the ecological limits within which human societies can sustainably exist. Developed by Earth-system scientists such as Johan Rockström and Will Steffen, this framework identifies nine biophysical systems , including climate regulation, biodiversity, land-system change, nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, ocean acidification, and freshwater use, that define a "safe operating space" for humanity. Transgressing these boundaries increases the risk of triggering irreversible environmental tipping points, with profound consequences for human well-being, social stability, and planetary habitability. (Johan Rockström et al., "A Safe Operating Space for Humanity," "Nature" 461, no. 7263 (2009): 472–475.) (Will Steffen et al., "Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet," "Science" 347, no. 6223 (2015): 1259855.)

Justice in an era of ecological limits

The planetary boundaries framework challenges the implicit assumption in modern rights discourse that economic and social development can expand indefinitely. Human rights have traditionally been articulated in a context of presumed abundance, where economic growth was seen as the primary vehicle for realizing rights. But in the Anthropocene, rights must be understood within ecological ceilings. Justice can no longer mean unlimited consumption or growth; it must involve ensuring that all people can flourish within planetary limits.

This perspective reorients human rights toward a dual ethical responsibility: securing human well-being while respecting ecological integrity. It requires acknowledging that the exercise of rights by some cannot undermine the ecological foundations necessary for others to enjoy those same rights, whether in the present or the future.

Linking environmental thresholds with distributive justice

Planetary boundaries make visible the finite character of Earth's life-support systems. This finitude forces difficult distributive questions: Who gets to use scarce ecological space, and on what terms? How can societies reconcile the right to development with the duty to stay within safe ecological limits? These questions are not only economic or technical but fundamentally ethical.

Rawlsian justice provides one pathway for addressing this challenge: policies should be designed to ensure fair terms of cooperation across generations and between nations. A Rawlsian approach would reject development models that benefit present generations while degrading conditions for future ones. Meanwhile, Nussbaum's capabilities approach emphasizes enabling every person to achieve a dignified life, which must be balanced against respecting ecological ceilings. Utilitarian perspectives further underscore the consequences of boundary transgression for billions of lives, amplifying the moral weight of staying within safe operating space.

Ecological debt, inequality, and climate justice

Planetary boundaries are not transgressed uniformly. Historically, high-income countries have contributed disproportionately to greenhouse gas emissions and resource depletion, while low-income nations bear the brunt of climate impacts. This uneven responsibility creates what scholars and activists call ecological debt, the accumulated cost of environmental degradation imposed on vulnerable populations and future generations. This global asymmetry raises profound questions of justice. Addressing ecological debt involves not only mitigation and adaptation efforts but also reparative and redistributive measures. Climate finance, technology transfer, debt relief, and legal accountability can be viewed as mechanisms to rectify this imbalance. From an ethical standpoint, those who have historically benefited from exceeding planetary boundaries carry greater responsibility to support those most affected.

Intergenerational responsibility and temporal justice

Planetary boundaries are inherently temporal. Crossing thresholds today will shape conditions for generations to come. Intergenerational justice therefore requires incorporating long-term ecological sustainability into the core of rights discourse and policy. The Rawlsian "just savings principle" provides a normative anchor for this, as does Kant's emphasis on universalizability - actions that undermine planetary stability could not be justified as a universal moral law. Jonas's imperative of responsibility likewise insists that technological societies bear the duty of safeguarding the conditions of life for future generations.

Ecocentric perspectives on planetary stewardship

Moving beyond anthropocentrism, planetary boundaries can also be understood through an ecocentric lens. Ecocentric ethics recognize the intrinsic value of ecosystems and non-human life, rather than treating them merely as resources for human use. This perspective aligns with ecofeminist and Indigenous worldviews that emphasize reciprocity, care, and respect for ecological relations. In this view, staying within planetary boundaries is not only a means of ensuring human survival but also a moral duty to other forms of life.

A new paradigm of justice within limits

In sum, the planetary boundaries framework compels a shift from an expansionist model of justice - based on the illusion of endless resources - to one grounded in ecological reality. Justice in the Anthropocene must reconcile human rights with planetary stewardship, ensuring a fair distribution of ecological space across peoples, nations, and generations, while protecting the central value of the more-than-human world. This reorientation of justice is not a restriction but an expansion: it embeds human flourishing within the wider ecological web that sustains it, ensuring the longevity, equity, and integrity of human-rights principles in a warming and destabilized world.

FROM THEORY TO GOVERNANCE

Translating the philosophical and ethical foundations of ecological justice into tangible governance frameworks is one of the most urgent and challenging tasks of our time. Ethical imperatives, no matter how powerful, must be institutionalized through legal, political, economic, and cultural structures that shape collective behavior over decades. Governance, in this sense, is not merely a technical mechanism for managing resources but a **normative project**: it orients institutions toward duties to future generations, fairness under ecological limits, and the protection of morethanhuman life.

To make this translation operational, four design principles are pivotal:

- Ecological ceilings as hard constraints. Decisions at every level such as constitutional, legislative, regulatory, budgetary, must be screened against scientifically grounded limits (carbon budgets, biodiversity thresholds, water tables). This reorders default priorities: *policies are presumed unacceptable unless compatible with the biosphere's carrying capacity.*
- Intergenerational trusteeship. Public office is reframed as a fiduciary duty owed to future persons. This warrants institutions such as futuregenerations commissioners, longterm impact assessments, and legal doctrines that treat natural capital as a trust rather than a disposable asset.
- Distributive fairness within limits. Staying within ceilings entails allocating scarce ecological space. Allocation should follow fairness criteria, historical responsibility, capability for action, and need, so that decarbonization and adaptation do not reproduce or deepen inequality.
- Procedural pluralism and epistemic justice. Legitimate ecological governance must include those most affected (youth, Indigenous peoples, frontline communities) and integrate diverse knowledge systems (scientific, Indigenous, local). Participation is not ornament but a condition for durable, contextsensitive policy.

These principles translate into institutional levers:

- Constitutionalization: embedding the right to a healthy environment; recognizing duties to future generations; enabling standing for ecosystems.
- Statutory & regulatory tools: carbon and material budgets; nonetloss biodiversity rules; strategic environmental assessment; mandatory transition plans for highimpact sectors.
- Fiscal & monetary policy: green tax reform; subsidy repurposing; sovereign transition funds; centralbank climate risk mandates.
- Market shaping: standards, disclosure, and procurement that favor lowthroughput, circular, and restorative models; phasedown schedules for highimpact goods.
- Public ownership & commons: stewardship of critical ecosystems (watersheds, forests) and infrastructures (energy, mobility) under trusteeship models.

- Deliberative democracy: citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, and local comanagement of ecosystems to align legitimacy with longterm goals.
- Knowledge & culture: curricula, professional standards, and narrative work that normalize sufficiency, reciprocity, and care.

Implementation requires attention to governance pathologies that block transformation: short electoral cycles, regulatory capture, siloed ministries, and the mismeasurement of progress via GDP. Countermeasures include independent climate institutions with statutory mandates, wholeofgovernment coordination on ceilings, conflictofinterest firewalls, and new metrics (wellbeing, capability realization, ecological integrity) to steer policy.

Finally, a theoryofchange connects ethics to action: (a) diagnose where current rules violate ceilings and fairness; (b) adopt binding targets with transparent monitoring; (c) sequence policies to secure nearterm wins while locking in longterm direction (e.g., carbon budgets → sectoral trajectories → justtransition compacts); (d) invest in social protections and placebased transitions to maintain legitimacy; and (e) institutionalize review, learning, and course correction. In this way, philosophical commitments become governing routines, capable of shaping markets, budgets, and everyday life in line with ecological justice.

Embedding ecological justice into legal frameworks

One of the most significant steps toward operationalizing ecological justice involves incorporating ecological principles directly into constitutions, international treaties, and domestic legal systems. Recognizing the right to a healthy environment as a fundamental human right is a critical starting point. Such recognition transforms environmental protection from a policy preference into a legal obligation. It also provides communities, civil society organizations, and individuals with a legal basis to hold governments and corporations accountable for ecological harm. Several jurisdictions have already taken meaningful steps in this direction. Constitutional provisions recognizing environmental rights exist in more than 100 countries, while regional human-rights systems are increasingly integrating climate and environmental concerns into their jurisprudence. International legal instruments, such as the Paris Agreement and emerging climate litigation, signal a growing recognition that environmental protection is inseparable from human rights.

Governance mechanisms and institutional innovation

Beyond legal recognition, ecological justice requires institutional structures capable of implementing planetary stewardship. Traditional governance models, often centered on short-term economic growth, are poorly suited for managing long-term ecological risks. New forms of governance must prioritize:

- Long-term ecological planning over immediate political cycles.
- Multi-level governance that bridges local, national, and global action.

- Participatory decision-making that includes marginalized voices, Indigenous communities, and future generations.
- Adaptive governance systems capable of responding to evolving environmental conditions.

Institutional innovations may include independent environmental courts, carbon budget authorities, climate assemblies, and mechanisms to give legal standing to nature itself. By reimagining governance structures to reflect ecological interdependence, societies can move from reactive crisis management to proactive stewardship.

Rights of nature and ecocentric legal developments

A particularly transformative development in recent decades has been the recognition of legal personhood for elements of nature, such as rivers, forests, and ecosystems. This ecocentric legal turn challenges anthropocentric legal systems and offers a model for embedding ecological ethics directly into law. Examples include the legal recognition of the Whanganui River in New Zealand, the Atrato River in Colombia, and constitutional provisions in Ecuador and Bolivia granting rights to nature. These legal frameworks do not simply protect resources; they acknowledge nature as a subject with inherent value and standing.

Such developments are not merely symbolic. They create enforceable obligations for states and corporations, reorienting governance toward ecological protection as a matter of justice. They also resonate with Indigenous legal traditions that long recognized reciprocal relations between humans and the more-than-human world.

Economic governance and the transformation of development models

Current economic systems are structured around the assumption of infinite growth, a model fundamentally incompatible with planetary boundaries. Governance for ecological justice requires reimagining development itself.

This involves:

- Shifting from GDP growth as the primary metric of success to indicators that reflect well-being, ecological health, and social equity.
- Implementing circular and regenerative economic models that reduce waste and resource extraction.
- Creating strong regulatory frameworks for carbon pricing, emissions reductions, and sustainable resource use.
- Supporting just transition strategies to protect workers and communities as economies decarbonize. This reorientation of economic governance demands political courage and collective imagination. It recognizes that sustaining human rights in the long term requires transforming the economic structures that drive ecological degradation.

Participatory and deliberative democracy

Effective ecological governance must also be democratic. Centralized decision-making alone cannot address the complexity of ecological crises. Participatory and deliberative democratic processes, such as citizens' assemblies on climate, local co-management of ecosystems, and transnational participatory mechanisms, can build legitimacy and foster collective ownership of environmental action.

Moreover, integrating diverse epistemologies, including Indigenous knowledge systems, feminist perspectives, and local ecological wisdom, enriches governance frameworks and counters the technocratic tendencies that often dominate environmental policy. This pluralism ensures that governance is not only ecologically informed but also socially just and inclusive.

Global governance and climate justice

Because ecological systems transcend national borders, governance must operate on a global scale. Global governance for ecological justice involves strengthening international cooperation, enforcing environmental agreements, and creating mechanisms for accountability. This may include expanding the jurisdiction of international courts to cover ecocide, creating global carbon budget frameworks, and ensuring fair distribution of adaptation and mitigation responsibilities.

Climate justice demands that wealthier nations, those historically responsible for the majority of emissions, bear a proportionally larger share of mitigation efforts and provide financial and technological support to vulnerable countries. Global governance rooted in justice must address power imbalances and promote equitable participation in decision-making processes.

A governance paradigm aligned with ecological ethics

The transition from theory to governance involves integrating ethical insights, responsibility to future generations, fairness, ecological care, and interdependence, into the very structure of political and legal systems. This is not a peripheral reform but a fundamental transformation of how societies organize themselves. Governance aligned with ecological ethics seeks to:

- Embed ecological ceilings in all levels of decision-making.
- Institutionalize responsibility to future generations.
- Balance human rights with ecological integrity.
- Empower communities and ecosystems as legitimate actors in governance processes. Such a paradigm represents a decisive shift away from the dominant extractive, short-term model of governance toward one rooted in stewardship, reciprocity, and justice. By operationalizing the philosophical foundations of ecological justice, governance can become a powerful tool for ensuring the durability of human rights and the flourishing of the more-than-human world.

DISCUSSION

The transition from ethical theory to applied governance, as outlined in the previous sections, raises profound questions about how societies conceptualize justice, responsibility, and human rights in an era of ecological disruption. The discussion of ecological justice must navigate the tension between moral philosophy, legal systems, political power, and real-world implementation. Expanding the discussion reveals how ethical imperatives can inform transformative political action, and how competing frameworks can be synthesized to shape coherent responses to the climate and ecological crises.

Ethical implications of ecological justice

The philosophical frameworks explored in this paper, Jonas's ethics of responsibility, Rawls's intergenerational fairness, Nussbaum's capabilities approach, Plumwood's ecofeminist critique, Kantian deontology, and utilitarian consequentialism, together provide a comprehensive ethical foundation for addressing environmental collapse. These frameworks, though conceptually diverse, converge on key principles: the need for responsibility to future generations, the recognition of ecological limits, and the imperative to protect both human and more-than-human flourishing.

Ethically, this means justice can no longer be confined to present human communities. The moral community must be expanded to include future persons and non-human beings. Jonas's forward-looking imperative emphasizes the irreversible consequences of technological action. Kantian reasoning underscores the duty to universalize principles of ecological protection. Utilitarianism demands that we minimize suffering on a planetary scale. Ecofeminism reframes the human-nature relationship as one of care and interdependence, challenging hierarchies that sustain both patriarchy and ecological exploitation. The capabilities approach centers dignity and flourishing as moral imperatives that depend on ecological stability.

Together, these perspectives ground ecological justice in a pluralistic ethical framework that is both principled and adaptable. They provide a moral vocabulary that can inform legal reforms, institutional design, and international cooperation, offering normative clarity in the face of complex planetary challenges.

Political and legal challenges

While the ethical case for ecological justice is compelling, translating these principles into political and legal structures is complex. Existing governance systems are largely built on growth-oriented economic models, short-term political cycles, and anthropocentric legal norms. These systems often prioritize national interests over planetary health and immediate benefits over long-term responsibility.

Political resistance to transformative ecological governance often stems from entrenched economic interests, power asymmetries, and geopolitical rivalries. For instance, fossil fuel dependence and global economic inequality create divergent incentives for climate action. Legal systems, in turn, frequently lack the mechanisms to incorporate planetary boundaries, intergenerational rights, or non-human legal standing. Even where environmental rights are formally recognized, enforcement remains weak.

Addressing these challenges requires both normative and structural change. Normatively, states and institutions must accept that ecological integrity is a prerequisite for human rights. Structurally, legal systems must evolve to embed ecological ceilings, long-term planning, and global cooperation. This also entails empowering civil society movements, Indigenous peoples, and youth-led initiatives, which are often at the forefront of pushing for ecological accountability.

Power, inequality, and justice

Ecological justice is also a question of power. The burdens and benefits of environmental degradation and protection are unequally distributed along lines of wealth, geography, gender, and historical responsibility. High-emission countries and corporations have historically profited from ecological exploitation, while vulnerable communities, particularly in the Global South, bear the greatest costs. Women, Indigenous peoples, and marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by climate change, not because of inherent vulnerability but because of systemic inequalities.

Addressing ecological justice therefore demands redistributive and reparative measures that confront these power imbalances. Climate finance, technology transfer, and debt relief can play critical roles in this regard. Ecofeminist and decolonial perspectives remind us that justice must go beyond formal equality to confront structural hierarchies that shape both ecological harm and political responses.

Transformative governance and cultural change

Effective implementation of ecological justice requires more than legal and policy reform; it demands a cultural shift in how societies relate to the natural world. Anthropocentrism must give way to an ethic of planetary stewardship. This involves rethinking prosperity, security, and development in terms of sufficiency, reciprocity, and interdependence rather than domination and extraction.

Transformative governance requires building institutions that embody this shift. Participatory democratic processes, rights-of-nature frameworks, ecocentric legal innovations, and economic models based on well-being rather than endless growth can provide practical pathways. But cultural narratives rooted in education, media, and collective identity, must also evolve to support these institutional changes.

The role of ethics in shaping global cooperation

Global ecological challenges require collective action. Ethical frameworks provide the moral grounding for international cooperation by articulating shared principles of responsibility, fairness, and care. The Paris Agreement, the recognition of the human right to a healthy environment, and growing climate justice movements reflect a nascent global ethic of ecological responsibility. However, to be effective, these frameworks must be matched with binding legal commitments, transparent accountability mechanisms, and equitable burden-sharing. Philosophy thus has a direct role to play in shaping the contours of global governance. Ethical reasoning helps articulate why certain actions are required, not merely how they might be achieved. It strengthens the legitimacy of collective action and anchors it in shared human values.

A pluralistic vision for the future

The discussion underscores the need for a pluralistic, multi-layered approach to ecological justice. No single ethical framework or governance model can address the complexity of the planetary crisis. Instead, what is required is a synthesis: ethical principles embedded in law, governance aligned with ecological limits, global cooperation rooted in fairness, and cultural narratives that reimagine humanity's place in the Earth system.

Such a vision does not romanticize nature nor demonize human development. Rather, it seeks to harmonize human flourishing with ecological integrity. It envisions a world in which rights and responsibilities are shared across generations and species, where justice is not defined against nature but within it.

Ethics as a guide to transformation

Ultimately, ecological justice is both an ethical imperative and a practical necessity. Without ecological stability, human rights will erode, governance will falter, and social inequality will deepen. Ethics provides the compass for navigating these transformations, not as abstract ideals, but as actionable principles guiding political choices and institutional design. By grounding governance in a robust ethical framework, societies can chart a path toward a just and sustainable future for all beings. This discussion makes clear that ecological justice is not an optional addition to human rights discourse but its necessary evolution in the Anthropocene.

CONCLUSION - RETHINKING JUSTICE IN AN AGE OF ECOLOGICAL LIMITS

The climate and ecological crises confronting humanity are not peripheral challenges, they strike at the heart of the moral, political, and legal architectures that sustain modern societies. Traditional human rights frameworks, forged in an era of presumed ecological

abundance, are ill-equipped to address the systemic disruptions of the Anthropocene. To secure human flourishing within planetary limits, we must reimagine justice in ways that fully acknowledge ecological interdependence, intergenerational responsibility, and the intrinsic value of the more-than-human world.

The Anthropocene demands a radical rethinking of the moral foundations of justice. It calls for a shift from anthropocentric and short-term perspectives toward ethical frameworks that are ecocentric, relational, and future-oriented. The philosophical perspectives explored throughout this paper - Jonas's ethics of responsibility, Rawls's intergenerational justice, Nussbaum's capabilities approach, Plumwood's ecofeminism, Kantian deontology, and utilitarian consequentialism, offer complementary lenses for grounding this transformation. Together, they reveal that human rights are inseparable from ecological conditions and that the protection of these conditions is a moral imperative.

The discussion has shown that translating ethical imperatives into governance requires more than legal technicalities. It involves a fundamental restructuring of political institutions, economic systems, and legal frameworks to align with planetary boundaries. This means embedding ecological ceilings into decision-making, recognizing the rights of future generations and non-human entities, and ensuring that distributive justice addresses historical inequities and ecological debt. Governance, in this sense, becomes a moral practice, an expression of humanity's collective responsibility to the Earth.

No single ethical or political theory can adequately address the scale and complexity of planetary crises. A pluralistic approach - drawing on multiple traditions and epistemologies enables a richer, more adaptive moral framework. This includes integrating scientific understanding with ethical reasoning, respecting Indigenous and local knowledges, and fostering dialogue across cultures and generations. Such a relational perspective situates human beings not as masters of the Earth but as participants in a shared planetary community.

The future of justice in a warming world lies in embracing stewardship as a guiding principle. Stewardship does not mean passive preservation but active, reciprocal care for the ecological systems that sustain life. It requires humility, restraint, and foresight virtues often absent in modern governance but essential for long-term survival and flourishing. Framing justice as stewardship emphasizes responsibility over domination, reciprocity over exploitation, and shared flourishing over narrow self-interest.

The Anthropocene is often described in terms of crisis, but it can also be understood as a horizon of moral possibility. By recognizing the ecological foundations of human rights and embedding them within a broader ethic of planetary care, humanity can redefine justice for the twenty-first century and beyond. This means building political institutions that reflect our interdependence, legal systems that protect both people and ecosystems, and cultural narratives that celebrate our embeddedness in the living Earth.

This conclusion affirms that ecological justice is not simply a theoretical ideal but a practical necessity. Without it, human rights will become fragile promises, unattainable

in a destabilized world. With it, we can create conditions for a more just, equitable, and sustainable future for humans and the more-than-human world alike. The path forward requires moral clarity, political will, and collective imagination: an unwavering commitment to justice on a warming planet.

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"ON THE EDGE OF A RAY": THE ROLE OF LITERATURE AND ART IN CONTROL, SURVIVAL, RESILIENCE, RESISTANCE, AND JUSTICE IN CONTEXTS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND REPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

An estimated 80% of the global population lives under conditions shaped by political violence, ranging from war and conflict to dictatorship and genocide. The effects of such violence are complex, far-reaching, and span generations. While political, psychological, sociological and legal analyses have extensively examined these phenomena, the role of literature and art in understanding and responding to political violence remains underexplored. This multidisciplinary research investigates how literature and art, intersects with the experience and aftermath of Albania's dictatorship. Study 1 explores how the dictatorship used literature as form of control (e.g. Genc Leka, Havzi-Nelaj poetry used to justify their execution). Study 2 explores ways the dictatorship used censure by targeting processes or resistance and resilience in translation of world literature (Balzac, Defoe and Böll) to maintain ideology and power. Study 3 explores how literature was used as a form of survival, dignity and resilience among writers who did not publish during the dictatorship (Zef Zorba, Mihal Hanxhari, Robert Prifti). Known as literature of the drawers, and preserved across time, this work provides a unique opportunity to explore survival in a context of extreme repression. Study 4 explores the relationship between literature, art and justice post- dictatorship. When other forms of transitional justice become difficult to achieve, literature and art can become valuable and accessible vehicles for documenting the past and educating future generations. Together, these studies offer a unique, rich, panoramic, interdisciplinary perspective on how literature (and art) engage with political violence, contributing to global strategies for prevention and justice.

INTRODUCTION

Political violence and repression are widespread in time and geography (Marshall, 2023). Understanding how political violence and repression works is important in order to build strategies for prevention but also rebuilding the lives of survivors and societies in the aftermath. Political violence and repression is at the core of authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian regimes maintain their power through violence, repressing human rights, controlling how people think, behave and relate to others (Geddes et al., 2018; Kellezi et al., 2021; 2023) as well as through careful controlling and manipulation of information (Guriev, & Treisman, 2015; 2020). Controlling of information that goes to the public is so important, that dictatorial regimes use significant resources to achieve the right content and form to facilitate repression, propaganda and censorship (Stein, 2016). Artistic expression and literature can become a key mechanism of information sharing and its impacts on the audiences, especially pre-social media (Kendall-Taylor et al., 2020).

Evidence from different dictatorial contexts shows that information control can take place through using artistic expression and literature. The most common form of information control is banning of publications on specific topics, or their removal from circulation. Time and context are important. For example, in the Albania context, King Zog censored books promoting communist and socialist ideas, while the communist dictatorship censored books promoting King Zog's ideologies (Prifti, 2018). Other forms of censorship include removal or reduction of specific texts in the original language or translated literature (Woods, 2018). The reasons for censorship can be varied, including ideological, social, political, religious and cultural factors (Billiani, 2014; Merkle, 2018; Sayaheen, & Darwish, 2023). While most research has focused on control of political books, censorship of artistic expression or literature are much less researched. What research does exist, indicates that literature (Billiani, 2014) but also artistic expression (Ritchie, 2010) have been censured and controlled by political regimes, and even used to support political propaganda (Faulkes, 2013; Gaunt, 2018).

There are also benefits of literature and artistic expression more broadly although evidence in dictatorial contexts is limited. For example, artistic creation has been linked to different aspects of individual and collective wellbeing including meaning making, and experiences of bonding, entertainment and enrichment (Lomas, 2016). For those creating, the benefits include experiences of connection, enacting of activism and communication (Lemon, 2022) and improved wellbeing (Gillam, 2018). These findings are well supported by psychological wellbeing theories (Acar et al., 2021) which link creativity not only with individual wellbeing but also with the development of civilisations. However, evidence on the positive or negative impact of creative arts and literature on artists themselves during dictatorship is very limited. Recent work (Acar et al., 2025) has analysed resilience in the context of political violence and repression illustrating how subtle forms of resilience such as art and music (Selvanath & Selter, 2025) or storytelling, (Marazzi et al., 2025) are essential for survival and wellbeing.

There is another potential benefit of artistic creations and literature in post-dictatorial context. Artistic expression and literature can have an important role to play as a form of justice serving as sources of education (Hanson, 2017) but also to inform public debates and reflections about past harms and their consequences (Foley, 2007). These forms of justice relating to the aftermath of political violence and repression are known as Transitional Justice Processes (Arthur, 2009). Transitional justice refers to political, judicial and social changes that take place in the aftermath of mass human rights violations (including dictatorship) aiming to address their harm. There are different forms of transitional justice such as judicial, reparatory, constitutional, administrative and historical justice (Teitel, 2002). Artistic expression and literature can be especially valuable for historical justice supporting the documentation, remembering and education about past harm (Rush & Simic, 2014), especially as a form of awareness raising and reconciliation (Bahun, 2016).

While these potential uses and benefits of artistic expression and literature have been studied more broadly, there is a very limited understanding of how these are used in authoritarian contexts. Where research does exists, it looks at each of these processes separately (e.g. Bahun, 2016; Faulkes, 2013; Rush & Simic, 2014). However, each context experiences unique forms of human rights violations and justice processes in the aftermath, so it is essential to take into account the specifics of individual context in the analysis (Kellezi et al., 2024b).

The present study will conduct an in-depth and panoramic exploration over time of the role of artistic expression and literature during and after dictatorship in one specific context, Albania. More specifically, we will address three key questions:

- ways literature and art are used as forms of control and repression
- how literature and art enable survival, resilience and resistance
- the role of literature and art as forms of justice: remembering the past, raising awareness, public debates and education on political violence and repression

THE CONTEXT OF THIS RESEARCH

The Albanian dictatorship has been classed as one of the most severe regimes in modern history. The Albanian communist dictatorship established itself with force at the end of WWII in Albania and lasted until 1991 (Fevziu, 2016). The Institute for the Study of the Crimes of and Consequences of Communism in Albania (ISKK, 2025) has systematically documented the wide-spread human rights violations during this period which included killing and imprisonment of political opponents, internment of political opponent and their families and denial of social, economic, political, cultural and civil rights to anyone perceived as a threat to the regime (ISKK, 2025). The dictatorship also systematically controlled every aspect of life including education, work, community, social and cultural life and severe punishment followed any perceived transgression (Kellezi et al., 2018; 2021; 2023, Kellezi & Guxholli, 2022). This control related to artistic expression as evidenced by the mass imprisonments following the 1972, 11th Song Festival of the Albanian Radio and

Television, where many artists were punished for participating in a festival that followed a more liberal format contradicting the dictatorship rules (Telegraf, 2023). Other examples include the killing of two young writers Genc Leka and Havzi-Nelaj in 1977, claiming their poetry being a threat to the communist regime (Sinoruka, 2022). Finally, another form of censure relates to translation of world literature (Klosi, 2016). These threats did not however silence all artistic expressions.

Thus, the history of Albanian literature is more a chronicle of brutal interruptions than of organic continuity. With the imposition of Socialist Realism following the end of World War II, Albanian literature experienced one of its deepest and most consequential ruptures: a sudden eclipse after the peak of its greatest flourishing in the 1930s. Poetic movements were cut short, voices were silenced. These threads were quietly rewoven in secrecy, reconnecting broken poetic lineages. In Albania, literary dissidence was not expressed publicly, but survived in manuscripts, in a silent and sublimated form, which could not be published during the dictatorship and were instead kept in the drawers, later becoming known as 'the literature of the drawers' (Isufaj, 2022). All these forms of repression will be the focus of the present study.

But the temporal view of the dictatorship does not finish with its end, and it continues in the justice attempts in the aftermath. Typical for context of political violence and repression, despite the widespread level of crimes, post-dictatorial Albania has not been successful at addressing the impact of such crimes leading to widespread dissatisfaction and further harm (Kellezi et al., 2024a; 2024b). As such, our study will also investigate art and literature post-dictatorship.

METHODOLOGY: MATERIALS, PARTICIPANTS AND ANALYSIS

Study 1 analyses direct censure in literature resulting in the persecution and even death of writers. Materials include secret files of persecuted authors analysed through legal analysis focusing on the legal judgement (final decision of the court) and legal discourse (Mitchell, 2023).

Study 2 analyses three original and translated novels (Balzac, Defoe and Böll) that were heavily censured and published during the dictatorship together with the original-language publications. Using microtextural comparative text analysis, this study investigates the key psychological dynamics of resistance and resilience targeted by the censorship processes.

Study 3 analyses literature that was either hidden or written under pseudonyms or in written in a foreign language. It uses published and unpublished work from three authors of the drawers Zef Zorba, Mihal Hanxhari and Robert Prifti as well as archival material held by the families of the authors. The analysis of their writing allowed discovering the experience of isolation and loneliness during dictatorship, but also paradoxically their survival through engagement with writing and artistic expression. To analyse the work and the Albanian context of socialist realism, a multi-faceted methodological approach was employed, where interpretive methods and stylistic, philosophical and historical analyses co-exist to illuminate

the complexity of both the works and their era. Through hermeneutic methodology, we sought to unravel hidden meanings- often layered- and the symbolism of the verse, reading poetry as an act of spiritual and cultural communication. Yet it was phenomenology that led us to explore the subjective experience of both author and reader, bringing to the light sensitivity and consciousness that permeate each text. To delve deeper and more broadly, comparative literature methods allowed us, through intertextuality, to draw parallels with biblical, philosophical and literary texts, positioning Albanian authors withing a wider cultural universe. Through stylistic and rhetorical analysis, we examined language, rhythm, and literary figures, while the bibliographical and phycological method proved indispensable: it linked the author's life to the work, particularly in cases of silence and self-censorship. Within this constellation of methods – each addressing a specific dimension- prior knowledge of Albanian literary histography was essential, as the research encompasses a broad temporal scope: from 1945 to 1990, when the dictatorship collapsed, and slightly beyond, into the transitional period when the work of these authors began to be published. These methods helped situate the texts in relation to historical events, ideologies, and social transformations that influenced not only their context but also their editorial fate.

Study 4 analysed semi-structured interviews with 27 survivors of the Albanian Dictatorship and their descendants to investigate the role of literature and art as a form of justice. Reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was used to analyse the data. This included 5 stages of analyses starting with reading through transcripts, data coding, generation of themes, revision of themes and write up of results. Analysis was informed by theories of transitional justice (Teitel, 2002) and psychological wellbeing (Acar, et al., 2021).

RESULTS

Study 1: Censorship of Albanian literature

Study 1 analysed how the dictatorship directly censured literary writing, in some case by persecuting and even executing authors for their work. At the end of WW2, along with the communist system, the Socialist Realism was installed as the only permitted creative method in literature and the arts. Half of the Albanian literature created in Kosovo and the diaspora was banned, as were many masterpieces of world literature.

Literary works, such as At' Gjergj Fishta's epic and Ernest Koliqi's works, were banned and condemned. Writers such as Mitrush Kuteli, Petro Marko, Kasëm Trebeshina, Ndoc Nikaj, Sejfulla Malëshova and Et'hem Haxhiademi faced bans, restrictions, imprisonment, or even death. During the middle and end of this period, young poets such as Trifon Xhagjika, Vilson Blloshmi, Genc Leka, and Havzi Nelaj were executed: shot or hanged, marking the tragic end of an entire generation of writers and poets. On August 8, 1988, the execution of the poet Havzi Nela was carried out with chilling composure, evoking the cruelty of medieval spectacles, a moment that etched a legacy of disgrace and brutality. In the communist-era files kept in the offices of the former Party of Labour in Librazhd, it is

recorded that nine individuals were involved in propaganda against the people's government. Every detail about them was scrutinized, including their poetic creations, among which were works that, at the request of the head of Internal Affairs in Librazhd, were subjected to literary analysis by two experts and writers. They drafted an expert report that was later used and cited in the trial against Genc Leka and Vilson Blloshmi in 1977. In the material she prepared, the expert wrote, among other things:

> "As can be seen from the poems or the quoted verses, the author writes with a pessimistic tone, expressing despair. He nostalgically recalls the past, alludes to a future, and uses allegory, which indicates a pronounced ideological disturbance, or that the author is dissatisfied with the current reality and considers the environment in which he lives to be oppressive and unbearable, thus seeking a way out."(The files Authority, 2025)

The literary expert report on Vilson Blloshmi's poem *Sahara* was a key document used by the communist regime to justify the prosecution and eventual execution of the poet. The analysis, conducted by state-appointed literary experts and cited in judicial proceedings, interpreted the poem not as a work of art, but as a veiled ideological threat. This sense of isolation was said to be reflected in one of Blloshmi's poems, *Sahara*, which brought him before the court.

> "Sahara, sand and stone, whose only companion is its own name," -the poem reads.

Today, Vilson Blloshmi, and Genc Leka alongside fellow literary martyrs such as Havzi Nela and Trifon Xhagjika stand as pillars of the cultural conscience, embodying the spirit of resistance and the enduring dignity of the human soul under dictatorship.

Study 2: Censorship in translation

Censorship worked relentlessly; it kept watch day and night. Works that managed to enter from world literature were mutilated, they had important parts removed, and were equipped with ideological forewords, serving as a kind of passport for their passage to the Albanian reader.

Case study 1, Censorship in the Translation of "Robinson Crusoe": Ideological Control Through Textual Intervention

One of the most evident cases of ideological censorship in the translation of foreign literature in Albania is that of the novel *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe. Although the first translation into Albanian, by Halit Selfo and Bujar Doko (1966), was a quality work that remained faithful to the source text, the 1982 reprint by the publishing house "Naim

Frashëri" represents a deep intervention of a censorial nature. This reprint was accompanied by the systematic removal of passages containing religious references, spiritual meditations, and especially scenes involving the evangelization of the character Friday. This type of censorship aimed to align the values of the work with the atheist ideology of the communist regime and to avoid any influence that could be perceived as opposition to the materialist morality of the time. The three main forms of censorship identified in this work are: a) removal of the main character's religious reflections, b) deletion of prayers and invocations to Divine Providence, and c) complete cutting of Robinson's efforts to convert Friday to Christianity (Hala, 2023). Examples of the censure can be found in Box 1 which presented the original and translated versions.

These interventions, although they do not directly distort the translators' words, significantly change the meaning of the work, detaching it from its philosophical, religious, and cultural context. The main issue caused by censorship is *decontextualization (Attridge, 1992)*, which occurs when important fragments are removed while others are left exposed in the text, creating misunderstandings or misinterpretations. As a result, the figure of Robinson is presented to the Albanian reader as someone who survives through personal strength, whereas in the original he is portrayed as a man who rediscovers faith and, through suffering, builds a new relationship with God. The example of the novel *Robinson Crusoe* clearly shows that censorship in translation was not merely an editorial intervention, but a form of thought control, aimed at ideologically reshaping the consciousness of the Albanian reader by using literary text as a tool for education and propaganda.

Unfortunately, the censorship of the communist era has been inherited even after the fall of the regime: a later edition (2018, "Zenit"), based on the censored 1982 version, continues to circulate without the necessary corrections, even including inaccuracies in translation authorship. This shows that censorship, when not analyzed, can survive through negligence, continuously distorting the transmission of classical literature to the reader.

Case study 2, The Case of the Novel The Clown by Heinrich Böll

The Clown is another illustrative example of censorship. It was first published in Tirana in 1985. According to translator Klosi (2016), censorship was not simply the removal of large textual blocks due to unacceptable content: such as anti-communist, sexual, or religious elements, but rather a delicate, fragmentary, and often complex intervention, carefully erasing specific words or small phrases, thus creating a kind of "disruption" in the text. This sophisticated method of censorship represents a kind of "masterpiece" of censorship, clearly reflecting the fear and strict control the regime exercised over various aspects of Western culture. Two examples of this censorship are presented in box 2.

Our analysis of the textual changes in Böll's novel shows that censorship was harsher regarding the theme of love, compared to religion or politics. Through this censorship, the regime aimed to control and distort the freedom and naturalness of expressing love,

treating it as a "filth" that needed to be legalized and confined within the strict norms of marriage and state morality. This model of censorship serves as important evidence of the Albanian communist regime's efforts to control not only political thought, but also the private life and social relationships of individuals-keeping them in the service of the official ideology.

Case study 3: Omission of the third part of Balzac's masterpiece "Lost Illusions" – The 1970 Edition

This case exemplifies how translations of foreign works were altered to remove social criticism deemed incompatible with communist ideology. The 1970 edition of Lost Illusions, which excludes the third part of the novel, is one such example. A concrete example of this practice is the omission of the translation of the third part of the novel *Lost Illusions* in the 1970 edition. The third part, titled *The Trials of the Inventor*, could be considered to contradict the ideology of the time for three key reasons.

First, it provided a pessimistic view on progress and innovation**.** David Séchard, the protagonist of the final part, is an inventor who creates an advanced method for paper production but instead of being rewarded, he faces betrayal and sabotage from unscrupulous competitors. Progress hindered by capitalist interests clashed with communist ideology, which promoted innovation as a tool for the development of socialist society. Second, a **c**riticism of the world of money and capitalism. Balzac portrays a society where money holds absolute power and is the source of corruption and injustice. In communist Albania, where the official ideology denounced capitalism and the bourgeoisie, Balzac's harsh and realistic depiction could be seen as a critique that presented the possibility of change as hopeless and without perspective. Thirdly, was the lack of revolutionary perspective. At the end of his novel, Balzac does not present a clear call for revolution or class struggle, which are key elements of communist ideology. The absence of a revolutionary perspective might have been seen as an ideological weakness, and thus the Albanian translation was adapted so as not to allow this perceived passivity to appear demoralizing.

Study 3. The literature of the drawers

Case study 1: Zef Zorba

Zorba (1920-1993) stands as the poet who retrieved the severed thread of continuity in Albanian literature, a creator who, in silence, reknit the strands of a disrupted tradition, constructing a rich and refined poetic universe. In this context, Zorba emerges as a key figure in the poetic revival, the silent heir of Lasgush Poradeci, Mitrush Kuteli, and Ernest Koliqi, authors who represent a golden era of Albanian letters. Zef Zorba was the artist who created for half a century, unknown and hidden. Zorba's solitude is not defined as a psychological condition, but as an ontological space where a profound encounter with the self and with light takes place. His withdrawal was not a bohemian choice, but a political punishment (both

during his years in prison and after his release), which transformed into creative power. His reticence and ellipse became more a thirst for silence than an inability to speak.

In his poem *The Cuckoo*, for example, love has turned to stone and happiness has vanished, yet the poet does not surrender: absence of meaning becomes a hermetic presence. Zorba's expressionist imagery, especially in *The Cuckoo*, approaches the cycle of Edvard Munch's paintings: unreal colors, swirling energy, anxiety, and isolation. Formed and devoted, far from the public eye, yet illuminated by an unwavering inner light, Zorba builds a complex poetic mechanism in which music is a structural substance. In his texts, musical ideas permeate the verses, creating an art that aspires to the conditions of music: modulation, rhythm, resonance. He builds poetry where the musical idea is born simultaneously with the verse. He creates a poetic system that seeks dialogue between different spheres of human creativity. *Melos* and *lexis* are inseparable. His verses are infused with internal rhythms, carefully chosen assonance and consonance, and a precise syntactic structure that gives the line intensity and density. His poetry is an inner symphony, where sound, color, and word intertwine in deep harmony. In his translation of *La pioggia nel pineto*, for example, he preserves the rhythm, colors, and sounds, rendering the poem "watery" even in Albanian.

Zorba naturally assimilates references from world culture, philosophy, religion, and metaphysics. In the work *Frozen Lips in Laughter*, Zorba envisions the world through the harmony of colors and images, inspired by very important Albanian figures like his uncle, the painter Kolë Idromeno (leading figure of Albanian visual arts). Zorba, thus, constructs a unique form of knowledge, where references to El Greco, Mozart, Horace, Kant, Shakespeare, and Wilde intertwine in a richly intertextual text, demonstrating a deep absorption of universal culture; he, as well, uses mystical concepts to express spiritual fulfillment. Some of his poems are a celebration of hope, a cosmic dance that bursts into ecstasy after the imaginary fall of tyranny. (poetry in supplementary material 1)

The poems such as *Sombre this path, The Gravel of the Kir, Feast Tonight* (written in prison) are spiritual radiographs of a man who has endured the hell of dictatorship (the poetries are presented in Supplementary material 1). In them, cement, mud, and darkness are not merely physical elements, but symbols of suffering. Memory becomes the counterforce against absurdity, against the erasure of myth and spirit. In the poem *Prayer on an August Day*, dreams confront apocalypse, yet the poet does not surrender: he prays, seeks salvation, and revives the myth of childhood as a refuge for the soul.

He gives voice to the collapse of elites, the disappearance of educators, and the shattering of ideals, as expressed in the poem *Andante mosso*: "...Why did they fall one by one: both Gods and heroes, / And ancient wisdoms."

In the poem *Ripresa*, subtitled *Partings*, Zorba recreates the atmosphere of the "September storm" - a wave of arrests that freezes the citizens' smiles and destroys the spiritual order. The broken verses, the stormy relief, and the inner rhythm of the poem evoke a silent cataclysm, where "all myths had died."

Recurring motifs such as "the ancient song of the tribe" or "the godfather's straw from long ago" become mantras of lost happiness, but also prayers for spiritual rebirth. He uses phrases like "if only we became children again," "How good it was back then…" to create a powerful contrast between the light of the past and the darkness of the present. Yet the poet does not surrender. He seeks an "undiscovered consolation," a salvation that comes from the elevation of the soul, from Intelligence and the Word.

In Zef Zorba's poetry, the confrontation with death, loss, and isolation is an internal structure of his poetic vision. In his verses, (e.g., in *Captives)* images drift like dreams between sleep and awakening, creating a suspended universe where beings hang "on the edge of a ray." This is tragic sublimity, akin to Shakespearean experiences, where the hero stands face-to-face with death.

In the poem *How Good It Was Back Then*, Zorba weaves biblical elements such as the cross, Calvary, and the prayer *ad adiuvandum me festina* ("Lord, hasten to help me"), turning the poem into a spiritual pilgrimage toward the divine. He seeks salvation, redemption, and a return to childlike innocence, to a world where the weight of guilt did not torment him. *The clock strikes five: I take the cross upon my shoulder / and with shallow breath begin the climb to Calvary.* This is the poetic summit, where suffering becomes the path to follow the divine, to escape the sinfulness of the world. At the end of Calvary, he finds rest: *I walk. And slowly, gently, a song begins to form / within my veins: "ad adiuvandum me festina."*

In Zef Zorba's work, memory is not merely recollection, but a poetic structure for constructing individual, historical, and cultural identity. It appears in two primary forms: as nostalgia for a time of happiness, and as documentation of collective pain. Zorba invokes place names such as *Zalli i Kirit*, *Rrapi i Çinarit*, *Kampi i Bedenit*, crafting a poetic map of suffering and pride, where memory becomes a form of resurrection.

Ultimately, Zef Zorba's poetry is a loving process to overcome violence and oblivion, a form of salvation through art, where writing and reading become a journey through the memory of a frozen time, still alive in verse. Zef Zorba opens the volume *Frozen Lips in Laughter* with a silent climax: an epilogue of being on the edge of the abyss, where the verse *Sombre this path* sets the tone for a long, arduous journey, illuminated by an inner light (the poetry is presented in the anthology). In the following tercet, the poet describes a spiritual tremor at the brink of the chasm, a vertigo that is not fear, but a yearning for descent, as Milan Kundera writes: "It is the voice of the void beneath us that pulls us."(Isufaj, 2024).

This poetic moment echoes the key verse from Psalm 23: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death…" -a silent paratext that permeates the entire volume, transforming the walk through darkness into an act of faith and endurance. But Zorba does not experience darkness as a loss of the righteous path, as in Dante, but as a trial to be overcome - a journey of the soul toward light. He appears as a figure who has passed through life's precipice, through the Calvary of suffering, and arrived at the light of fulfillment - making his poetry a mystical, historical, and spiritual journey.

Within the framework of totalitarian repression, where free speech was forbidden, censorship insurmountable, and free publication impossible, Zef Zorba represents now one of the most distinctive voices of what is known as "drawer literature": a voice that sings in silence, beyond the ear of its own time.

His poetry is an aesthetic act, but also a form of spiritual survival, a quiet gesture of resistance that preserves dignity through art.

Case study 2: Mihal Hanxhari

Hanxhari (1930–1999), another author of "drawer literature," represents a unique case, both in terms of his isolation and his aesthetic approach. He is the only Albanian writer who published nothing during his lifetime, not only under the totalitarian regime in Albania, but also after its fall in 1990, despite living until 1999. He never spoke about his writings with anyone, not even with friends. Among his posthumous collections of verse are: *Se sytë e mi kështu e shohin botën*, Tirana 2000 (For thus my eyes see the world); *Na ishte njëherë*, Tirana 2000 (Once upon a time); *Ti vdekja ime mbushur me jetë*, Tirana 2001 (You my death filled with life); and *Gdhend një statujë*, Tirana 2005 (Carve a statue).

In the landscape of Albanian literature, Mihal Hanxhari stands as a poet whose voice, though hushed, resonates with profound emotional depth and philosophical clarity. His work, particularly the collection *Gdhend një statujë* (*Carve a Statue*), translated into English by Robert Elsie, offers a lyrical counterpoint to the dominant literary paradigm of socialist realism. Through silence, brokenness, and intimate beauty, Hanxhari crafts a poetics of resistance, dignity, and resilience. Where the latter demanded ideological clarity, optimism, and collective heroism, Hanxhari offers ambiguity, introspection, and emotional truth.

His poems do not sing of factories or heroic workers. Instead, they mourn broken bridges (*An Ancient Broken Bridge*), whisper through wounded statues (*Dusk*), and linger in the scent of linden trees (*The Linden Trees*). These are not symbols of social progress, but of memory, loss, and spiritual endurance. Hanxhari's poetic figures are often *damaged bridges* that cannot connect, statues missing limbs, prayers severed mid-sentence. Yet they are never destroyed. In *A Severed Prayer*, the broken bridge becomes two arms reaching across a river, unable to touch. The image is haunting but dignified. In *Relics*, fractured marble bodies lie in the grass, embraced by spring. Hanxhari's poetry honors what remains and finds beauty in the incomplete, and dignity in the wounded.

In *Without Speaking a Word*, two soldiers eat watermelon in the shade, wordless. The scene repeats across time, suggesting that even in eras of repression, life and silence persist. In *"Voiceless"*, pain is compared to a tattoo, a scar, a fractured statue: mute, permanent. These images evoke a world where speech is dangerous, but memory is sacred.

Hanxhari's language is lush, sensual, and painterly, a stark contrast to the utilitarian tone of socialist realism. Hanxhari's refusal to conform is not loud, it is lyrical. Nature is not

a backdrop for ideology, but a mirror of emotion. This is lyricism as defiance. Hanxhari seduces, he mourns, he longs and remembers. His metaphors are not slogans; they are sighs.

In *Rapture*, carnations are flung on a bed, and bodies become blossoms. In *Lemon Blossoms*, love is fragrant, painful, and irrevocable. In *While on Its Way*, spring becomes a metaphor for longing, and the soul transforms into a flowering lily. In *Where Is*, an afternoon of sensual intimacy becomes an Etruscan terracotta, fragile, ancient, enduring. In *Farewell*, bitter skies are imbibed and left behind in trees. In *An Ink Stain*, childhood books bear the marks of deceptive life and bells no longer toll. These memories insist on being felt.

Hanxhari's poetry often blurs the line between the sacred and the sensual. In *I Love You*, the speaker loves like the stars: distant, indifferent, eternal. In *To Sleep*, fragrance becomes a lullaby, and petals float down a river. In *The Dream*, the poet becomes a tree, blooming with vision. This fusion of body and spirit, of nature and emotion, is a poetics of wholeness in a fractured world. Thus, Mihal Hanxhari's poetry does not march, declare, or demand. It carves and whispers and this is the way it survives.

Hanxhari offers this silence in a literary tradition once dominated by ideological noise and glorification. His work is a testament to the resilience of the inner world, the dignity of longing, and the power of lyrical beauty to resist, endure, and transform. And in doing so, instead of carving a statue of triumph, he carved a statue of truth. The inner rhythm of the verse resembles that of a modern psalm: a hymn for all souls seeking to escape the ordinary and find meaning in the eternal, through a clear poetic diction and a profoundly musical language. Hanxhari's poetry is a meeting point between Albanian and European culture as well. He also sings of real and metaphysical bridges, of eternal love and the terror of war, of Paris and Kosovo, making his art a worthy representative of universal experience in his unique language.

He is a creator who brings to Albanian literature a new aesthetic, philosophical, and emotional dimension. Not only a poet of nature and love, he is also a witness to the cultural and spiritual conscience of his time. His poetry born of elevated awareness, refined and universal, remained in drawers until 1999; he represents that kind of author who, even freed from political censorship, remained within a deep and intimate form of self-censorship. His hesitation to publish continued to prevail over the need to convey poetic messages. His work was published late and remains little known, as if still waiting for a reader who never called out for it aloud. Hanxhari's poetic vision earns a rightful place in the pages of immortal Albanian art (Isufaj, 2025).

Case study 3: Robert Prifti

Prifti (1925-1993) remains one of the most distinctive, yet unknown voices of Albanian literature written in secrecy during the communist dictatorship. By using foreign languages, pseudonyms ("Robert Elin" and "Trevor Elin"), and unconventional formats (e.g., microscopic handwriting- see supplementary material 2), Prifti, such a rare case in Albanian literature

constructed a literary universe that defied censorship, surveillance, and ideological uniformity. He published nothing during his lifetime, except for a single attempt in 1987, when he tried to smuggle a novel through customs, hidden in a bag. A hidden collection, a precious legacy, Prifti's body of work includes eight major pieces, among them *The two beds of Procrustes*, *Shenjtori i dhunës,/The Saint of Violence*, *Dielli i të vdekurve/ The Sun of the Dead/*, *Syri i Polifemit/The Eye of Polyphemus*, as well as philosophical manuscripts, poetry, and other prose awaiting publication.

Though a "drawer writer," his literary universe bridges European and Albanian culture through a deeply philosophical and aesthetic discourse. A self-taught intellectual polyglot, with deep knowledge of Ancient Greek, Latin, German, and Spanish, Prifti lived among the sounds of Bach, Debussy, and Mozart, and a library filled with Goethe, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and Freud. This inner world was his refuge and literature source that could not come to light until after his death and the fall of the dictatorship. This form of writing was a double act: self-censorship and resistance, concealment and testimony. Prifti did not write to be read of course; he wrote to exist and this was his strategy of survival. His manuscripts (Example in figure 1) were later translated into Albanian by his son, Edgar Prifti, who considers this act a mission of remembrance for those who dared to think differently.

Through an analysis of his novels *The Eye of Polyphemus* and *The Two Beds of Procrustes* and *Purgatory* we can note and explore themes of silence, also the grotesque, paradox, and the philosophy of unmaking. In the shadowed margins of Albanian literature, Prifti emerges as a singular voice, through volume, as well through philosophical intensity and allegorical depth. His story *Purgatory* beyond his narrative, it is a metaphysical reckoning, a political parable, and a psychological confession. Written far from ideological conformity, and originally composed in a foreign language under pseudonyms, *Purgatory* stands as a testament to the power of literature to resist, reflect, and reimagine.

Prifti's work was created in secrecy during the Albanian dictatorship, often without hope of publication. But *Purgatory* transcends its historical context. It is a universal meditation on power, ego, utopia, and the tragic failure of imposed salvation. The protagonist, a hybrid figure of prophet, tyrant, and philosopher, constructs a totalitarian system in the name of altruism, only to be devoured by the very mechanisms he designed. The narrator of *Purgatory* is not a man, but a mythic consciousness. He is Caesar and Christ, beast and God, scientist and mystic. His journey from instinct to reason, from faith to ideology, mirrors the evolution of human civilization and its recurring descent into violence. Prifti constructs this character as a vessel of contradiction: he seeks to annihilate ego while cultivating his own; he preaches equality while enforcing hierarchy; he promises paradise while building a prison. This is not a character arc it is a philosophical spiral. The narrator's ascent is not toward enlightenment, but toward self-deception. His confession is not redemptive, but diagnostic. He is the disease he sought to cure.

The titular *Purgatory* is a dystopian state masquerading as a redemptive system. It is a factory for the *New Man*, of Socialism, a place where desire is criminalized, individuality erased, and dissent pathologized. Prifti's vision of Purgatory draws obviously on the aesthetics

of socialist realism, religious ritual, and Orwellian surveillance but it is not derivative. It is uniquely Albanian in its texture, and deeply philosophical in its ambition. The system divides people into three categories: the loyal ("shokët"), the educable masses, and the irredeemable. This tripartite structure echoes both Dante's Inferno and Marxist class theory, but Prifti subverts both. In *Purgatory*, purification is indistinguishable from punishment, and salvation is indistinguishable from submission.

Prifti's narrative is saturated with ritual: T*he Night of Saint Bartholomew*, the ceremonial executions, the symbolic cage, the forbidden city. These are plot devices, but also metaphors for the machinery of myth. The protagonist uses symbols (the cross, the mirror, the city) to manipulate collective consciousness. But the symbols betray him. The mirror reflects uniformity, not truth. The city is empty. The cross is absent. The story's climax, the revolt of the crowd and the exposure of the forbidden city is not a revolution. It is a revelation. The people do not overthrow the system, instead they discover its hollowness. At last, as we see, the protagonist is not defeated by force, but by the failure of his illusion.

One of the most striking motifs in *Purgatory* is the war against narcissism. The protagonist commissions "mirrors" that erase individual beauty, replacing it with standardized reflections. This is a literalization of ideological uniformity, a war against the self. But the war fails. Lindor, the handsome dissident, continues to admire himself. The crowd continues to desire. The ego persists. Prifti's insight is devastating: utopia cannot be built on the annihilation of desire. The attempt to purify humanity leads not to paradise, but to deformity. The forbidden city is populated by atavistic creatures, surely, not perfected humans, but regressed shadows instead.

Stylistically, *Purgatory* is all irony and grotesque. The protagonist's speeches are grandiose, but hollow. His sacred rituals are absurd. His system seems rational, but in its essence it is monstrous. Prifti uses these contradictions, these reversed paradoxes to expose the philosophical tragedy of totalitarianism: the idea that man can be perfected through force. The final scene: we see the protagonist in a cage, watching the crowd enter the dead city — is a masterstroke of tragic irony. He cries out, "Forgive them, Lord! They know not what they do," echoing Christ. But unlike Christ, he is not innocent. He is the architect of their suffering. His plea is self-pity.

Purgatory is a story of disillusionment. It is a philosophical autopsy of utopia, a confession of ideological failure, and a lament for the ego that cannot be erased. The machinery of control often wears the mask of virtue. And that the greatest danger is not the tyrant who rules, but the prophet who believes.

Prifti was not a dissident in the classical sense and in Albania, such dissidence was nearly impossible due to the extraordinary and unmatched level of repression compared to other Eastern countries. He did not protest publicly, was never imprisoned, and remained unmentioned. But he was a dissident in the ethical and aesthetic sense: he wrote in secrecy, in a foreign language (Italian), in miniature script, without readers to preserve the soul and the freedom of thought.

Study 3: Art and literature as form of justice

There were two key issues that participants discussed in relation to artistic expression and literature: recognising the political nature of some of the art/literature created during the dictatorship and the way it is interpreted in the present, and the value of art and literature in documenting the past.

Theme 1: Art and literature created during the dictatorship

The participants were concerned with how the art/literature created during the dictatorship was being shared in the present without critical reflection of what it represented or how it could misinform new generations.

> The films of the communist dictatorship era... made by very prepared, very great artists... But the content of the film is bad because they reverberate crime... They reverberate the dictatorship/// So what should we do? These films can be shown in the movie production theater (Kinostudio). Let them be shown there and let the admirers of that system come and watch them… Let the researchers watch them, and even make observations... these films can be shown, but accompanied by a great criticism… here's how they killed this person, here's how they imprisoned him[1], here's how they did this, here!... The youth does not yet know the life of the dictatorship and they like the artistic play of the artists... Today's youth do not understand. Even worse is that today's youth is not being made aware of the communist regime… It is inexcusable. They haven't found the bodies of the missing yet. (Berti)

This participant argues that showing films made during communism which aimed to support the communist ideology in the present carries many risks. While the quality of filmmaking can attract young people, they are not informed about the past and can absorb this information uncritically. Second, it can shift the focus from seeking justice (i.e., findings the body of the missing) to glorifying the past. However, there is power in this art if shown correctly. These films can play an important role to illustrate how crimes were committed and when associated with critical discussions can become an important source of public debate even among the young. As such, artistic creations can become a sourse of education (for young people and researchers alike) and inform public debates. The next participant also criticises the screening of such films widely and uncritically in two of the main Albanian TV channels.

[1] Despite reference to male gender which is often the default in many languages including Albanian, all genders were targets and victims of communist crimes.

> Society must understand that that time must be punished. …There is a cascading, an undeclared cascading through Digitalbit and T, where films from the communist era are shown all day long and the conversations of Mehmet Shehu (the communist prime minister from 1945-1981) are being exalted in the newspapers, how Mehmet Shehu was killed, what a good man he was... He was also a statesman. We are not saying that he was not. But what about the policies that were implemented, how were they? There needs to be a condemnation, even a formal one, of that period that comes from high state authorities... All day long T films with partisans, when Spartak Ngjela (a persecuted politician) said, "The war" he said, "The New Albania Film Studio has won". They did not fight. (Turi)

As Turi explains, this uncritical showing of films supporting the ideological past is particularly dangerous because historical discussions are also uncritical. As such, these films risk distorting the past and undermining justice and education of new generations. The context where these events take place is very important in understanding the risk carried by such art. It is a context of perceived injustice where knowledge about the past is very limited. As such art becomes a key source of information for educating the young people, public debate but also other justice processes. Here Turi refers to the fact that crimes of the past are not documented or discussed in the media. Another key feature of this context is the perceived silencing of the victims as illustrated in the next account. Ilir argues that those that try to speak about past harmed are not given a platform or are even cast aside by the media:

> This regime that is now does not love us (the persecuted) at all, they even interviewed me several times, when it was a democratic regime, 3 years ago. Since these (the new government) came, no one has called me anymore. They don't love me anymore. They know how I speak. Even the media has been bought…Now, now we are tired, and no one listens to us. Those of us who speak exactly as it was, they don't love us very much…We have nowhere to say our word. I have published 2-3 books. A novel, "(name of novel)",… it has not been well distributed. Because they have all the power in their hands…We (the persecuted), in a certain sense, are free to move, and speak, but in a very important way, using a metaphor, we are still prisoners. Because we don't have the opportunity to have our own media, because we don't have money. (Ilir)

Ilir explains how an additional danger to communist art being shown uncritically is due to this context where the voices, the art and literature created that criticises the past is not given space or opportunities to flourish. Ilir perceives this lack of ability to distribute art and victims' perspectives as a different form of imprisonment, that is less visible but equally dangerous to justice and democracy.

Theme 1 illustrates the dangers of uncritical distribution of communist art and literature, which gives a distorted view of the past to new generations, provides an uncritical discussions of history, and undermines the critical voices which are given less space in the media and public discussions. The next theme discusses the potential role that art and literature could have as form of justice.

Theme 2: Art as a form of justice

There was strong agreement amongst participants that art and literature created post-dictatorship has not engaged with the past sufficiently.

> Art has not dealt with the problems of these crimes…Art, moreover... always deals with the past, but not in this direction, you understand, to punish these things... To reflect it, there are different books about these prisoners mainly, written by them, about the horror they endured in prisons, how they were treated and how they are... That was it. There are no films about that period, except "Death of the Horse", (Meti)

As Meti explains, while it is the role of art and literature to document past harm, this has not been done sufficiently in post-dictatorial Albania. According to Meti, the exceptions include one artistic film, and biographies of ex-prisoners who took upon themselves this difficult task. This is emphasised in Anila's and Ilis's accounts next:

> I also have a civic duty to testify, and that's why I wrote the book, to give a true testimony about... my truth, at least, about the dictatorship (Anila).

> I thought I also had a debt to Albania to tell... I felt that I had to give a testimony. To give a personal, family testimony... I wrote two or three books about that period, because it's my duty to do this, so that others can find out what happened. I did it in prison, because I didn't tell you, but now the talk came, of course I didn't keep it written down, I only wrote it in the dungeons, when I was like that, on some piece of paper that fell into my hands, I wrote a satirical poem (name of poem). I even wrote it and rewrote it 120 times because I never kept it written down, I wrote it like that, I made some corrections and I remembered it, I learned it by heart, and I published (Ilir)

As Anila and Ilir explain, writing about the dictatorship in the aftermath was a civic duty for them, to ensure the testimonies were not lost. Ilir explains that he even wrote during the dictatorship despite the high personal risk, and then published this work afterwards. Both Anila and Ilir, as well as Meti see a clear role of art and literature as a form of justice aiming to document the past. The next two accounts agree with this and believe that literature has a unique ability to do so with more honesty and empathy:

> I say that art is less, in quotes, "bought" than the media. They are reflected in art…Both on stage, in exhibitions and in films. It's enough to mention "The Death of the Horse", a film not to be forgotten…In literature the blunt statement of things is better, more sound than in institutions and in various associations (Ana)
>
> ---
>
> Dine: It is precisely the artists, artists are a superior race, art helps you to remove that harshness that you may have, to change opinions. (Lea)

As both these accounts illustrate, art and literature have a unique power to present the truth, but also to overcome some of the challenges of the how this truth is perceived. As Lea argues, it literature has the potential to remove some of the harshness of this truth, which might make the message easier to process.

Theme 2 discusses the potential that art and literature have in documenting the past in such a way that can inform justice process. However, despite the potential, there are context-specific barriers that undermine their role. These need to be addressed for art and literature to full their role in full.

DISCUSSION

This study offers a nuanced exploration of how literature and art functioned during and after the Albanian dictatorship, revealing their multifaceted roles in three key areas. First, control and repression. Our findings show how literature was weaponized by the regime to enforce ideological conformity (by executing writer for their poetic dissent) and through censorship extending to both domestic and translated works. Canonical texts were ideologically sanitized to align with communist values. Comparing the censored translation with the original reveals subtle shifts in tone and emphasis, showing how translators navigated ideological pressures. The changes expose the mechanisms through which state control shaped narrative meaning.

Secondly, the "literature of the drawers", unpublished or hidden works, served as silent acts of resistance and spiritual survival. These texts preserved cultural memory, philosophical depth, and emotional truth, often in defiance of the regime's aesthetic and ideological mandates. Findings highlight the profound role of "drawer literature" as a silent yet powerful form of resilience and survival under Albania's communist dictatorship. Authors such as Zef Zorba, Mihal Hanxhari, and Robert Prifti wrote in secrecy, often without hope of publication, transforming isolation into creative strength. Their works reveal a paradox: while censorship sought to erase individuality, writing became a sanctuary for identity, memory, and dignity. Zorba's expressionist imagery and musicality, Hanxhari's lyrical defiance, and Prifti's philosophical allegories illustrate how art can resist ideological

uniformity through introspection and intertextuality. These texts, steeped in metaphysical and cultural references, document suffering while envisioning transcendence, positioning literature as both testimony and spiritual refuge. In contexts of extreme repression, such creativity underscores the human need for meaning-making and cultural continuity. Ultimately, drawer literature emerges not only as aesthetic achievement but as an ethical act of survival and resistance.

And thirdly, post-dictatorship, literature and art emerged as alternative vehicles for transitional justice, with creative expression documenting past harms, educating future generations, and fostering public debate, especially in contexts where formal justice mechanisms remain inadequate or absent. Survivor interviews reveal two key dynamics: the dangers of uncritical dissemination of dictatorial art, which risks glorifying oppression, and the transformative potential of creative expression to document harm and educate future generations. Artistic works can offer honesty and empathy often absent in institutional narratives and media bias, enabling public dialogue and historical reckoning.

This study builds on and extends prior research in several key ways. While censorship in authoritarian regimes has been documented (e.g., Billiani, 2014; Guriev & Treisman, 2020), this paper uniquely illustrates how translation censorship operated as a subtle but powerful tool of ideological control in Albania. The concept of "drawer literature" parallels global examples of dissident writing (e.g., Soviet samizdat), but the Albanian context, marked by extreme repression and near-total isolation, it presents a particularly stark case of creative survival under silence. The role of art in transitional justice has been explored (e.g., Bahun, 2016; Rush & Simic, 2014), but this study adds depth by showing how uncritical dissemination of regime-era art can perpetuate injustice and misinform younger generations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, PRACTICE, AND POLICY

The findings support theories of censorship (e.g. Billiani, 2014; Merkle, 2018) and collective resilience (Acar et al., 2021; Marazzi et al., 2025), showing how creativity can maintain control but also sustain identity and dignity under repression. They also contribute to transitional justice theory (Teitel, 2002), suggesting that literature and art can serve as forms of historical justice, especially when institutional mechanisms fail.

Educators and cultural institutions should critically curate and contextualize regime-era art to prevent glorification of oppressive ideologies. Survivor narratives and dissident literature should be actively preserved, published, and integrated into public discourse and curricula. Governments and transitional justice bodies should recognize and support artistic expression as a legitimate form of testimony and justice. Policies should ensure equitable access to media and publishing platforms for survivors and dissident voices, countering the marginalization described by participants.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The research employs a robust multi-method approach, integrating hermeneutic, phenomenological, stylistic, text and thematic analyses. It combines archival research, literary analysis, and survivor interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Albanian context. While context-specific focus on Albania is necessary, it should be applied with care to other authoritarian contexts.

CONCLUSION

This research underscores the profound role of literature and art in contexts of political violence, not only as tools of control, but also as mediums of survival, resistance, and justice. In Albania, where formal transitional justice remains incomplete, creative expression offers a vital pathway for truth-telling, healing, and historical reckoning. The study calls for greater recognition of artistic voices in post-authoritarian societies and urges critical engagement with cultural legacies to prevent the perpetuation of past harms.

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IMPLEMENTATION OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES IN PEDIATRIC IMAGING: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The development of new technologies in medical imaging has significantly advanced diagnostic capabilities, particularly in pediatric patients. These innovations offer enhanced image quality while reducing risk; however, their application in children presents specific challenges due to higher sensitivity to radiation, limited cooperation during imaging procedures, and the need for personalized approaches. This paper explores the practical, technical, and ethical challenges associated with the use of advanced modalities such as low-dose CT, accelerated MRI, advanced ultrasound, and artificial intelligence (AI) in pediatric imaging. Through a review of current literature and clinical experience, the study presents actionable strategies to address these challenges. These include the development of pediatric-specific imaging protocols, ongoing staff training, creation of child-friendly environments, and the integration of AI to optimize scanning parameters and streamline image interpretation. The findings underscore the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to ensure safe, effective, and ethical imaging care for pediatric patients. Modern imaging technologies, when applied thoughtfully and responsibly, can significantly enhance diagnostic accuracy while minimizing potential harm.

INTRODUCTION

Pediatric imaging has undergone major technological advances aimed at reducing harm and improving diagnostic accuracy. Children's anatomy, radiosensitivity, and motion susceptibility require the adaptation of imaging methods and the integration of newer technologies. This extended article includes graphical illustrations, structured tables, and a dedicated RX section.

Table 1. Comparison of Emerging Pediatric Imaging Technologies

Technology	Clinical Use	Advantages	Limitations
Low-dose CT	Trauma, lung disease	90% radiation reduction	High equipment cost
Fast MRI	Neuro, abdomen, MSK	Sedation reduction	Longer acquisition than CT
Elastography	Liver, thyroid	Non-invasive stiffness	Operator dependent
CEUS	Liver, trauma	Zero radiation	Limited regulatory approval
AI	Detection & segmentation	Automation, speed	Bias, dataset limitations
3D Printing	Surgical planning	High precision	Expensive

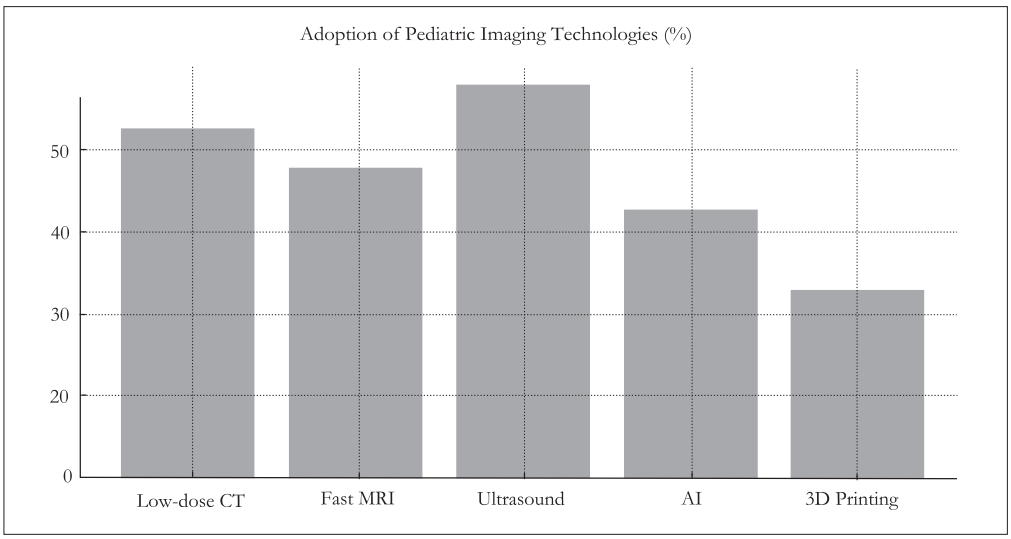


Figure 1. *Adoption of Pediatric Imaging Technologies*

EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

This section provides expanded details on each modality, incorporating scientific accuracy.

Low-Dose CT

Ultra-low-dose CT incorporates iterative reconstruction, photon-counting detectors, and tin filters, achieving up to 90% dose reduction. It is valuable in lung imaging, trauma, and congenital anomalies.

Fast MRI

Fast MRI sequences reduce exam duration, decreasing sedation need. Motion-corrected imaging improves pediatric neurologic and abdominal studies.

Fast MRI platforms allow sedation-free imaging for children older than three years and generate diagnostic-quality images in minutes.

Elastography & CEUS

High-frequency probes, elastography, and CEUS expand diagnostic capability without radiation. Ultrasound remains the primary modality for neonates and infants.

Elastography quantitatively measures tissue stiffness, while CEUS safely evaluates microvascular perfusion.

Artificial Intelligence

AI aids the detection of pneumonia, fractures, hemorrhage, and tumors. AI-based reconstruction improves image quality while reducing radiation. Ethical concerns persist regarding pediatric datasets.

3D Printing and VR

3D printing is widely used in congenital cardiac disease and orthopedic deformities, enabling precise surgical planning.

Implementation challenges include radiation concerns, motion artifacts, high equipment cost, limited availability in low-resource regions, ethical issues with AI, and insufficient specialized training.

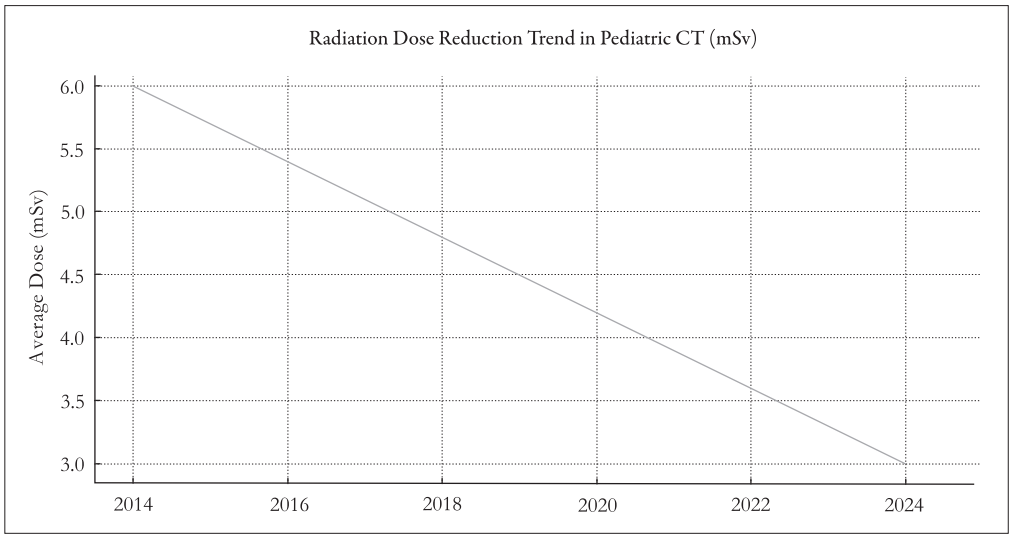


Figure 2. *Radiation Dose Reduction Trend*

PEDIATRIC RADIOGRAPHY (RX)

Digital radiography in pediatrics has advanced through dose-efficient detectors, automated exposure control, and AI-based patient positioning. These tools minimize repeat exposures and improve soft-tissue contrast.

DISCUSSION

Advanced technologies greatly enhance diagnostic workflows but introduce ethical and financial challenges. AI requires pediatric-specific datasets to avoid algorithmic bias. Artificial intelligence (AI) in medical imaging has rapidly expanded in recent years; however, very little AI has been dedicated to pediatric imaging. Few products indicate whether they are validated for children, and pediatric imaging requires careful adaptation due to age-specific variability. Of the >200 AI software as a medical device cleared by the FDA currently listed in the online ACR Data Science Institute catalog, only 6 (3%) indicate that they are intended for pediatric use.

There are no computer-aided diagnosis radiology products authorized for pediatric use. Kids' medical needs and body sizes change a lot as they grow, and their organs and bones look different at each age. These differences make interpreting pediatric medical images challenging for radiologists who aren't specialists. As children grow, their bone marrow, skeletal patterns, thymus, brain metabolism, and organ blood flow all change. These developmental differences affect how medical images look and must be considered when designing AI tools. Differences in blood vessel size and circulation also mean that contrast agents need to be tailored for pediatric patients to achieve good imaging results.

The findings highlight that emerging technologies significantly improve diagnostic safety and precision in pediatric imaging. Radiation optimization remains essential, with low-dose CT and AI-based dose monitoring reducing long-term cancer risk. Motion challenges can be mitigated using fast MRI sequences and child-friendly environments. However, disparities in low-resource regions hinder technology adoption. Tele-radiology, refurbished equipment, and regional collaborations offer practical solutions. Ethical issues in AI—including privacy, consent, and algorithm transparency—must be addressed through robust frameworks. Training remains a critical component of implementation, requiring investment in pediatric-specific education.

CONCLUSION

Emerging imaging technologies will continue reshaping pediatric care. Equitable global implementation must include policies for access, dose management, and ethical AI integration. AI for pediatric radiology is far behind adult applications, so timely action is needed to make pediatric AI tools accessible, safe, effective, and reliable for children. Actively involving pediatric radiologists is crucial both to mentor others who care for children and

to ensure that AI systems reflect the unique nuances of pediatric practice. Their expert guidance will be key to how pediatric AI tools are designed, validated, and adopted.

Small centers with few specialists and limited funding will find it much more difficult to implement new imaging methods and pediatric AI–based techniques.

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BETWEEN THE MAP AND THE MISSION: JUSTICE ON NEW COORDINATES

An Evaluation of the 2022 Judicial Map Reform in Albania and Its Impact on Efficiency and Access to Justice

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ABSTRACT

The 2022 judicial map reform in Albania was one of the central structural measures adopted as part of the broader 2016 justice reform and EU accession process. It aimed to improve judicial efficiency, optimise resources, strengthen specialisation, and enhance the quality and consistency of judicial services through the territorial consolidation of courts. Key measures included reducing the number of First Instance Courts of General Jurisdiction from 22 to 13 and merging six courts of appeal into a single national Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction. This paper assesses the early impact of the reform on judicial efficiency, workload distribution, backlog management, and access to justice. Using 2022 as a baseline year, the study analyses judicial performance data from 2023–2025, including court workload, staffing levels, Clearance Rates (CR), and Disposition Times (DT), complemented by qualitative insights from institutional reports, stakeholder perspectives, and comparative European experiences. The findings show that while the reform has created a more concentrated and potentially more coherent judicial structure, the expected efficiency gains have not yet fully materialised, particularly at the appeal level. The Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction has emerged as the principal pressure point, marked by increasing backlog, high disposition times, and persistent judicial vacancies. At the same time, the reform has generated relevant access-to-justice concerns linked to territorial centralisation, travel costs, and the accessibility of courts for rural and vulnerable populations. The paper argues that the Albanian experience reflects a broader dilemma

visible in contemporary European judicial reforms: balancing efficiency and specialisation through court consolidation while safeguarding effective and equitable access to justice. It concludes that the long-term success of the reform will depend on sustained investment in judicial staffing, infrastructure, digitalisation, and evidence-based court management.

INTRODUCTION

Albania's 2016 justice reform is widely regarded as a European Union (EU)-driven transformation of the judicial system, closely linked to the country's accession process and broader efforts to strengthen the rule of law and combat corruption.[1] As part of this comprehensive restructuring of the justice system, the territorial reorganisation of the courts adopted in 2022 emerged as one of the reform's most significant institutional measures. By redesigning the judicial map and restructuring court jurisdictions, the reform sought to align the organisation of the judiciary with the principles of judicial independence, procedural efficiency, and effective access to justice.[2]

The 2016 justice reform revised a large share of the Constitution and introduced a new governance architecture [High Judicial Council, High Prosecutorial Council, High Inspector of Justice, Special Structure Against Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK) and Special Courts][3], together with an extraordinary vetting process[4] that removed more than half of the sitting magistrates. While vetting has strengthened integrity and public trust, it has also generated serious short–term capacity constraints, backlogs, and delays that affect the right to a trial within a reasonable time.[5]

The EU placed justice reform, including a more efficient and independent judiciary, among the core political criteria for Albania's accession, repeatedly highlighting the need to strengthen the rule of law in its progress reports.[6] Constitutional changes and the creation of new institutions, together with the vetting of judges and prosecutors, were explicitly

[1] Garunja, E. (2022). The Effects of Constitutional Changes on the Judiciary System in Albania: The Process of Vetting. Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies.

[2] Maho, B. (2022). Approval of the new judicial map: A priority of the Albanian justice reform. Jus & Justicia.

[3] Ligji nr 76/2016, datë 22 korrik 2016, Për disa shtesa dhe ndryshime në Ligjin nr 8417, datë 21 tetor 1998 "Kushtetuta e Republikës së Shqipërisë", i ndryshuar ("Law on Constitutional Amendments").

[4] The Albanian vetting process is a temporary re-evaluation of all judges, prosecutors, and key judicial officials, assessing their assets, background, and professional competence in order to confirm, suspend, or dismiss them from office as part of the broader 2016 justice reform aimed at restoring public trust and strengthening judicial integrity. Law No 84/2016 on the Transitional Re-evaluation of Judges and Prosecutors (Vetting Law).

[5] Agalliu, P. (2024). Analysis of Legal and Practical Aspects of the Vetting Process. Proceeding of the International Conference on Political Sciences.

[6] Kolotylo, M. (2024). Judicial System Reform in Albania in the Context of Accession Process to the European Union. NaUKMA Research Papers. Law.

framed as measures to meet EU standards and address systemic corruption and dysfunction in the justice system.[7] Reorganisation and functioning of the courts, including the territorial structure, was therefore not optional but a central expectation within the EU conditionality framework for opening and advancing accession negotiations.[8]

Within this broader EU-driven agenda, the adoption of Law No. 98/2016 "On the Organisation of the Judiciary" made the approval of a new judicial map a priority component of justice reform, intended to increase efficiency, improve access, and bring Albania closer to European best practices in court organisation.[9] Under strong EU conditionality to deliver visible rule–of–law improvements, the justice reform and especially the vetting process generated severe capacity constraints, growing backlogs and delays, which in turn were used to justify rationalising the court network through consolidation and centralisation, particularly at the appeal level as a way to optimise limited human resources, promote more consistent jurisprudence, and signal progress toward the rule–of–law benchmarks required for EU integration.[10]

The paper explores three overarching questions. The first concerns outcomes: has the judicial map reform begun to deliver on its stated objectives of improving access to justice, enhancing efficiency, and raising the quality of judicial services? To answer this, we use 2022 as a baseline year and examine performance data from courts in 2023, 2024 and 2025.

A second question focuses on trends: what early signs can be observed in workload distribution, case backlogs, and the timeliness of proceedings that might indicate the likely long-term trajectory of the reform? By comparing statistical data across the four years, the paper seeks to identify patterns that go beyond short-term fluctuations.

The third question relates to perceptions and lived experience: how is the reform being received by those directly involved in the justice system, judges, prosecutors, and legal professionals, and what do their insights reveal about both opportunities and challenges in the early stages of implementation?

Taken together, these three dimensions provide an initial assessment of whether the judicial map reform is advancing its intended objectives, while also highlighting the challenges likely to shape its long-term impact on the administration of justice in Albania.

[7] Garunja, E. (2022). The Effects of Constitutional Changes on the Judiciary System in Albania: The Process of Vetting. Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies.

[8] Maho, B. (2022). Approval of the new judicial map: A priority of the Albanian justice reform. Jus & Justicia.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Bara, J., & Bara, B. (2020). Trial Within a Reasonable Time and the Impact of Justice Reform in Albania. ICL Journal, 14, 211 - 230.

THE 2022 JUDICIAL MAP REFORM: POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION

The Rationale for Reform: Legal and Institutional Background

Prior to the 2022 judicial map reform, the Albanian judiciary operated through a highly fragmented territorial structure, with 29 courts of first instance, including 22 general jurisdiction courts, six administrative courts, and one special court; eight courts of appeal, comprising six general jurisdiction appeal courts, one administrative appeal court, and one special appeal court; and the High Court.[1] While this architecture was formally justified by the need for territorial proximity, it increasingly produced systemic inefficiencies: uneven caseloads, delays, duplication of small administrative units and erosion of public trust in the effectiveness and integrity of justice institutions.[12]

These weaknesses became more acute in the post–2016 context. The justice reform package, including Law No. 98/2016 "On the Organisation of the Judiciary in the Republic of Albania", introduced a new model of judicial organisation, tying the court network to functional criteria such as workload, resource rationalisation and access to justice, rather than mere geographic dispersion.[13] Subsequent assessments highlighted persistent imbalances: some courts faced excessive inflows and backlogs while others were under–utilised; many operated with serious judicial vacancies due to vetting, contributing to paralysis, long delays and rising stocks of pending cases, especially at the appeal level.[14] The duplication of administrative structures across numerous small courts led to suboptimal use of scarce financial and human resources, while geographical disparities and increased travel burdens raised concerns about effective access to justice and compliance with the right to a trial within a reasonable time.[15]

Against this backdrop, structural reconfiguration of the judicial map emerged as a systemic necessity and a core benchmark within the EU accession process, where consolidation, efficiency and rule–of–law performance are central conditionality elements.[16] Anchored in the mandate of the High Judicial Council (HJC), an Inter-Institutional Working Group established in 2019 conducted a comprehensive assessment of caseloads, staffing and territorial coverage, culminating in a proposal for a new judicial map approved by the

[11] High Judicial Council (KLGJ), Relacion Report on the Judicial Map Reform Proposal, June 2022, available at: https://klgj.al/media/4qppqy53/relacion-harta-gjyqesore-f-1-mbledhje-plenare.pdf

[12] Lamçe, J. (2024). Improving judicial performance in Albania. Jus & Justicia.

[13] Rupa, Y. (2017). The Albanian Reform in the Institutions of Justice and Its Impact on the Integration of Albania in the European Union. Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, 8, 196 - 201.

[14] Garunja, E. (2022). The Effects of Constitutional Changes on the Judiciary System in Albania: The Process of Vetting. Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies.

[15] Bara, J., & Bara, B. (2020). Trial Within a Reasonable Time and the Impact of Justice Reform in Albania. ICL Journal, 14, 211 - 230.

[16] Balliu, A. (2020). The Reform of Justice in Albania. Beijing Law Review.

HJC after broad consultations.[17] On this basis, the Council of Ministers adopted Decision No. 495, dated 21.07.2022, "On the Reorganisation of Judicial Districts and Jurisdictional Competences of Courts", formally implementing the reform.[18]

Substantively, the reform consolidated the court network: first–instance courts of general jurisdiction were reduced from 22 to 13, six courts of appeal were merged into a single Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction, and administrative courts of first instance were reduced from six to two, dissolving a total of 18 courts.[19] The prosecution offices attached to these courts were correspondingly reorganised and territorially restructured.[20] This restructuring reflects a policy orientation towards rationalisation, centralisation and specialisation, aimed at addressing resource shortages and improving consistency and efficiency, although it has also triggered concerns about reduced territorial access and increased costs for court users.[21]

The analytical basis of the reform relied primarily on judicial workload indicators such as court caseloads, case-to-judge ratios and territorial distribution of courts, while the integration of prosecutorial data and broader justice-chain analysis appears more limited, despite acknowledged vetting-related vacancies in the prosecution system and their impact on the case-flow.[22] This suggests that the reform's evidence base and institutional design remained fragmented, despite the judiciary and prosecution facing pressures that are closely interconnected.

In this sense, the rationale for the 2022 judicial map is best understood as the product of a convergence between the EU driven legal and institutional redesign following the 2016 justice reform and accumulated structural pressures, including fragmentation, backlogs, vacancies and territorial inequalities, which together made a comprehensive reconfiguration of the territorial organisation of the judiciary both legally possible and practically unavoidable.

The Methodology and Comparative Models

The design of the 2022 judicial map was informed not only by domestic structural challenges but also by comparative European experiences concerning the rationalisation of judicial

[17] Këshilli i Lartë Gjyqësor (KLGJ), 'Harta e Re Gjyqësore' https://klgj.al/harta-e-re-gjyqesore/accessed 1 May 2026.

[18] Council of Ministers Decision No. 495, dated 21.07.2022, "On the Reorganisation of Judicial Districts and the Territorial Jurisdiction of Courts", Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania, available at: https://qbz.gov.al/eli/fz/2022/107/17dcee01-3e7d-450b-9178-7cc7ea631705?utm_source=

[19] Këshilli i Lartë Gjyqësor (KLGJ), 'Harta e Re Gjyqësore' https://klgj.al/harta-e-re-gjyqesore/ accessed 1 May 2026.

[20] High Judicial Council of Albania, Një Hartë e Re Gjyqësore për Shqipërinë: Raport Vlerësimi (May 2022) https://klgj.al/media/gltnnq3j/klgj-raport-vleresimi-nj%C3%AB-hart%C3%AB-e-re-gjyq%C3%ABsore-maj-2022.pdf accessed 15 May 2026.

[21] Ibid (no.21).

[22] Garunja, E. (2022). The Effects of Constitutional Changes on the Judiciary System in Albania: The Process of Vetting. Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies.

systems. In developing the reform proposal, the Inter-Institutional Working Group[23] relied extensively on international standards and comparative models, particularly studies and recommendations produced by the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ).[24] Reference was made to broader European trends over the past two decades, during which several European jurisdictions, including Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Sweden, undertook territorial consolidation of courts through the merger of smaller judicial units into larger and more specialised structures.[25] These reforms were generally aimed at improving efficiency, strengthening judicial specialisation, optimising resource allocation, and enhancing consistency in judicial decision-making.

Within this comparative framework, the Albanian judicial map reform sought to adapt European models to the country's institutional, demographic, and geographic realities. The methodology adopted by the Inter-Institutional Working Group was primarily grounded in quantitative indicators and operational criteria intended to assess the functionality and sustainability of the court network.[26] A central indicator in this assessment was judicial workload, particularly the ratio between caseloads and the number of judges assigned to each court. The objective was to ensure a more balanced distribution of cases and to avoid situations in which courts remained either structurally overburdened or underutilised.[27]

In addition to workload indicators, the reform methodology incorporated factors relating to population distribution, territorial jurisdiction, and the complexity of cases handled by different courts. Structural and infrastructural considerations were also taken into account, including the number of judges, courtrooms, and administrative capacities available within each judicial district. At the same time, geographic accessibility constituted an important component of the assessment, measured primarily through travel distance and travel time for court users. The underlying objective was to design a judicial structure capable of balancing efficiency and institutional sustainability with the constitutional requirement of effective access to justice.[28]

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[23] The Working Group on the judicial map was established under the High Judicial Council and brought together representatives of the Council, the judiciary and courts, the Ministry of Justice, and supporting administrative and international partner institutions. Moreover, the High Judicial Council, in cooperation with the Ministry of Justice, conducted public consultations in early 2022 on the new judicial map, involving eight meetings with stakeholders, including representatives of the General Prosecutor's Office, judges, legal professionals, civil society, and the business community, whose feedback was jointly assessed and used to refine and finalise the reform proposal. More information accessible High Judicial Council of Albania, Një Hartë e Re Gjyqësore për Shqipërinë: Raport Vlerësimi (May 2022) https://klgj.al/media/gltnnq3j/klgj-raport-vleresimi-nj%C3%AB-hart%C3%AB-e-re-gjyq%C3%ABsore-maj-2022.pdf accessed 15 May 2026.

[24] Lamçe, J., & Kurti, A. (2022). The effects of the new judicial map on family disputes resolution. Jus & Justicia.

[25] Mak, E. (2008). Balancing Territoriality and Functionality; Specialization as a Tool for Reforming Jurisdiction in the Netherlands, France and Germany. International Journal for Court Administration, 1, 2-9.

[26] High Judicial Council (KLGJ), Report on the Judicial Map Reform Proposal, June 2022, available at: https://klgj.al/media/4qppqy53/relacion-harta-gjyqesore-f-1-mbledhje-plenare.pdf

[27] Ibid.

[28] Maho, B. (2022). Approval of the new judicial map: A priority of the Albanian justice reform. Jus & Justicia.

On the basis of this methodology, the judicial map reform introduced substantial territorial and organisational restructuring across all levels of the judiciary. At the level of first-instance courts of general jurisdiction, the number of courts was reduced through the consolidation of smaller courts into larger judicial units. The reform envisaged that each court would operate with a minimum number of judges sufficient to ensure functional stability and balanced workload distribution.[29]

A similar consolidation logic was applied within the administrative judiciary. The six Administrative Courts of First Instance were reduced to two regional courts, located in Tirana and Lushnja, with the intention of concentrating judicial expertise, strengthening administrative adjudication capacity, and addressing the growing volume of pending administrative cases.[30] The most significant restructuring occurred at the appellate level, where the existing six courts of appeal were merged into a single national Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction located in Tirana. The rationale underlying this centralisation was to promote greater uniformity of jurisprudence, improve workload management, and reduce procedural delays through a more coordinated appellate structure.[31]

At the same time, the reform attempted to mitigate concerns regarding reduced territorial accessibility resulting from court closures. For this purpose, Judicial Service Offices were envisaged in the premises of former courts.[32] These offices were designed to provide citizens with basic administrative and procedural services, including the submission of claims, access to court documentation, and issuance of certifications, even though hearings and adjudicatory functions would no longer take place locally. [34] In this way, the reform sought to preserve a limited local institutional presence while advancing broader objectives of consolidation and rationalisation.

Taken together, the methodology and comparative foundations of the reform reflect an effort to balance two potentially competing objectives: on the one hand, the drive to streamline and modernise the judicial system through consolidation and efficiency-oriented restructuring; and on the other, the imperative of safeguarding effective access to justice and sustaining public trust in judicial institutions.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Këshilli i Lartë Gjyqësor (KLGJ), 'Harta e Re Gjyqësore' https://klgj.al/harta-e-re-gjyqesore/ accessed 1 May 2026.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Lamçe, J., & Kurti, A. (2022). The effects of the new judicial map on family disputes resolution. Jus & Justicia.

MAPPING THE IMPACT: EARLY OUTCOMES OF THE 2022 JUDICIAL MAP REFORM

To assess quantitative trends, we used 2022 as a baseline year and examined performance data from all courts in 2023 and 2024, and 2025.

The early evidence suggests that despite the creation of a more concentrated court structure with potential efficiency gains, such gains have remained uneven and are strongly conditioned by judicial staffing levels, infrastructure capacity, and effective access-to-justice challenges. The reform aimed to rationalise the court network, rebalance workloads, and improve the quality and efficiency of court services. However, the data for 2022–2025 show that institutional consolidation alone does not automatically produce uniform improvements across all court levels. Rather, the impact of the reform varies significantly depending on the type of court, the level of existing stock of pending cases, the availability of judges, and the capacity of merged courts to absorb additional pressure.

The Stock of Pending Cases

A first important trend concerns judicial backlog. The data showed a mixed picture. The High Court managed to significantly reduce the stock of pending cases between 2022 and 2025: from 31,826 pending cases in 2022 to 16,445 in 2025. This suggests a positive reduction in accumulated caseload at the highest level of the judiciary. The assessment of the reform, however, should focus less on developments at the High Court, which was not

Court backlog (end of the year) and age of pending cases	2022	2023	2024	2025	Trend
HC	31,826	26,058	20,888	16,445	
SPAK Court	152	126	169	199	
SPAK Appeal Court	34	25	14	24	
Appeal court/s gen jurisdic	31,370	37,662	41,700	45,876	
Age Civ +2	10,572	17,468	19,049	19,459	
Age Crim +2	2,993	5,750	7,415	8,296	
Admin. Appeal court/s	21,166	23,056	23,862	24,530	
Age Admin+2	13,732	17,060	17,406	17,527	
First instance general courts	40,866	43,853	42,070	39,767	
First instance admin courts	7,354	8,788	8,396	8,796	
Age Admin+2	907	1,759	1,518	1,360	

part of the concentration effort of the judicial map, and more on the newly reorganised appeal structure.

Data shows that the appeal level has become the most visible stress point of the reformed judicial map. The stock of pending cases before the Court of Appeal of general jurisdiction increased, from 31,370 cases in 2022 to 41,700 in 2024, to 45.876 in 2025. The age profile of pending cases is also a concern: by the end of 2025, more than 60% of cases had been pending for over two years (19,459 civil and 8,296 criminal), including 6,211 cases older than five years. This upward trend is particularly important because it suggests that the merger of appeal courts into a single court has not yet translated into a reduction of accumulated caseload. On the contrary, the appeal level appears to have absorbed significant pressure during the transition period, with a larger territorial jurisdiction and a high stock of pending cases. Administrative Appeal Courts also continued to carry a very high stock of pending cases – from 21,166 cases in 2022 to 24,530 cases in 2025, with 30.5% of such cases being older than 5 years. We therefore explore below possible reasons for such increased pressure, such as volume of incoming cases, human resources (judge and non-judge staff), average judge efficiency rate, etc.

At first instance, the Administrative Court of First Instance slightly increased the stock of pending cases, while Courts of General Jurisdiction recorded a modest reduction in 2025. The SPAK Court, being newly established, recorded a comparatively low number of pending cases overall.

Incoming Cases

The incoming cases data provide additional context, as this indicator can reveal important shifts in demand across the system, ultimately potentially affecting the growing stocks of pending cases noted above.

Regarding First Instance Courts of General Jurisdiction, data shows that while they continue to receive by far the highest number of incoming cases, the volume has overall declined between 2022 and 2025. First Instance Administrative Courts also recorded a gradual reduction of incoming cases.

In contrast, the SPAK Court recorded a significant rise in incoming cases, growing from 2,059 in 2022 to a peak of 3,459 in 2024, before declining slightly to 3,067 in 2025. This points to the growing institutional weight of the specialised anti-corruption and organised crime jurisdiction and suggests that future monitoring should pay close attention to its staffing, workload, and case-processing capacity. At the appeal level of general jurisdiction, the volume of incoming cases remained broadly stable between 2022 and 2024, fluctuating narrowly between 13,888 and 14,507, before edging upward to 15,290 cases in 2025. The Administrative Court of Appeal followed a similar pattern, with a modest increase to 4,067 cases in 2025 after three years of near-constant volume..

Court incomingcases	2022	2023	2024	2025	Trend
HC	2,096	2,145	2,469	2,433	
SPAK Court	2,059	2,775	3,459	3,067	
SPAK Appeal Court	314	288	393	445	
Appeal court/s gen jurisd	14,176	14,507	13,888	15,290	
Civil	6,362	8,030	5,960	6,168	
Criminal	7,814	6,477	7,928	9,122	
Admin. Appeal court/s	3,641	3,470	3,465	4,067	
First intance general courts	96,596	84,112	84,720	81,842	
Civil	52,287	41,478	38,448	32,408	
Criminal	44,309	42,634	46,272	49,434	
First instance admin courts	16,095	15,435	14,370	13,225	

This means that the rise in backlog can only partly be explained by a dramatic increase in new incoming cases. Rather, it appears to be linked to the court's limited capacity to process both new and pending cases. The problem is therefore less one of sudden demand growth and more one of insufficient adjudicative capacity within the new appeal structure.

The Appeal Court of General Jurisdiction and the Administrative Court of Appeal represent the most critical test cases for the judicial map reform. Regarding the Appeal Court of General Jurisdiction, in particular, consolidation into a single court holds genuine medium- and long-term promise — greater consistency of case law, more effective deployment of specialised expertise, and more rational use of resources. Yet, the 2022–2025 data shows that these potential benefits have not yet fully materialised. Instead, the immediate effect has been a concentration of pressure in a court that remains severely understaffed and burdened by a growing stock of pending cases, and where about 60% of the cases have been waiting for more than two years.

Human Resources – Judge and Non-Judge Staff

The percentage of judges in office provides an essential explanation for many of these trends. The data points to significant variation in judge staffing levels across courts, with the most acute pressures concentrated at the appeal level and in some specialised jurisdictions.

The SPAK Appeal Court and the Administrative Appeal Court also have a good percentage of judges in office compared to the organigram foreseen by law. At the SPAK Appeal Court, the share of judges in office fluctuated from 72% in 2022 to 91% in 2023 and 85% in 2024. The Administrative Court of Appeal was brought up to its full establishment of 13 judges in 2025.

Judges in courts	2022	2023	2024	2025	Trend
HC Law	19	19	19	17	
HC Actual	13	16	18	15	
HC	70%	86%	94%	88%	
SPAK Court Law	16	16	16	16	
SPAK Court Actual	8	9	10	11	
SPAK Court	47%	56%	64%	69%	
SPAK Appeal Court Law	11	11	11	11	
SPAK Appeal Court Actual	8	10	9	10	
SPAK Appeal Court	72%	91%	85%	91%	
Appeal court/s Law	78	78	78	78	
Appeal court/s Actual	35	24	27	28	
Appeal court/s	44%	31%	34%	36%	
Admin. Appeal court/s Law	13	13	13	13	
Admin. Appeal court/s Actual	6	8	12	13	
Admin. Appeal court/s	43%	64%	88%	100%	
First instance general courts Law	235	235	235	235	
First instance general courts Actu	133	131	173	173	
First instance general courts	56%	56%	74%	74%	
First instance admin courts Law	36	36	36	36	
First instance admin courts Actu	26	24	19	20	
First instance admin courts	73%	65%	53%	56%	

By contrast, the Appeal Court of General Jurisdiction continues to operate well below the required staffing levels, recording the lowest proportion of judges in office among all courts. The number of actual judges in appeal courts fell sharply from about 35 in 2022 to 24 in 2023, before only partially recovering to 27 in 2025 (or 35% of the number foreseen by law).[34] This indicates that, despite some recent stabilisation, the appeal level remains significantly under-resourced, despite having to face one of the heaviest accumulated backlogs in the system.

[34] Judicial composition at the Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction fluctuated throughout the year due to dismissals and transfers, with a significant number of judges assigned to the court only in December 2025, bringing the total to 40 judges in post by the end of the year. As a result, the court's annual report reflects statistics based on 27 judges.

The staffing gap is particularly important because it can be understood as the main driver of the increasing backlog. The reduced number of judges limits the courts' ability to absorb the caseload, lengthens disposition times, and weakens the overall impact of efficiency-oriented reforms. The partial recovery in staffing in 2024 and throughout 2025 is a positive development, but it may not yet be sufficient to reverse the backlog trend unless staffing levels continue to improve and are matched by measures to increase case-processing capacity. In this regard, at the end of 2025, the HJC appointed (permanently and/or temporarily) 14 more judges to the Appeal Court. Additional measures aimed at increasing efficiency via organisational tools and changes to procedural laws are underway as part of the HJC's Roadmap[35] to improve court efficiency (see also Section 3.6).

The First Instance Courts of General Jurisdiction recorded an increase in judge staff capacity, rising from around 56% in 2022–2023 to about 74% in 2024-2025. Instead, the First Instance Administrative Courts show a declining staffing rate, from 73% in 2022 to 65% in 2023 and 56% in 2025, which may create additional pressure on administrative justice, particularly if inflows remain stable or increase.

Overall, the data shows that the staffing gap remains a structural challenge across most courts. The Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction and First Instance Administrative Courts continue to require close monitoring, as persistent vacancies may undermine the expected efficiency gains of the judicial map reform and slow progress in reducing backlogs. The data also confirm that the effects of the judicial map reform cannot be assessed separately from the consequences of the vetting process and the continuing shortage of magistrates, especially of senior judges, filling in appeal positions.

To assess human resources' capacity at courts more comprehensively, we also examine the availability of non-judge staff.[36] Data shows a generally higher level of staffing than for judges, although with important differences across courts.

First Instance Courts of General Jurisdiction appear comparatively well staffed, reaching 95% of the legally foreseen non-judge staff positions in 2024. The SPAK Court of First Instance also records a high staffing level, increasing from 93% in 2022–2023 to 96% in 2024. The High Court also shows steady improvement, from 74% in 2022 to 86% in 2024.

At appeal level, the picture is mixed. The Administrative Appeal Court shows a strong recovery, reaching 91% in 2024, while the SPAK Appeal Court records a deterioration, falling from 74% in 2022 to 65% in 2024. The Appeal Court of General Jurisdiction remains

[35] High Judicial Council (Këshilli i Lartë Gjyqësor), Roadmap for the Efficiency of the Judicial System (Udhërrëfyesi për Efikasitetin e Pushtetit Gjyqësor), KLGJ, available at: https://klgj.al/media/vbxjc3af/udh%C3%ABrr%C3%ABfyesi-p%C3%ABr-efikasitetitn-e-pushtetit-gjyq%C3%ABsor-n%C3%ABshqip%C3%ABri-2025-2027.pdf

[36] High Judicial Council, Annual Reports 2022-2025. Available at: https://klgj.al/raportevjetoreklgj/ (Accessed: 15 May 2026). Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction (Albania), "Annual Report 2025", Tirana, 2025. At the time of writing, court datasets regarding judge supporting staff were not available for all courts.

Court	Staff	2022	2023	2024	2025	Trend
HC	Law	126	126	129	132	
HC	Actual	94	102	111	115	
HC	%	74%	81%	86%	86%	
HC	Per judge actu	7.1	6.3	6.2	7.7	
SPAK Court	Law	49	49	49		
SPAK Court	Actual	46	46	47		
SPAK Court	%	93%	93%	96%		
SPAK Court	Per judge actu	6.1	5.1	4.6		
SPAK Appeal	Law	31	31	31		
SPAK Appeal	Actual	23	23	20		
SPAK Appeal (	%	74%	73%	65%		
SPAK Appeal	Per judge actu	2.9	2.3	2.2		
Appeal court/	Law	196	167	167	167	
Appeal court/	Actual	158	115	123	130	
Appeal court/	%	81%	69%	74%	78%	
Appeal court/	Per judge actu	4.6	4.8	4.6	4.8	
Admin. Appea	Law	57	67	67		
Admin. Appea	Actual	46	50	61		
Admin. Appea	%	80%	74%	91%		
Admin. Appea	Per judge actu	8.2	6.0	5.3		
First intance (	Law	622	661	658		
First intance (	Actual	585	589	628		
First intance (	%	94%	89%	95%		
First intance (	Per judge actu	4.4	4.5	3.6		
Admin First In	Law	106	106	106		
Admin First In	Actual	97	93	94		
Admin First In	%	91%	88%	89%		
Admin First In	Per judge actu	3.7	4.0	4.9		

below full non-judge staffing capacity, although it improved from 69% in 2023, to 74% in 2024, and 78% in 2025. In absolute figures, actual non-judge staff decreased sharply from 158.3 in 2022 to 115.1 in 2023, before increasing to 130 in 2025, against 167 legally foreseen posts from 2023 onwards (i.e. after the merger of the six appeal courts into one).

Importantly, the figures on supporting staff per judge should be interpreted with caution. The Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction is a clear example. Under the legal framework, the court should have approximately 2.1 non-judge staff per judge in 2024–2025, based on 167 non-judge staff posts and 78 judge posts. However, because the court is operating with far fewer judges than legally foreseen, the actual ratio is much higher: around 4.6 non-judge staff per judge in 2024 and 4.8 in 2025.

This higher ratio should therefore not be read as evidence of excess support staff. Rather, it reflects the depth of the judicial vacancy gap. When considered alongside the increasing stock of pending cases, the data suggests that the main challenge is not only the overall availability of non-judge staff, but how effectively this capacity is used. In particular, there is a need to strengthen the skills of non-judge staff and to delegate tasks to them to the fullest extent permitted by law, so that judges can focus more effectively on their core adjudicative functions. Measures to this end are set out in the HJC's Efficiency Roadmap (see below Section 3.6).[37]

Court efficiency indicators - CR and DT

Clearance Rate (CR) and Disposition Time (DT) are two core indicators, typically used to assess court efficiency. The Clearance Rate measures the relationship between resolved and incoming cases in a given period. A CR of 100% means that the court resolved as many cases as it received. A CR above 100% indicates that the court is reducing its stock of pending cases, while a CR below 100% suggests that pending cases are likely to increase. Disposition Time estimates the number of days needed to resolve the pending caseload, based on the court's current pace of case resolution. Higher DT values indicate longer expected processing times and greater pressure from accumulated pending cases. The DT indicator is thus heavily influenced by the existing stock of pending cases.

The data shows very different performances across courts.

The High Court has recorded exceptionally high Clearance Rates: 363% in 2022, 387.8% in 2023, 309.6% in 2024 and 297.7% in 2025. The court resolved roughly three times as many cases as it received, contributing to a reduction in its pending stock. This is also reflected in the Disposition Time, which decreased from 1,834 days in 2022 to 873 days in

[37] High Judicial Council (Këshilli i Lartë Gjyqësor), Roadmap for the Efficiency of the Judicial System (Udhërrëfyesi për Efikasitetin e Pushtetit Gjyqësor), KLGJ, available at: https://klgj.al/media/vbxjc3af/udh%C3%ABrr%C3%ABfyesi-p%C3%ABr-efikasitetitn-e-pushtetit-gjyq%C3%ABsor-n%C3%ABshqip%C3%ABri-2025-2027.pdf

Clearance Rate (CR) Indicator						
Court	Case type	2022	2023	2024	2025	Trend
HC	Total	363%	387.8%	309.6%	291.7%	
	Civil	283%	362.5%	357.6%	373%	
	Crim.	193%	265.2%	275.8%	254%	
	Admin.	613%	535.6%	295.4%	248%	
SPAK Court		77.3%	100.9%	98.8%	99%	
SPAK Appeal Court		98%	103.3%	102.3%	98%	
Appeal Court/s	Total	85.5%	58.4%	70.1%	73%	
	Civil	85%	42.3%	64.2%	75.6%	
	Crim.	86%	74.4%	76%	71%	
Admin. Appeal Court/s		24%	43.4%	76.7%	84%	
First Instance General Courts		95%	90%	103%	106.5%	
Admin First Instance Court		75%	89.6%	102%	101.5%	

Disposition Time (DT) Indicator						
Court	Case type	2022	2023	2024	2025	Trend
HC		1,834	1,167	934	873	
SPAK Court		27	16	18	24	
SPAK Appeal Court		41	31	15	20	
Appeal Court/s	Total	1,006	1,838	1,753	1507	
	Civil	1,605	2,790	2,683	2318	
	Crim.	407	885	823	920	
Admin. Appeal Court/s		8,680	5,326	3,276	2634	
First Instance General Courts	Total	133	193	177	181	
	Civil	168	272	256	270	
	Crim.	98	114	97	92	
Admin. First Instance Court		261	255	223	256.5	

2025. The DT, however, remains high (over two years on average), showing that the High Court still carries a significant legacy backlog.

The main area of concern remains again the Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction. Its total Clearance Rate dropped sharply from 86% in 2022 to 58% in 2023, before partially recovering to 70% in 2024 and 73% in 2025. Although the trend is improving, the CR remains well below 100%, meaning that the court continues to resolve fewer cases than it receives. This directly contributes to the growth or persistence of a large stock of pending cases. The corresponding DT figures confirm the pressure: total DT increased from 1,006 days in 2022 to 1,838 days in 2023, and remained very high at 1,753 days in 2024 and 1,507 days in 2025. Civil cases are particularly affected, with DT remaining above 2,300 days in 2025, despite some recent improvement.

At the Administrative Appeal Court, the CR increased substantially and steadily from 24% in 2022 to 84% in 2025, while DT decreased from 8,680 days in 2022 to 2634 days in 2025. This points to a clear improvement in case-processing capacity, though the data also reveals a heavy accumulated backlog and lengthy expected resolution times, averaging over seven years.

At first instance, performance is stronger. Courts of General Jurisdiction at first instance achieved a clearance rate of 106.5% in 2025, meaning they resolved slightly more cases than they received, while disposition time remained comparatively low at 181 days. Administrative Courts of First Instance also improved, sustaining a clearance rate of around 102% in both 2024 and 2025, with disposition time edging down from 261 days in 2022 to 256.5 days in 2025.

The SPAK Court and SPAK Appeal Court, as new courts, show more stable efficiency performance with low DT levels.

Overall, the court efficiency indicators – CR and DT – confirm that backlog pressure is concentrated mainly at the appeal level, especially in the Appeal Court of General Jurisdiction and the Administrative Appeal Court. The persistently low CR of the Appeal Court of General Jurisdiction, combined with the high stock of pending cases result in a very high DT, suggesting that the court's current capacity remains insufficient to process cases efficiently. This finding should be read alongside the staffing data: the low number of judges in office at the appeal level is one of the key factors constraining case-processing capacity and driving the persistence or growth of backlog.

Average Statistics per Judge

To further assess the factors affecting the stock of pending cases, the analysis also considered judge workload and judge productivity. The Workload Rate (WR) is calculated as the sum of pending cases at the beginning of the year and incoming cases during the year, divided by the number of judges. It therefore provides an estimate of the average number of cases

Workload Rate (WR) Indicator (per judge)					
Court	2022	2023	2024	2025	Trend
HC	2,880	2,084	1,602	1,405	
SPAK Court	299	325	348	309	
SPAK Appeal Court	38	32	45	46	
Appeal court/s	981	1,903	1,945	2,265	
Admin. Appeal court/s	3,953	2,968	2,306	2,116	
First intance general courts	776	842	750	607	
First instance admin courts	955	872	1,074	818	

Efficiency Rate (ER) Indicator (per judge)					
Court	2022	2023	2024	2025	Trend
HC	478	486	429	414	
SPAK Court	278	311	332	290	
SPAK Appeal Court	38	30	43	44	
Appeal court/s	312	341	372	412	
Admin. Appeal court/s	167	190	231	258	
First intance general courts	563	547	516	420	
First instance admin courts	659	523	677	484	

requiring judicial action per year, per judge, at a certain court. Instead, the Efficiency Rate (ER) measures the average number of resolved cases per judge and is used as a proxy for judicial productivity.

The data illustrates the uneven distribution of pressure both between courts and over time. In the High Court, the workload per judge fell from 2,880 cases in 2022 to 1405 in 2025. A similar downward trend is visible in the Administrative Court of Appeal, where workload decreased from 3,953 cases per judge in 2022 to 2,116 in 2024. Improvements in staffing (43% in 2022, to 100% in 2025) have helped reduce pressure on individual judges, although workload remains high in absolute terms. In contrast, at the Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction workload per judge more than doubled, from 981 in 2022 to 2,265 in 2025. This is one of the clearest signs that the new appeal structure is under considerable pressure and that consolidation has not yet translated into a manageable workload at this level.

Productivity trends are generally stable and show positive trends across courts, suggesting that the increase in pending cases and Disposition Time cannot be attributed to low judicial efficiency. In several courts, judges are resolving more cases per judge over time. Even at the Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction, the ER indicator per judge has steadily improved, from 312 in 2022 to 412 resolved cases per judge in 2025. However, these productivity gains are not sufficient to offset the effects of high workload, accumulated backlog, and persistent judicial vacancies. The problem, therefore, appears to lie less in individual judge performance and more in the limited overall case-processing capacity of courts operating with too few judges.

At the same time, sustained productivity under conditions of high workload should not be interpreted as a stable or risk-free situation. Persistently high caseloads may lead to judge and staff exhaustion, reducing the system's ability to maintain performance over time. Without adequate staffing and support, continued pressure on judges and court personnel may affect the quality, timeliness, and sustainability of case processing.

The National Strategy for Reducing Court Backlog and the Related Roadmap on Efficiency

Albania's Strategy for the Reduction of Court Backlog (2024–2027)[38] forms part of the broader justice reform agenda. It was adopted in response to well-documented structural weaknesses in the judiciary's capacity to deliver timely justice, and aims to improve the efficiency, timeliness, and quality of judicial proceedings through organisational, procedural, staffing, and digital reforms. The accompanying Roadmap for Judicial Efficiency,[39] adopted by the HJC, provides the operational framework: it sets benchmarks and targets for reducing pending caseloads and disposition times through better caseflow management, harmonised judicial statistics, targeted backlog-reduction measures, and stronger use of support staff and technology.

Both instruments rest on a shared diagnosis — that the backlog accumulated gradually because the growing volume of cases was never matched by proportional growth in institutional capacity, human resources, or case management tools. Their stated ambition is to move the justice system away from reactive backlog clearance, toward a sustainable performance-management model grounded in data, strategic planning, and continuous monitoring of court efficiency indicators. It is worth noting, however, that this structured

[38] High Judicial Council (Këshilli i Lartë Gjyqësor), Strategjia kombëtare e uljes së numrit të çështjeve të prapambetura në gjykata (2024-2027), May 2024, available at: https://klgj.al/strategjia-e-uljes-se-numrit-te-ceshtjeve-te-prapambetura-2024-2027/

[39] High Judicial Council (Këshilli i Lartë Gjyqësor), Roadmap for the Efficiency of the Judicial System (Udhërrëfyesi për Efikasitetin e Pushtetit Gjyqësor), KLGJ, available at: https://klgj.al/media/vbxjc3af/udh%C3%ABrr%C3%ABfyesi-p%C3%ABr-efikasitetitn-e-pushtetit-gjyq%C3%ABsor-n%C3%ABshqip%C3%ABri-2025-2027.pdf

response came three years after the judicial map reform, suggesting that reform was partial and that the efficiency dimension was addressed belatedly.

According to official reporting,[40] 2025 should mark a shift from diagnosis to active implementation. A full inventory of backlog cases has reportedly been completed for the first time, providing a verified and measurable baseline for targeted interventions. Practical steps taken include grouping cases by type and complexity, establishing processing priorities, creating structured case lists, fast-tracking certain categories, standardising procedural templates, expanding the role of legal assistants, training support staff, and advancing electronic documentation.

That said, as the analysis above makes clear, the transformation faces significant structural obstacles. Staff shortages remain the most acute constraint — but the challenge is not only one of numbers. Even where staff are available, the effective implementation of these reforms depends on their capacity to apply procedures, tools, and case management approaches consistently. Without adequate human resources, sustained investment in their training and professional development, and the financial backing to maintain both over time, the practical impact of these reforms is likely to remain limited.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES AFTER THE REFORM

This Section focuses on the key challenges emerging from the implementation of the 2022 judicial map, particularly its implications for access to justice and the functioning of the court system. While the new map aimed to pursue efficiency through the consolidation of courts into larger judicial centres, its early application has raised practical and institutional concerns affecting both court users and justice-sector professionals. Accordingly, the initial implementation phase reveals not only that the anticipated gains in rationalisation and specialisation have yet to fully materialise (see Section 3), but also that the reform has generated a range of operational and socio-legal challenges affecting both the functioning of the justice system and effective access to justice.[41] From the perspective of public perception, however, a more nuanced picture emerges, as recent findings from the World Bank Group's 2025 Justice Survey – comparing results with the 2020 survey – indicate a notable increase in trust in courts (53% in 2025 compared to 26% in 2020) and in perceptions of judicial independence (51% compared to 21% in 2020).[42]

[40] The High Judicial Council of the Republic of Albania (Këshilli i Lartë Gjyqësor – KLGJ). (2022–2024). Annual Report 2025 of the High Judicial Council. Tirana: KLGJ. Available at: https://klgj.al/raportevjetoreklgj/ (Accessed: 15 May 2026).

[41] Maho, B. (2022). Approval of the new judicial map: A priority of the Albanian justice reform. Jus & Justicia.

[42] World Bank Group, 2025 Justice Survey Findings, presented at the dissemination event attended by the authors; the full report is not yet publicly available online at the time of writing. Further information available in this article: https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/anketa-besimi-i-shqiptareve-tek-gjykatat-u-dyfishua-ne-pese-vjet-gogu-banka-boterore-konfirmon-permiresim-te-ndjeshem-te-drejtesise-shqiptare

Access to Justice Between Efficiency and Territorial Centralisation

Access to justice constitutes one of the foundational principles of the rule of law and represents a central benchmark for evaluating judicial reforms in contemporary European legal systems.[43] It is increasingly conceptualised not merely as the formal existence of courts, but as the effective ability of individuals to seek remedies and have their grievances heard and decided by an independent and impartial tribunal, and thus as an integral element of the right to a fair trial and the protection of fundamental rights.[44] This broader, effectiveness–oriented understanding encompasses multiple practical dimensions, including the availability and accessibility of courts in practice, the absence of unjustified legal or practical barriers, and equal access irrespective of socio–economic status.[45]

It further includes affordability, supported where necessary by legal aid or other forms of assistance, procedural guarantees and efficiency, notably reasonable duration of proceedings, as well as procedural arrangements that secure the ability of litigants to meaningfully participate in judicial processes through fair hearings, proper information, representation and effective remedies.[46]

Within this framework, the Albanian judicial map sought to balance efficiency gains with the need to ensure continued access to justice, primarily through the consolidation and territorial reorganisation of courts.[47]

The reduction in the number of courts significantly altered the territorial relationship between citizens and the judiciary. Thus, the territorial concentration of courts simultaneously reduced the proximity of courts to citizens, reinforcing concerns that "there can be no justice for the citizens away from the citizens."[48] Civil–society and professional actors warned that increased distances, travel costs and logistical burdens particularly affect individuals in peripheral and rural areas, potentially discouraging the initiation of proceedings and undermining effective access to justice.[49] These concerns are reinforced by analyses showing that the reduction in the number of courts in 2022

[43] Lotysh, T., & Balatska, O. (2024). The right to effective access to justice in the European Union. Visegrad Journal on Human Rights.

[44] Beqiraj J. and McNamara L. (2014). International Access to Justice: Barriers and Solutions. Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law Report 02/2014, International Bar Association, October 2014, p. 8. Kelbya, S. (2024). Access to justice as an element of the rule of law in the modern democratic state. Uzhhorod National University Herald. Series: Law.

[45] Ivanenko, T. (2020). Accessibility of administrative justice as an element of judicial and state legal reform in European countries, p. 21-25.

[46] Beqiraj J. and McNamara L. (2014). International Access to Justice: Barriers and Solutions. Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law Report 02/2014, International Bar Association, October 2014, p. 8. Kelbya, S. (2024). Access to justice as an element of the rule of law in the modern democratic state. Uzhhorod National University Herald. Series: Law.

[47] Maho, B. (2022). Approval of the new judicial map: A priority of the Albanian justice reform. Jus & Justicia.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Lamçe, J., & Kurti, A. (2022). The effects of the new judicial map on family dispute resolution. Jus & Justicia.

"significantly reduced the access" for citizens, increased the stock of court files and contributed to failures to decide cases within legal deadlines.[50]

Studies show that geographic remoteness, transport expenses, and court consolidation particularly hinder access to justice for rural and economically deprived populations.[51] Civil society organizations have also argued that centralising courts, without sufficient attention to transport access and local conditions, creates additional practical and financial barriers to justice, especially for people in rural areas, vulnerable groups, and those with limited financial means.[52] This is further reflected in the fact that lawyers, witnesses, and other participants in judicial proceedings increasingly face longer travel distances and higher financial costs to access court services.

In addition, recent findings from the World Bank Group's 2025 Justice Survey indicate that 72% of citizens do not consider the justice system financially accessible.[53] These burdens are especially acute in areas with limited infrastructure and scarce public services, where poor roads, unreliable or infrequent public transport, and long travel times make court attendance difficult and costly, and may require repeated trips due to adjournments.[54] Concerns are also raised that the new judicial map, including a single Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction in Tirana, does not adequately consider the economic situation of Albanians and the existence of remote villages where people are "economically impossible to travel," thereby threatening both access to justice and the economic viability of local legal practice.[55]

To mitigate these effects, the reform envisaged the establishment of Judicial Service Offices in the premises of former courts.[56] These offices were intended to preserve a degree of local institutional presence by allowing citizens to submit filings, obtain official documentation, and access archived decisions without travelling to the newly centralised courts. Nevertheless, the absence of adjudicatory functions at local level limits the extent to which such mechanisms can fully compensate for the closure of courts, particularly

[50] Kasaj, A. (2024). Access to justice in Albania and EU policies. European Journal of Economics, Law and Social Sciences, 8, 67 - 74.

[51] Kasaj, A. (2024). Access to justice in Albania and EU policies. European Journal of Economics, Law and Social Sciences, 8, 67 - 74.

[52] Institute for Public and Legal Studies (IPLS), "Konsolidimi i Gjykatës Rajonale të Apelit – një rishikim i ndikimit të saj në efikasitetin dhe cilësinë e gjyqësorit" (Project on consolidation of the Regional Court of Appeal and its impact on judicial efficiency and quality), KGRA/IPLS platform, available at: https://kgra.ipls.org/

[53] World Bank Group, 2025 Justice Survey Findings, presented at the dissemination event attended by the authors; the full report is not yet publicly available online at the time of writing. Further information available in this article: https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/anketa-besimi-i-shqiptareve-tek-gjykatat-u-dyfishua-ne-pese-vjet-gogu-banka-boterore-konfirmon-permiresim-te-ndjeshem-te-drejtesise-shqiptare

[54] Maho, B. (2022). Approval of the new judicial map: A priority of the Albanian justice reform. Jus & Justicia.

[55] Rushiti, A. (2022). The Impact of The Court Map in the Field of Advocacy. Indonesian Journal of Advocacy and Legal Services.

[56] Maho, B. (2022). Approval of the new judicial map: A priority of the Albanian justice reform. Jus & Justicia.

where hearings require repeated physical attendance.[57] There is also a risk that, if these offices remain underused, they may draw on non-judge staff resources that are urgently needed elsewhere in a justice system already facing significant human resource shortages, as noted above. Alongside geographic proximity to courts, however, there are additional factors affecting access to justice, such as court capacity, workload distribution, resource allocation, and the quality and timeliness of judicial proceedings.[58] In this sense, the Albanian reform echoes a broader European tendency, reflected in CEPEJ and ENCJ[59] work, to conceptualise access to justice not solely in terms of territorial closeness, but also as the capacity of the judiciary to deliver timely, professional and predictable decisions through adequately sized, specialised and efficiently managed courts.[60]

The Albanian case therefore illustrates a wider structural dilemma in contemporary judicial map reforms: the need to balance territorial accessibility with institutional sustainability and efficiency, as also debated in Italian and Portuguese reorganisation initiatives that seek efficiency gains through concentration while struggling with physical access and social cohesion.[61] While consolidation may strengthen the long−term operational capacity of the judiciary by optimising resources and increasing specialisation, early evidence from Albania and other European experiences points to uneven territorial impacts and persistent concerns about practical accessibility, especially for vulnerable users and communities located far from newly consolidated judicial centres.[62]

Implementation Dynamics and Stakeholder Perspectives

Despite concerns regarding accessibility, the judicial map reform was primarily justified by the objective of improving judicial efficiency and addressing structural imbalances in workload distribution. This rationale reflects broader European trends where court reorganisation and territorial concentration are promoted as mechanisms to tackle backlogs and unequal caseloads across territories.[63] In Albania these challenges became particularly

[57] Lamçe, J., & Kurti, A. (2022). The effects of the new judicial map on family disputes resolution. Jus & Justicia.

[58] Castro, M., & Guccio, C. (2018). Measuring Potential Efficiency Gains from Mergers of Italian First Instance Courts through Nonparametric Model. Public Finance Review, 46, 116 - 83.

[59] European Network of Councils for the Judiciary (ENCJ).

[60] Dias, J., & Gomes, C. (2018). Judicial Reforms 'Under Pressure': The New Map/Organisation of the Portuguese Judicial System. Utrecht Law Review.

[61] See Castro, M., & Guccio, C. (2018). Measuring Potential Efficiency Gains from Mergers of Italian First Instance Courts through Nonparametric Model. Public Finance Review, 46, 116 - 83. And Dias, J., & Gomes, C. (2018). Judicial Reforms 'Under Pressure': The New Map/Organisation of the Portuguese Judicial System. Utrecht Law Review.

[62] Rushiti, A. (2022). The Impact of The Court Map in the Field of Advocacy. Indonesian Journal of Advocacy and Legal Services.

[63] European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ), Compendium of "best practices" on time management of judicial proceedings (Council of Europe 2021) Resource Centre on Backlog Reduction Practices - European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ) accessed 1 May 2026.

acute following the vetting process, which removed or prompted the resignation of more than half of all magistrates.[64] Thus, the consolidation of courts through the judicial map was presented as a way to rationalise human and infrastructural resources, with the stated aim of improving quality and efficiency of judicial activity through concentrated management and specialisation.[65]

Early implementation and stakeholder analyses, however, highlight significant transitional pressures linked to institutional restructuring rather than the judicial map reform's stated objectives per se.[66] These include administrative burdens associated with case transfers, adjustments to territorial jurisdiction, and the reorganisation of court management systems, all of which have required adaptation by both judicial staff and court users.[67] In this phase, delays appear to be driven less by workload concentration alone and more by implementation-related disruptions and uneven administrative capacity across newly consolidated courts.[68]

Thus, judges, prosecutors and lawyers face a dual burden: adjusting to structural reorganisation while simultaneously managing heavier workloads within an under−staffed system. Concerns have been particularly voiced by lawyers outside Tirana who have highlighted the increased travel demands, higher operational costs, and the potential erosion of the viability of local practice following appellate centralisation.[69] Yet institutional actors also underline potential medium−term benefits: larger courts and a single appellate court are seen as opportunities for greater specialisation, more consistent allocation of cases, improved internal coordination and, ultimately, more coherent and predictable case law.[70]

In this context, stakeholders participating in a civil society roundtable presenting findings on the effects of the judicial map reform emphasised that not all operational challenges observed in the early implementation phase can be attributed to the judicial map reform itself.[71] Instead, they underlined the continued impact of pre-existing structural constraints,

[64] Pulaj, E. (2025). Justice System Reform in Albania: Achievements, Challenges, and the Path Forward. Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development.

[65] Rushiti, A. (2022). The Impact of The Court Map in the Field of Advocacy. Indonesian Journal of Advocacy and Legal Services.

[66] Rushiti, A. (2022). The Impact of The Court Map in the Field of Advocacy. Indonesian Journal of Advocacy and Legal Services.

[67] Maho, B. (2022). Approval of the new judicial map: A priority of the Albanian justice reform. Jus & Justicia.

[68] Agalliu, P. (2024). Analysis of Legal and Practical Aspects of the Vetting Process. Proceeding of the International Conference on Political Sciences.

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[70] Maho, B. (2022). Approval of the new judicial map: A priority of the Albanian justice reform. Jus & Justicia.

[71] Tryeza "Efektet e Hartës Gjyqësore në Sistemin e Prokurorisë" (Roundtable on the Effects of the Judicial Map in the Prosecution System), Tiranë, 12 May 2026, available at: https://klgj.al/aktivitete/deklarate-per-shtyp-12-maj-2026/

particularly infrastructural deficiencies in court and prosecution offices facilities and broader system capacity limitations. In this regard, they argue that a comprehensive assessment of the judicial map reform's effects should also account for ongoing staffing gaps and only be undertaken once judicial vacancies have been fully addressed and workforce levels stabilised. Thus, future assessments of the judicial map reform should adopt a structured, data-driven monitoring approach combining court-level performance indicators with user-experience evidence, in order to distinguish more clearly between transitional implementation challenges and the reform's long-term structural effects on access to justice and judicial efficiency.

Overall, the Albanian judicial map reform reflects a familiar trade-off in comparative court map reforms: efficiency gains and specialisation through consolidation on the one hand, and transitional strain, congestion risks, and uneven territorial impacts on the other. Its ultimate effect on the quality and efficiency of justice will depend on addressing persistent staffing gaps, investing in infrastructure and digitalisation, and ensuring that the pursuit of efficiency does not undermine access to justice or public trust in the courts.[72] Notably, Albanian legislation provides for the judicial map to be reviewed every five years, allowing for periodic reassessment of the reform's impact and the adaptation of the court structure to evolving institutional and societal needs.[73]

CONCLUSIONS

The review of the 2022 judicial map reform demonstrates that Albania's justice system remains in a complex transitional phase shaped simultaneously by institutional consolidation, post-vetting capacity shortages, and increasing demands for efficiency and accessibility. The reform responded to genuine structural problems that had long affected the judiciary, including fragmented court organisation, uneven workload distribution, limited specialisation, and inefficient use of resources. In this sense, the reform was broadly aligned with wider European trends promoting court consolidation and rationalisation as mechanisms for improving judicial performance.

At the same time, the findings in our assessment show that structural redesign alone is insufficient to generate immediate efficiency gains. The effectiveness of the reform depends fundamentally on the institutional capacities available to support its implementation. The data analysed for the period 2022–2025 reveal that the expected benefits of consolidation have materialised unevenly across the judicial system and remain heavily conditioned by staffing levels, organisational capacity, infrastructure, and backlog-management mechanisms.

The Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction represents the clearest illustration of these tensions. While the creation of a single appellate court may provide long-term opportunities

[72] Lamçe, J. (2024). Improving judicial performance in Albania. Jus & Justicia.

[73] Law No. 98/2016 "On the Organisation of Judicial Power in the Republic of Albania".

for greater consistency of jurisprudence, specialisation, and coordinated case management, the court currently operates under severe structural pressure. Persistent judicial vacancies, increasing backlog, low Clearance Rates, and exceptionally high Disposition Times indicate that the court's adjudicative capacity remains insufficient in relation to the workload absorbed through territorial concentration. The reform has therefore concentrated institutional pressure at appellate level without yet providing the human and organisational resources necessary to fully manage that concentration.

Importantly, the findings do not suggest that low judicial productivity is the principal cause of increasing backlog. On the contrary, workload and efficiency indicators show that judges in several courts, including the Court of Appeal of General Jurisdiction, continue to maintain comparatively high productivity under difficult conditions. The central problem is instead the structural gap between workload demands and available adjudicative capacity. Continued reliance on sustained high productivity in an under-resourced environment risks generating long-term exhaustion among judges and court staff and may ultimately affect the quality, consistency, and sustainability of judicial performance.

The analysis further highlights the importance of non-judge staff and internal court organisation in improving judicial efficiency. Strengthening the professional capacity of legal assistants and administrative staff, expanding delegation of tasks where legally permissible, improving case-management practices, and investing in digitalisation may significantly enhance court performance without compromising judicial independence or quality of adjudication. In this respect, recent initiatives of the High Judicial Council, including the National Strategy for the Reduction of Court Backlog and the Roadmap for Judicial Efficiency, represent important attempts to address implementation gaps and move towards a more sustainable performance-management model.

Beyond efficiency considerations, the reform also raises important access-to-justice concerns. Territorial concentration has reduced the physical proximity of courts for many citizens, particularly affecting rural and economically vulnerable populations through increased travel distances, costs, and logistical burdens. Although Judicial Service Offices were introduced to preserve a degree of local institutional presence, their ability to compensate for the loss of local adjudicatory functions remains limited. The Albanian experience therefore illustrates the broader structural dilemma characteristic of many contemporary European judicial map reforms: balancing efficiency, specialisation, and institutional sustainability with the need to preserve effective and equitable access to justice.

Overall, the judicial map reform should be understood as a necessary but incomplete stage within Albania's broader justice reform process. It has created a more coherent institutional framework and established the basis for potential long-term efficiency gains, but its success will ultimately depend on whether consolidation is matched by sustained investment in judicial staffing, infrastructure, digital transformation, training, and evidence-based court management. Recent findings from the World Bank Group's 2025 Justice Survey indicate an overall improvement in public perceptions of the justice

system (albeit by comparison to 2020), particularly in terms of trust in courts and perceptions of judicial independence, suggesting strengthened institutional legitimacy alongside ongoing implementation challenges.

Future assessment of the reform should therefore adopt a multidimensional approach combining quantitative indicators such as Clearance Rate, Disposition Time, workload, and staffing levels with broader access-to-justice indicators, including travel time, use of judicial service offices, user satisfaction, availability of legal aid, digital access, and the experiences of vulnerable groups. Quantitative data should also be complemented by qualitative evidence from judges, prosecutors, lawyers, court staff, and court users.

The reform has placed Albania's justice system on new institutional coordinates, but the mission of delivering accessible, efficient, and high-quality justice remains unfinished. The next phase should focus on converting structural consolidation into practical improvements for citizens, lawyers, judges, and court users.

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THE ROLE OF DIGITALIZATION IN STUDENT BEHAVIOUR AND THE MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Digitalization is fundamentally transforming both the management of higher education institutions (HEIs) and student behavior. The integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) has reshaped how HEIs deliver services, manage resources, and interact with students. Across Europe, institutions are increasingly using digital platforms to enhance efficiency, transparency, and personalized student support. These tools offer real-time access to academic records and services, promoting greater student engagement, self-regulation, and accountability (Aydin, 2022; Jisc, 2023).

This review synthesizes recent academic literature to identify the benefits and challenges of digital transformation in HEIs. Key advantages include flexibility, data-informed decision-making, and inclusive access to education. Yet, significant challenges persist, such as digital literacy gaps, resistance to change, and infrastructure inequalities (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2023). Emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, machine learning, and analytics are also being adopted to support adaptive learning and strategic planning (García-Peñalvo et al., 2022; Rospigliosi, 2023).

Findings suggest that effective digitalization requires not only technological upgrades but also organizational culture change and continuous capacity building. Understanding the impact of digital tools on student engagement and institutional performance is critical for policymakers and educators aiming to modernize higher education systems.

Keywords: *Digitalization; higher education; student behavior; ICT; AI; transformation*

INTRODUCTION

As the digital world continues to mature, higher education institutions have undergone rapid transformations to survive in the ever-changing and complex digital ecosystem. Increasing focus is placed on digitalization to enhance institutional competitiveness, student-visits, and even administrative performance (Laurillard, 2013; Marginson, 2018). As highlighted in the Digital Education Action Plan 2021 - 2027, the European Commission (2020) focused on digital transformation and the need to properly situate higher education within the broader digital transformations of society.

These abstract reviews the literature on the behavioral impact of digitalization on students and its use for the management of institutions. Through a synthesis of international scholarship and regional perspectives, with a focus on Europe and Albania, this review highlights the benefits, challenges, and cultural implications of digital transformation in higher education.

DIGITALIZATION AND STUDENT BEHAVIOR

One great example of the impact digitalization has had on higher education is the change in students' behavior. There is evidence to suggest the use of digital tools has changed the ways in which students learn, engage, and interact with any learning content on (Bond et al., 2021). Today, students learn and engage with content with academic descriptions in more ways than ever which has increased their independence as well as their mobility and availability to learning resources.

Digitalization encourages students to undertake self-directed learning. Students are now more in control of the pace of their learning and how their study schedule is organized. Students can access their learning resources, performance indicators, and peer/staff comments in real time (Laurillard, 2013). This encourages active learning and personal responsibility for learning. The "digital native" perspective myths should be broken. Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017) argues that the misconception that all students have access to advanced digital skills should be corrected. Digital competencies are a result of learning and go through several stages of development.

Digitalization is said to change the social structures of higher education as well. There is evidence of the development of peer enforcement complemented using online social collaborative resources. On the contrary, the development of remote learning because of the COVID 19 pandemic has been associated with the emergence of social isolation and a lack of motivation (Crawford et al., 2020). This means that the changes in behaviors... are exacerbated by the increased availability also come with more complex psychological and social challenges.

MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Looking through the lens of institutions, the adoption of digital platforms enables the universities to para processes, eliminate excess red tape, and improve transparency (Selwyn, 2016). The LMS, student relationship management systems, and data dashboards enable HEIs to assist in data driven personalized support supervision as well as track performance of the institutions.

Graduates and Administrative Heads can further streamline management processes through digital infrastructure allocation. Big data and predictive analytics enable decision makers to supervise expenditure focused on determining at-risk students and evaluating program impact (Marginson, 2018). These techniques resonate with the worldwide movement in higher education towards evidence-based management.

Across Europe, HEIs has adopted digital systems to respond to the requirements of competitive and knowledge-based economies. The situation in Albania illustrates the opposite 'digital divide' scenario: though much progress has been made, cultural lag and infrastructural deficits still pose a challenge for complete digital integration (Shkembi, 2022).

One of the 10 biggest improvements noted from the process of digitalization in managing higher education is improvement in administration productivity. Digital technologies, such as ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) Systems and LMS (Learning Management Systems) help in the centralization of data collection and workflow process. This enables the streamlining of workflows by reducing bureaucratic redundancies (Laurillard 2013). This streamlining save time in communication and enables the staff to focus more on teaching and research activities.

More openness also serves as an advantage. Digital systems provide students with payment systems and other administrative services, loosening blockages and processes within institutions. This improves transparency and accountability, as well as the overall relationship between the students and the institution (Marginson 2018)

Digitalization supports the transition from experience-based to evidence-based governance. According to Bond et al. (2021), higher education institutions (HEIs) can ascertain student performance, ascertain potential dropout risks, and determine the need for action through predictive analytics. For instance, predictive analytics can identify at-risk students so that timely action can be taken by the institution to provide them support services through mentoring programs to reduce attrition.

At the strategic level, data analytics guide the management of resources, faculty workload, and curriculum resources. This has been especially useful in the context of the massification of higher education, whereby institutions need to meet the standards of quality and growth in student enrollment (Marginson, 2018).

The installation of technology infrastructures is vital, but not the foremost driver of success of digitalization in HEIs. It is the management and the cultural ethos of the organization

that matter the most. The simplification of the prediction of technology adoption failure by leaders to diffusions in the "institutional" culture is the argument positioned by Selwyn (2016). It is the misconception of digitalization as a managerial apparatus of control as opposed to a mechanism of support that has led to the emergence of apprehension by faculty, fears of surveillance, and concerns for academic freedom (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017).

Successful leaders should adopt comprehensive approaches to management that promote participation of faculty, administrative workers, and students. This approach fosters not just support but digitalization of the HEIs for the primary purposes of pedagogy of the institution and is not implemented as an administrative burden (Laurillard, 2013).

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF DIGITALIZATION

The digitalization of higher education offers a multitude of advantages which have been pointed out by numerous studies.

Having flexibility means that students and staff can access digitalized resources anytime and anywhere which enhances mobility. Online learning facilitates both synchronous and asynchronous learning which makes education more broad-based. Laurillard, 2013.

New platforms have the capacity to increase equity in access, especially for underserved populations. As a result of digitalization, barriers such as geography and socio-economic status are no longer hindrances for adult learners and learners from non-traditional backgrounds. European Commission, 2020.

The ability to collect and analyze large datasets through digitalization enhances evidence-based decision-making and strategy development. Data-driven decision-making improves the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching, student (and learning) support, and the institutional mechanisms at higher education institutions (Bond, 2021).

In the interest of adaptive learning, new technologies such as artificial intelligences (AI) and machine learning can provide learners with real time support that responds in real time to distinct needs of the learners (Selwyn, 2016).

European Perspectives and the Albanian Context:

Even with the advantages that technology brings with it, it brings new challenges too.

One challenge that is removing this gap is the digital literacy gap. There are many people in the faculty as well as the student body that do not have the skills to properly utilize technology. This situation will increase inequality and decrease inclusivity (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017).

There are also changes that come with technology that do not encourage its adoption. Negative attitude toward the emergence of new digital technologies that enhance changes to

the conventional techniques of teaching is considered as stagnation (Selwyn, 2016). Likewise, slowness to adopting new innovative techniques is known as institutional stagnation.

The lack of digital resources in some of the European countries is part of the infrastructure gap. Advanced digital resources are one of the many advantages that universities in the rest of Europe possess in comparison to Albania and other developing regions (Shkembi, 2022).

There have also been new issues that have come up. Things like student consent and the use of drones in the classroom are some of the few things that people have been thinking about recently (Marginson, 2018).

Throughout Europe, universities have incorporated digitalization into their operations at the institutional level, as part of the broader national and regional strategies. The European Commission (2020) considers digital education a policy priority, connecting it to both competitiveness and inclusion. Advanced digital infrastructures in countries like Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands include integrated learning, AI-driven assessment, and virtual classrooms (Crawford et al. 2020).

As a transitional area, Albania is at the border of 'developed' and 'developing' countries. Research shows that the higher educational institutions in Albania acknowledge the importance of digital transformation, however their implementation is inhibited by financial limitations, lack of sufficient infrastructure, as well as sociocultural factors, or backwardness (Shkembi, 2022). There are gaps in faculty training, student support, and institutional leadership that need to be filled.

This comparative approach underscores Albania's digitalization as part of Europe, with particular attention to the context-sensitive needs of strategies.

Emerging Technologies in Higher Education:

The future of digitization within higher education is interlinked with transformative technical innovations. Tools of Artificial Intelligence are increasingly used to support one's learning with personalized pathways while providing real time feedback and enhancing the accuracy of assessments (Bond et al., 2021). Predictive analytics allow universities to forecast student success and retention, as well as strategize the allocation of resources.

Apart from AI, immersive technologies like VR and AR offer the opportunity to learn by doing medicine, architecture, and engineering. Blockchain technologies are also being explored for secure and seamless credential verification, as well as the management of academic records (Selwyn, 2016).

All the above innovations imply that the role of digitalization in teaching pedagogy, governance and the institutional identity of the school will likely transition from being a supportive role to being the primary transformative driver.

DISCUSSION

Recent scholars highlight that digitalization is much more than a change in the technology used by institutions, it involves a change in culture (Selwyn, 2016; Castells, 2010). Institutions that fully invest in digitalization are expected to adopt values such as flexibility, collaboration, and governance by data.

Laurillard (2013) articulates a more nuanced framework. Digital tools do not lead to better outcomes by default. There are still gaps in policy, institutional culture, and pedagogy that technologically enhanced environments fail to address, and the digital divide is certainly one of them, as seen in Albania.

With the advent of an analytics culture, ethical issues such as data- driven decision making are required to improve operational efficiency. This further accentuates the need to discuss surveillance culture and the need to protect student information and privacy (Marginson, 2018).

All in all, the status quo of digitalization for any aspect of governance is to capitalize it as an inclusive form of technological advancement that comes with both challenges and advantages. Inclusivity, critical thinking, and a change of culture is the only optimal path to achieving the advantages.

CONCLUSION

The literature review shows how digitalization can impact the behavior of students and the administration of higher education institutions. It also shows how the potential of engagement, flexibility and efficiency is counter-balanced by the problems of illiteracy, resistance, inequality and ethics.

Unlike Albania, which shows how the lack of resources can restrict the potential of integrated digital strategies, European universities showcase the potential of integrated strategies. Digital transformation is further emphasized by the digitalization of education, particularly the use of AI, VR, and blockchain.

More research is needed to understand the impact of digitalization on educational practices and identify the cultural changes it brings to the higher education system. Emphasizing innovation while critically addressing the risks of digital transformation will be necessary to ensure the predicted promise of higher education transformation to result in more inclusive, efficient and flexible systems.

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ADVANCING DIGITAL COMPETENCIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A REGIONAL ANALYSIS FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to assess how the integration of digital competencies into higher education curricula, focusing on selected social sciences and humanities courses, have advanced digital transformation in higher education and influenced both teaching practices and student learning experiences. This study is developed as a regional initiative, within the framework of the Homo Digitalis (HD) project in four Western Balkan countries. The research employs a quantitative approach grounded in the European Commission's DigCompEdu framework (The Joint Research Centre, n.d.). Data were collected through two structured surveys targeting academic staff (n=14) and students (n=46) in spring 2025. Each instrument captured six competence domains: professional engagement, digital resources, teaching and learning, assessment, empowering learners, and facilitating learners' digital competence. Internal consistency Cronbach $\alpha \geq 0.92$. Findings indicate a significant shift toward digitalization in teaching practices. Faculty members reported active integration of digital tools into course design and delivery, while students expressed overall satisfaction with the accessibility and organization of digital resources. The results demonstrate measurable alignment with European digital education standards. However, persistent challenges were identified,

including limited time for implementation and disparities in students' digital preparedness. The study provides evidence-based insights and policy recommendations that may inform regional strategies for digital curriculum reform. It contributes to a deeper understanding of digital education transformation in the Western Balkans, with implications for improving teaching quality, enhancing student employability, and fostering institutional innovation both regionally and in broader educational contexts.

Keywords: *Digital competencies, higher education curricula, Western Balkans, DigCompEdu, digital transformation, teaching innovation*

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of digital competence has become increasingly pronounced, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the ability to transition smoothly between online and in-person teaching proved essential. Developing strong digital skills allows educators to employ a wide range of digital tools, fostering engaging teaching approaches while also preparing students for the demands of a technology-driven future. Nonetheless, higher education institutions in the Western Balkans face unique difficulties, including limited infrastructure and uneven levels of digital literacy, which call for collaborative solutions. Across Europe, various initiatives have been introduced to support the enhancement of teachers' digital competence, including the adoption of competence frameworks, ongoing professional training, and the incorporation of digital technologies into teaching practices. In today's educational landscape, the digital proficiency of teaching staff is a vital factor in creating inclusive, innovative, and effective learning environments. By doing so, education remains relevant and meaningful while equipping students to face the realities of the digital era. European higher education institutions are actively engaged in strengthening these competencies among teachers, thereby advancing the goal of delivering an education that is aligned with the challenges and opportunities of the digital world.

This study examines the integration of digital competencies in higher education curricula across selected institutions in the Western Balkans, within the framework of the European Commission's DigCompEdu model, across its six its domains: professional engagement, digital resources, teaching and learning, assessment, empowering learners, and facilitating learners' digital competence (The Joint Research Centre, n.d.). We draw on data from 46 students and 14 university teachers in Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia.

The results underscore both progress and challenges in advancing digital education in the Western Balkans. While students and teachers largely endorse digital integration, inconsistencies across institutions highlight the need for targeted policies, staff training, and infrastructure investments. Strengthening pedagogical practices in teaching and assessment, ensuring equitable access, and supporting long-term sustainability and scalability are crucial

for aligning regional practices with European digital education standards. By providing empirical evidence on student and teacher perceptions, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of digital transformation in higher education. The findings offer actionable insights for policymakers and institutions seeking to enhance teaching quality, foster student employability, and drive innovation across the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital transformation in higher education is widely recognized as a defining trend of contemporary pedagogy and institutional development. Across Europe, digitalization has been linked to greater accessibility, inclusivity, and flexibility in learning environments (Redecker and Punie 2017; European Commission 2020). The expansion of online libraries, digital platforms, and virtual classrooms has enabled students to access diverse resources beyond physical and temporal constraints, supporting broader goals of equity and lifelong learning.

The adoption of blended and hybrid learning models is also prominent. Evidence from European countries demonstrates how these models foster student-centered and personalized learning when supported by clear pedagogical strategies (Castañeda and Selwyn 2018; OECD 2019). Similarly, the implementation of digital assessment tools, such as e-portfolios and automated grading systems, has contributed to transparency and efficiency, though concerns persist regarding academic integrity, timeliness of feedback, and alignment with learning objectives (Boud and Soler 2016; JISC 2021).

Another strong theme in the literature is the empowerment of learners. The European Commission's (2018) *Digital Education Action Plan* highlights the potential of digital platforms to increase student autonomy, provide individualized learning pathways, and enhance employability. Frameworks such as DigCompEdu have structured the integration of digital skills into curricula, extending beyond technical literacy to encompass critical thinking, collaboration, and ethical technology use (Redecker and Punie 2017; van Laar, van Deursen, van Dijk, and de Haan 2019).

For higher education institutions, digitalization provides opportunities for professional engagement, networking, and pedagogical innovation. However, studies emphasize that successful digital transformation depends on systemic policies, ongoing training, and sustainable infrastructure, rather than isolated individual initiatives (Beetham and Sharpe 2019; European University Association 2020).

The literature indicates that higher education institutions in the Western Balkans are moving toward digital transformation but face systemic obstacles that differentiate their trajectory from that of more digitally advanced European counterparts. The trajectory of digital transformation is marked by fragmentation and uneven adoption. While the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed rapid uptake of digital tools, regional studies emphasize

persistent challenges in infrastructure, policy alignment, and faculty training. In Albania studies note rapid adoption of digital tools during the pandemic, yet highlight gaps in advanced digital competencies, faculty preparedness, and equitable access (Hoti, Dragusha and Ndou 2022; Sulaj et al. 2021). Students appreciated the flexibility of online learning but reported inconsistency in teaching practices (Quka 2021; Gugu and Kristo 2023). Babameto (2024) stresses the importance of aligning Albanian higher education with European digital standards. In Bosnia and Herzegovina research illustrates disparities, with some universities effectively integrating digital tools into teaching and assessment, while others lag due to limited infrastructure and policy fragmentation (Becirovic and Dervic 2022). In Kosovo studies show enthusiasm for digital learning among students and faculty but highlight persistent barriers, particularly related to funding limitations and regional inequities in access (Rugova, Selimi, and Berisha 2021). The higher education institutions of Montenegro had initiated blended learning strategies, but digital literacy among faculty remains uneven, with institutional support varying across departments (Vujović 2021). In North Macedonia, research identifies significant progress, particularly in institutions such as South East European University, but also points to infrastructural gaps and insufficient professional development as limiting factors (Qazimi and Pejchinovska 2023).

The literature reveals growing awareness in the region of the need to align with European frameworks such as DigCompEdu and the *Digital Education Action Plan*. This indicates significant opportunities for regional collaboration, cross-institutional initiatives, and policy harmonization, which could help bridge disparities and ensure more sustainable digital integration in higher education.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative research design grounded in the European Commission's DigCompEdu framework, which provides six dimensions of digital competence: professional engagement, digital resources, teaching and learning, assessment, empowering learners, and facilitating learners' digital competence. The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What are students' perceptions for the six main domains of DigCompEdu as applied in university curricula? (2) How do students' perceptions of the application of these six domains differ across universities? (3) What are university teachers' perceptions for the six main domains of DigCompEdu applied the university curricula? (4) How do university teachers' perceptions of the application of these six domains differ across universities?

To answer the study questions, two structured questionnaires were prepared, one targeting students and the other university teachers, both designed around the six domains of the DigCompEdu framework. Student Questionnaire included six main competence domains, plus a section on background information. Teacher Questionnaire covered the same six competence domains, but also added a section on Sustainability and Scalability, alongside background information.

Distributed online via Google Drive and facilitated by university teachers involved in the curriculum changes, the instruments were completed by 46 students (IBCM, Kosovo n= 6, Logos, Albania n= 8, Polis, Albania n= 20, SSST, Bosnia and Herzegovina n= 5, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina n= 7). The study initially aimed to gather data from all 37 lecturers involved in the revised curricula under the Homodigitalis project across participating Western Balkan universities; however, only 14 of them ultimately completed the questionnaire. Both instruments, administered in spring 2025, consisted of closed-ended Likert-scale items from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', that were adapted and piloted to ensure clarity, cultural appropriateness, and alignment with the DigCompEdu framework. Reliability was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha (≥ 0.92), demonstrating high internal consistency, while content validity was established through expert review and pilot testing. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics and inferential tests, as ANOVA, to examine group differences across institutions. Ethical procedures adhered to principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. This design enabled a cross-institutional comparative analysis, ensuring both depth and comparability, and provides a transferable methodological framework for evaluating digital transformation in higher education within and beyond the Western Balkans.

RESULTS

STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS

Students Perception about the six domains of DigiCompEdu

As is shown in table 1, overall, students' perceptions across domains were positive, with all mean scores exceeding 3.30, demonstrating broad agreement that digital tools and systems are effectively integrated into the curriculum. Standard deviations were consistently low to moderate (0.62–0.81), indicating relatively stable responses with limited variability across the student sample (see table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of student perceptions across six digital competence domains

Domain	M	SD
1. Professional Engagement: How the curriculum supports students' interaction with teachers and academic systems through digital means	3.52	0.62
2. Digital Resources: How the curriculum improves access to and use of digital learning materials	3.44	0.76
3. Teaching and Learning: How digital tools are used in the learning and teaching process	3.37	0.81
4. Assessment: Use of digital tools in evaluation and feedback	3.42	0.77
5. Empowering Learners: How the curriculum supports independent learning and inclusivity through technology	3.53	0.75
6. Facilitating Learners' Digital Competence: Support for building students' own digital skills	3.55	0.75

Professional Engagement

Students reported high levels of agreement regarding how digital systems facilitate their interaction with teachers and academic processes (M = 3.52, SD = 0.62). This was one of the most consistent domains, as evidenced by the lowest SD across all categories. These results suggest that students perceive professional engagement through digital tools as both effective and uniformly experienced.

Digital Resources

The domain of access to and use of digital learning resources received a mean of M = 3.44 (SD = 0.76). Students expressed agreement that digital resources (e.g., slides, readings, and videos) are accessible and well-integrated into the learning process. The SD indicates a modest level of variation, suggesting that while most students find resources accessible, a minority may face challenges in ease of access or consistency of organization.

Teaching and Learning

This domain, which examined the use of digital tools to support pedagogy, yielded the lowest mean score among the six areas (M = 3.37, SD = 0.81). Although students generally agreed that digital platforms and tools enrich learning, the relatively higher SD indicates greater variability in experiences. This suggests that while many students benefit from the integration of digital teaching methods, others may encounter inconsistencies in implementation or effectiveness.

Assessment

Students' perceptions of digital assessment and feedback were also favorable (M = 3.42, SD = 0.77). The mean suggests that most students agreed digital platforms are effective in administering evaluations and providing feedback. However, the moderate SD indicates variability in perceived clarity, fairness, and timeliness of digital assessment practices, highlighting an area where improvements could yield more uniformly positive experiences.

Empowering Learners

The domain of independent learning and inclusivity through technology received a strong mean score of M = 3.53 (SD = 0.75). Students agreed that digital tools empowered them to learn at their own pace, access diverse resources, and feel included in digital learning spaces. The SD indicates modest variation, suggesting that empowerment is a widely shared experience but with some differences depending on personal learning needs or contexts.

Support for Building Students' Own Digital Skills

The highest overall domain mean was found here (M = 3.55, SD = 0.75). Students strongly endorsed the idea that the curriculum enhances their digital competence, including skills relevant for academic work, collaboration, and career preparation. Although variability was moderate, the consistently high scores suggest that this is a clear strength of the curriculum.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that students view the curriculum's integration of digital tools as effective, empowering, and supportive of skill development. All domains received mean scores above 3.30 on a 4-point scale, signaling clear overall agreement with the value of digital resources, systems, and practices. The strongest endorsements emerged in the areas of support for building digital skills, empowering learners, and professional engagement, suggesting that students particularly appreciate opportunities for independence, inclusivity, and career-relevant competence.

At the same time, slightly lower mean scores and greater variability in teaching and learning, and assessment highlight areas where experiences are less uniform. These domains, while still positively rated, may benefit from more consistent pedagogical strategies and improvements in digital assessment practices, especially in terms of clarity and timeliness of feedback.

Generally, the curriculum appears to be successful in equipping students with the digital competence, flexibility, and confidence needed for both academic success and future professional contexts, while continued refinement of instructional and evaluative practices could further strengthen its impact.

Student perceptions according to Higher Education Institutions

Student perceptions of digital competence integration were examined across six domains professional engagement, digital resources, teaching and learning, assessment, empowering learners, and facilitating learners' digital competence. Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) were calculated to assess levels of agreement by university (see table 2 and table 3)

Table 2. Students perceptions per university, Mean Grade

Domain	IBCM	Logos	Polis University	SSST	University of Sarajevo
1.Professional Engagement	3.67	3.62	3.6	3	3.43
2. Digital Resources	3.77	3.5	3.42	3.08	3.4
3.Teaching and Learning	3.83	3.52	3.34	2.64	3.4
4. Assessment	3.83	3.55	3.33	3.32	3.26
5.Empowering Learners	3.93	3.75	3.38	3.36	3.46
6.Facilitating Learners Digital Competence	4	3.69	3.33	3.68	3.57

Table 3. Students perceptions per university, Standard Deviation

Domain	IBCM	Logos	Polis University	SSST	University of Sarajevo
1.Professional Engagement	0.52	0.52	0.68	0.71	0.53
2. Digital Resources	0.5	0.55	0.81	0.91	0.77
3.Teaching and Learning	0.38	0.51	0.77	1.11	0.91
4.Assessment	0.46	0.55	0.79	0.95	0.85
5. Empowering Learners	0.25	0.44	0.79	0.99	0.85
6.Facilitating Learners Digital Competence	0	0.52	0.87	0.63	0.81

Professional Engagement

Across institutions, students reported moderately positive perceptions of professional engagement. IBCM (M = 3.67, SD = 0.52) and Logos (M = 3.62, SD = 0.52) scored highest, suggesting consistent agreement that digital tools supported collaboration, communication, and academic networking. Polis University reflected similar perceptions (M = 3.60, SD = 0.68). SSST reported lower agreement (M = 3.00, SD = 0.71), while the University of Sarajevo showed mean score (M = 3.57, SD = 0.53). Meanwhile, ANOVA test demonstrated there was no significant difference across universities, F (4, 41) = 1.15, p = .349, η^2 = .10.

Digital Resources

Students expressed strong confidence in their ability to access and utilize digital resources at IBCM (M = 3.77, SD = 0.50). Logos (M = 3.50, SD = 0.55), Polis University (M = 3.42, SD = 0.81), and the University of Sarajevo (M = 3.40, SD = 0.77) showed moderate agreement. SSST scored lowest (M = 3.08, SD = 0.91), suggesting greater variability in perceptions of resource availability and integration. No significant differences were noted here, F (4, 41) = 0.84, p = .511, η^2 = .08.

Teaching and Learning

Perceptions regarding digital enhancement of teaching and learning were particularly strong at IBCM (M = 3.83, SD = 0.38). Logos (M = 3.52, SD = 0.51) and the University of Sarajevo (M = 3.40, SD = 0.91) also reported moderately positive responses. Polis University showed lower agreement (M = 3.34, SD = 0.77), and SSST scored the lowest (M = 2.64, SD = 1.11), with a wide standard deviation indicating substantial variation in student experiences. The omnibus ANOVA was not statistically significant, F (4, 41) = 2.46, p = .060, η^2 = .19. But we need to emphasize the effect size (η^2 = .19), noting that despite the non-significant result, there was a moderate-to-large effect, suggesting meaningful differences might exist, but the sample size was too small to detect them.

Assessment

Students at IBCM expressed strong agreement that digital tools supported assessment practices (M = 3.83, SD = 0.46). Logos (M = 3.55, SD = 0.55) and Polis University (M = 3.33, SD = 0.79) reflected moderately positive perceptions. SSST reported similar results (M = 3.32, SD = 0.95), while the University of Sarajevo scored lowest (M = 3.26, SD = 0.85). These findings suggest overall student support for digital feedback and evaluation, albeit with variation across institutions. ANOVA test indicated no significant differences, F (4, 41) = 0.96, p = .442, η^2 = .09.

Empowering Learners

Empowering learners through digital technologies was rated most positively at IBCM (M = 3.83, SD = 0.38), followed by Logos (M = 3.64, SD = 0.50) and the University of Sarajevo (M = 3.43, SD = 0.79). Polis University reported somewhat weaker perceptions (M = 3.34, SD = 0.68). SSST once again had the lowest score (M = 2.96, SD = 1.04), indicating inconsistent confidence in technology's role in fostering autonomy, inclusivity, and engagement. After ANOVA test, no significant differences were noted, F (4, 41) = 1.10, p = .368, η^2 = .10

Facilitating Learners' Digital Competence

Students perceived IBCM most positively in terms of developing digital competence (M = 3.87, SD = 0.35). Logos (M = 3.71, SD = 0.46) and the University of Sarajevo (M = 3.57, SD = 0.65) reported strong agreement, while Polis University showed somewhat lower agreement (M = 3.49, SD = 0.62). SSST reported the weakest perceptions (M = 2.84, SD = 0.95), again with high variability. No significant differences, F (4, 41) = 1.45, p = .235, η^2 = .12.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for mean scores across universities

University	Mean (M)	SD
IBCM	3.84	0.35
Logos University College	3.61	0.52
Polis University	3.40	0.79
SSST	3.18	0.88
University of Sarajevo	3.42	0.79

As table 4 show, institutional comparisons highlighted variability among universities. IBCM students reported the strongest endorsement of digital integration (M = 3.84, SD = 0.35), suggesting consistent satisfaction across domains. SSST students, however, expressed lower

levels of agreement ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.88$), with high variability across responses. Students from Polis University and the University of Sarajevo fell in between, reporting moderate but positive evaluations.

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS

Teacher perceptions according to the 6 domains

This section presents the findings from the teacher questionnaire. The analysis of teacher perceptions across the six domains of digital integration in higher education revealed consistent patterns of moderately high agreement with the benefits and effectiveness of digital practices. Teachers' evaluations are reported in terms of mean scores and standard deviations, which provide insight into both central tendency and variability in their responses (table 5).

Table 5. Teacher perceptions per domain

Domain/teacher	Mean	SD
1. Professional Engagement	3.71	0.63
2. Digital Resources	3.57	0.78
3. Teaching and Learning	3.43	0.82
4. Assessment	3.32	0.9
5. Empowering Learners	3.41	0.92
6.Facilitating Learners Digital Competence	3.64	0.74
C. Sustainability and Scalability	3.42	0.83

Professional Engagement

Teachers reported high levels of agreement that the curriculum supported their professional engagement through digital collaboration, communication, and academic development. The mean score for this domain was 3.52 (SD = 0.62), indicating that teachers generally felt that digital tools were effective in facilitating their professional practices. The relatively low standard deviation highlights that teacher responses were relatively homogeneous, suggesting broad consensus in this area. This domain consistently reflected the view that digital platforms enhanced professional networking, scholarly exchange, and administrative efficiency.

Digital Resources

The second domain, which addressed the use, adaptation, and creation of academic digital resources, produced a mean score of 3.44 (SD = 0.76). This value suggests moderate to strong agreement among teachers regarding their ability to find, adapt, and generate digital resources. However, the slightly higher standard deviation relative to Professional

Engagement indicates greater variability in teacher perspectives. While many teachers expressed confidence in integrating digital resources into teaching, some remained less certain about their ability to consistently adapt or share materials across departments.

Teaching and Learning

Teachers' perceptions of digital enhancement in teaching and learning processes were also positive but slightly lower than other domains, with a mean of 3.37 (SD = 0.81). This was the lowest average score among the six domains. The larger standard deviation suggests that opinions diverged more substantially in this area compared to others. Although many teachers valued the incorporation of digital tools to enrich lectures, foster collaboration, and support flexible learning pathways, some teachers reported less confidence in fully leveraging these technologies. These results imply that further professional development may be required to standardize and strengthen digital teaching practices across the institution.

Assessment

Teacher perceptions regarding the use of digital tools in evaluation and feedback processes were moderately positive, with a mean score of 3.42 (SD = 0.77). This indicates that teachers generally agreed that digital assessments and feedback mechanisms are beneficial and align with learning objectives. Nonetheless, the standard deviation suggests some diversity in teacher views. Some teachers emphasized the value of timely digital feedback and data analysis for instructional improvement, while others were more hesitant about relying on such tools for evaluating student progress.

Empowering Learners

The domain of empowering learners, which relates to supporting student autonomy, inclusivity, and engagement through technology, received the highest overall score among the domains, with a mean of 3.53 (SD = 0.75). This demonstrates that teachers strongly perceived digital technologies as effective in promoting student independence and engagement. Teachers reported that digital components of curricula were successful in fostering inclusivity and motivating students. The moderate standard deviation indicates that while there was consensus, some variation in confidence levels remained.

Facilitating Learners' Digital Competence

Teachers reported strong perceptions regarding their ability to support learners' digital competence, with a mean score of 3.64 (SD = 0.74). This indicates that instructors generally agreed that the curriculum provides effective opportunities for students to develop digital skills essential for academic and professional contexts. The relatively low standard deviation suggests a high degree of consistency among teacher responses. Teachers emphasized

that digital integration facilitated the development of critical digital literacies, including information evaluation, safe and responsible online behavior, and the productive use of digital platforms for collaboration. The findings suggest that the majority of teachers feel confident in their capacity to guide students toward becoming digitally competent learners, although some variation in confidence remains.

Sustainability and Scalability

The construct of sustainability and scalability received a mean score of 3.42 (SD = 0.83). This result reflects moderately positive teacher perceptions, indicating agreement that the curriculum's digital integration is both sustainable over time and scalable across various instructional contexts. However, the slightly higher standard deviation points to greater variability in teacher responses compared to other domains. While many teachers expressed optimism that the digital practices and tools embedded in the curriculum could be maintained and expanded, others expressed reservations about long-term sustainability, citing potential concerns such as resource allocation, institutional support, and the pace of technological change. These mixed perceptions highlight the importance of providing ongoing infrastructure, training, and institutional commitment to ensure that digital initiatives can be effectively scaled and maintained.

Taken together, teacher perceptions across the domains suggest that digital tools and curricula are beneficial to professional engagement, resource adaptation, assessment practices, and empowering learners. The highest levels of agreement were observed in the areas of empowering learners (M = 3.53) and professional engagement (M = 3.52), while the lowest was reported in teaching and learning (M = 3.37). This pattern suggests that teachers feel more confident about the broader systemic and student-oriented benefits of digital practices than they do about their own classroom-level integration of technology.

Teacher Perceptions of Digital Integration by University

Teacher perceptions regarding the integration of digital competences were analyzed across all six domains and one additional construct of sustainability and scalability. Responses were collected from five institutions: IBCM, LOGOS University College, Polis University, SSST, and the University of Sarajevo.

Table 6. Teacher perception per university/Mean grade

Domain	IBCM	LOGOS	Polis University	SSST	University of Sarajevo
1. Professional Engagement	4	3.7	3.87	2.8	3.74
2. Digital Resources	4	3.6	3.73	1.4	3.69
3. Teaching and Learning	4	3.5	3.7	1.56	3.56
4. Assessment	4	3.2	3.87	1.8	3.23

5. Empowering Learners	4	3.2	3.87	1.3	3.54
6.Facilitating Learners Digital Competence	4	3	3.87	3	3.77
C. Sustainability and scalability	3.6	3.3	3.87	3.8	3.17

Table 7. Teacher perception per university/Standard Deviation

Domain	IBCM	LOGOS	Polis University	SSST	University of Sarajevo
1. Profesional Engagement	0	0.45	0.35	1.3	0.56
2. Digital Resources	0	0.22	0.46	0.55	0.58
3. Teaching and Learning	0	0.35	0.47	0.73	0.67
4. Assessment	0	0.45	0.35	1.1	0.77
5. Empowering Learners	0	0.42	0.35	0.67	0.76
6.Facilitating Learners' Digital Competence	0	0.55	0.35	1.41	0.49
C. Sustainability and scalability	0.55	0.27	0.35	0.45	0.98

Professional Engagement

Teachers generally reported high levels of professional engagement across institutions. Scores were strongest at IBCM ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.00$) and Polis University ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.35$), indicating consistent agreement that digital tools supported collaboration, academic networking, and administrative efficiency. LOGOS University College produced mixed responses ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.89$; $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.00$), suggesting some variability in faculty experiences. By contrast, SSST reported lower engagement ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.30$), reflecting a wider divergence in perceptions. The University of Sarajevo showed relatively strong agreement ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.56$). Differences were not significant, $F(4, 9) = 2.27$, $p = .141$, $\eta^2 = .50$. Although means varied somewhat, overall levels of professional engagement were statistically comparable across universities.

Digital Resources

Perceptions regarding the creation, adaptation, and use of digital resources varied more widely. IBCM again reported full agreement ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.00$). Polis University ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.46$) and the University of Sarajevo ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.58$) reflected strong positive views. LOGOS University College presented divided responses ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.45$; $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.00$). SSST reported the lowest scores ($M = 1.40$, $SD = 0.55$), suggesting limited confidence in this domain. A significant effect was found, $F(4, 9) = 8.79$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .80$. This represents a large effect size, indicating meaningful differences in teacher perceptions of access to, adaptation, and creation of digital resources across institutions.

Teaching and Learning

Teacher views on the integration of digital tools into teaching and learning processes were moderately positive. IBCM scored highest (M = 4.00, SD = 0.00), while Polis University (M = 3.70, SD = 0.47) and the University of Sarajevo (M = 3.56, SD = 0.67) indicated strong but slightly varied agreement. LOGOS University College presented both moderate (M = 3.00, SD = 0.71) and strong (M = 4.00, SD = 0.00) results, indicating inconsistency across respondents. SSST reported much lower perceptions (M = 1.56, SD = 0.73), pointing to challenges in integrating technology into pedagogy. There was also a significant difference, F (4, 9) = 6.82, p = .008, η^2 = .75. This large effect suggests that universities differed considerably in how teachers perceived digital enhancement of teaching and learning processes.

Assessment

Perceptions of digital assessment tools also varied. IBCM again reported full agreement (M = 4.00, SD = 0.00). Polis University showed strong positive views (M = 3.78, SD = 0.44), as did the University of Sarajevo (M = 3.69, SD = 0.48). LOGOS University College presented mixed responses (M = 3.40, SD = 0.55; M = 4.00, SD = 0.00). SSST scored the lowest (M = 1.67, SD = 0.71), suggesting difficulty in adopting digital evaluation methods. Differences were not significant, F (4, 9) = 1.89, p = .196, η^2 = .46. Teacher views of digital assessment tools appeared relatively consistent across institutions.

Empowering Learners

Teachers perceived digital tools as particularly effective in empowering learners. IBCM once more scored highest (M = 4.00, SD = 0.00). Polis University (M = 3.85, SD = 0.36) and the University of Sarajevo (M = 3.77, SD = 0.42) also reported strong agreement. LOGOS University College reflected moderate to strong results (M = 3.20, SD = 0.45; M = 4.00, SD = 0.00). However, SSST once again reported low perceptions (M = 1.80, SD = 0.84), indicating limited effectiveness in fostering autonomy, inclusivity, and engagement. A significant effect emerged, F (4, 9) = 5.50, p = .016, η^2 = .71. This indicates that teacher perceptions of how digital technologies foster student autonomy, inclusivity, and engagement differed substantially by university.

Facilitating Learners' Digital Competence

Teachers generally agreed that curricula supported the development of learners' digital competence. IBCM reported full agreement (M = 4.00, SD = 0.00), with Polis University (M = 3.83, SD = 0.37) and the University of Sarajevo (M = 3.66, SD = 0.52) also demonstrating strong positive perceptions. LOGOS University College reflected mixed but favorable responses (M = 3.40, SD = 0.55; M = 4.00, SD = 0.00). SSST showed substantially lower results (M = 1.60, SD = 0.55), with wider disagreement among faculty. Results approached

significance, F (4, 9) = 3.60, p = .051, η^2 = .62. Although just above the .05 threshold, the large effect size suggests practical differences in how teachers perceive curricula supporting students' digital skills.

Sustainability and Scalability

Perceptions of sustainability and scalability were moderately positive overall. IBCM again reported unanimous agreement (M = 4.00, SD = 0.00). Polis University (M = 3.85, SD = 0.36) and the University of Sarajevo (M = 3.69, SD = 0.48) also indicated confidence in sustaining and expanding digital integration. LOGOS University College produced both moderate (M = 3.20, SD = 0.45) and strong (M = 4.00, SD = 0.00) responses. In contrast, SSST scored lowest (M = 1.60, SD = 0.55), reflecting skepticism regarding institutional support for scalability and long-term digital adoption. No significant differences were observed, F (4, 9) = 0.85, p = .529, η^2 = .27. Teachers generally perceived digital initiatives as equally sustainable and scalable across institutions.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study demonstrates that both students and teachers in Western Balkan universities generally perceive digital integration positively, particularly in areas related to professional engagement, digital skill development, and learner empowerment. However, perceptions vary across institutions, highlighting disparities in access to resources, infrastructure, and staff training. While some universities show strong institutional cultures of digital adoption, others report inconsistencies in teaching practices and assessment strategies. These findings suggest that institutional context plays a decisive role in shaping experiences with digital tools.

To achieve equitable outcomes, higher education institutions must address gaps in teaching, learning, and assessment by strengthening infrastructure, offering sustained professional development, and ensuring scalability of digital initiatives. Policymakers and universities should align regional strategies with European standards to enhance teaching quality, foster student employability, and promote innovation. Targeted investment in infrastructure, faculty training, and sustainability policies will be critical to bridging institutional divides and ensuring that digital education benefits all learners. Ultimately, fostering collaboration among institutions, sharing best practices, and building long-term digital resilience will be essential for achieving inclusive and transformative higher education across the Western Balkans

Limitations and Future Research

This research is limited by its small and uneven sample size, reliance on self-reported data, and its focus on a specific group of Western Balkan universities. As a cross-sectional study, it provides a snapshot of current practices but does not capture long-term changes or causal relationships. Future studies should include larger, more diverse samples. Qualitative

methods, such as interviews and classroom observations, would also enrich understanding of how digital tools are implemented in practice. Such approaches could provide deeper insights into the institutional, pedagogical, and cultural factors that shape digital integration in higher education. Future studies should also expand to include comparative perspectives with other European regions to contextualize the Western Balkan experience. Cross-disciplinary approaches could also reveal how digital competencies influence diverse fields beyond the social sciences and humanities. Moreover, longitudinal studies would help capture evolving trends and the long-term impact of digital integration on teaching quality, student employability, and institutional innovation, thereby offering valuable guidance for sustainable policy development.

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FROM CONNECTION TO CONTRIBUTION: STRENGTHENING TRANSNATIONAL TIES FOR ALBANIA'S DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The Albanian diaspora represents a significant but underutilized resource for Albania's socio-economic development. Despite substantial remittance inflows and increasing policy attention, diaspora engagement remains fragmented and largely confined to local or symbolic initiatives. This paper examines how transnational ties facilitate diaspora engagement in development, focusing on two rural communities in northern Albania: Hoti and Dajçi. Drawing on qualitative data from 15 in-depth interviews and 3 focus groups, the study explores motivations for engagement, trust dynamics, and mechanisms through which diaspora contributions are mobilized.

The paper distinguishes between the "old" diaspora, characterized by long-term settlement and symbolic attachment, and the "new" diaspora, marked by ongoing transnational practices and economic engagement. Findings show that trust—mediated primarily through religious institutions and diaspora associations—plays a decisive role in enabling successful community investments. While diaspora engagement has generated tangible local benefits, including infrastructure improvements and productive enterprises, it remains difficult to scale and sustain without stronger institutional support.

The paper argues that transforming emotional attachment into durable development outcomes requires policies that strengthen trust, integrate diaspora initiatives into local development frameworks, and recognize the diversity of diaspora engagement forms. The findings contribute to debates on transnationalism and development in post-socialist contexts and offer practical insights for strengthening diaspora–homeland cooperation.

Keywords: *Albanian diaspora; transnationalism; development; trust; rural communities; migration*

INTRODUCTION

The engagement of diasporas in the development of their countries of origin has attracted growing academic and policy attention over the past two decades. Migrants and their descendants are increasingly viewed not only as senders of remittances, but also as potential agents of economic development, knowledge transfer, social change, and institutional innovation (Sinatti and Horst 2015; Vertovec 2008). This shift reflects a broader rethinking within the migration–development nexus, which has moved away from viewing migration primarily as a loss for sending countries toward recognizing diasporas as transnational actors capable of linking origin and destination contexts in productive ways (Brinkerhoff 2008).

In this debate, diasporas are no longer assumed to demonstrate exclusive loyalty to a single nation-state. Instead, they are understood as embedded in complex transnational social fields that allow for multiple forms of belonging and engagement across borders (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003)national and global political processes. Based on inductive reading of existing scholarship and in particular the author's own research on Turks and Kurds in Europe, the article discusses key concepts and trends in our understanding of why, how and with what consequences migrants engage in transnational political practices. These practices, this article suggests, are influenced by the particular multilevel institutional environment, which migrant political actors negotiate their way through. This environment includes not only political institutions in the sending and receiving country, but also global norms and institutions and networks of other nonstate actors. Finally, the article argues for critical examination of the democratic transparency and accountability of migrants' transnational networks in any analysis of their long and short-term impact on domestic and global politics.","container-title":"International Migration Review","DOI":"10.1111/j.1747-7379.2003.tb00157.x","ISSN":"0197-9183","issue":"3","language":"EN","page":"760-786","publisher":"SAGE Publications Inc","source":"SAGE Journals","title":"The Politics of Migrants' Transnational Political Pract ices","volume":"37","author":[{"family":"Østergaard-Nielsen","given":"Eva"}],"issued":{"d ate-parts":[["2003",9,1]]}}}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/ raw/master/csl-citation.json"} . These dynamics are particularly relevant in post-socialist and post-transition contexts, where state capacity is often limited and informal or non-state actors play a central role in development processes. In such settings, diaspora engagement frequently emerges in localized, bottom-up forms rather than through centralized policy frameworks.

Albania represents a particularly salient case for examining these dynamics. Since the early 1990s, Albania has experienced sustained and large-scale emigration, resulting in a diaspora that today constitutes more than one-third of the country's population (INSTAT 2020). Remittances have long been one of the main pillars of Albania's transition economy, accounting for approximately 8.6 percent of GDP in 2024. In response to the scale and persistence of emigration, the Albanian state and international organizations have increasingly sought to mobilize the diaspora through strategies aimed at encouraging investment, return migration, and knowledge transfer (Barjaba, Joniada 2019). These include the National Diaspora Strategy (2018–2024), diaspora-focused agencies, and a range of development programs supported by international actors (Republika e Shqipërisë Këshilli i Ministrave 2020).

Despite this growing policy attention, diaspora engagement in Albania remains fragmented, uneven, and largely confined to the local level. Many initiatives rely on informal networks, personal trust, and community-based intermediaries, while cooperation with state institutions is often limited or actively avoided. As a result, successful diaspora-led investments frequently remain isolated "success stories" that are difficult to scale or sustain over time. This raises important questions about how different forms of diaspora engagement operate in practice, what motivates diaspora members to contribute, and which mechanisms enable or constrain the translation of transnational ties into local development outcomes (King and Lulle 2016).

This paper addresses these questions through a comparative qualitative analysis of diaspora engagement in two rural communities in northern Albania: Hoti (Malësi e Madhe) and Dajçi (Shkodër). Both communities experienced intense emigration after 1990, yet they differ markedly in the historical composition of their diaspora, the destinations of migration, and the forms of engagement that have emerged over time. While Hoti is primarily connected to an "old" diaspora with long-term settlement abroad and strong symbolic attachment to the homeland, Dajçi is linked to a "new" diaspora characterized by ongoing transnational practices, return migration, and productive investment.

The paper pursues three main research questions: (1) What motivates Albanian diaspora members to invest in their home communities? (2) How does trust between diaspora actors, local communities, and institutions shape the success of diaspora-led initiatives? (3) How do different diaspora typologies—old and new—translate into distinct patterns of engagement and development outcomes? By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to the literature on diaspora and transnationalism by highlighting how historical migration trajectories and trust-based mediation shape development processes in rural, post-transition contexts.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on diaspora and transnationalism theories with particular attention to the distinction between old and new diasporas and the role of trust. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological approach and a brief overview of Albanian migration and diaspora dynamics. The core of the paper presents the two case studies of Hoti and Dajçi, followed by a comparative discussion and policy implications. The conclusion reflects on the sustainability of diaspora engagement and its limits in contexts of ongoing emigration and weak institutional trust.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: DIASPORA, TRANSNATIONALISM, AND TRUST

This study draws on the theoretical literature on diaspora and transnationalism to conceptualize the diverse forms of migrant engagement with countries of origin and to explain variations in diaspora-led development outcomes. These frameworks are particularly useful for understanding how historical migration trajectories, patterns of mobility, and institutional trust shape the ways in which diaspora communities mobilize resources for local development (Faist 2010).

From Classical Diaspora to Differentiated Diasporas

The concept of diaspora has evolved significantly over time. Classical understandings of diaspora emphasized forced dispersion, collective trauma, and a strong orientation toward return or symbolic attachment to the homeland. Cohen (2008) defines diasporas as long-established emigrant communities dispersed across multiple locations, whose members maintain a shared ethnic identity and a material and emotional commitment to their place of origin. Othe scholars emphasize that diasporas are not homogeneous entities but encompass diverse historical experiences, social positions, and modes of engagement (Vertovec 2008). This has led to a widening of the diaspora concept beyond catastrophic dispersions to include labor, trade, imperial, and cultural diasporas. Such differentiation allows for a more nuanced understanding of the often positive and mutually constitutive relationships between migrants' homelands and their places of settlement.

Building on this literature, the present study adopts the analytical distinction between "old" and "new" diasporas (Cohen 2008; Vertovec 2009; Faist 2010). Old diasporas are generally characterized by early migration, long-term settlement abroad, limited physical mobility, and engagement with the homeland that is primarily symbolic, moral, or community-oriented. New diasporas, by contrast, emerge from more recent migration waves and are marked by ongoing mobility, dense cross-border networks, and more direct economic and social engagement with the country of origin (Vertovec 2009; King and Christou 2010). This distinction provides a useful framework for understanding the different forms of diaspora engagement observed in Hoti and Dajçi.

Transnationalism as Practice

While the concept of diaspora captures long-term collective attachment to the homeland, transnationalism offers a complementary framework for analyzing the everyday practices through which migrants maintain connections across borders. Transnational migration refers to processes through which migrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations linking their societies of origin and settlement (Glick Schiller et al. 1994; King and Christou, 2010). These relations encompass economic activities, social obligations, cultural exchanges, and political engagement.

Vertovec (2008) emphasizes that transnationalism highlights the simultaneity of migrants' lives across different national contexts. Rather than being oriented exclusively toward either the origin or destination country, transnational migrants operate within social fields that span borders. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding the "new" diaspora, whose members often divide their lives between multiple locations and actively transfer financial, social, and cultural resources.

The literature further distinguishes between financial and social remittances. Financial remittances refer to monetary transfers, while social remittances include ideas, behaviors, norms, identities, and social capital transmitted from destination to origin contexts (Levitt

1998; Levitt and de la Dehesa 2003). Social remittances can influence organizational practices, entrepreneurial strategies, and community norms, and may scale up from local-level impacts to broader social change (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011)

In rural development contexts, where institutional capacity is often weak, transnational practices can play a particularly important role. Migrants draw on experiences and skills acquired abroad to introduce new economic activities, organizational models, and expectations regarding transparency and accountability. As such, transnationalism provides a key lens for analyzing how diaspora engagement moves beyond remittances toward more complex forms of development involvement.

Trust, Mediation, and Institutional Contexts

Trust emerges in the literature as a central factor shaping diaspora engagement and its development outcomes. Wescott and Brinkerhoff (2006) argue that diaspora members are more likely to invest time, resources, and expertise when they trust the institutions and intermediaries involved in managing development initiatives. In contexts characterized by weak governance, corruption, or limited institutional capacity, trust deficits can significantly constrain diaspora engagement.

Research on Albania and other post-socialist contexts highlights that migrants often prefer to channel their contributions through non-state actors, such as religious institutions, community organizations, or informal networks, rather than through state institutions (King and Lulle 2016). These actors function as trusted mediators, reducing perceived risks and ensuring transparency and accountability. Trust, in this sense, is not merely interpersonal but embedded in social institutions that guarantee the credibility of collective action.

Theoretical perspectives on diaspora engagement therefore emphasize the importance of mediation mechanisms that bridge diaspora actors and local communities. Where trust in the state is low, religious institutions and diaspora associations may substitute for formal governance structures, enabling development initiatives that would otherwise not materialize. This dynamic is particularly visible in rural areas, where local governments often lack resources and legitimacy.

Linking Theory to the Case Studies

The combined use of diaspora and transnationalism theories allows this study to explain the divergent patterns of engagement observed in Hoti and Dajçi. In Hoti, diaspora engagement reflects characteristics of an old diaspora, where long-term settlement abroad and limited mobility result in engagement focused on community solidarity, cultural heritage, and infrastructure support. Transnational practices are relatively weak, and economic investments remain limited.

In contrast, Dajçi illustrates a form of engagement associated with a new diaspora configuration, where frequent mobility, return migration, and transnational entrepreneurship enable the transfer of both financial and social remittances. Trust-based mediation, primarily through religious institutions and diaspora associations, facilitates cooperation between migrants and non-migrant communities, leading to more productive forms of development engagement.

By situating these empirical cases within the broader theoretical debates on diaspora, transnationalism, and trust, this study contributes to a more differentiated understanding of diaspora engagement in post-transition contexts and highlights the conditions under which transnational ties can be transformed into sustainable local development outcomes.

Diaspora Engagement and Local Development Pathways

Building on the literature on diaspora, transnationalism, and trust, this study conceptualizes diaspora engagement as a process through which transnational ties are translated into specific local development pathways. Rather than assuming a direct or automatic relationship between diaspora presence and development outcomes, this approach emphasizes the mediating role of historical migration trajectories, forms of engagement, and local institutional contexts (Faist 2010; Vertovec 2008).

Diaspora engagement may take multiple forms, ranging from symbolic and community-oriented contributions to productive investment and entrepreneurship. Symbolic engagement is typically associated with collective identity, moral obligation, and the preservation of cultural and religious heritage. Such forms of engagement are particularly prevalent among older diaspora communities, where long-term settlement abroad and limited mobility result in a relationship with the homeland that is emotionally strong but economically indirect (Cohen and Fischer 2019; Bruneau 2010). While symbolic contributions can significantly enhance social cohesion, community infrastructure, and local well-being, their capacity to generate sustained economic transformation is often limited (De Haas 2012).

Productive engagement, by contrast, is more closely linked to transnational practices characteristic of newer diaspora configurations. Ongoing mobility, return migration, and cross-border economic activity enable migrants to mobilize not only financial resources but also skills, knowledge, and organizational practices acquired abroad. In this sense, transnationalism functions as a mechanism through which diaspora engagement becomes embedded in local economic systems rather than remaining episodic or charitable (Glick Schiller et al. 1994; Portes et al. 1999). The transfer of social remittances plays a crucial role in shaping these processes, influencing how economic initiatives are organized and managed at the local level (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011).

Trust and mediation are central to determining which development pathway prevails. In contexts where trust in formal institutions is weak, diaspora engagement depends heavily on informal or semi-formal intermediaries capable of guaranteeing transparency and

accountability. Religious institutions, community organizations, and diaspora associations often fulfill this role by providing credible frameworks for collective action (Wescott and Brinkerhoff 2006; King and Lulle 2016). These intermediaries do not merely facilitate resource transfer; they actively shape the form and scope of diaspora engagement by influencing decision-making processes, risk perceptions, and patterns of cooperation (Brinkerhoff 2008).

Importantly, the relationship between diaspora engagement and development is not linear. Symbolic and productive forms of engagement may coexist within the same community, and their relative importance may shift over time in response to changing migration patterns, generational dynamics, and local economic conditions (King and Christou 2010; De Haas 2012). Understanding diaspora engagement as a set of evolving development pathways allows for a more nuanced interpretation of empirical cases and avoids normative assumptions about the desirability of particular forms of engagement.

This conceptualization provides the analytical lens through which the cases of Hoti and Dajçi are examined. It enables a distinction between engagement that primarily reinforces community cohesion and engagement that contributes to economic transformation, while highlighting the conditions under which transnational ties can be translated into sustainable local development outcomes.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This article adopts a qualitative research design, using a case study methodology to explore diaspora engagement in rural development contexts in Albania. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this study, as it allows for an in-depth examination of motivations, perceptions, trust relations, and informal mechanisms that shape diaspora engagement—dimensions that are difficult to capture through quantitative methods alone. Case study research is especially useful when investigating complex social phenomena embedded in specific local contexts, where boundaries between actors, institutions, and practices are not clearly defined (Priya 2021).

Case Selection

The study focuses on two rural communities in northern Albania: the Administrative Unit of Hoti (Municipality of Malësi e Madhe) and the Administrative Unit of Dajçi (Municipality of Shkodër). These cases were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria. First, both communities experienced intense and sustained emigration after the early 1990s, resulting in strong and long-lasting diaspora ties. Second, both cases exhibit visible forms of diaspora engagement at the community level, making them suitable for examining concrete development outcomes (Kopliku 2016). Third, despite their geographical proximity, Hoti and Dajçi differ significantly in migration destinations, historical trajectories, and forms

of diaspora engagement, allowing for a comparative analysis between what this paper conceptualizes as "old" and "new" diaspora configurations.

Hoti is primarily connected to a long-established diaspora in the United States, characterized by early migration, limited return, and strong symbolic attachment to the homeland. Dajçi, by contrast, is mainly linked to labor migration to Italy, with frequent mobility, return migration, and transnational entrepreneurship. This contrast enables an exploration of how different diaspora typologies and transnational practices translate into distinct development pathways.

Data Collection

Data were collected using multiple qualitative methods to ensure triangulation and enhance the reliability of findings. The primary data sources consist of 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews and 3 focus groups conducted between 2022 and 2024. Interviewees included migrant entrepreneurs, members of diaspora organizations, representatives of religious institutions, local government officials, and non-migrant community members. This diverse range of respondents allowed for the inclusion of both diaspora and local perspectives on engagement processes.

Two focus groups were conducted in Dajçi with migrant entrepreneurs and returnees involved in productive investment, while one focus group was organized in Hoti with diaspora contributors and community representatives. The focus groups provided insight into collective perceptions, shared experiences, and points of tension regarding diaspora engagement and cooperation with local institutions.

Interviews and focus groups were guided by a flexible topic guide covering motivations for engagement, decision-making processes, trust and transparency mechanisms, collaboration with intermediaries, challenges encountered during investment, and perceptions of sustainability. All interviews were conducted in Albanian, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

In addition to interviews and focus groups, the study draws on observational data collected during participation in policy meetings, development-related events, and diaspora activities. Social media platforms and online communication channels used by diaspora associations were also consulted to identify patterns of mobilization, transparency practices, and public narratives surrounding diaspora engagement.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were coded inductively to identify recurring themes related to motivations, trust, mediation mechanisms, forms of engagement, and development outcomes. These themes were then analyzed comparatively across the two case studies, with particular attention to how differences in diaspora

typology and transnational practices shape engagement patterns. Throughout the analysis, empirical findings were interpreted in dialogue with the theoretical framework on diaspora, transnationalism, and trust.

ALBANIAN DIASPORA AND MIGRATION CONTEXT

Albanian international migration has unfolded in distinct historical phases, resulting in the formation of both an old diaspora and a new diaspora, whose characteristics differ in terms of migration timing, destinations, settlement patterns, and modes of engagement with the homeland. These differences are central to understanding contemporary forms of diaspora involvement in Albania's development.

The old Albanian diaspora consists primarily of emigrants who left before 1944, as well as those who migrated during the Cold War period under restrictive political conditions. These early migration waves were shaped by political upheaval, economic hardship, and, in some cases, forced displacement. Members of the old diaspora settled predominantly in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in other countries of Western Europe (Bici 2009). Due to long-term settlement abroad, limited mobility, and restricted contact with Albania during the socialist period, engagement with the homeland has traditionally taken symbolic, cultural, and community-oriented forms, strongly linked to national identity and collective memory (Barjaba, Joniada 2019; King and Vullnetari 2003)"volume":"5","author":[{"family":"Barjaba, Joniada","given":""}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["2019"]]}},{"id":1861,"uris":["http://zotero.org/users/8848309/items/TXHDMTXA"],"itemData":{"id":1861,"type":"paper-conference","abstract":"Starting in 1990, Albania has witnessed one of the great emigrations of recent times; ten years later at least 600,000 Albanians, one in five of the population, were living abroad, mainly in Greece and Italy. An equally significant, but less well-documented internal redistribution of the population has taken place over the same time frame. This paper chronicles and interprets this multiple mass migration; it concludes by identifying important gaps in the research literature and some hypotheses and questions for future work. The paper is in several parts. After the introduction, the second part describes the political, demographic, economic and cultural background of Albania's post-communist transition, highlighting the key determinants of migration. The third and fourth parts look at Albanian international and internal migration respectively: topics covered include the chronology of movement, a review of the available statistics, and the geographical distribution of the migrants. In the fifth part of the paper we examine, within the constraints of the evidence available, the socio -economic impacts of migration. For internal migration this includes the hyper-rapid growth of the main Tirana-Durrs urban axis, coupled with rural depopulation, especially in the mountainous regions of the north and south of the country. For external migration, depopulation is again an important issue; but equally vital are the effects of remittances on the home country, at a variety of levels, together with the prospects for return migration and the developmental impulse that this might bring. Finally, we point to key gaps in the literature on Albanian migration and development, and from this identify some future research agendas.","source":"Semantic Scholar","title":"Migration and development in

Albania","URL":"https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Migration-and-development-in-Albania-King-Vullnetari/7f1204fbe9ca13bc80dbb80eb5d35363e52daacd","author":[{"family":"King","given":"Russell"},{"family":"Vullnetari","given":"J."}],"accessed":{"date-parts":[["2026",1,27]]},"issued":{"date-parts":[["2003",12,15]]}}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"}

The collapse of the socialist regime in the early 1990s marked the beginning of a new phase of mass emigration and the emergence of the new Albanian diaspora. Migration during this period was largely labor-driven and oriented toward nearby destinations, particularly Italy and Greece, which became the main host countries for Albanian migrants (King 2003; INSTAT 2020). Unlike earlier migrants, members of the new diaspora have maintained frequent physical and social ties with Albania, facilitated by geographic proximity, improved transportation, and the gradual liberalization of mobility regimes.

The new diaspora is characterized by ongoing mobility, circular migration, return migration, and dense transnational networks linking origin and destination societies. These features have enabled more direct economic and social engagement with the homeland, including productive investment, entrepreneurship, and the transfer of skills and social norms acquired abroad (Vullnetari 2007). As a result, diaspora engagement increasingly extends beyond remittances toward more complex forms of transnational involvement.

These historically rooted differences between the old and new Albanian diasporas shape not only the intensity of engagement but also its orientation and development impact. While the old diaspora tends to prioritize symbolic contributions, community solidarity, and cultural preservation, the new diaspora is more likely to engage in economic activities and development initiatives that draw on transnational practices. This distinction provides an essential contextual framework for understanding the divergent patterns of diaspora engagement observed in the rural communities of Hoti and Dajçi.

FINDINGS

The findings indicate that diaspora engagement in the rural communities of Hoti and Dajçi is shaped by a combination of emotional attachment, trust-based mediation, and the degree of transnational connectivity maintained by diaspora members. While both communities benefit from diaspora contributions, the nature, scope, and perceived impact of these engagements differ significantly, reflecting variations in diaspora typology and local institutional contexts.

Motivations for Diaspora Engagement

Across both case studies, diaspora engagement is primarily motivated by strong emotional, moral, and identity-based ties to the community of origin rather than by purely economic considerations. Interviewees frequently framed their contributions as a moral obligation

toward their place of origin, rooted in family histories, collective memory, and a sense of responsibility toward those who remained behind.

In Hoti, diaspora members often described their engagement in explicitly moral and symbolic terms, emphasizing solidarity and community belonging. As one interviewee explained:

> "We didn't think of it as an investment. It was something we owed to the village, to our parents and grandparents. If we didn't help, who would?"
>
> (Diaspora member, Hoti)

This form of engagement was closely linked to maintaining cultural continuity and reinforcing community cohesion. Contributions were frequently directed toward religious institutions, community infrastructure, and social support for vulnerable households. Economic returns were rarely mentioned, and engagement was largely detached from expectations of profit or material gain.

In Dajçi, emotional attachment similarly played a central role, but it was more often combined with pragmatic considerations related to migrants' professional experiences abroad. Diaspora members emphasized the desire to create opportunities for family members and to apply skills acquired through labor migration. As one returnee noted:

> "I learned how this business works in Italy. When I came back, I thought: why not try it here, so people don't all have to leave?"
>
> (Return migrant, Dajçi)

This blending of emotional commitment with economic reasoning resulted in forms of engagement that were more explicitly oriented toward productive investment and employment creation. These findings suggest that diaspora engagement in both communities is best understood as a socially embedded practice rather than a purely economic one. In Hoti, motivation rooted in moral obligation and collective identity reinforces community cohesion but simultaneously constrains the scope of engagement. Because contributions are framed as acts of solidarity rather than investment, they are rarely linked to expectations of economic return or long-term transformation. This reflects a form of engagement characteristic of older diaspora configurations, where emotional attachment substitutes for ongoing transnational practice.

In Dajçi, by contrast, emotional motivation is combined with practical considerations shaped by migrants' experiences abroad. This hybrid motivation allows diaspora members to imagine development not only as support for the community, but also as the creation

of locally embedded economic opportunities. The findings thus illustrate how motivation itself is shaped by transnational exposure, influencing whether diaspora engagement remains symbolic or becomes productive.

Trust, Mediation, and Forms of Cooperation

Trust emerged as a decisive factor enabling diaspora engagement in both communities. Interviewees consistently expressed skepticism toward state institutions, citing concerns about bureaucracy, lack of transparency, and previous negative experiences. As a result, diaspora members largely avoided direct engagement with government actors and instead relied on trusted intermediaries.

In both communities, religious institutions played a central role in mobilizing resources and coordinating collective initiatives. These institutions were widely perceived as neutral, transparent, and morally legitimate. One participant stated:

> "If the church is involved, people trust the process. Everyone knows where the money goes, and no one is afraid it will disappear."
>
> (Community member, Hoti)

In Dajçi, mediation took on a more complex form, involving cooperation between diaspora investors, religious institutions, local authorities, and international development organizations. This broader network of actors enabled co-financing arrangements and facilitated more ambitious projects. A local official observed:

> "The diaspora would not invest if they were alone. They needed guarantees, partners, and someone they could trust to manage things on the ground."
>
> (Local official, Dajçi)

These findings suggest that trust is not merely interpersonal but institutional, embedded in organizations that reduce perceived risks and enable collective action. From an analytical perspective, these findings highlight trust as a structural condition rather than an individual attitude. The reliance on religious institutions and community-based intermediaries reflects a broader pattern in post-transition contexts, where formal institutions are perceived as unreliable or distant. Trust-based mediation enables collective action by reducing uncertainty, coordinating actors across borders, and legitimizing decision-making processes.

Importantly, mediation does not merely facilitate diaspora engagement; it shapes its form. In Hoti, mediation supports collective fundraising and symbolic projects, reinforcing a model of engagement centered on cohesion and continuity. In Dajçi, more complex mediation

arrangements allow for cooperation across multiple institutional levels, enabling co-financing and productive investment. This suggests that the institutional capacity of intermediaries plays a decisive role in determining the developmental trajectory of diaspora engagement.

Development Outcomes and Perceived Limitations

Diaspora engagement has produced visible and tangible outcomes in both communities, particularly in terms of improved infrastructure, community facilities, and social support. In Hoti, respondents emphasized the importance of these contributions for maintaining community life and dignity. However, many also acknowledged the limits of such engagement:

> "We fixed roads and buildings, but young people still leave. We haven't created something that keeps them here."
>
> (Community representative, Hoti)

In Dajçi, diaspora engagement was more frequently associated with economic transformation and employment creation. Interviewees highlighted the role of productive investment in fostering a sense of shared purpose and reducing out-migration pressures. Nevertheless, these initiatives were described as fragile and highly dependent on continued diaspora involvement:

> "If those abroad stop coming back or sending support, everything becomes uncertain again.".
>
> (Entrepreneur, Dajçi)

Overall, the findings indicate that while diaspora engagement can generate meaningful local development outcomes, its sustainability remains constrained by structural challenges such as ongoing emigration, labor shortages, and weak institutional support. Without stronger frameworks for scaling and institutionalizing successful initiatives, diaspora engagement risks remaining localized and vulnerable despite its demonstrated potential. These outcomes point to a central tension in diaspora-led development. While symbolic and infrastructure-focused engagement can improve living conditions and reinforce social bonds, it does not necessarily address the structural drivers of migration. Productive engagement, as observed in Dajçi, holds greater potential for economic transformation but remains fragile and highly dependent on continued transnational involvement. This fragility reflects the absence of institutional mechanisms capable of sustaining initiatives beyond individual or collective diaspora commitment.

The findings therefore caution against viewing diaspora engagement as a substitute for public investment or structural reform. Instead, diaspora contributions should be understood as complementary and conditional, capable of generating meaningful local change only when embedded within supportive institutional and policy environments.

Comparative Synthesis: Diaspora Type, Trust, and Development Outcomes

Bringing together the findings from Hoti and Dajçi allows for a clearer understanding of how diaspora typology, transnational practices, and trust-based mediation interact to shape local development outcomes. While both communities demonstrate strong diaspora attachment and collective mobilization, the pathways through which diaspora engagement unfolds differ substantially, producing distinct social and economic effects.

The comparison highlights the central role of historical migration trajectories in shaping contemporary forms of engagement. In Hoti, the predominance of an old diaspora configuration—characterized by long-term settlement abroad and limited physical mobility—results in engagement that is largely symbolic and community-oriented. Contributions are framed as moral obligations and expressions of belonging, reinforcing social cohesion and collective identity. However, the absence of sustained transnational economic practices constrains the potential for productive investment and limits the capacity of diaspora engagement to address structural challenges such as unemployment and continued out-migration.

In contrast, Dajçi illustrates how a new diaspora configuration enables a different development pathway. Frequent mobility, return migration, and dense transnational networks allow diaspora members to translate experiences and skills acquired abroad into locally embedded economic activities. Engagement in Dajçi is therefore more closely aligned with productive investment and entrepreneurship, generating employment and fostering collective economic participation. This comparison underscores that transnationalism is not merely a background condition but an active mechanism shaping the form and impact of diaspora engagement.

Across both cases, trust emerges as a necessary condition for engagement, but its function varies according to diaspora type and institutional context. In Hoti, trust-based mediation primarily supports collective fundraising and infrastructure projects, reinforcing a model of engagement centered on solidarity and continuity. In Dajçi, mediation extends to more complex coordination among diaspora actors, local authorities, and development organizations, enabling co-financing and economic initiatives. These differences suggest that trusted intermediaries not only facilitate engagement but also shape its developmental orientation.

The comparative analysis further reveals a tension between sustainability and dependency. Symbolic engagement, while socially resilient, risks losing momentum over time as generational distance from the homeland increases. Productive engagement, while economically transformative, remains vulnerable to external shocks, continued emigration, and the withdrawal of diaspora actors. In both cases, the absence of strong institutional frameworks limits the scalability of successful initiatives.

Overall, the synthesis demonstrates that diaspora engagement should be understood as a differentiated and context-dependent process. Development outcomes depend not only

on the presence of a diaspora but on how historical migration patterns, transnational practices, and trust-based mediation combine to channel diaspora resources into specific local development pathways. This insight provides a crucial foundation for the policy implications discussed in the following section.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study carry several implications for diaspora engagement policies in Albania, particularly in rural and post-transition contexts characterized by weak institutional trust and sustained emigration. First, the evidence suggests that diaspora engagement strategies should move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and instead recognize the heterogeneity of the Albanian diaspora. The distinction between old and new diaspora configurations has concrete policy relevance, as different groups display distinct motivations, capacities, and modes of engagement. Policies designed primarily to attract financial investment may be ill-suited for older diaspora communities whose engagement is rooted in symbolic attachment and moral obligation, while failing to adequately support the productive and transnational practices of newer diaspora groups.

Second, trust emerges as a central precondition for effective diaspora engagement. The findings demonstrate that diaspora members consistently rely on trusted intermediaries—particularly religious institutions and community-based organizations—rather than formal state structures. This suggests that diaspora policies should acknowledge and incorporate these intermediaries as legitimate partners in development processes. Rather than attempting to bypass or replace informal trust-based mechanisms, public institutions could seek to collaborate with them by establishing transparent co-financing schemes, monitoring frameworks, and channels for coordination that respect existing trust relations.

Third, local governments play a critical but currently underutilized role in facilitating diaspora engagement. While diaspora initiatives in Hoti and Dajçi have largely emerged from bottom-up mobilization, their long-term sustainability depends on stronger links with local development planning. Municipalities could act as facilitators by providing technical assistance, reducing bureaucratic barriers, and integrating diaspora-funded projects into broader local development strategies. Such an approach would help bridge the gap between informal community initiatives and formal governance structures without undermining diaspora autonomy.

Fourth, the findings highlight the importance of supporting productive diaspora engagement, particularly in rural areas facing depopulation and limited economic opportunities. Policies that encourage transnational entrepreneurship, return migration, and skill transfer—such as targeted incentives, access to credit, and support for cooperative business models—could enhance the development impact of diaspora involvement. At the same time, these measures should be accompanied by safeguards to prevent over-reliance on diaspora actors and to ensure that local communities remain active participants rather than passive recipients.

Finally, diaspora engagement policies should be understood as part of a broader development strategy rather than as a substitute for structural reforms. While diaspora contributions can generate meaningful local improvements, they cannot compensate for persistent challenges such as labor shortages, weak institutions, and limited public investment. Strengthening diaspora engagement, therefore, requires parallel efforts to improve governance, transparency, and local institutional capacity, ensuring that transnational contributions can be transformed into sustainable and inclusive development outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined how diaspora engagement contributes to local development in rural Albania through a comparative analysis of two communities, Hoti and Dajçi. Drawing on qualitative data and grounded in theories of diaspora, transnationalism, and trust, the study explored the motivations, mechanisms, and outcomes of diaspora involvement, as well as the conditions under which such engagement becomes developmentally meaningful.

The findings demonstrate that diaspora engagement in Albania is primarily driven by emotional attachment, moral obligation, and a strong sense of belonging to the community of origin. However, the form and impact of this engagement vary significantly depending on diaspora typology and the degree of transnational connectivity. In Hoti, engagement reflects the characteristics of an old diaspora, where long-term settlement abroad and limited mobility give rise to symbolic, community-oriented contributions that strengthen social cohesion but have limited transformative economic impact. In contrast, Dajçi illustrates how a new diaspora configuration—characterized by ongoing mobility, return migration, and dense transnational networks—can facilitate productive investment and more direct involvement in local economic development.

A key theoretical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that diaspora engagement should be understood not as a uniform development mechanism, but as a set of differentiated local development pathways. These pathways are shaped by historical migration trajectories, forms of transnational practice, and trust-based mediation. The analysis shows that trust—embedded in religious institutions and community-based intermediaries—plays a decisive role in translating diaspora attachment into collective action, particularly in contexts where confidence in state institutions is limited.

At the same time, the study highlights the limitations of diaspora-led development. While diaspora contributions can generate tangible local benefits, they remain uneven, localized, and vulnerable to broader structural constraints, including ongoing emigration, demographic decline, and weak institutional capacity. These findings caution against treating diaspora engagement as a substitute for public investment or structural reform. Instead, diaspora involvement should be understood as complementary to broader development efforts and dependent on supportive institutional environments.

Beyond the Albanian case, the paper contributes to wider debates on migration and development in post-transition and peripheral rural contexts. It underscores the need for policies that recognize diaspora diversity, support trusted mediation mechanisms, and link bottom-up initiatives with local governance structures. Future research could build on these findings by examining generational change within diaspora communities, comparing rural and urban engagement patterns, and assessing the long-term sustainability of productive diaspora investments. Such work would further enhance understanding of how transnational ties can be transformed into inclusive and durable development outcomes.

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TELEMEDICINE IN ALBANIA: CONSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS, LEGAL CHALLENGES, AND POLICY PATHWAYS FOR EQUITABLE DIGITAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the development of telemedicine in Albania through a comprehensive analysis of its constitutional foundations, legal challenges, and policy pathways toward equitable digital health. Drawing on recent legislative developments, implementation experiences, and empirical data from over 2,700 teleconsultations, this study identifies critical gaps in the regulatory framework while highlighting opportunities for reform aligned with European Union integration processes. The analysis reveals that while Albania has made significant strides in establishing digital health infrastructure, substantial barriers remain in ensuring equitable access, particularly for vulnerable populations in rural areas. The research demonstrates that successful telemedicine implementation requires not only technological readiness but also coherent legal frameworks that safeguard patient rights, ensure data privacy, and guarantee equitable access to digital health services.

INTRODUCTION

Telemedicine represents a transformative evolution in healthcare delivery, leveraging advanced telecommunications technologies to enable remote diagnosis, consultation, treatment, and patient monitoring[1]. In Albania (a country undertaking extensive healthcare reforms as part of its trajectory toward European Union integration), the rapid development of digital health, particularly telemedicine, presents both transformative opportunities and persistent structural challenges. Early evidence from the establishment of the National Telemedicine Centre and a network of 12 regional hubs already demonstrated that telemedicine was being positioned as a central mechanism for modernising Albania's healthcare system and addressing entrenched geographic disparities in specialist access[2].

[1] World Health Organization, *Telemedicine: Opportunities and Developments in Member States,* WHO, Geneva, 2010, p. 9.

[2] R. Latifi, et al., *Telemedicine as an Innovative Model for Rebuilding Medical Systems in Developing Countries Through Multipartnership Collaboration: The Case of Albania, in Telemedicine and e-Health* 20, no. 10, 2015, pp. 1-5.

These dynamics were later accelerated at the European level by the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly intensified national commitments to digital health. According to data from the 2022 WHO Regional Survey, 77% of Member States had adopted telemedicine or remote monitoring services, 78% had integrated telehealth into national policies or strategies, and 59% had introduced new legislation or policy instruments specifically to support telehealth expansion during the pandemic[3]. This reflects a regional shift in which digital health is increasingly perceived as a core enabler of universal health coverage, quality improvement, and efficiency gains within national health systems. At the same time, the report highlights persistent obstacles that are directly relevant to Albania's health system transformation: uneven progress in implementing interoperability standards, insufficient systematic evaluation of digital health interventions, limited digital health literacy, and the risk of digital exclusion among vulnerable groups.

These challenges mirror structural barriers already observed in Albania's health sector, such as infrastructural disparities between urban and rural areas, and a constrained health workforce.

Consequently, the Albanian experience with telemedicine should be understood as part of this broader regional dynamic: a rapid but uneven digital transformation process, accelerated by the pandemic, which creates an urgent need for robust national digital health governance, sustainable financing mechanisms, and targeted strategies to build digital literacy and ensure inclusion. Situated within the EU's broader digital health agenda and the WHO Regional Digital Health Action Plan 2023-2030, Albania's telemedicine development thus represents both a strategic opportunity to strengthen health system resilience and a policy challenge requiring coordinated governance, regulatory adaptation, and investment[4].

Empirical evidence from Albania's telemedicine program demonstrates substantial potential to improve healthcare access. Analysis of 2,724 telemedicine consultations revealed that approximately 80% of patients did not require transfer to tertiary care facilities, suggesting significant cost savings and improved access to specialised care, particularly in time-sensitive conditions such as neurotrauma[5]. This evidence underscores telemedicine's capacity to address healthcare disparities in resource-constrained settings while maintaining quality standards.

The importance of establishing strong legal and constitutional frameworks for telemedicine in Albania cannot be overstated, as digital health technologies become increasingly integrated into healthcare delivery systems and questions of patient rights, data protection, equity, and accessibility demand clear regulatory responses. Albania's experience is particularly illustrative because it is simultaneously modernising its healthcare infrastructure and aligning

[3] World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, *The Ongoing Journey to Commitment and Transformation: Digital Health in the WHO European Region,* 2023, pp. XX.

[4] World Health Organization, Regional Office for Europe, *The Ongoing Journey to Commitment and Transformation: Digital Health in the WHO European Region,* 2023, pp. ix-xvi, 9-26

[5] R. Latifi, et al., *Telemedicine as an Innovative Model for Rebuilding Medical Systems in Developing Countries Through Multipartnership Collaboration: The Case of Albania, in Telemedicine and e-Health* 20, no. 10, 2015, pp. 1-5.

with European Union (EU) regulatory standards as part of its ongoing accession process. As scholars demonstrate, the Europeanization process has significantly shaped health policy trajectories across the Western Balkans, including Albania, by compelling candidate countries to revise their public health legislation, reorganise healthcare institutions, and adopt new regulatory frameworks in line with the EU acquis[6]. However, the authors also highlight persistent gaps in implementation and enforcement, underscoring the fragility of these newly constructed frameworks. Within this evolving legal and institutional landscape, telemedicine offers a valuable case study for understanding the complexities of governance in transitional healthcare systems. This article, therefore, aims to provide a comprehensive examination of telemedicine in Albania through a multidimensional lens, focusing on its constitutional foundations, legal challenges, and policy pathways. The analysis situates telemedicine within the broader Europeanization of Albanian health governance, examining how EU accession-driven conditionalities and European policy models are reshaping national health regulation and institutional design[7].

CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL FOUNDATIONS FOR DIGITAL HEALTH IN ALBANIA

The Albanian constitutional framework establishes the fundamental legal parameters for the organisation and delivery of healthcare services. Article 55 of the Constitution explicitly enshrines the right to health protection, affirming that "citizens enjoy the right to health care from the state equally" and mandating the state to ensure "the highest possible standard of health, physical and mental care". These provisions, complemented by the social objectives outlined in Article 59, situate health protection among the state's core constitutional obligations. In the digital era, this constitutional duty extends to ensuring that technological innovation (such as telemedicine) serves the principles of accessibility, equality, and quality in healthcare delivery.

Moreover, Article 35 on the protection of personal data provides a constitutional anchor for the ethical and legal governance of telemedicine, safeguarding patients' informational autonomy in digital health environments. Hence, the Constitution of Albania provides the normative foundation for the integration of telemedicine into the public health system, framing it as both a means and an obligation to realise the right to health for all citizens[8].

This constitutional commitment carries significant implications for the implementation of telemedicine, as digital health services must conform not only to equality and non-discrimination but also to broader standards of transparency, accountability, and lawful processing of sensitive

[6] E. Tresa et al., *Europeanization of Health Policy in Post-Communist European Societies: Comparison of Six Western Balkan Countries, in Health Policy* 126, no. 8, 2022, pp, 817-822.

[7] *Ibid,* pp. 817-822.

[8] *Constitution of the Republic of Albania,* arts. 35, 55, 59 (1998, as amended).

personal data. Recent legislative reforms reinforce this connection. The Law on Public Health establishes the state's obligation to ensure universal and equitable access to healthcare services, creating a statutory basis for telemedicine as a mechanism to overcome geographical disparities and enhance continuity of care[9]. Albania's digital health reforms have introduced a structural shift toward integrated digital-health governance. According to the Ministry of Health's *E-Health in Albania* report, the government has implemented a nationwide electronic health record based on a secure, federated architecture, interoperable with other public registries, and compliant with international standards such as IHE and HL7[10]. These developments (accompanied by the expansion of e-prescription systems, the e-Albania patient access portal, and health-information monitoring platforms) provide the foundational infrastructure enabling telemedicine to function as a reliable, system-integrated public service.

The constitutional framework in Albania also extends beyond substantive healthcare rights to encompass broader principles governing public administration and public service delivery, including legality, accountability, transparency, and citizen inclusion. These principles are operationalised through the Law on Public Administration, which requires public authorities to ensure equal access to services, uphold procedural fairness, and modernise administrative practices in line with public needs[11]. In the context of digital health, these provisions form an essential legal basis for regulating telemedicine, ensuring its alignment with constitutional requirements of good administration and citizen-oriented service provision. Telemedicine's role as a digital public service thereby positions it within the constitutional discourse on service standards, citizen participation, and institutional transparency.

Nevertheless, despite these progressive legal developments, Albania's regulatory system continues to exhibit significant gaps and inconsistencies. The Law on Personal Data Protection (harmonised mainly with EU data protection standards) provides essential safeguards for sensitive health information processed through telemedicine platforms[12]. However, telemedicine-specific guidelines remain underdeveloped. For instance, legislation does not yet clearly define informed consent procedures for remote consultations, nor does it outline tailored obligations for healthcare professionals and institutions that deliver digital services. Accountability mechanisms and supervisory structures are also insufficiently articulated, limiting regulatory bodies' capacity to monitor compliance and ensure institutional transparency. Moreover, Albania lacks specific regulatory guidance on integrating artificial intelligence into telemedicine, creating uncertainty that may hinder innovation while exposing both providers and patients to unmitigated risks. When viewed collectively, these constitutional principles and legislative developments reveal both progress and fragmentation: telemedicine is grounded in solid constitutional and administrative obligations; nevertheless, its regulatory

[9] Law No. 10138/2010 *"On Public Health"*.

[10] *Ministry of Health of Albania*, E-Health in Albania, Ministry of Health, 2016, https://health.ec.europa.eu/document/download/64a95cba-468f-47c6-9d48-c89a6f318fca_en (accessed on 20th november 2025).

[11] Law No. 152/2013 *"On the Civil Servant and the Organisation of Public Administration"*.

[12] Law No. 9887/2008 *"On Personal Data Protection," amended 2014*.

architecture remains incomplete. Strengthening this framework is therefore essential to ensuring that digital health innovations uphold Albania's constitutional commitments to equality, transparency, and the protection of fundamental rights.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM TELEMEDICINE IMPLEMENTATION IN ALBANIA

The development of telemedicine in Albania offers one of the most instructive cases in the Western Balkans for understanding how digital health interventions can reshape healthcare delivery in a resource-constrained system. Indeed, over the last decade, a series of empirical studies have documented how Albania's Integrated Telemedicine and e-Health Programme improved access to specialist care, strengthened local clinical capacity, and introduced new forms of coordinated digital governance. Taken together, this body of evidence demonstrates that telemedicine is not merely a technological addition to the health system, but rather a transformative instrument that directly addresses structural constraints such as specialist shortages, geographic disparities, and the excessive concentration of advanced services in urban tertiary centres.

The first systematic evaluation of the national programme analysed 1,065 teleconsultations conducted in regional and district hospitals shortly after the programme's launch. Scholars found that telemedicine significantly expanded access to specialised expertise in fields such as trauma, neurology, internal medicine, and radiology (clinical areas where peripheral hospitals typically lacked continuous specialist coverage)[13]. Crucially, these findings align with a substantial body of international research demonstrating that telemedicine improves access to care in geographically remote or resource-constrained environments. Studies from rural health systems show that disparities in telehealth use arise primarily from infrastructural and access barriers rather than patient willingness, underscoring telemedicine's potential to mitigate structural inequities in healthcare delivery[14].

Subsequently, a more extensive dataset reinforced these initial results. An analysis of 2,724 telemedicine consultations demonstrated that nearly 80 per cent of patients could be managed locally without transfer to tertiary institutions, indicating significant improvements in system efficiency and substantial cost avoidance for the national health system[15]. Given these findings and the logistical challenges of inter-hospital transport in Albania (particularly in mountainous and rural regions), the ability to manage the majority

[13] R. Latifi, et al., *Telemedicine as an Innovative Model for Rebuilding Medical Systems in Developing Countries Through Multipartnership Collaboration: The Case of Albania, in Telemedicine and e-Health* 20, no. 10, 2015, pp. 1-5.

[14] J. S. Ko et al., *Disparities in Telehealth Access, Not Willingness to Use Services, Likely Explain Rural Telehealth Disparities, in Journal of Rural Health* 39, no. 3, 2023, pp. 617-624.

[15] R. Latifi, et al., *Telemedicine as an Innovative Model for Rebuilding Medical Systems in Developing Countries Through Multipartnership Collaboration: The Case of Albania, in Telemedicine and e-Health* 20, no. 10, 2015, pp. 1-5.

of cases locally represents a significant advancement in equitable access to care. Moreover, international evidence demonstrates that well-designed telemedicine systems reduce unnecessary transfers, enhance triage accuracy, and produce measurable economic benefits (effects that are especially pronounced in lower-income and geographically dispersed healthcare systems)[16]. The Albanian evidence, therefore, not only reflects global trends but also underscores the particular value of telemedicine in countries with uneven provider distribution and infrastructure limitations.

Speciality-specific applications further illuminate telemedicine's clinical significance. A study of 146 neurotrauma cases demonstrated that remote consultations led by neurosurgeons enabled regional hospitals to manage complex injuries safely at the local level, with a substantial proportion of patients avoiding transfer to tertiary facilities[17]. In this regard, given the scarcity of neurosurgical specialists outside Tirana and the time-sensitive nature of neurotrauma care, these findings underscore how telemedicine can elevate the standard of emergency response in settings where specialist availability is structurally limited. Evidence from acute-stroke telemedicine research likewise confirms that remote neurological expertise improves diagnostic accuracy, accelerates the initiation of critical interventions, and reduces unnecessary transfers (core outcomes that parallel and reinforce Albania's experience)[18].

Furthermore, international best-practice analyses of tele-critical-care systems highlight that specialist-led remote support significantly enhances the quality, safety, and timeliness of acute care, particularly when protocols ensure real-time expertise, reliable technological infrastructure, and seamless integration with on-site teams[19]. Accordingly, Albania's experience confirms that speciality-oriented telemedicine, when accompanied by standardised protocols and trained personnel, can play a decisive role in improving patient outcomes.

Another defining feature of the Albanian model is its multipartnership governance structure, which united Albanian governmental institutions with U.S. Government agencies, international organisations, and academic partners. Latifi and colleagues explicitly describe the Integrated Telemedicine and e-Health Programme as the product of a coordinated collaboration between USAID, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the International Virtual e-Hospital (IVeH), and the Ministry of Health of Albania[20]. Notably, this arrangement is presented as a novel form of transnational health system strengthening, designed not only

[16] C. B. Doarn, *Telemedicine Can Lower Costs and Improve Access, in Healthcare Financial Management* 54, no. 1, 2000, pp. 66-69.

[17] R. Latifi, et al., *Telemedicine as an Innovative Model for Rebuilding Medical Systems in Developing Countries Through Multipartnership Collaboration: The Case of Albania, in Telemedicine and e-Health* 20, no. 10, 2015, pp. 1-5.

[18] T. Johansson, C. Wild, *Telemedicine in Acute Stroke Management: Systematic Review, in International Journal of Technology Assessment in Health Care* 26, no. 2, 2010, pp. 149-55.

[19] B. K. Scott et al., *Best Practices in Telecritical Care: Expert Consensus Recommendations From the Telecritical Care Collaborative Network, in Critical Care Medicine* 52, no. 11, 2024, pp. 1750-1778

[20] R. Latifi, et al., *Telemedicine as an Innovative Model for Rebuilding Medical Systems in Developing Countries Through Multipartnership Collaboration: The Case of Albania, in Telemedicine and e-Health* 20, no. 10, 2015, pp. 1-5.

to meet immediate clinical needs but also to build durable institutional capacity through the IBOT (initiate-build-operate-transfer) strategy. Consequently, the Albanian experience demonstrates how structured multipartnership models can generate sustainable digital health infrastructure while aligning clinical, educational, and governance objectives.

This structure proved critical for technology transfer, workforce training, clinical protocol development, and the establishment of interoperable digital infrastructures. Importantly, the role of such systemic support is well documented in global telemedicine scholarship. The WHO's global telemedicine survey emphasises that technological tools alone cannot produce durable transformation without sustained investments in governance mechanisms, evaluation frameworks, and capacity-building initiatives[21]. Similarly, evidence from telehealth responses to global emergencies underscores that effective digital health systems depend not merely on technological availability but on coordinated leadership structures, clear protocols, and ongoing training to ensure resilient and safe clinical practice[22].

In practice, Albania's experience illustrates this principle clearly: hospitals with engaged leadership and trained clinical champions made significantly greater and more sustained use of telemedicine, reinforcing the view that local capacity and organisational readiness are as crucial as technological deployment. Latifi's account of the IBOT process shows that the most successful centres were those in which political leaders, hospital managers, and key clinicians were actively involved from the outset, and in which continuous training and local capacity-building were embedded in daily practice[23]. Thus, the emphasis placed on identifying "local champions", cultivating institutional commitment, and developing human resources demonstrates that telemedicine adoption depends fundamentally on organisational conditions rather than on technological availability alone[24].

Taken as a whole, the Albanian case demonstrates that telemedicine can serve as a powerful mechanism for enhancing healthcare quality, improving equity in access to specialised services, and strengthening the resilience of a transitioning health system. Ultimately, the consistency of results across multiple studies, specialities, and institutional contexts confirms that telemedicine is not simply a stopgap tool but a durable component of modern healthcare provision. As Albania continues to move towards deeper integration with European health standards and digital governance frameworks, this empirical foundation provides strong justification for embedding telemedicine within long-term health policy, legal regulation, and public administration reform.

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[21] World Health Organization, *Telemedicine: Opportunities and Developments in Member States, in Global Observatory for eHealth Series,* vol. 2, 2010, pp. 50-52.

[22] J. Kissi, *Telehealth Services for Global Emergencies: Implications for COVID-19 - A Scoping Review based on current evidence, in BMC Health Services Research,* 2023, pp. 2-9.

[23] R. Latifi et al., *Telemedicine as an Innovative Model for Rebuilding Medical Systems in Developing Countries Through Multipartnership Collaboration: The Case of Albania, in Telemedicine and e-Health* 21, no. 6, 2015, pp. 3-4.

[24] Ibid., p. 5.

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES IN TELEMEDICINE IMPLEMENTATION

A central barrier to the effective implementation of telemedicine in Albania lies in the unequal distribution of technological infrastructure. While urban centres generally benefit from more reliable broadband connectivity and stronger digital networks, rural, mountainous, and otherwise marginalised areas continue to face significant deficits in internet coverage and bandwidth stability. These disparities materially limit both patients' ability to engage in remote consultations and healthcare providers' capacity to deliver digital services. As highlighted by the WHO, digital health technologies remain unevenly accessible across Europe, with connectivity gaps disproportionately affecting populations in geographically remote or socio-economically disadvantaged regions (an observation that directly mirrors Albania's infrastructural landscape)[25].

Consequently, these inequalities constrain the routine use of telemedicine by both patients and clinicians, thereby reinforcing longstanding disparities in access to care. WHO further notes that developing and transition health systems often struggle with low bandwidth, unstable connectivity, and inadequate ICT infrastructure—factors that directly impede the effective use of digital health technologies26.

Moreover, these infrastructural deficits are compounded by substantial gaps in digital literacy among both healthcare professionals and the general population. The WHO reports that many clinicians lack sufficient training in telemedicine platforms, digital documentation systems, and the organisational requirements of remote care delivery. At the same time, patients—especially older adults and those with lower levels of education—often lack the competencies needed to navigate telehealth tools confidently and securely[27]. Taken together, deficiencies in both infrastructure and digital literacy form a critical barrier to the equitable and effective expansion of telemedicine in Albania.

International evidence, including WHO assessments of global digital health readiness, reinforces this picture by demonstrating that limited digital literacy significantly restricts telemedicine uptake, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. The WHO emphasises that many states lack a digitally capable health workforce, with clinicians insufficiently trained in digital tools, data management, telemedicine protocols, and remote communication[28]. It also cautions that populations with lower educational attainment, older adults, and marginalised communities face substantial barriers in using digital health technologies, thereby restricting the reach and equity of digital interventions. Without

[25] World Health Organization, *Digital Health in the WHO European Region 2023, 2023,* p. 17

[26] Ibid., p.17.

[27] World Health Organization, *Telemedicine: Opportunities and Developments in Member States, in Global Observatory for eHealth Series,* vol. 2, WHO, Geneva, 2010, pp. 18-19, 24-25.

[28] World Health Organization, *Global Strategy on Digital Health 2020-2025*, WHO, Geneva, 2021, pp. 19-25.

sustained investment in digital competencies and capacity-building, digital health reforms risk reproducing (and in some cases deepening) existing inequalities rather than mitigating them[29]. As the WHO notes, without deliberate investment in digital competencies and sustained capacity-building efforts, digital health interventions risk reproducing or even deepening existing health inequities, rather than mitigating them[30]. This assessment aligns closely with Albania's experience, where uneven digital skills among both providers and patients represent a significant obstacle to the development of inclusive telemedicine services.

Telemedicine expansion in Albania is also profoundly shaped by longstanding workforce pressures that undermine the system's ability to absorb and sustain digital health innovations. The State of Health in the EU - Albania, 2021 profile underscores that the country faces chronic shortages of healthcare professionals, with both physician and nurse densities remaining well below EU averages and particularly acute deficits in specialist cadres outside the capital[31]. In addition, sustained outward migration (driven by more favourable employment conditions abroad) has eroded health-system resilience, increased workloads for remaining staff, and contributed to persistent regional service gaps[32]. These structural weaknesses directly restrict institutional capacity to integrate new digital responsibilities, as overstretched professionals have limited time, training opportunities, and organisational support to adopt unfamiliar technologies[33]. In this context, workforce constraints represent not merely a human-resource challenge but a fundamental barrier to the practical and equitable implementation of telemedicine.

Compounding this challenge, telemedicine requires a composite skill set that extends beyond traditional clinical training. Effective remote care delivery depends not only on technical proficiency with digital platforms, monitoring systems, and telecommunication tools but also on communication competencies tailored to virtual interaction. However, current training pathways in Albania (and indeed in many health systems) offer limited structured preparation in these areas. International expert consensus stresses that telemedicine and telecritical care require dedicated onboarding, formalised competence development, and continuous training programmes to ensure clinicians can navigate digital interfaces, collaborate effectively with remote teams, and maintain high-quality patient communication[34]. Without such targeted curricula, healthcare professionals may remain reluctant or poorly equipped to integrate telemedicine into routine practice.

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[29] Ibid., pp, 19-25.

[30] Ibid., pp, 19-25.

[31] *State of Health in the EU: Albania - Country Health Profile 2021, in European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies,* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021, pp. 9-10.

[32] Ibid., pp. 10-12.

[33] Ibid., pp. 12-13.

[34] B. K. Scott et al., *Best Practices in Telecritical Care: Expert Consensus Recommendations From the Telecritical Care Collaborative Network, in Critical Care Medicine* 52, no. 11, 2024, pp. 1755-1758.

This dynamic reflects broader trends identified in the scientific literature, which consistently highlight insufficient training as one of the most persistent barriers to telehealth implementation across Europe and North America. Albania is no exception: the limited availability of protected training time exacerbates an already strained workforce context. Furthermore, rising burnout among healthcare workers (intensified during and after the COVID-19 pandemic) undermines clinical teams' capacity to assume additional digital responsibilities. Recent evidence showing dramatic increases in emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation among physicians illustrates the scale of this problem, revealing that work-related distress has worsened markedly in the post-pandemic period and has diminished clinicians' ability to engage with new models of care, such as telemedicine[35]. Without targeted capacity-building initiatives, telemedicine risks being underutilised, despite investments in digital infrastructure.

In addition to these human and technical challenges, Albania faces significant institutional and administrative barriers. Comparative analyses show that fragmented governance, bureaucratic complexity, and inconsistent strategic coordination frequently impede the integration of telemedicine. OECD assessments indicate that even where digital infrastructures improve, institutional constraints (including siloed information systems, weak cross-sector coordination, and outdated administrative practices) remain among the most persistent obstacles to digital-health reform[36].

As the OECD emphasises, the primary barriers to digital health are "not technological" but rather "institutional and organisational," slowing digital transformation and undermining the scalability and sustainability of telehealth initiatives.

Within Albania, similar patterns are visible. Despite meaningful progress in digital public administration (particularly through initiatives led by the National Agency for Information Society - AKSHI), the governance landscape remains marked by overlapping mandates, procedural inconsistencies, and limited inter-institutional coordination. The Digital Inclusion Initiative, National Report for Albania, highlights the absence of a dedicated national coordination mechanism to align ministerial, regulatory, and institutional efforts, resulting in fragmented digital systems and uneven implementation across sectors[37]. Such governance fragmentation (evident in unclear responsibilities, siloed infrastructures, and insufficient cross-agency cooperation) creates substantial variability in how telemedicine is adopted and undermines the coherence of digital health reforms.

International comparative assessments by the OECD and WHO similarly caution that weak governance, limited interoperability between information systems, and fluctuating political

[35] T. D. Shanafelt et al., *Changes in Burnout and Satisfaction With Work-Life Integration in Physicians During the First 2 Years of the COVID-19 Pandemic, in Mayo Clinic Proceedings* 97, no. 12, 2022, pp. 2249-2254.

[36] OECD, *Health in the 21st Century: Putting Data to Work for Stronger Health Systems, in OECD Publishing,* Paris, 2019, pp. 17-19, 31-35.

[37] *Digital Inclusion Initiative - National Report for Albania* - Digital Inclusion Initiative National Report for Albania, 202, pp. 14-15

commitment frequently undermine digital health reforms[38]. This reinforces the principle that stable, coordinated, and long-term institutional frameworks are essential for realising the transformative potential of telemedicine. In Albania, periodic political contestation and shifting resource allocations have at times delayed or diluted digital-health initiatives, underscoring the need for sustained political will and clear strategic direction.

Taken together, these structural challenges (spanning infrastructural inequalities, digital-literacy gaps, workforce limitations, and institutional fragmentation) demonstrate that the implementation of telemedicine is as much a socio-organisational and governance endeavour as it is a technological one. Addressing these multidimensional barriers will be essential if Albania is to harness telemedicine effectively to strengthen the equity, quality, and resilience of its healthcare system.

EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN TELEMEDICINE DELIVERY

Ensuring equity and inclusion in telemedicine delivery requires a nuanced and multidimensional understanding of the social determinants that shape individuals' capacity to access and benefit from digital health services. In Albania (as in many lower- and middle-income or transitional health systems), socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and geographical location remain decisive factors influencing telemedicine utilisation. Disadvantaged and remote populations systematically experience reduced connectivity, lower levels of digital literacy, and persistent structural barriers to digital health access[39]. Consequently, rural and economically marginalised communities face cumulative and mutually reinforcing disadvantages, including limited ICT infrastructure, reduced digital competence, and financial constraints that restrict their ability to purchase devices or maintain data plans[40].

Moreover, international evidence confirms that such inequalities are neither incidental nor unique to Albania. OECD analyses repeatedly demonstrate that rural regions tend to have poorer broadband availability and slower connection speeds, conditions that directly impede the use of digital public services, including telehealth. Likewise, socioeconomic disadvantage compounds these infrastructural deficits: even where mobile technologies are broadly diffused, affordability remains a decisive barrier, with low-income households often unable to purchase smartphones or sustain monthly data packages[41]. Similarly, OECD assessments of digital transformation in health systems show that socioeconomic inequalities continue to shape access to online health resources, as lower-income and less educated groups have

[38] OECD, *Health at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators, in OECD Publishing,* Paris, 2023, pp. 33-40, 54-56.

[39] World Health Organization, *Telemedicine: Opportunities and Developments in Member States-Report on the Second Global Survey on eHealth,* WHO, Geneva, 2010, pp. 18-21, 24

[40] OECD, *Bridging Connectivity Divides,* in OECD Publishing, Paris, 2023, pp. 17-19

[41] Ibid., pp. 30-32.

significantly reduced capacity to use digital tools effectively[42]. WHO evaluations further corroborate these findings, emphasising that inadequate ICT infrastructure and limited digital literacy remain key obstacles to telemedicine implementation in many transitional health systems, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups[43]. Taken together, this body of evidence demonstrates that infrastructural deficits, affordability constraints, and unequal digital skills interact to create a persistent digital health divide (one that both reflects and reinforces existing access inequalities in Albania).

This dynamic is entirely consistent with broader global trends. Research by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) shows that economic deprivation and digital exclusion intersect to restrict meaningful access to digital health innovations, particularly for disadvantaged communities that face structural barriers to ICT availability, affordability, and usability[44].

Furthermore, gender-related and demographic disparities intensify these inequities. International and national evidence indicates that gender remains a significant axis of digital exclusion, as socio-cultural norms, unequal care burdens, and persistent economic disparities limit women's ability to engage fully with digital services, including telemedicine[45]. In Albania, the *Digital Inclusion Initiative - National Report for Albania* notes that women and girls are disproportionately at risk of digital exclusion due to lower digital skills, constrained financial autonomy, and unequal access to digital tools[46]. These gendered challenges intersect with broader demographic factors. Older adults frequently encounter difficulties navigating digital platforms. At the same time, Roma and Egyptian communities, persons with disabilities, and individuals with lower education levels face additional obstacles linked to inadequate infrastructure, limited digital competence, linguistic barriers, and reduced trust in digital systems[47]. Albanian studies reinforce these patterns, showing that women often experience reduced autonomy, financial dependence, and limited familiarity with digital technologies—factors that significantly constrain their uptake of remote health services. Age, minority status, disability, and cultural-linguistic diversity further intersect with digital-health readiness in ways that produce additional layers of exclusion[48].

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[42] OECD, *Health in the 21st Century: Putting Data to Work for Stronger Health Systems, in OECD Publishing,* Paris, 2019, pp. 34-36.

[43] World Health Organization, *Telemedicine: Opportunities and Developments in Member States,* WHO, Geneva, 2010, pp. 18-19.

[44] International Telecommunication Union, *Access to Telecommunication/ICT Services by Persons with Disabilities and Other Persons with Specific Needs: Output Report on ITU-D Question 7/1, in Study Period 2018-2021,* Geneva: ITU, 2021, pp. 1-10.

[45] *Digital Inclusion Initiative - National Report for Albania* - Digital Inclusion Initiative National Report for Albania, 202, p. 13, highlighting the role of gender inequalities in digital inclusion gaps, including limited digital skills and structural barriers affecting women, p. 13

[46] Ibid., p. 9, discussion of vulnerable groups, including women and girls at risk of digital exclusion.

[47] Ibid., pp. 27-28, detailed findings on older adults, rural residents, Roma and Egyptian communities, and persons with disabilities facing significant infrastructural, educational, and skills-related barriers to digital access.

[48] *Digital Inclusion Initiative - National Report for Albania* - Digital Inclusion Initiative National Report for Albania, 2024, pp. 27-28, 35-36, 8-9.

International scholarship on digital inclusion strongly underscores that telemedicine systems must be culturally and linguistically responsive to serve diverse populations effectively. As Jan van Dijk's foundational work on digital inequality demonstrates, meaningful digital participation is shaped not only by access to devices and connectivity but also by the availability of culturally adapted interfaces, multilingual content, and community-based outreach mechanisms, features essential to preventing the systematic exclusion of marginalised groups[49].

Equally crucial are trust, privacy, and ethical safeguards, which form the bedrock of equitable telemedicine implementation. Public confidence in digital health services depends on robust mechanisms that protect patient autonomy, guarantee confidentiality, and ensure transparent data-handling practices[50]. Because telemedicine systems necessarily process sensitive personal and health-related information, strong data-protection frameworks are indispensable. International regulatory principles (most notably those articulated in the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and clarified in the European Data Protection Board's *Guidelines on Data Protection by Design and by Default*) emphasise that digital health infrastructures must embed privacy-preserving mechanisms at every stage of system design and operation. The principle of "data protection by design and by default" requires controllers to implement safeguards that ensure data minimisation, purpose limitation, and the confidentiality and integrity of health information. These guidelines further emphasise that restrictions on secondary uses and strict accountability standards are essential for maintaining trust in telemedicine systems[51].

Nevertheless, despite notable progress in digital health reform, many national legal systems, including Albania's, continue to exhibit significant gaps in areas crucial to the safe and equitable functioning of telemedicine. These include deficiencies in digital informed-consent procedures, insufficient interoperability and standardisation of electronic health systems, inadequate cybersecurity protections, and limited transparency in algorithmic decision-making[52]. A growing body of scholarly work warns that without explicit safeguards (particularly regarding automated triage, remote diagnostics, and AI-supported clinical decision tools), telemedicine risks undermining patient trust and widening inequities, especially for populations already underrepresented in health-system governance[53].

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[49] J. van Dijk, *The Digital Divide,* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020, pp. 85-112.

[50] World Health Organization, *Ethics and Governance of Artificial Intelligence for Health,* Geneva: WHO, 2021, pp. 25-30, emphasising the ethical principles of protecting autonomy, ensuring transparency, and safeguarding privacy.

[51] European Data Protection Board, *Guidelines 4/2019 on Article 25: Data Protection by Design and by Default,* Version 2.0, 2020, pp. 5-12, 14-17

[52] OECD, *Health at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators, in OECD Publishing,* Paris 2023, pp. 34-36, 40-41, 56, highlighting persistent gaps in interoperability frameworks, cybersecurity protections, and governance structures for digital health systems.

[53] T. Sharon, *When Digital Health Meets Digital Capitalism: How Many Common Goods Are at Stake?* in Big Data & Society, 2018, pp. 2-4, 7-9

Collectively, these structural, demographic, and institutional factors underscore that equitable telemedicine delivery is not merely a technical challenge but a fundamentally social-justice, governance-architecture, and rights-based regulatory-design question. Addressing disparities in access, competence, and trust, therefore, demands coordinated investment in digital infrastructure, sustained capacity-building, gender-sensitive and culturally responsive design, and the strengthening of transparent, accountable digital-health governance systems.

POLICY PATHWAYS, REFORM RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Advancing telemedicine in Albania requires a coherent, forward-looking policy strategy that integrates legal reform, infrastructure investment, institutional strengthening, and inclusive governance mechanisms. Increasingly, comparative scholarship demonstrates that the safe, effective, and equitable expansion of telemedicine depends on a sound legal and regulatory foundation, one that clearly delineates the scope of remote healthcare, standardises procedural requirements, and secures patient rights in digital environments[54]. Furthermore, telemedicine raises complex issues concerning health-data protection, legal certainty, and the safeguarding of patient autonomy; consequently, states must articulate explicit rules on informed consent, data-processing safeguards, and non-discriminatory access to ensure that remote care operates within a secure and ethically grounded framework. These insights underscore the urgency for Albania to adopt dedicated telemedicine legislation that formalises standards for digital consent, establishes enforceable data-protection obligations, and introduces mechanisms for accountability, dispute resolution, and cross-border service provision.

Moreover, clear accountability frameworks and well-anchored oversight mechanisms are indispensable for ensuring lawful and ethical telemedicine practice. Recent analyses highlight that the expansion of telemedicine necessarily increases the scope of sensitive data processing, thereby requiring clearly allocated institutional responsibilities, enforceable supervisory structures, and state-level guarantees of patient protection[55]. As Albania moves toward a more digitally enabled health system, its regulatory architecture must also evolve to address the growing integration of artificial intelligence into telemedicine. AI-assisted diagnostics, automated triage tools, and algorithmic decision-support systems introduce new layers of clinical and ethical complexity, making it imperative to adopt legal provisions that ensure transparency, mandate clinician training, and establish comprehensive risk-mitigation safeguards. These regulatory imperatives align closely with emerging WHO standards, which emphasise explainability, accountability, and bias prevention in AI-supported health

[54] M. Julesz, Health *Equity and Health Data Protection Related to Telemedicine amid the COVID-19 Pandemic, in Információs Társadalom* 22, no. 2, 2022, pp. 28-32, discussing legal certainty, data protection, informed consent, and state obligations in telemedicine.

[55] Ibid., pp. 29-33

applications, and collectively call for governance structures that protect both patient safety and substantive equity[56].

Ensuring the long-term sustainability of telemedicine in Albania further requires sustained, system-level investment in national ICT infrastructure, particularly in regions where digital exclusion is most pronounced. As the OECD stresses, reliable, high-quality connectivity is a prerequisite for any inclusive digital transformation. Nevertheless, persistent disparities in broadband availability, affordability, and network stability (especially across rural and remote territories) continue to constrain citizens' ability to use digital public services and reinforce socio-territorial inequalities[57]. Consequently, targeted infrastructure investments to expand broadband coverage, improve network performance, and reduce deployment barriers are indispensable for enabling equitable telemedicine adoption. Complementing this, international digital-health evidence consistently demonstrates that infrastructural inequality remains one of the most persistent barriers to telemedicine uptake, particularly in low- and middle-income or transition economies. The WHO Global Strategy on Digital Health 2020-2025 underscores that inadequate ICT foundations, low bandwidth, and legacy technological constraints remain major impediments to national digital health scale-up[58]. Without reliable connectivity and equitable access to digital tools, health systems cannot deploy telemedicine safely or effectively, making infrastructural consolidation a foundational precondition for meaningful digital health transformation[59].

In parallel, Albania's ability to deliver high-quality telemedicine depends substantially on comprehensive capacity-building programmes for healthcare professionals. International evidence increasingly shows that telemedicine requires a blended skill set that integrates clinical expertise with competence in digital tools, remote-care protocols, data governance, and virtual communication. Expert consensus guidelines in tele-critical care emphasise the necessity of structured onboarding, competency-based education, and continuous professional development to ensure safe and effective remote care[60]. Accordingly, integrating digital health education into medical and nursing curricula (supported by simulation-based

[56] World Health Organization, *Ethics and Governance of Artificial Intelligence for Health,* WHO, Geneva, 2021, pp. 6-16.

[57] OECD, *Bridging Connectivity Divides, in OECD Publishing,* Paris, 2021, pp. 3-22, noting that only around 59% of rural households have access to high-speed broadband, significantly lower than in urban areas, thereby reinforcing structural barriers to digital-service accessibility, including digital health.

[58] World Health Organization, *Global Strategy on Digital Health 2020-2025,* Geneva: WHO, 2021, pp. 15-17.

[59] Ibid., 7-8, noting that digital health adoption is contingent on access to ICT infrastructure and equitable broadband connectivity

[60] B. K. Scott et al., *Best Practices in Telecritical Care: Expert Consensus Recommendations From the Telecritical Care Collaborative Network, in Critical Care Medicine* 52, no. 11, 2024, pp. 1756-1759. The experts emphasise that safe and effective telecritical care requires "structured onboarding programmes," "competency-based training frameworks," and "continuous professional development mechanisms" for all clinicians operating within telemedicine environments. The report further specifies that clinicians must acquire skills in remote communication, navigation of digital interfaces, interprofessional coordination across distributed teams, and protocol-based virtual assessment. It also recommends establishing formal certification and evaluation systems to ensure consistent quality standards across telemedicine providers.

training, continuous professional development, and telemedicine-specific certification pathways) constitutes an essential step toward standardising and professionalising telemedicine practice in Albania.

Because digital transformation carries the risk of reproducing or exacerbating existing social inequalities, ensuring that Albania's telemedicine strategy is inclusive requires explicit attention to the structural disadvantages faced by underserved and marginalised groups. The *Digital Inclusion Initiative: National Report for Albania* identifies women, older adults, Roma and Egyptian communities, persons with disabilities, rural residents, and low-income households as groups disproportionately affected by digital exclusion. Their barriers (ranging from limited digital literacy and unaffordable internet access to inaccessible platform design and insufficient support structures) significantly constrain their ability to benefit from telemedicine. The report additionally finds that these communities often rely on intermediaries to access digital services, exposing them to greater financial burdens and heightened privacy risks. Consequently, targeted policies that prioritise inclusivity and equitable access must become central components of Albania's digital health strategy[61].

In addition, public campaigns aimed at increasing digital health literacy, strengthening patient empowerment, and fostering user trust are essential to encouraging the uptake and appropriate utilisation of telemedicine services. Digital-inclusion research consistently shows that bridging inequalities requires not only infrastructure and technical skills but also sustained outreach efforts that build user confidence, digital motivation, and trust in digital public services[62]. At the same time, transparent communication strategies and participatory engagement mechanisms can help embed user perspectives into the design and delivery of telemedicine platforms, ensuring alignment with citizens' needs and with constitutional principles of good administration[63].

Looking ahead, the global technological landscape offers significant opportunities to advance digital health solutions in Albania. International evidence confirms that telemedicine markets are expanding rapidly, driven by advances in artificial intelligence, big data analytics, remote monitoring technologies, and interoperable health information systems. The WHO *Global Strategy on Digital Health* highlights that emerging technologies (such as the Internet of Things, virtual care, AI-enabled diagnostics, and integrated data-exchange platforms) have substantial potential to enhance diagnostic accuracy, treatment effectiveness, and the overall efficiency of health service delivery[64]. In the Albanian context, future development is expected to involve consolidating multiple speciality platforms into unified, user-friendly

[61] *Digital Inclusion Initiative - National Report for Albania* - Digital Inclusion Initiative National Report for Albania, 2024, pp. 31-33.

[62] J. van Dijk, *The Digital Divide*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020, pp. 45-52.

[63] European Commission, *Quality of Public Administration: A Toolbox for Practitioners, in Publications Office of the European Union,* Luxembourg, 2015, pp. 221-254

[64] World Health Organization, *Global Strategy on Digital Health 2020-2025,* Geneva, WHO, 2021, pp. 7-10.

digital gateways, enabling patients to access remote consultations, diagnostics, and medical information through a single interface. This trajectory is supported by earlier national initiatives, including the establishment of a hub-and-spoke telemedicine model connecting the National Telemedicine Centre in Tirana with twelve regional centres via interoperable digital systems. These efforts indicate that Albania is well-positioned to move toward integrated, system-wide telemedicine solutions[65].

Equally, sustained collaborations with international digital-health companies and technology providers will remain crucial for accelerating innovation, particularly in areas such as secure data exchange, privacy-enhancing technologies, and advanced telemonitoring systems. The early development of Albania's telemedicine infrastructure illustrates the value of partnership collaboration models involving national institutions, international donors, foreign universities, and private-sector technology partners[66]. Such coordinated partnerships generate more sustainable, scalable outcomes than isolated initiatives and will likely remain central to Albania's future digital health expansion. Notably, digital-health companies currently active in Albania increasingly operate within a broader regional ecosystem and are seeking to extend their services to neighbouring Western Balkan states, including Kosovo and North Macedonia, an evolution consistent with WHO and EU guidance emphasising regional interoperability, cross-border collaboration, and scalable digital-health ecosystems[67].

Despite these advancements, significant challenges persist. OECD analyses demonstrate that the successful implementation of digital-health innovations requires more than strong infrastructure and a capable workforce; it also demands robust institutional capacity to integrate secure data-sharing systems, ensure interoperability, and maintain compliance with European data-protection and cybersecurity standards[68]. For this reason, alignment with international guidance (particularly the WHO/Europe *Regional Digital Health Action Plan 2023-2030)* is essential.[69] The Plan provides a comprehensive roadmap for strengthening governance capacities, enhancing interoperability of digital systems, and scaling secure digital health infrastructure across the region. As Albania continues its EU integration process, strategic alignment with these frameworks will become increasingly crucial for consolidating digital health reforms.

In conclusion, Albania's telemedicine experience shows that digital health development is not merely a technological endeavour, but a multidimensional reform process situated at the intersection of constitutional rights, public law obligations, institutional capacity,

[65] R. Latifi et al., *Telemedicine as an Innovative Model for Rebuilding Medical Systems in Developing Countries: The Case of Albania, in Telemedicine and e-Health,* 2015, pp. 2-5.

[66] Ibid., pp. 2-6.

[67] Ibid., pp. 2-6. See also: World Health Organization, Global Strategy on Digital Health 2020-2025, 2021, pp. 19-25.

[68] OECD, *Health at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators, in OECD Publishing,* Paris, 2023, p.15

[69] WHO Regional Office for Europe, *The Ongoing Journey to Commitment and Transformation: Digital Health in the WHO European Region 2023,* Copenhagen, WHO, 2023, pp. xvii-xviii, 1-3

and regional integration. Evidence from over 2,700 teleconsultations demonstrates that telemedicine can significantly improve healthcare access, reduce unnecessary patient transfers, and support better clinical outcomes. Nevertheless, the persistence of infrastructural, legal, governance, and equity challenges indicates that successful telemedicine implementation requires coherent legislation, strong data-protection safeguards, strategic workforce development, and inclusive, user-centred policies. As Albania moves closer to EU membership, the incentives and obligations of regulatory harmonisation offer a significant opportunity to accelerate digital health transformation. Ultimately, sustained political commitment, cross-sectoral collaboration, and the capacity to adapt to evolving technologies will determine whether Albania can build a digital-health system that is accessible, equitable, and resilient, capable of delivering high-quality telemedicine services to all citizens, regardless of geography or socioeconomic status.

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE AROMANIAN (VLACH) MINORITY LIVING IN ALBANIA BASED ON HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

Historically, the Aromanians of Albania have played a significant social, cultural, and political role, despite their recent official recognition as a national minority. As a distinct Romance-speaking community, they have preserved their language and identity over centuries without ever forming a nation state. Previous scholarship (Capidan 1931; Papahagi 1932; Saramandu 1984; Nevaci 2011) indicates that most Aromanians in Albania belong to the Farsherot subgroup, whose dialect forms part of the historical Romanian varieties south of the Danube. This article examines the collective identity of the Farsherots through two key sources: Constantin Colimitra's autobiographical work *Fărşeroţii* (1986) and Theodor Capidan's linguistic study *Fărşeroţii.* Studiu lingvistic asupra românilor din Albania (1931). The analysis is framed by Monika Fludernik's narrative theory, which conceptualizes identity as constructed through experience, storytelling, and social embeddedness. Moving beyond classical structural narratology, Fludernik's approach emphasizes cognitive, experiential, and performative dimensions, making it particularly suitable for understanding minority identity narratives. The study highlights how Farsherot identity has been shaped by historical pressures, migration, linguistic continuity, and cultural resilience. By examining narrative representations of experience in Colimitra's and Capidan's texts, the article sheds light on the mechanisms through which this community articulates belonging and preserves its heritage. The findings underscore the urgency of documenting and safeguarding the Farsherots' linguistic and cultural legacy.

Key words: *minority, Farsherots, narratives, identity, cultural heritage*

INTRODUCTION

The Farsherots of Albania represent a dynamic community with deep historical roots and rich cultural expressions, forming an essential part of the Albanian heritage, and contributing meaningfully to the broader Albanian identity. Existing scholarship explores their history, linguistic features, and cultural practices highlighting their distinctiveness within the Balkan mosaic.

Traditionally regarded as a subgroup of the Aromanian people, the Farsherots trace back their origins to migrations and settlements during the Ottoman period. Stoica (2021) maps their distribution as small "islands" across southern Albania. Migrations studies by Vullnetari (2007) demonstrate the socio-economic factors influencing these communities including exchanges with the diaspora which have shaped demographic patterns and shaped the Farsherots' identity.

Linguistically, the majority of the Aromanians in Albania belong to the Farsherot subgroup (Capidan 1931, Papahagi 1932, Saramandu 1984, Nevaci 2011). Other groups include the Gramosteans (originating from Gramoz, a chain of mountains between Albanian and Greek border), the Graboveans (originating from the old villages of Grabovë, Llëngë, Niçë in Albania, near Pogradec) and finally the Pindeans (most of them compactly concentrated in Greece, in the Pindus Mountains).

Cultural memory plays a central role in Farsherot identity. Kocój (2016) highlights the importance of artefacts and oral traditions for Aromanian heritage preservation across the Balkans. Similarly, Minov (2021) emphasizes shared cultural practices that foster while linguistic studies by Sorescu-Marinkovi et al. (2021) and Selvelli (2022) examine sociolinguistic resilience under shifting political dynamics.

Research also reveals the challenges faced by the Farsherots in maintaining their cultural and linguistic distinctiveness. St nil and Vasiliu (2022) analyze the community's sociopolitical position in Albania, showing how state policies can either hinder or support cultural survival. Other scholars (Sobolev 2008; Negrea 2021) explore broader linguistic identities, revealing how language serves both as expression and negotiation of identity.

Folklore, rituals, festivals, cuisine and music remain essential markers of Farsherot cultural life. Vullnetari (2007) connects migration to cultural forms of expression, while Sobolev's (2021) discussion of the *Balkan Sprachbund* illustrates how linguistic synthesis occurs through contact, raising questions about preserving minority identities in modern context.

In addition, the intersectionality of identity, language and cultural expression is an important theme in the literature examined. The research of Nisioi (2014) on the syllabic structures of the Aromanian highlights the linguistic uniqueness of the Farsherots and their relationship with wider regional identities, while others such as St nil and Vasiliu (2022) emphasize the complexities of self-identification in the midst of national influences.

In sum, the Farsherots offer a compelling case study of cultural resilience in a post-Ottoman

Balkan context. Their heritage is not a static remnant of the past, but a dynamic, living entity shaped by memory, migration and identity politics. Understanding their identity contributes to the broader appreciation of Albania's complex cultural landscape.

THE FARSHEROTS' COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

The Farsherots, an ethnolinguistic community, having the status of a minority since 2017[1], distinct from the Albanian majority and concentrated mainly in Southern Albania, embody a multilayered collective identity shaped by cultural, historical and social forces. Collective identity, in this context, refers to the shared sense of belonging emerging from communal ties, traditions and collective experiences.

Historical dimensions

The Farsherots are first historically attested indirectly through the documentation of Frashër (< Lat. *fraxinus*, "ash tree"), their place of origin, in 1330 and 1432, with their ethnonym appearing explicitly only in the 19th century and receiving full scholarly treatment in the early 20th century. Their origins lie in a Romance-speaking pastoral population that gradually developed into a distinct subgroup through migration, transhumance and cultural consolidation from the late medieval to modern periods. Thus, their identity is deeply connected to historical experiences ranging from Ottoman-era migrations with interactions with neighboring populations. Through oral narratives, the Farsherots have preserved stories of resilience amid pressures of assimilation.

Colimitra's *Farşeroţii* (1986) blends autobiography and ethnography, documenting their customs, idiom, migration routes, and memories- a narrative practice Fludernick (2017, 140) associates with texts written by individuals who experienced events as members of a collective.

Capidan's fieldwork-based account (1931) complements this perspective. Although not a Farsherot himself, he provides detailed linguistic and cultural observations, praising the group's adaptability, mobility and industriousness. For example, Capidan describes the Farsherots originating from Plasa as inhabiting both the village of Plasa and the town of Korçë (Arom. *Curceaua*), preserving their traditional lifestyle in their native village, but also adjusting to the urban lifestyle when choosing to live in the town. Nevertheless, many of them had previously gone through the immigration experience, especially in the United States and afterwards returned to their homeland bringing back with them their savings and becoming entrepreneurs or businessmen. The author highly praises the Farsherots' capacity to adjust quickly from the nomad to the urban lifestyle, particularly because in the

[1] According to Law 96/2017, 9 national minorities are recognized today in Albania: Aromanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Egyptian, Greek, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Roma and Serbian.

past many of them had been nomads, their life being characterized by transhumance[2]. This cyclical pastoral migration shaped not only the economic practices of the Farsherots, but also their social structures, mobility patterns, and cultural identity. Historically, Farsherots families engaged in long-distance transhumance across the actual territory of Albania, Greece, and the wider Balkan region, following established routes such Via Egnatia (Arom. *Calea mari*). These journeys facilitated sustained contact with diverse communities while reinforcing a shared sense of belonging among Aromanian groups who practiced similar forms of pastoral mobility. Transhumance also contributed to the Farsherot variety, as oral traditions, songs, and storytelling circulated with shepherding groups during seasonal migrations. Moreover, the demands of pastoral movement fostered resilience, adaptability, and cooperative networks, qualities repeatedly emphasized by both Colimitra and Capidan in their descriptions of the Farsherot life. As a result, transhumance is not merely an economic activity, but a cultural institution that has historically shaped the collective identity, social memory and intergenerational cohesion of the Farsherot community.

Social dimensions

Social structures — including kinship, community networks and ritual gatherings — reinforce group solidarity. Family units, communal meetings and moral obligations form a strong social fabric within which identity is cultivated and transmitted. The analysis of family structures, community organizations and social networks illuminates the deep impact of social dimensions on the collective identity of Farsherots. This intricate network of interactions not only reinforces cultural continuity, but also encourages resilience against the challenges raised by modernity and globalization. When examining these aspects through Colimitra's ideas and Fludernik's theoretical considerations, one may conclude that Farsherots' identity is not a static phenomenon, but a dynamic narrative formed by continuous social practices rooted in historical and cultural contexts.

NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF FARSHEROT IDENTITY

Guided by Fludernik's framework, identity is approached as a narrative construct shaped by experiential storytelling (Fludernik 1996, 12; 2009, 4-5). Farsherot identity is embedded in oral history, folklore, ritual performance and shared memories. Fludernik's approach highlights the centrality of narrative in the construction of identity and emphasizes the role that storytelling plays in shaping collective self-understanding. Examining the ways in which the Farsherots recount their experiences reveals the broader cultural and social frameworks that support their identity formation. Fludernik (2009) encourages us to consider how individual experiences, when integrated into shared narratives, generate a

[2] The seasonal, cyclical migration of shepherds and their herds between lowland winter pastures and highland summer pastures.

cohesive sense of belonging that accommodates both unity and internal diversity. Viewed through this lens, the analysis of Farsherot collective identity—grounded in Colimitra's ethnographic insights and interpreted within Fludernik's theoretical framework—offers a comprehensive exploration of how cultural, historical, and social dimensions converge to form a distinctive communal identity. Colimitra's work unveils a multifaceted landscape marked by rich traditions, elaborate rituals, and a vibrant folklore that lies at the core of Farsherot identity. Originating from Farsher, one of their major historical centers, the community has preserved a remarkable degree of cultural continuity despite periods of enforced isolation, migration, and external pressure.

Folklore as Identity Capital

Central to Colimitra's analysis is the notion of folklore, which encompasses narrative, music—particularly polyphonic singing—dance, and traditional crafts. For the Farsherots, folklore serves as a repository of shared memory and collective experience, reinforcing belonging across generations. Their stories frequently depict ancestral figures who embody virtues such as bravery, wisdom, and resilience, reflecting the community's deep connection to both their natural environment and their historical past.

Colimitra also documents a series of cultural practices—such as festive meals, wedding rituals, and religious celebrations—that strengthen communal ties and articulate shared values. The preparation of traditional foods, especially during holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, reinforces both hospitality and interdependence. Rituals, such as the making and sharing of *pita* on Pentecost in memory of the deceased, reveal the symbolic depth embedded in everyday practices (. Collective events, particularly weddings with their complex ceremonial structures, further exemplify the communal ethos at the heart of Farsherot life.

These cultural practices are inseparable from the community's historical experiences. Colimitra underscores how resistance to foreign domination, notably under Ottoman rule, and the challenges of socio-political upheaval have shaped a resilient identity. Historical narratives—transmitted through folklore and ritual—contribute to a shared understanding of what it means to be Farsherot in modern Albania.

In this light, the Farsherots' collective identity emerges as a dynamic tapestry woven from cultural practices, historical consciousness, and strong social bonds. It reflects both internal unity and the capacity to negotiate the challenges of modernization and social change. Fludernik's theoretical model enriches this perspective by emphasizing "natural narratology," which posits that narrative is intrinsically tied to human experience and thus central to cultural identity (Fludernik 1996, 12-17, 43-51, 245-254). Narratives, in this sense, are not merely aesthetic constructs but vehicles of cultural transmission, embodying values, beliefs, and collective memory. Storytelling functions as a culturally mediated framework through

which individuals and communities make sense of their lives- thus placing narrative at the core of cultural identity formation.

Fludernik (1996, 208-315) also stresses the role of empathy in narrative comprehension—the capacity of audiences to emotionally engage with characters and situations. This dynamic is visible in Farsherot storytelling, where tales of migration, hardship, survival, and cultural resilience foster a shared emotional landscape that strengthens communal identity. Furthermore, the temporal and spatial anchoring of their narratives—stories tied to specific places, seasons, and historical moments—deepens their cultural resonance. In addition, traditional myths, such as those relating to natural phenomena or local landscapes, often anthropomorphized, a symbolic connection between the community and their environment. By attributing human qualities to natural elements, these myths reflect the rooted relationship of the Farsherots with their land, strengthening a sense of the place integral part of their identity.

The transmission of folklore occurs through common meetings and rituals, in which the community collectively engage in practices that evoke their cultural heritage. For example, the festivals that celebrate collections or significant historical events often incorporate traditional music, dance and recitations of folklore. These events not only serve as a method of cultural expression, but also strengthen social cohesion and collective memory among the members of the community. These common activities, as highlighted by Colimitra, provide a phase for intergenerational dialogue, allowing the elderly to transmit knowledge and values incorporated into folklore to the younger generations.

Folklore therefore functions as a crucial mechanism for cultural continuity. Myths, stories, and oral histories articulate the community's worldview and allow the Farsherots to articulate their identity within the broader Albanian environment. Tales depicting local heroes, legendary warriors, and moral exemplars transmit ethical codes such as loyalty, perseverance, and solidarity.

Narrative Styles: Colimitra vs. Capidan

A comparison between Colimitra's and Capidan's narrative styles further illuminates their distinct approaches. Colimitra employs a lyrical, personal mode of narration: his return to his native village, accompanied by Farsherot horsemen, is recounted using the authorial "we," at times blurring the boundary between narrator and community. He later addresses the reader directly, establishing an intimate connection that transforms the reader into a metaphorical travel companion. His nostalgic depictions—sunsets over the village, moonlit landscapes—are interwoven with quotations from Mihai Eminescu[3], reflecting his education in the Romanian-language school of Plasa.

[3] Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889), the greatest Romanian national poet.

Capidan, by contrast, adopts a detached scholarly tone. Writing as a linguist during his 1928 fieldwork in Albania, he documents the linguistic and cultural characteristics of the Farsherots with academic precision. Although Aromanian himself, he does not belong to the Farsherot subgroup and thus maintains a more objective stance. Nevertheless, he expresses admiration for their industriousness, adaptability, and courage. Capidan also maps out the internal sub-branches of the Farsherots—*Plisoți, C str nioți, J rc nioți, Uianț, Culoniați, Curtișani, Ci meriani,* and *Muzichiari*—each named after their place of origin, further illustrating the internal diversity of the group.

THE FARSHEROT VARIETY AS AN IDENTITY MARKER

In addition to folklore and social customs, Colimitra underscores the crucial linguistic dimensions of Farsherot culture. The Farsherot variety of the Aromanian dialect is characterized by distinct phonetic and lexical features that differentiate it from other Aromanian subgroups. Language thus functions not only as a communicative tool but as a powerful identity marker that separates the Farsherots from surrounding populations. The preservation of their mother tongue—maintained primarily through intergenerational oral transmission—demonstrates the community's commitment to safeguarding its cultural heritage despite ongoing pressures of modernization and assimilation.

Their idiom plays a pivotal role in shaping and maintaining Farsherot identity. Theodor Capidan devotes an entire chapter to the linguistic features of the Farsherot variety, noting that this subgroup alone has preserved the ethnic designation without the prosthetic prefix *a-* and retains the distinct apical trill *rrămăn*, comparable to the Albanian sound associated with the *rr* grapheme (Capidan 1931, 116). Based on extensive field interviews, Capidan also concludes that even Aromanians living in towns continue to speak the Farsherot variety (Capidan 1931,117). His collection of folk poems and fairy tales, transcribed in the Aromanian dialect, offers valuable evidence of the phonetic and morphological traits that define this linguistic variety.

Futhermore, Capidan notices a gender differentiation in the Farsherot variety: uvular *r* appears only in the speech of the Farsherot women, particularly from rural areas, a sound which also affects the pronunciation of the nearby vowels. According to Capidan, uvular *r* used to be uttered by all Farsherot speakers in the past, regardless of their gender, but it has been preserved only by women because they were not socially mobile like men. Traditionally, women were confined to their households and villages where they were living and raising their children or grandchildren to whom they were teaching their "authentic" mother tongue. More than that, Capidan claims that the pronunciation of the apical *r* with several vibrations is more frequent with men, who have lost their uvular *r* because of their social mobility, bilingualism or tri-lingualism (Capidan 1931, 123-124).

Linguistic continuity and education

The continued use of the Aromanian dialect represents an important act of cultural resistance. Education, in particular, plays a key role in transmitting their idiom to younger generations. Colimitra recounts his own experience as a student in the village school, where children learned both the Farsherot variety and standard Romanian. Despite never having visited Romania, students felt a strong symbolic connection to the Romanian state, developing a sense of belonging expressed through songs, recitations, and school performances. Education thus becomes an essential component of collective identity, equipping younger generations to navigate life with greater confidence and enabling some to pursue further studies in Bitola and later in Romania, contributing to the formation of an intellectual elite. Colimitra emphasizes the role of education in preserving linguistic heritage. The school in Plasa transmitted both the Aromanian dialect and standard Romanian, fostering a sense of kinship with Romanians north of the Danube.

Stanciu and Stoica (2022, 150) further emphasize that the Aromanian dialect is both a repository of cultural heritage and a means of resisting external pressures. Within the Farsherot community, their mother tongue encapsulates shared history, values, and traditions, reinforcing social bonds and group solidarity. Dialectal expressions capture the nuances of Farsherot experience and mediate social interactions, while proverbs, stories, and anecdotes communicate moral teachings and historical memory. By maintaining and transmitting these linguistic forms, the community asserts its cultural distinctiveness in an increasingly globalized world. Colimitra also highlights similarities between Aromanian and Daco-Romanian by presenting lists of fundamental Latin-derived vocabulary, illustrating the close relationship between the two dialects.

The interplay between linguistic and collective identity is shaped by historical and social contexts. Many of the historical narratives that inform Farsherot identity are embedded within the dialect itself, reinforcing a sense of continuity between past and present. As a result, negotiating identity through language is an ongoing process that reflects the community's adaptability to shifting socio-political circumstances. Speaking the dialect becomes not only an expression of belonging but also an assertion of difference within the broader Albanian landscape.

It becomes clear that the Farsherot variety transcends its communicative function to serve as a fundamental marker of identity for the Farsherots. Linguistic practice encapsulates cultural, historical, and social meaning, shaping what it has meant—and continues to mean—to be Farsherot in both Capidan's and Colimitra's time and the present.

MOBILITY AND FLUID IDENTITY

The semi-nomadic pastoral lifestyle and migration patterns of the Farsherots—to Greece, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Romania—introduce a fluid and dynamic dimension to their identity. Fludernik's non-essentialist view of identity resonates strongly with this

mobility: the Farsherots continuously adapt to new environments while preserving core symbols, narratives, and cultural practices. Because narrative, in Fludernik's framework, is intrinsically social, Farsherot identity emerges not as an individual construct but as a collective product shaped through shared interactions, experiences, and communal memory. Through the lens of natural narratology, the cultural, historical, and social layers that inform their identity become visible, enriching scholarly understanding and illustrating the broader significance of narrative in identity formation across diverse cultural contexts.

Farsherot Mobility

The historical dimensions shaping Farsherot identity are closely intertwined with their migration trajectories and their interactions with other communities across Albania. Colimitra emphasizes that the Farsherots, originally from the region of Farsher, have navigated a complex web of geographical, socio-political, and cultural dynamics throughout the centuries. The destruction of the town of Frashër by Ottoman forces triggered a widespread dispersal of Farsherot families. According to Colimitra, this displacement was not merely physical; it initiated a profound reconfiguration of social structures and inter-community relations. As they resettled in regions such as Gjirokastër and Vlorë, the Farsherots adopted certain local customs while simultaneously safeguarding distinctive elements of their own traditions and family structures.

A particularly significant transformation occurred among those who settled in the Myzeqe plain. There, traditional pastoral and transport-oriented professions—*picurar* ("shepherd") and *cărvănar* ("merchandise carrier, transporter")—were replaced by agricultural labor, leading some to become small landowners. Migration from rural to urban environments also influenced professional roles: while in Plasa men typically worked as shepherds, transporters, tailors, shoemakers, or priests, and women as homemakers or midwives, in cities they became entrepreneurs, pharmacists (in Korçë or Bucharest), or factory workers (notably in the United States).

Capidan complements this perspective by describing the principal routes of transhumance and trade used by Farsherots, based on the testimonies he gathered during his Balkan fieldwork. He underscores the central role of the ancient Roman road Via Egnatia, whose historical significance remains deeply embedded in Aromanian collective memory. In Albania, Via Egnatia began in Durrës on the Adriatic coast, passed through Kavaja, and Elbasan, followed the northern shore of Lake Ohrid, and then crossed Struga, Ohrid, and Bitola before linking with the road to Thessaloniki. Capidan also documents internal commercial routes used by Farsherot carriers, such as the one beginning in Durrës and continuing through Peqin, Kavaja, and Elbasan, from where caravans traveled toward Pogradec and subsequently either to Ohrid and Bitola or to Korçë (Arom. *Curceaua*). These routes demonstrate the remarkable mobility of the Farsherots throughout Albania and the wider Balkans.

The historical networks of cooperation forged among Farsherot groups—often in response to shared external challenges—highlight a dual dynamic of identity formation. On one hand, these networks nurtured internal solidarity; on the other, they facilitated cultural exchange with surrounding communities, thus shaping the evolution of their collective identity. The Farsherots' longstanding adaptability supports this duality, enabling them to integrate into diverse socio-cultural environments while preserving the core aspects of their ethnic heritage.

Intercultural exchanges—manifested through marriage alliances, trade relations, and community cooperation—further enriched Farsherot cultural practices. The persistence of their dialect, folklore, and rituals amid such exchanges underscores the influence of historical forces on their identity. Colimitra highlights the significance of oral histories recounting hardship, endurance, and communal resilience. These narratives reinforce social cohesion while continuously shaping collective identity, portraying the Farsherots as a resilient community navigating the shifting landscapes of Albanian history.

Farsherot Fluid Identity

Major historical events—such as World War I, World War II, and the subsequent communist regime—also left a profound imprint on Farsherot identity. These periods altered traditional professions, political affiliations, and social roles, requiring continuous renegotiation of identity markers under new ideological constraints. For example, the traditional occupation of the *cărvănar*, who transported goods across Albania and into Yugoslavia, Greece, and Romania using horses and mules, largely disappeared after World War I, when French and British forces introduced automobiles and constructed Albania's first modern roads.

In summary, the historical experiences of the Farsherots illuminate the complex interplay of migration, adaptation, and inter-community relations in shaping their collective identity. Through Colimitra's insights, one can trace how these historical layers—cultural resilience, mobility, and adaptability—interweave to define the Farsherots within the broader Albanian context.

OTHERING AND BOUNDARY CREATION

In Colimitra's and Capidan's narratives, it becomes evident that the Farsherots frequently define themselves in contrast to the Albanian majority and to other Aromanian subgroups such as the Moscopolitans, Gramosteans, and Pindeans. This process of differentiation—or "Othering"—aligns with Fludernik's understanding of identity as relational, constructed through contrast rather than inherent essence (Fludernik 2005, 283-300).

Dress as a Marker of Identity

From the outset, Colimitra identifies the group he describes as "Farsherots," but later complements this term with the qualifier "Romanian," especially when referring to urban Farsherots in Korçë, many of whom had become tailors. These "Romanian Farsherot

tailors" manufactured distinctive garments for Farsherot townspeople—coats, trousers, and woolen waistcoats—which functioned as visible markers of identity. Dress, in this context, becomes a semiotic indicator of cultural distinctiveness. On the other hand, in Capidan's work, almost each chapter dedicated to the Farsherots living in various areas of Albania contains pictures of Farsherot men or women, often performing their traditional arts and crafts, sometimes entire families with members of all ages, wearing their specific traditional costumes. Even though the pictures are in black and white, we may distinguish the similarities, especially in terms of common elements, but also the differences.

Colimitra also employs the broader term "Macedo-Romanians" to encompass all Aromanian subgroups, including Gramosteans (from the Gramos Mountains), Graboveans (from the Grabovë region), and Pindeans (from the Pindus Mountains). Regarding the Mizukiars (from the Myzeqe plain) and the Castriniots or Cristiniots (whose name Colimitra attributes either to their settlement around Argirocastro/ Gjirokastër or possibly to the ethnonym *Christian*), he argues that these groups were originally Farsherots who transitioned from mountain life to agriculture. Despite these internal distinctions, Colimitra insists on a common origin: all Aromanian groups, in his view, descend from a fusion of Thracian and Roman populations, inheriting what he terms "aristocratic characteristics" both physically and spiritually.

Religion as a Marker of Identity

Religion further differentiates the Farsherots from surrounding populations. Their adherence to Eastern Orthodoxy, the use of their mother tongue in religious practice, and the maintenance of their own churches set them apart—particularly in opposition to the Greek Orthodox hierarchy. Colimitra recounts tensions with the Greek bishop of Korçë, who attempted to impose Greek instead of Aromanian in church services in Plasa. Such instances illustrate the Farsherots' strong tradition of resistance: "O alt caracteristic specific farşeroţilor este c nu se dau niciodat b tuţi, lupt pân la cap t cu dârzenie" [Another characteristic specific to the Farsherots is that they never give up; they fight to the end with determination] (Colimitra 1986, 76).

Despite these boundaries, Colimitra records numerous examples of harmonious coexistence with Albanian Muslims and Christians. Farsherot tailors often made garments for Albanian Muslims, especially in urban contexts where intercommunal relations were generally more fluid. Economic exchanges were common: for instance, Farsherots from Plasa regularly purchased grapes from Albanian Muslims in Lower Plasa to produce *raki*. Wealthy Farsherots (*celnik*s) also contributed financially to the construction of churches and monasteries in Albanian Christian areas.

Colimitra also documents the exonyms used by Albanians to refer to Aromanians: *ciobeni* (from Turkish, indicating their pastoral profession) and *vlahi* (from a Celtic root adopted by Greek), both still in use today.

Social Organization and Community Life as Markers of Identity

Beyond these external distinctions, the Farsherots cultivate an internally cohesive collective identity shaped by robust social structures, particularly family units, community organizations, and dense social networks. Farsherot families, traditionally patriarchal and extended, function as vital conduits for transmitting language, values, and collective memory. Families were organized into *fălări* (groups of 20–100 families), fostering solidarity and ensuring the continuity of cultural practices. Elders played a central role by narrating stories, teaching traditions, and anchoring intergenerational identity formation. This process reflects Fludernik's view that identity grows from the interaction of individual and collective memory.

Gender roles were clearly demarcated: men worked as shepherds, merchandise carriers, or artisans, while women managed the household, raised children—ideally large families with several sons—and preserved daily cultural practices. Capidan similarly highlights women's essential role in transmitting linguistic heritage to the next generation.

Community organizations further strengthened collective identity. Village councils, elected by vote, mediated local affairs and ensured the church's financial stability. Colimitra describes the annual *Bobotează* (Epiphany) auction, during which icons were temporarily "sold" to the highest bidders, who paid in gold coins, Turkish liras, or Napoleons—evidence of the Farsherots' longstanding commercial ties with both Eastern and Western regions.

Even in the diaspora, particularly through the Cultural Organization *Farsherotu* in the United States (founded in 1903), Farsherots have sustained their heritage via cultural events featuring traditional music, dance, and cuisine. These gatherings serve not only to reinforce cultural continuity but also to maintain strong social networks that facilitate mutual support, resource exchange, and community cohesion.

Social networks among Farsherots operate on principles of trust and reciprocity, providing mechanisms for communal support in life events such as weddings, funerals, and religious celebrations. The institution of the *celnik*—wealthy pastoralists who owned large flocks—played an important philanthropic role by assisting those in need and supporting church activities. Such interactions reinforce a shared understanding of history and collective responsibility, exemplifying Fludernik's notion of identity as a narrative co-constructed through social participation.

The spatial environment of Farsherot villages also contributed to group identity. Colimitra's native village, *Plasa di Supr* (Upper Plasa), like other Farsherot settlements, was located high in the mountains, hidden and difficult to access. It stood in contrast to *Plasa di Jos* (Lower Plasa), inhabited by Albanian Muslims, with vineyards marking the boundary between the two communities. Farsherots owned beech forests but used the wood for construction rather than heating. Village life was characterized by industriousness: each household functioned as a workshop for wool processing—carding, spinning, weaving, knitting, and

sewing—reflecting a self-sufficient lifestyle. Equally essential was the church, a core symbol of Farsherot identity and resilience amid surrounding populations.

To sum up, the interplay between family structures, community organizations, and social networks illuminates the profound role of social dimensions in shaping Farsherot collective identity. This intricate web of relationships not only ensures cultural continuity but also enables resilience amid modernization and rapid change. Read through the complementary insights of Colimitra, Capidan, and Fludernik, the Farsherots' identity emerges as a dynamic narrative shaped by enduring cultural practices, historical experience, and communal interdependence.

CONCLUSIONS

Fludernik's theoretical framework—emphasizing the interdependence of narrative, identity, and socio-historical context—offers a multidimensional perspective that can be effectively applied to the study of other ethnic communities as well. Her model posits that collective identity is not static; rather, it is continuously reshaped through narration, memory, and historical experience. In this sense, the identities of Albania's various ethnic groups can be understood as dynamic formations that evolve in response to internal developments and external forces ranging from state policies to cultural exchange and historical trauma.

Just as the Farsherots reinforce their community cohesion through historical links to specific regions and long-standing cultural practices, other ethnic groups rely on their distinct collective memories to articulate and affirm their identities. Framing these processes through Fludernik's lens highlights that such narratives do not exist in isolation but are in constant dialogue with one another and with broader national narratives. This comparative perspective brings to light the layered complexity within multi-ethnic societies, underscoring the importance of an inclusive approach to identity—one that acknowledges the interplay of local, regional, and national stories.

This narrative-based framework also carries implications for the design of multicultural policies in Albania. Recognizing the diverse ways in which collective identities are constructed and sustained allows policymakers to promote a vision of cultural plurality that goes beyond mere tolerance. The ethnographic insights provided by Colimitra and the linguistic and cultural observations of Capidan offer a deeper appreciation of the unique socio-cultural fabrics characterizing each community. Their accounts demonstrate the necessity of fostering dialogue and cooperation among ethnic groups to strengthen social cohesion.

In practical terms, community engagement initiatives would benefit from adopting a narrative-centered approach that encourages cross-ethnic collaboration. By creating spaces where members of different backgrounds can share their stories, a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Albanian identity can emerge—one that embraces multiculturalism rather than imposing a monolithic conception of nationhood.

Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of cultivating environments in which ethnic communities can articulate their identities without fear of marginalization. The Farsherots, through their cultural practices and distinctive social dynamics, exemplify the need for recognition and respect within a national framework that accommodates multiple identities. Their experience enriches academic discussions on collective identity while offering practical insights for fostering intercultural dialogue and societal cohesion in Albania.

The examination of the Farsherots' collective identity reveals the complex interweaving of cultural, historical, and social dimensions—a complexity captured through Colimitra's ethnographic narrative and illuminated by Fludernik's theoretical model. Colimitra's monographic work highlights the distinctive attributes of the Farsherots, a community whose linguistic heritage and cultural traditions stand out within the broader Albanian mosaic. His insights clarify how the Farsherots navigate a dual identity: as a distinct ethnolinguistic group and as part of the Albanian nation-state.

Fludernik's narrative theory complements Colimitra's observations by elucidating how collective memory and shared stories function as vehicles for identity construction. The oral histories and folkloric traditions that define the Farsherots operate not merely as cultural artifacts but as dynamic narratives that actively shape social reality and reinforce communal cohesion.

Historical experiences further contribute to this identity formation. The legacy of Ottoman rule, transformations brought by twentieth-century political regimes, and shifting national policies have all influenced the ways in which the Farsherots perceive themselves and their place within Albania. Colimitra's synthesis of these historical layers demonstrates the importance of reading local experiences alongside national identity structures.

Finally, the social dimensions of Farsherot identity—family bonds, kinship networks, and communal practices—highlight the enduring significance of community solidarity. These forms of social organization reinforce core values and beliefs, creating a cohesive social fabric rooted in shared history. Their continued relevance in contemporary Albania underscores the complex negotiation between tradition and modernity, illustrating both the challenges and the resilience of the Farsherots as they preserve their heritage in an increasingly globalized world.

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CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATING STEM INTO THE MATHEMATICS CURRICULUM IN SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

The mathematics curriculum is a fundamental component of the education system, playing a crucial role in developing students' logical and analytical skills. In this context, curriculum design should be aligned with societal needs and the demands of education in an increasingly digitalized world. This study aims to analyze the current challenges in integrating the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) approach into the teaching process in Albania and to propose improvements by comparing them with practices in other countries. A survey was conducted with teachers in the Korça region to assess the need for changes in the mathematics curriculum, particularly regarding the integration of technology and the application of the STEM approach. The proposed curriculum structure seeks to enhance students' understanding and application of mathematical concepts in real-life contexts by incorporating technology and STEM principles into teaching. The findings of the study highlight the existing limitations and potential barriers to effectively integrating STEM into the mathematics curriculum in Albania.

Keywords: *STEM, mathematics education, curriculum reform, secondary education, innovation*

INTRODUCTION

Today, we are more dependent on technology than ever before. Technological advances are revolutionizing every arena of work, especially education. One of the most important recent trends in educational reform worldwide is the integration of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) into education. STEM began in the early 1990s and has been slowly growing worldwide[1].

However, while the Western Balkans are experiencing various reforms in education focused on competency-based learning, implementing STEM has yet to be successful. The Albanian curriculum reform (National Pre-University Education Framework [2014]) established the framework for competency-based approaches, but the practical implementation of STEM integration in mathematics education presents structural and pedagogical challenges.

However, Albania is still at an early stage of implementing STEM education. In recent years, the Ministry of Education has acknowledged the necessity of integrating STEM into the pre-university curriculum, aiming to align it more closely with contemporary international educational practices. To facilitate this process, initiatives to train teachers have been put in place, and there have been official guidelines issued for the implementation of STEM education in the pre-university system for the academic year 2025–2026[2].

In addition, local cooperation across the Western Balkans can be a significant step towards the greater integration of STEM education in Albania. Initiatives funded by the European Union, UNESCO, and other global partners highlight the value of cooperation across borders and educational knowledge sharing. This would allow Albanian instructors to consider joining regional networks and teacher mobility programs, which will allow them to learn from the experiences of the countries across the border that have already begun implementing interdisciplinary STEM practices. For example, shared professional development seminars, cross-national STEM fairs, and joint research efforts may contribute to standardization, stimulate innovation, and increase confidence for teachers when applying STEM-based approaches. Such cooperation would increase the quality of STEM teaching in Albania and contribute to greater harmonization with European education values and the EU's long-run development goals. Many countries have faced significant challenges in integrating STEM into the secondary school curriculum[3]. Given these experiences, one should expect to face major difficulties on the road to STEM implementation in Albania. These challenges are already manifested in the fact that, at this moment, the Albanian education system is still in a transitional phase, both in terms of content and the infrastructure that is built into schools. As such, dismantling

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these organizational and structural barriers will be required for the STEM approach to be fully implemented. Moreover, given the relatively new and evolving approach to STEM education, there is a risk that teachers might also not have the same appreciation of these concepts, especially newly qualified teachers[4].

Nevertheless, the Ministry of Education in Albania has taken initial steps to implement this approach through the National Teacher Professional Development Program "School 2030"[5]. This shows that PISA 2018 results and PISA 2024 results are positively compared because one can see that the efforts in the Ministry of Education have realized positive results due to the implementation of technology integration through teaching practices and interdisciplinary projects.

It highlights the relevance of reforms in education and emphasizes the need for reforms in this space so that our curriculum is up to date and able to keep up with changing and innovative trends in society[6]. The curriculum threatens creativity if not kept updated, risking mismatches with students' developmental needs and society. Furthermore, a review of the literature on STEM implementation in education across various countries reveals a positive impact on students' competencies in all STEM fields, including mathematics[7].

Mathematics, a key aspect of STEM, contributes to critical thinking, problem-solving, and the modeling of natural and technological phenomena[8]. From the pedagogical viewpoint, the constructivist learning model provides a strong foundation for STEM integration, as it emphasizes active learning, exploration, and collaboration[9]. Instructional models such as the 5E cycle - Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, Evaluate - provide a structured approach to designing STEM-based mathematics activities that encourage students to actively construct knowledge[10].

Moreover, project-based learning methods based on Vygotsky's social constructivist theory emphasize the importance of contextually and collaboratively building learning experiences allowing students to make meaningful connections across disciplines. Integrating these principles into the mathematics content can help students develop problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, and the applications of learning mathematics concepts in real STEM scenarios[11].

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Implementing such constructivist, project-oriented concepts into practice demands deliberate curriculum design and teacher support, both of which are critical in the case of high school mathematics education in Albania, where the incorporation of STEM tools is still in its early stages. Nitzan-Tamar and Kohen[12], found that research indicates that acquiring advanced mathematical or scientific discipline knowledge in secondary school eventually leads to a long-lasting effect on the continuation of studies in STEM within tertiary education.

Furthermore, as Bybee[13] emphasizes, if students are to learn how to effectively apply knowledge, their educational experiences must engage them both in mastering STEM disciplinary content and in responding to situations that require the application of that knowledge in contexts appropriate to their age and developmental stage.

From this viewpoint, the mathematics curriculum in Albania's secondary education system is clearly in need of careful revision so as also to contribute to meet increasingly innovation-driven society demands. More importantly, in regard to the introduction of STEM into the mathematics curriculum, it is important to consider the critical role played by the development of textbooks that incorporate STEM elements. Studies of STEM implementation in other nations show that in the early years, the main focus was upon the integration of STEM content in science books[14]. But recently, there has been increasingly more effort to infuse STEM content to be integrated into mathematics textbooks[15]. Related to the theme of STEM in mathematics, this includes students learning about how mathematics interacts with the other STEM disciplines of Science, Technology, and Engineering to help in realizing the relevance of mathematics and understanding the applicability of mathematics in real-world contexts. This means designing activities and learning experiences that embed mathematical principles to solve problems derived from scientific experiments, engineering projects, or technology-based tasks directly within its framework.[16]

Consistent with the aforementioned discussion, a questionnaire was administered to secondary school mathematics teachers in the Korça region to determine the degree to which conditions are conducive to STEM implementation in Albania and also to evaluate the need for curriculum adjustments, specifically with regards to the integration of technology in teaching. The results indicate a clear need for curriculum restructuring to enable a deeper integration of STEM, with the aim of improving both the understanding and application of mathematical concepts in real-life contexts. Moreover, the findings reveal a number

[12] Nitzan-Tamar and Kohen, "Secondary School Mathematics and Entrance," 2022.

[13] Bybee, "Advancing STEM Education," 2010.

[14] Luo, "Working Together to Address Global Issues," 2021.

[15] Li, Fan, and Luo, "How STEM Content Is Presented," 2025.

[16] Kelley and Knowles, "A Conceptual Framework," 2016.

of relevant issues which may impede the implementation of STEM in the mathematics curriculum in Albania. They are such components as inadequate building and physical infrastructure in schools, inappropriate training of teaching staff, and a curriculum not yet completely adapted to interdisciplinary practice.

In conclusion, this study finds that addressing these factors is an essential prerequisite for the sustainable implementation of STEM in Albanian education, particularly in the field of mathematics.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study aims to examine the current challenges associated with integrating STEM into the teaching process in the Korça region and to propose strategies for its improvement, with the objective of facilitating effective implementation in education. In this regard, empirical data were collected through a survey administered to 191 secondary school teachers in the Korçë region. The survey was conducted during teacher training sessions, as part of professional development programs, specifically within the following modules:

- "Enhancing the Quality of the Teaching-Learning Process with a Focus on the Application of Mathematical Knowledge in Real-Life Contexts"
- "The Use of Effective Teaching-Learning Methods During Mathematics Lessons"

The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire, designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire items were based on two main pillars:

- *Use of Technology in Teaching* – The teachers' level of knowledge and use of digital platforms and technological tools during the teaching process was assessed.
- *Implementation of the Mathematics Curriculum* – The way in which the current mathematics curriculum is implemented in teachers' daily practice was analyzed, including the suitability of textbooks in relation to the curriculum and the presence of STEM elements.

The questionnaire included closed-ended questions, formulated using a Likert scale, to measure teachers' attitudes and perceptions regarding the topics addressed, as well as open-ended questions, which allowed participants to express their individual opinions and experiences.

The collected data were analyzed to identify the current state of mathematics curriculum implementation and the integration of technology in the teaching process, as well as to formulate recommendations for the further improvement of these aspects. Data processing was carried out using the SPSS software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study involved 191 secondary school mathematics teachers from the Korça region, who completed a questionnaire during the professional development sessions on contemporary teaching methodologies, organized by the Ministry of Education and Sport of Albania in March 2024. The training program emphasizes interactive teaching methods grounded in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). Its aim was to enhance teachers' competencies in implementing interdisciplinary approaches and technology-based instructional strategies in mathematics. Participation in this program may have influenced teachers' awareness of innovative teaching practices. It may also have affected their attitudes toward integrating technology into the curriculum.

Regarding the demographic composition of the respondents, 69% were female and 31% were male. In terms of age distribution, 17% were under 30 years old, 41% were between 31 and 40 years old, 17% were between 41 and 50 years old, and 25% were over 50 years old. In terms of teaching experience, 17% had less than 5 years of experience, 20% had 5 to 10 years, 30% had 11 to 20 years, and 33% had more than 20 years of experience.

Consequently, over one-third of the respondents possess more than 20 years of teaching experience, highlighting the significance of their perspectives and recommendations concerning the evaluation of the curriculum in terms of its relevance to contemporary educational practices, the integration of technology in instruction, and the design of interdisciplinary lessons.

RESULTS OF THE FIRST SESSION: USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN TEACHING

The data analysis of the first session, which focused on the use of technology in teaching, highlights several important trends. Regarding the conditions provided by schools for access to technological equipment, 44% of teachers consider them sufficient, while only 6.8% evaluate them as very good (see Figure 1). This finding highlights the need for schools in the Korça region to strengthen their technological infrastructure, a key component for the effective integration of technology in education.

Regarding the practical use of technology in mathematics lessons, 60% of teachers report frequent use, while only 2% state that they never use it (see Figure 2). This result can be interpreted as a positive indicator of the potential for integrating STEM into the teaching process. According to contemporary literature, the use of technological tools not only facilitates learning but also promotes the development of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and digital competencies, which are considered essential for 21st-century education[17].

[17] OECD, *Education at a Glance 2019.,* OECD, Skills Outlook 2019.

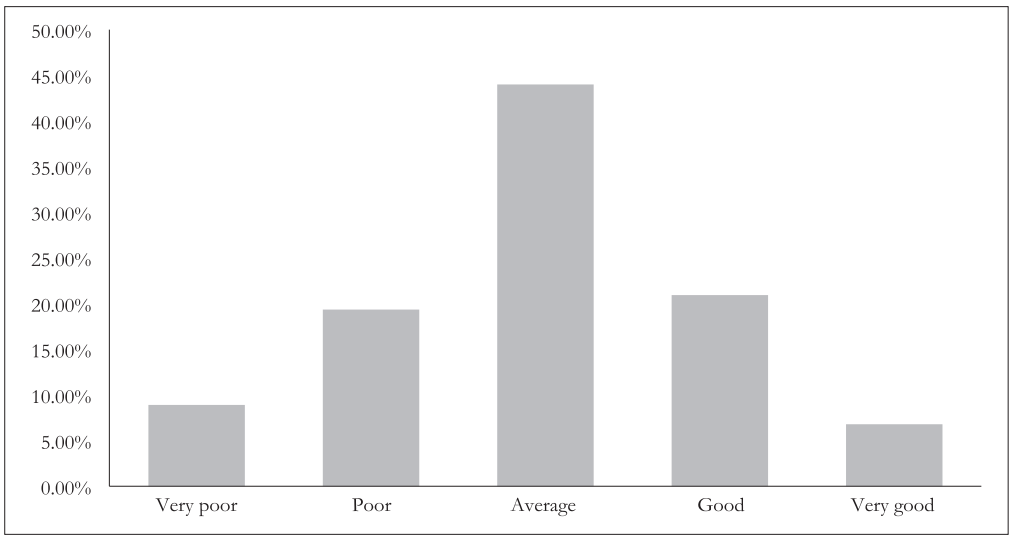


Figure 1. *School Conditions Regarding Technological Equipment*

To test the hypothesis regarding the impact of school conditions on technology use, the questions "*My school provides the necessary conditions to work with technological tools*" and "*I use technology in the teaching process*" were analyzed. As shown in Figure 3, a sizable proportion of teachers, even though they consider the technological infrastructure only as "sufficient," report active use of technology. From another perspective, it is evident that schools with better-reported conditions for technology use demonstrate a broader integration of technology in teaching.

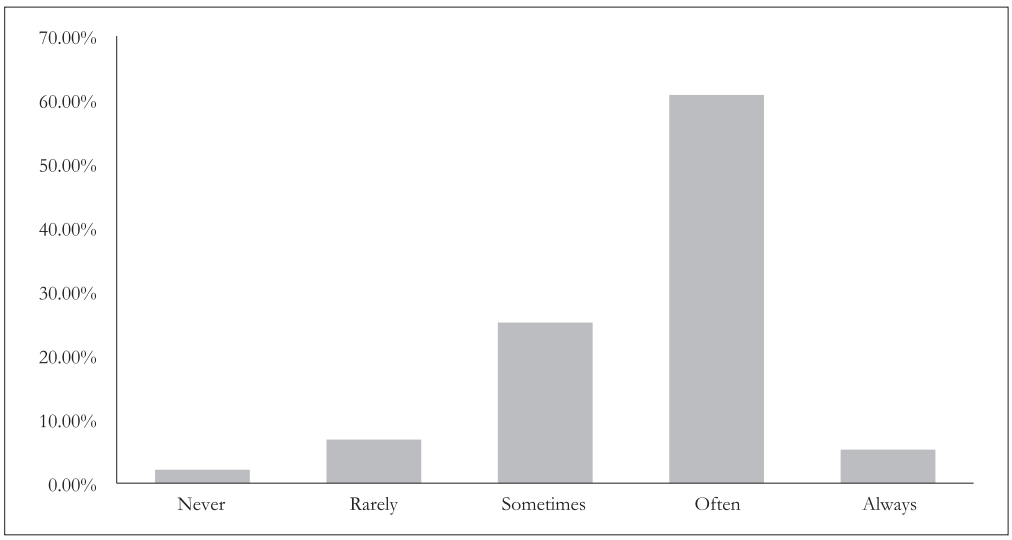


Figure 2. *Use of Technology by Mathematics Teachers*

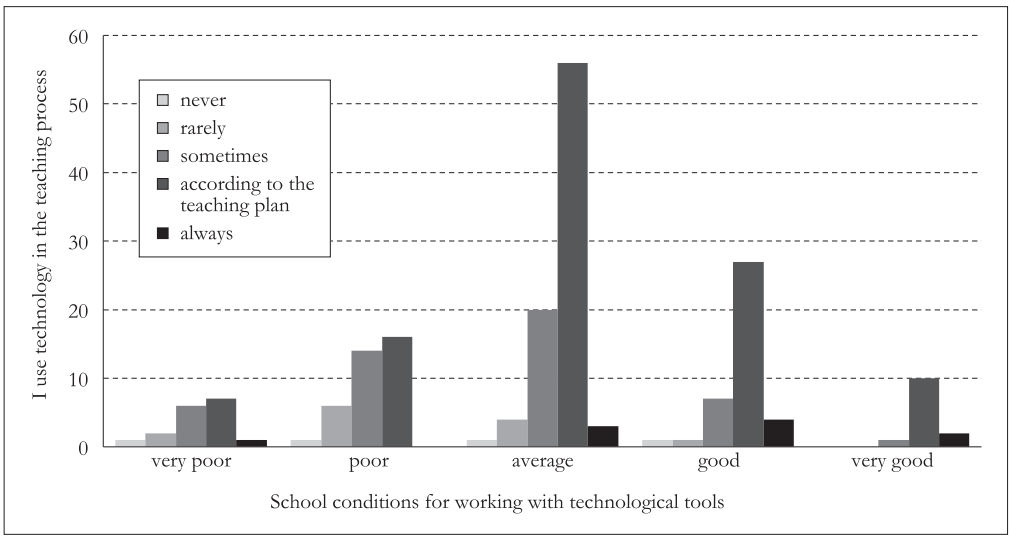


Figure 3. *Relationship between "I use technology in the teaching process" and "School conditions for working with technological tools"*

For a more detailed analysis, we applied the Chi-Square test to explore the association between these variables. The results of the test show χ^2 (16) = 26.385, with a p-value of 0.049 (< 0.05), indicating a *statistically* significant association between "*I use technology in the teaching process*" and "*School conditions for working with technological tools*".

By exploring the relationship between the statements "*The use of technological tools increases the effectiveness of learning"* and "*Students are more interested when we use technological tools than when we do not use them*" (see Table 1), it can be observed that the majority of responses are at the above-average level, i.e.; specifically, 62 interviewees responded with "agree". The majority of responses highlighted the role of technological tools in enhancing teaching effectiveness and fostering students' interest.

Table 1. Cross-tabulation between the variables "Students are more interested when we use technological tools than when we do not use them" and "The use of technological tools increases the effectiveness of learning"

		The use of technological tools increases the effectiveness of learning				Total
		Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Students are more interested when we use technological tools than when we do not use them.	Disagree	0	2	1	0	3
	Neither agree nor disagree	2	12	24	1	39
	Agree	0	12	62	30	104
	Strongly agree	1	0	13	31	45
Total		3	26	100	62	191

The Chi-Square test was applied again to examine the association between the statements *"The use of technological tools increases the effectiveness of learning"* and "*Students are more interested when we use technological tools than when we do not use them"*. The results of the test, $\chi^2(9) = 63.178$, p-value = $0 < 0.05$, indicate a *statistically* significant association between these variables.

Upon further analysis of the results, it can be concluded that teachers view technology as an element that enhances the quality and effectiveness of teaching, despite the infrastructural limitations present in schools. This perception aligns with international research on active learning, which emphasizes the role of digital tools in enhancing student engagement and achievement in STEM fields[18]. The results of this study reinforce the belief that technology represents a significant potential for strengthening the learning process and developing 21st-century competencies.

In the context of using technology in mathematics teaching, interactive platforms play a significant role in supporting the development of mathematical competencies and facilitating active learning. According to data collected from the questionnaire, approximately 37.7% of teachers reported not using any such platforms, which indicates a concerning level of technology integration in teaching. This finding aligns with international studies, which emphasize that one of the main challenges in integrating ICT in education is the inconsistent and unsystematic use of digital tools by teachers[19].

On the other hand, among the group of teachers who report using interactive platforms, GeoGebra emerges as the most well-known and widely used tool, followed by PhET and, to a lesser extent, Desmos. This finding is consistent with the literature, where GeoGebra is recognized as one of the most effective tools for the dynamic visualization of mathematical concepts and for integrating experimental methods into teaching[20]. Furthermore, approximately 20% of teachers report using more than one platform, indicating a tendency toward diversifying digital teaching tools. According to contemporary literature, such diversification is important, as it positively influences student motivation and increases their engagement in the learning process[21].

Apart from technological competence, teachers' pedagogical orientation significantly influences effective integrated STEM integration. Educators who use inquiry-based and collaborative pedagogy engage their students to actively solve problems, experiment, and

[18] Freeman et al., "Active Learning Increases Student Performance," 2014.

[19] Lomos, Luyten, and Tieck, "Implementing ICT in Classroom Practice," 2023., Msafiri, Kangwa, and Cai, "A Systematic Literature Review of ICT Integration," 2023., Weinhandl et al., "Integrating Technologies into Teaching and Learning Mathematics," 2021., Daher, Baya'a, and Anabousy, "In-Service Mathematics Teachers' Integration," 2018.

[20] Gurmu, Tuge, and Hunde, "Effects of GeoGebra-Assisted Instructional Methods," 2024, Zöchbauer, Hohenwarter, and Lavicza, "Evaluating GeoGebra Classroom," 2021., Zöchbauer, Hohenwarter, and Lavicza, "Improving the GeoGebra Classroom Tool," 2022., Uwurukundo et al., "GeoGebra Software in Teaching and Learning Geometry," 2024.

[21] Zafer et al., "Impact of Digital Learning Tools,"2025., OECD, *Education at a Glance 2019., OECD, Skills Outlook 2019*

take ownership of learning. To this end, students get to connect mathematical reasoning with practical use, promoting a rich conceptual experience. Improving pre-service and in-service teacher school readiness to incorporate interdisciplinary lesson design, as well as STEM-focused pedagogy, is thus the potential way to sustain the curriculum change. Promoting reflection on teaching processes and peer interaction among teachers will also support innovative pedagogy and facilitate a seamless infusion of STEM in mathematics instruction. To examine the relationship between mathematics teachers' knowledge of technology and its use in class, the questions "*I know very well how to use technology in teaching"* and *"I use technology in the teaching process*" were analyzed. The results show that teachers who consider themselves good users of technology are also those who report using it more frequently in the teaching process (see Figure 4).

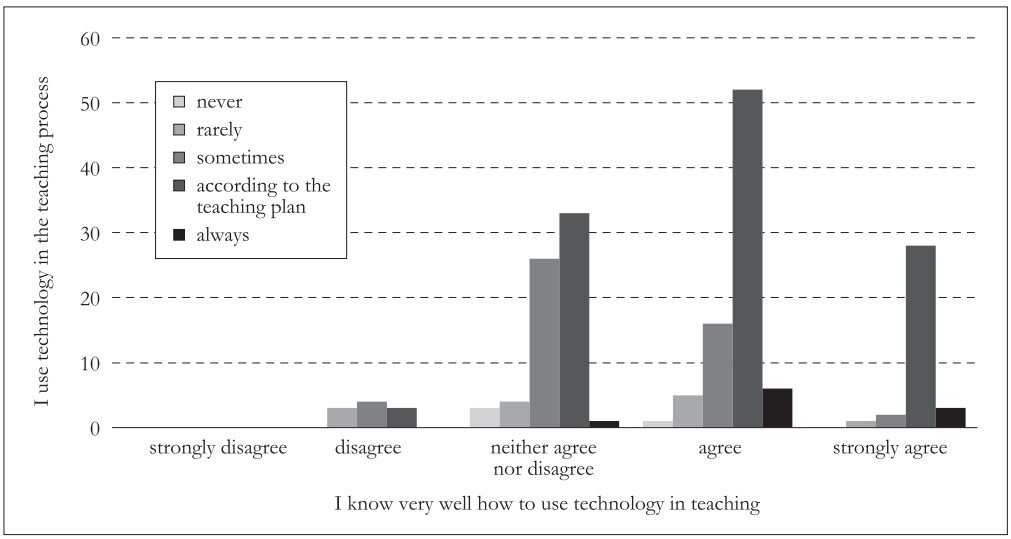


Figure 4. *Relationship between: "I know very well how to use technology in teaching" and "I use technology in the teaching process"*

The Chi-Square test was applied to examine the association between '*I know very well how to use technology in teaching'* and '*I use technology in the teaching process*'. The results show χ^2 (12) = 33.284, with a p-value of 0.001 (< 0.05), indicating a *statistically* significant association between these variables.

This result indicates that the level of technological knowledge is closely linked to its practical application, suggesting that teachers with more advanced digital competencies are more likely to integrate technology consistently and effectively into their teaching. Thus, enhancing teachers' digital skills appears to be a key factor in expanding the use of technological tools and strengthening contemporary teaching practices in our country[22].

[22] Prodani et al., "Digital Technologies Integration in the Classroom."

RESULTS OF THE SECOND SESSION: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CURRICULUM BY MATHEMATICS TEACHERS IN THE KORÇA REGION

The data analysis of the second section focuses on mathematics teachers' perceptions of the curriculum and school textbooks. Specifically, regarding the identification of the most significant challenges facing education today, the data indicate that teachers consider issues related to textbooks and the curriculum the most pressing, representing the highest proportion of responses. An illustration of the distribution of these perceptions is shown in Figure 5.

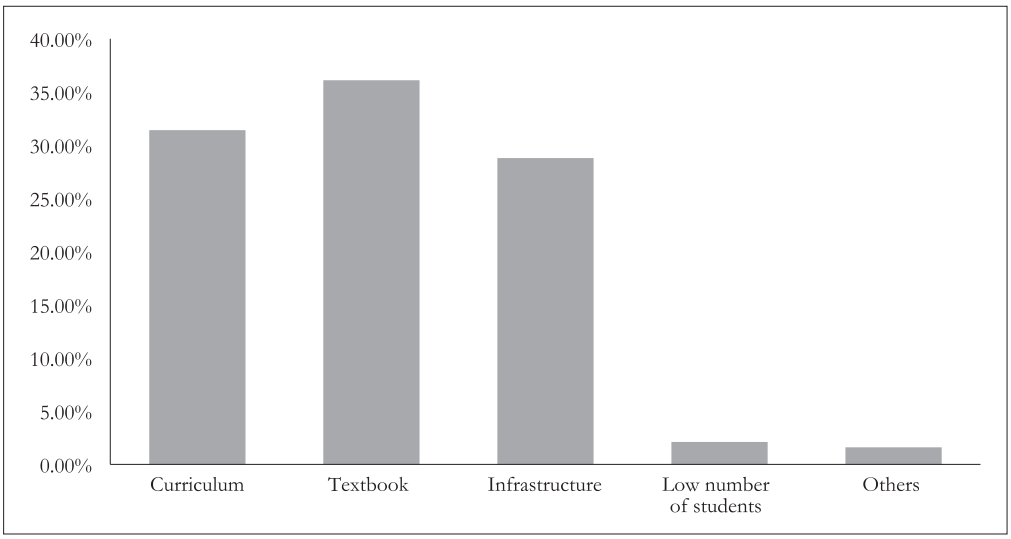


Figure 5. *Challenges in Albanian Education*

Subsequently, an interesting aspect emerges regarding the major challenges currently facing mathematics education. Teachers predominantly report issues related to textbooks and the subject curriculum, without citing curriculum design as a distinct challenge. At lower percentages, challenges related to students' interest in mathematics and the teaching methods employed in the subject are also noted. The distribution of these perceptions is illustrated in Figure 6.

For a more in-depth analysis of the potential relationship between current challenges in education and mathematics in pre-university education, from the perspective of mathematics teachers in the Korça region, the results are presented in the Table 2.

The Chi-Square test was used to examine the association between teachers' opinions regarding the main problems facing education and mathematics today. The results show χ^2 (16) = 64.793, with a p-value of 0 (< 0.05), indicating a statistically significant association between these variables.

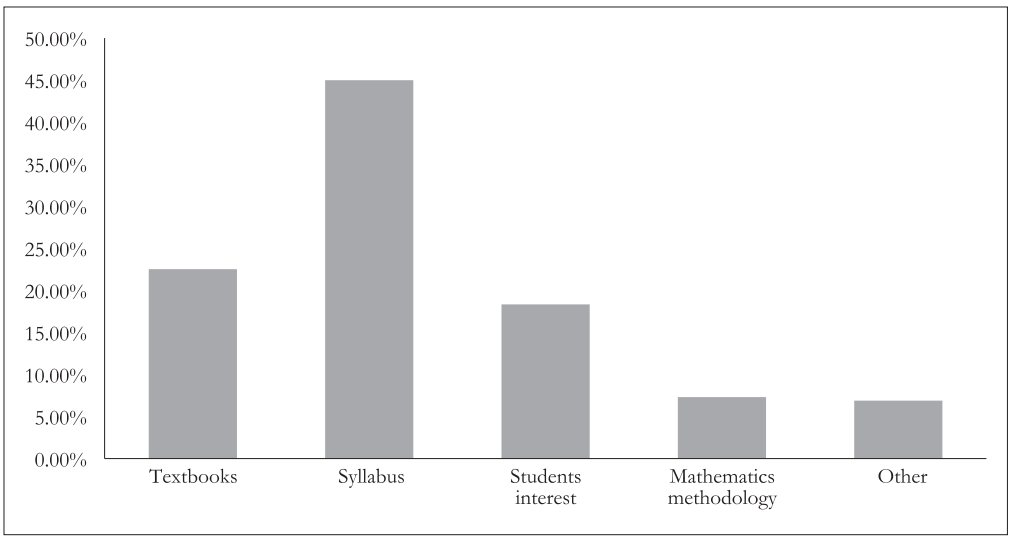


Figure 6. *Challenges Encountered in Mathematics Education in Contemporary Albania*

For a more detailed analysis, we calculated Cramer's V coefficient, which measures the strength of association between two nominal variables. The results are Cramer's V = 0.291 and Phi = 0.582, both of which are statistically significant (p-value = 0 in each case). This indicates a significant association between teachers' opinions regarding the main problems currently facing both education and mathematics.

Table 2. Cross-tabulation between the variables "In your opinion, what is the biggest problem facing education today" and "In your opinion, what is the main problem facing mathematics today"

Text		In your opinion, what is the main problem facing mathematics today					Total
		Syllabus	Student's interest	Teaching methods	Other		
In your opinion, what is the biggest problem facing education today	Curriculum	18	18	17	2	5	60
	Textbooks	12	50	2	2	3	69
	Infrastructure	13	16	16	8	2	55
	Low students number	0	2	0	1	1	4
	Other	0	0	0	1	2	3
Total		43	86	35	14	13	191

There is also much of a relationship between current difficulties in education and what is happening in mathematics. When the most problematic issue in education is seen by respondents to be textbooks, they relate this most closely with the mathematics curriculum. This demonstrates that the lack of instructional materials has significant direct effects on the perceptions of difficulties within the mathematics program. The distribution of responses is more diverse, for example including textbooks as well the program and student interest, at the curriculum level. This indicates that a poorly designed curriculum affects both content (the program), resources (textbooks) and student motivation.

Furthermore, regarding teachers' views on reorganizing mathematical concepts within the curriculum, it is observed that 95% of mathematics teachers agree with such a restructuring. This finding suggests that adjusting the mathematics curriculum is feasible and can be achieved by integrating its concepts in an interdisciplinary manner within the STEM framework.

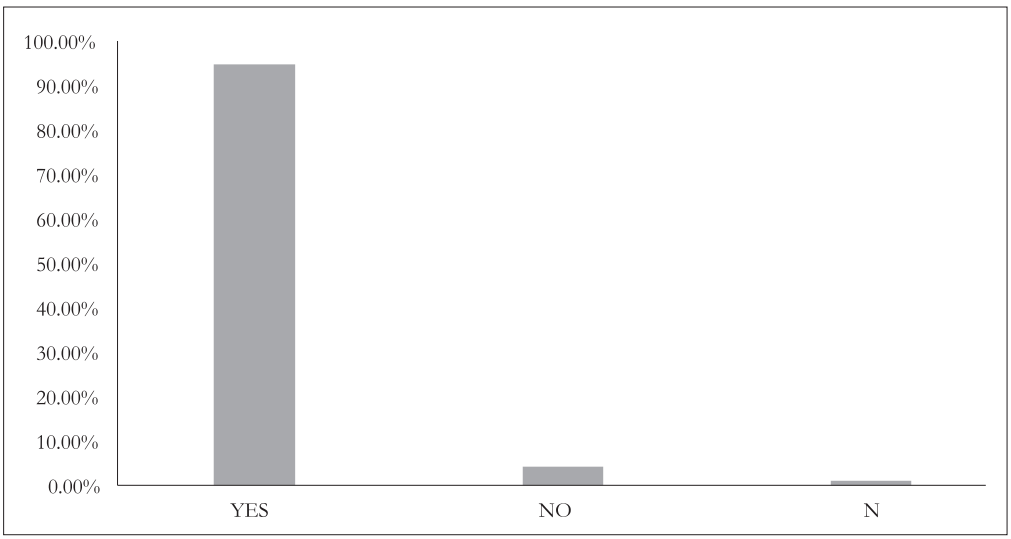


Figure 7. *Reorganization of the Mathematics Curriculum*

From the teachers' responses to the open-ended question, "Write a short idea on how teaching can be improved," most expressed opinions regarding the current implementation of the mathematics curriculum in Albanian schools and offered suggestions for necessary adjustments. One of the most frequently mentioned suggestions is the improvement of textbooks, particularly through the inclusion of practical examples. This approach aids students in understanding the application of mathematical concepts in real-life contexts.

Teachers also reported that greater integration of STEM-based activities could increase students' motivation and engagement in mathematics. According to their observations, students respond positively when lessons include real-life examples, experimental work, or technology-

supported exploration. This finding is consistent with international evidence showing that authentic learning contexts foster both higher-order thinking and persistence in problem-solving. Thus, rethinking curriculum design to emphasize student-centered and applied learning experiences would likely contribute to improved academic outcomes and stronger interest in STEM-related careers. Another common suggestion is the continuous professional development of teachers, particularly in the use of technology and innovative methodologies. Such training enhances teachers' digital competencies and increases their flexibility in adopting new teaching methods. Additionally, many teachers highlighted the importance of improving school infrastructure and technological equipment, which provides a stimulating environment conducive to learning. A smaller proportion of teachers emphasized the development of interdisciplinary projects to foster creativity and collaboration among students.

There is a strong comparison of mathematics curricula of secondary school curricular areas in countries such as Spain, El Salvador, Singapore, Trinidad, Japan, and Indonesia, and significant similarities and differences between them and the mathematics curriculum of Albania. Mathematics concepts in Singapore and Japan have a strong connection to everyday matters and disciplines of study and support the integration of STEM. On the other hand, more and more emphasis is placed on STEM in Albania, but adopting such an approach in the mathematics curriculum is a challenge. Albania is conceptually connected with most other countries according to this analysis, but it still needs to advance in deepening content, providing good teaching resources, and implementing STEM in classroom practice[23].

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This research contributes valuable understandings on the difficulties in integration of STEM in the secondary school mathematics curriculum in Albania; however, there are also challenges to be recognized. The study was carried out in the Korça region, making it less generalizable to other contexts. A bigger sample representing diverse geographical and socio-economic regions would improve results both in covering and in their representation. We assessed the research through self-report questionnaires, collecting teachers' perception and experience data, but by including classroom observations or student achievement data, our results would be better validated. Placing teachers' viewpoints at the forefront of the analysis leaves out the voices of students, school leaders and decision-makers. In light of the fact that successful STEM integration necessitates collaborative efforts among relevant players, a multi-perspective framework needs to be taken by future research, which would provide enhanced guidance on curriculum development and instructional planning processes. Finally, this study is a matter of short-term perspective, whereas STEM implementation is a dynamic and developing process. Therefore, longitudinal studies are

[23] Ministry of Education, El Salvador, accessed 2024., Ministry of Education, Singapore, Mathematics Syllabuses, 2023., ASCAP 2024, Ministry of Education in Albania, accessed 2024., Ministerio de Educación, Ciencia y Tecnología and Ministry of Education Singapore, accessed 2024

necessary to see how teachers' attitude and professional knowledge shift, or when this change is taken into effect when an increased and continuous introduction becomes part of daily routine at Albanian secondary education institutions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research provides a snapshot of the mathematics curriculum in secondary education in Albania and the issues faced when implementing STEM in it. Based on the survey results of 191 mathematics teachers from the Korça region, data analysis and literature review, it is clear that such integration is necessary for modernizing the teaching process and aligning it with international standards.

Technology is a key to the execution of STEM in education. The results suggest that while teachers are eager to have technology be utilized in teaching, there are major barriers, such as inadequate infrastructure in schools. The research findings also show that the use of interactive tools GeoGebra, PhET, and Desmos may play a significant role in student motivation and active engagement, and also in their learning. However, issues of the diversification and sustainable integration of these platforms within the teaching system remain a challenge. Another significant point of contention that is brought in by teachers is about an incongruity between the current curriculum course content and textbooks and the requirements for STEM. As the authors note, there is a strong consensus (95%) to reform the mathematics curriculum to better integrate cross-disciplinary STEM content, thereby contributing to teaching that is practical, functional, and connected to real-world contexts. This point of view reflects the recommendations of UNESCO[24] and the European Commission[25], which emphasize the importance of a flexible and interdisciplinary curriculum to foster innovation and critical thinking.

Based on the findings, the authors recommend that policymakers and educational institutions engage in investment around upgrading technological infrastructure to be embedded in schools, with the use of technology being deemed key to the integration of STEM[26]. At the same time, the revision and adaptability of the mathematics curricula and textbooks to the principles of interdisciplinarity and practical application should comply with the recommendations of UNESCO[27] and the European Commission[28]. And, in the professional development context, it can be recommended that continuous training programs be organized on a continuum to take into consideration the integration

[24] UNESCO, Education for Sustainable Development Goals, 2017.

[25] European Commission, STEM education policies in Europe, 2018.

[26] OECD, Education in the Western Balkans, 2024., OECD, The future of education and skills, 2018.

[27] UNESCO, Education for Sustainable Development Goals., UNESCO, Reimagining our futures together.

[28] European Commission, STEM education policies in Europe, 2018., European Commission, A new ERA for research and innovation, 2020.

of innovations like STEM in education. Therefore, while increased use of technology among Albanian teachers will help teachers in improving STEM learning, infrastructural and curricular constraints remain obstacles to the full integration of STEM. Infrastructure enhancement, continuous teacher professional development, curriculum reform, and institutional collaboration are all necessary for building a present technology program to ensure that students can find success in STEM.

This study offers valuable insights into the integration of STEM into the mathematics curriculum in Albania, but also indicates a range of avenues for future research. First, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the effects of STEM-based interventions, particularly regarding student performance, skill development, and career choices. The second point would be examining the impact of interdisciplinary curriculum projects and digital laboratory-based STEM teaching on improving learning outcomes through a systematic evaluation of those initiatives in schools. Last, there is a need to investigate pre-service teacher education programs so that future prospective teachers possess the necessary pedagogical understanding and practical competencies to effectively integrate STEM into mathematics teaching.

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LEVERAGING BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGY IN THE TOURISM SECTOR TO ENSURE SECURE AND TRANSPARENT BOOKING PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT

The tourism industry is undergoing major change due to digitalization and the use of innovative technologies in booking and payments. While online platforms have simplified access to tourism services, they have also exposed challenges such as misuse, lack of clarity, high intermediary fees, and payment delays. Blockchain technology, with its decentralized and tamper-resistant structure, offers promising solutions by increasing transparency, enhancing security, and reducing dependency on intermediaries. This study explores the potential of Blockchain in the Albanian hospitality sector, focusing on hotel managers' awareness, perceptions, and willingness to implement the technology. A descriptive approach was applied, based on literature review and structured interviews with managers to identify operational opportunities and challenges of integration. Results show limited knowledge but a growing interest in adopting systems that foster customer trust and operational efficiency. An essential part of the research is also the role of cryptocurrencies as a natural extension of Blockchain, enabling secure, low-cost international transactions and improved financial flexibility. Nonetheless, issues like volatility and limited financial knowledge remain obstacles. The paper concludes by recommending national strategies to support Blockchain and cryptocurrency adoption in tourism, alongside staff training programs, aiming to modernize Albania's tourism industry and boost its global competitiveness.

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is a key sector for the global economy, contributing significantly to job creation and GDP growth in most countries. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2024), tourism accounts for approximately 10% of global Gross Domestic Product and supports over 350 million jobs annually. It also promotes culture and historical heritage, helping to preserve local identity and develop infrastructure (UNWTO, 2023). In developing countries, including Albania, tourism is an important source of revenue, contributing around 8.4% of GDP in 2023 and having an indirect impact of up to 26% (INSTAT, 2023). The sector's growth has mainly resulted from the development of tourism infrastructure, international promotion, and an increase in visitors from neighboring countries and Western Europe.However, rapid development has revealed significant challenges, particularly in the digitalization of services. Online platforms such as Booking.com, Expedia, and Airbnb have simplified the booking process and expanded business opportunities, but they have also introduced issues such as high intermediary fees, lack of transparency, double bookings, and payment delays, negatively affecting market reliability and hotel reputations (García-Murillo & MacInnes, 2020). For small and medium-sized enterprises, this reduces autonomy and profit margins.

The reliance on third-party platforms in tourism has also concentrated power in the hands of a few global corporations. For instance, the dominance of booking intermediaries often leaves hotels, especially small businesses in developing economies, with little bargaining power to negotiate fees or data ownership. This creates asymmetrical relationships where service providers are locked into platforms that dictate terms and conditions. In Albania, where family-owned hotels and guesthouses make up a large proportion of the hospitality sector, this dependency not only reduces profit margins but also restricts innovation and direct interaction with customers. This structural imbalance highlights the urgent need for alternative solutions that restore control to local businesses while ensuring customer trust

In this context, Blockchain offers a promising solution. As a decentralized data recording system, Blockchain ensures that every transaction is immutably recorded and verified by all parties involved (Folgieri, 2025). It increases transparency, enhances reliability, reduces the need for intermediaries, lowers operational costs, and improves booking management (Alonso-Muñoz, 2025).A key element of Blockchain is smart contracts, digital contracts that are automatically executed when pre-defined conditions are met. This enables automatic bookings and immediate payments, eliminating delays and intermediaries, as well as transparent management of special offers and loyalty programs (Maythu, 2024; Folgieri, 2025). By integrating smart contracts, hotels can automate not only booking processes but also refund policies, insurance claims, and supplier agreements, ensuring a higher level of efficiency and trust.

Integrating cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin or Ethereum allows peer-to-peer transactions with minimal fees and without the need for currency conversion, improving liquidity and financial flexibility for hotels while attracting a broader clientele. Cryptocurrencies can be particularly

advantageous for international travelers, who often face hidden charges and unfavorable exchange rates when paying with traditional banking systems. By offering crypto-based payments, Albanian hotels could differentiate themselves in a competitive market, appealing to tech-savvy tourists and the growing segment of digital nomads who seek destinations that embrace innovation. However, their use also presents challenges, including price volatility and limited financial knowledge among operators (García-Murillo & MacInnes, 2020). The volatility of cryptocurrencies, in particular, raises concerns for business owners who cannot risk significant fluctuations in revenue. Stablecoins—cryptocurrencies pegged to traditional currencies—have been proposed as a potential solution to this challenge, offering stability while maintaining the benefits of blockchain technology.

Beyond financial transactions, blockchain has the potential to revolutionize other aspects of tourism services. One example is digital identity verification, where customer information can be securely stored and shared through blockchain systems, eliminating the need for repeated submission of sensitive documents such as passports or ID cards. This reduces the risk of fraud and identity theft, which are growing concerns in the digital age. Additionally, blockchain can support sustainable tourism by tracking supply chains, certifying eco-friendly practices, and ensuring transparency in how revenues are distributed among stakeholders. For Albania, a country increasingly marketing itself as a sustainable and authentic destination, these applications could strengthen its reputation and attract environmentally conscious tourists.

In Albania, awareness of Blockchain and cryptocurrencies in tourism remains limited, although interest is increasing. Hotel managers are open to technologies that enhance reliability, reduce costs, and improve operational efficiency (Alonso-Muñoz, 2025). Nevertheless, major challenges remain, including lack of professional training, underdeveloped digital infrastructure, and legal uncertainties (Folgieri, 2025). The Albanian context is further complicated by the predominance of SMEs, which often lack the resources to invest in advanced technologies without external support. However, these same SMEs are also more flexible and innovative than large corporations, making them potential pioneers in blockchain adoption if provided with the right training and incentives.

Moreover, blockchain adoption aligns with Albania's broader economic and political goals. As a candidate for European Union integration, Albania is under pressure to modernize its digital infrastructure and harmonize its practices with EU regulations. The European Commission (2022) has already recognized blockchain as a key technology for innovation in the hospitality sector, emphasizing its role in improving transparency and competitiveness. By encouraging blockchain adoption in tourism, Albania could demonstrate its readiness to align with EU digital transformation policies and position itself as a leader among Western Balkan countries.

This paper aims to analyze the perceptions and willingness of Albanian hotel managers to adopt Blockchain and cryptocurrencies in booking processes, combining international

literature with structured interviews. The results are intended to support the development of national strategies and training programs, with the goal of modernizing Albania's tourism industry and increasing its international competitiveness (WTTC, 2024). Ultimately, blockchain is not only a technological tool but also a strategic opportunity for Albania to reposition its tourism sector in the global market. By fostering innovation, enhancing trust, and promoting sustainability, blockchain adoption could help the country achieve a more resilient, transparent, and competitive tourism industry in the coming decade.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Blockchain technology has gained considerable attention in the academic literature on tourism due to its potential to transform how bookings and information management are conducted in this sector. Blockchain is a decentralized and immutable system that records every transaction in a chain of blocks verified by all involved parties, thereby increasing reliability and transparency (Folgieri, 2025). This is particularly important in the tourism industry, where numerous intermediaries and lack of clarity often lead to financial losses and concerns for both customers and service providers (García-Murillo & MacInnes, 2020). Scholars note that trust is a cornerstone of the hospitality sector, and blockchain offers an infrastructure in which trust is established by technology rather than by centralized institutions.

Various studies indicate that integrating Blockchain can significantly improve the online booking process. One major advantage is the elimination of unnecessary intermediaries, who typically charge high fees and slow down payment processing (Alonso-Muñoz, 2025). For instance, the Travala platform uses Blockchain to record every booking and payment immutably, allowing direct access for hotels and improving real-time management of offers (Maythu, 2024). This system also reduces human errors and prevents double bookings, a common issue on traditional platforms. Travala also accepts over 100 cryptocurrencies, enabling greater payment flexibility for travelers. Another example is the Winding Tree platform, which operates as an open marketplace based on Blockchain. This platform allows service providers to publish their availability, set prices, and receive secure payments from customers without relying on traditional intermediaries (Folgieri, 2025). Studies show that using Winding Tree reduces operational costs and increases customer trust in the booking process, creating a more transparent and efficient business model (Alonso-Muñoz, 2025). Similarly, LockTrip, another blockchain-based marketplace, reports that users save up to 20% compared to mainstream platforms, confirming blockchain's ability to disrupt traditional intermediated systems.

Beyond transparency and security, one of the most important features of Blockchain is smart contracts, digital contracts automatically executed when predefined conditions are met (Maythu, 2024). Smart contracts can manage booking payments, refunds, special offers, and loyalty programs automatically and securely. Folgieri & Rossi (2023) emphasize that smart contracts minimize disputes, as all contractual conditions are embedded in code and

enforced without human intervention. In tourism, this means fewer delays, faster dispute resolution, and higher confidence in transactions. Hotels can, for example, create smart contracts that release payment only after guests check in, or automate compensation in cases of overbooking or cancellations. This not only enhances the customer experience but also reduces administrative errors and improves management efficiency for hotels (Folgieri, 2025).

The role of Blockchain is not limited to bookings. A growing body of research highlights its integration with cryptocurrencies to enable international payments with low fees and without currency conversion, improving financial flexibility and transaction speed for international tourists (Maythu, 2024). For example, using Bitcoin or Ethereum for hotel payments can avoid bank delays and high fees from traditional intermediaries. Cryptocurrencies are especially relevant in cross-border tourism, where exchange rates, transaction costs, and banking delays often complicate payments. Some tourism companies now accept stablecoins, which are pegged to traditional currencies such as the U.S. dollar, in order to mitigate volatility risks. Kim & Park (2022) argue that stablecoins may represent the most practical solution for hospitality businesses by combining blockchain's efficiency with financial stability.

Another emerging application is digital identity verification. The hospitality industry must regularly process sensitive customer information, including passports, payment details, and loyalty program data. Blockchain-based identity systems, such as self-sovereign identities (SSI), enable travelers to store their personal data securely on the blockchain and selectively share it with hotels, airlines, or tour operators. This reduces the risk of fraud and data breaches while streamlining check-in procedures. In Europe, pilot projects have demonstrated how blockchain-based digital IDs can cut waiting times at airports and hotels, enhancing both security and convenience. Such systems are particularly valuable for Albania's growing international tourism, where handling diverse customer identities safely is a challenge.

The literature has also begun to explore blockchain's potential in loyalty programs. Traditional loyalty schemes are often fragmented, with points locked into a single hotel chain or airline. Blockchain enables the tokenization of loyalty points, making them transferable and interoperable across multiple service providers. Martínez-González & Pérez (2023) suggest that blockchain-based loyalty tokens could create an ecosystem where tourists accumulate points across hotels, restaurants, and transportation services, encouraging repeat visits and boosting local economies. By eliminating administrative inefficiencies, blockchain makes loyalty programs more appealing to both providers and travelers.

Beyond direct consumer services, blockchain has important implications for supply chain management in tourism. Hotels and resorts rely on extensive supply chains for food, beverages, and equipment. Blockchain can record the provenance and movement of these goods, ensuring authenticity and sustainability. For instance, eco-resorts can use blockchain to certify that their food is locally sourced or that their energy supply comes from renewable sources. This enhances transparency for sustainability-conscious travelers and supports marketing strategies built on eco-certifications.

Furthermore, blockchain can be applied in cultural heritage and experience management. Non-fungible tokens (NFTs) are increasingly used to represent digital tickets, limited-access passes, or collectibles tied to cultural and historical experiences. Folgieri (2025) notes that NFTs in tourism allow destinations to create unique, monetizable digital assets—such as virtual museum tours, exclusive festival passes, or digital souvenirs. These applications not only diversify revenue streams but also strengthen the connection between tourists and local heritage. Albania, with its rich archaeological sites and intangible cultural traditions, could leverage NFTs to promote cultural tourism and engage younger, digitally savvy audiences.

Despite these opportunities, literature also emphasizes substantial barriers to blockchain adoption. Alonso-Muñoz & García (2024) highlight the lack of technological literacy among managers and employees as a primary obstacle. Many small business owners view blockchain as overly technical or risky, particularly when associated with volatile cryptocurrencies. High initial implementation costs also deter adoption, as blockchain platforms require technical expertise and IT infrastructure that many SMEs lack. Additionally, there is resistance to change from employees accustomed to traditional systems, a phenomenon well-documented in digital transformation literature. Organizational culture thus plays a critical role in determining whether blockchain adoption succeeds.

Legal and regulatory issues present another layer of complexity. In many countries, including Albania, there are no clear regulations on the use of blockchain and cryptocurrencies in the tourism sector. The absence of legal guidelines creates uncertainty for businesses, particularly regarding taxation, consumer protection, and dispute resolution. By contrast, the European Union has taken steps to develop regulatory frameworks through initiatives such as the Markets in Crypto-Assets Regulation (MiCA), which could serve as a model for Albania. Aligning with EU standards would provide Albanian businesses with greater clarity and integration into the European digital economy.

Comparative studies provide additional insights. Estonia, a pioneer in blockchain adoption, has integrated decentralized technologies into its national e-governance systems, creating a foundation for digital services across multiple sectors, including tourism. Switzerland has positioned itself as a hub for blockchain innovation, with cities like Zug promoting blockchain tourism initiatives. Spain has tested blockchain pilots in its hotel industry to enhance transparency in reservations and loyalty programs. These cases highlight how national policies, infrastructure investment, and training programs accelerate adoption. For Albania, they demonstrate possible pathways: by combining state support with private sector experimentation, blockchain could be adopted progressively, starting with pilot projects in high-tourism areas such as Tirana, Shkodër, and the Adriatic coast.

Overall, international literature demonstrates that the use of Blockchain and smart contracts can bring multiple benefits to tourism: cost reduction, increased operational efficiency, improved trust and transparency, and the possibility of faster and more secure payments (Folgieri, 2025; Maythu, 2024). However, key challenges include lack of technological knowledge, legal and regulatory barriers, and cryptocurrency volatility. Researchers converge

on the idea that blockchain adoption in tourism is most successful when supported by a triad of elements: technological education, secure and user-friendly platforms, and enabling regulations. This literature review lays the foundation for the empirical part of the study, which will analyze the perceptions and willingness of hotel managers in Albania to adopt blockchain and cryptocurrencies in booking processes. The empirical section aims to link theoretical data with local realities and identify opportunities and obstacles for successful implementation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive approach aimed at understanding the perceptions and willingness of hotel managers in Albania to adopt Blockchain technology and cryptocurrencies. A descriptive approach is suitable for this research as it focuses on depicting a specific phenomenon, identifying opportunities and challenges in the practical implementation of digital technologies in the tourism sector. Descriptive studies allow researchers to map out current attitudes, levels of awareness, and perceived opportunities and challenges, which are especially relevant when investigating emerging technologies with limited prior adoption. As blockchain adoption in tourism is still at an early stage in Albania, the aim is not to test a predefined model but to explore patterns that can inform future strategies.

Data collection was conducted using structured interviews, which provide a direct way to understand the attitudes and perceptions of hotel managers. Unlike unstructured interviews, which can produce highly variable results, structured interviews enable the collection of comparable responses across participants. This methodological choice enhances reliability by ensuring that each manager is asked the same set of core questions, while still allowing space for elaboration. The interview guide was divided into several thematic categories:

- Knowledge of blockchain – assessing familiarity with key concepts and applications.
- Perceptions of benefits – including transparency, cost reduction, and customer trust.
- Practical applications – exploring the use of smart contracts, cryptocurrencies, and identity verification.
- Challenges and risks – such as volatility, legal uncertainty, and technical barriers.
- Future willingness to adopt – gauging openness to pilot projects or gradual integration.

To capture both quantitative and qualitative insights, the interview guide included a mix of closed-ended questions (e.g., Likert-scale ratings on knowledge levels) and open-ended questions (e.g., "How do you think blockchain could improve your current booking processes?"). This hybrid design allowed for numerical comparisons while also giving participants the freedom to express context-specific experiences.

The sample consisted of 20 hotel managers from different categories, ranging from small hotels to 4–5 star establishments, located in major cities and tourist areas of Albania,

including Shkodër, Tirana, and the Adriatic coast. The use of purposive sampling was intentional, as the study sought to include participants with direct operational experience and responsibility for bookings, payments, and customer management. Purposive sampling is frequently recommended in qualitative tourism research because it ensures that participants are knowledgeable about the phenomena being studied (Etikan et al., 2016). While the sample does not allow for broad statistical generalization, it does enable an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of decision-makers who are directly positioned to adopt or reject blockchain technologies.

For each interview, privacy and anonymity were prioritized, following ethical guidelines for academic research. Participants were informed in advance about the study's purpose, scope, and intended academic use providing their written consent.. Informed consent was obtained in writing, and participants were assured that their names and hotel identities would not be disclosed. This ethical consideration was particularly important given that blockchain adoption is still a sensitive topic in Albania, where legal frameworks are underdeveloped and some managers expressed concerns about reputational risks if their views were publicized. Interviews were conducted in a flexible format: while most were face-to-face in Shkodër and Tirana, others were conducted online via video conferencing tools to accommodate availability. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes, providing sufficient time to explore the themes in detail without causing fatigue.

After data collection, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis, which allowed for the identification of recurring patterns, key concepts, and divergent opinions. Coding was performed in two stages: an initial open coding phase, where emerging categories such as "trust," "cost reduction," and "legal uncertainty" were identified, followed by axial coding, where these categories were organized into broader themes. To enhance the robustness of analysis, coding was independently reviewed by two researchers, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved. This double-coding process ensured inter-rater reliability and reduced the risk of subjective bias.

To strengthen validity, the findings from interviews were compared with existing international literature on blockchain in tourism. This triangulation approach ensured that the results were not only grounded in local perspectives but also contextualized within broader global trends. For example, concerns about cryptocurrency volatility expressed by Albanian managers were cross-checked with similar findings in studies conducted in Latin America and Southern Europe. Such comparisons helped to validate the universality of certain challenges while also highlighting context-specific obstacles unique to Albania.

Nevertheless, the methodology is not without limitations. The relatively small sample size restricts the ability to generalize findings to the entire Albanian tourism sector. Additionally, self-reporting bias may have influenced participants' responses, as some managers may have exaggerated their familiarity with blockchain concepts to appear more knowledgeable.

Another limitation is the uneven distribution of hotel sizes and regions, with a slight overrepresentation of urban hotels compared to rural guesthouses. Future studies could address these gaps by expanding the sample size, including more diverse participants, and incorporating quantitative surveys to complement qualitative insights.

This methodological design is appropriate for the study's objectives as it combines theoretical and practical insights, providing a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and obstacles for integrating Blockchain and cryptocurrencies in Albania's tourism sector. This approach ensures that the findings are not only academically rigorous but also practically relevant for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and tourism professionals seeking to modernize their operations.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

After analyzing 20 structured interviews with hotel managers in Albania, several clear trends were identified regarding their knowledge, perceptions, and willingness to adopt Blockchain technology and use cryptocurrencies. The results reveal a mixed situation, where awareness of the benefits of Blockchain is limited, but interest in adoption is steadily increasing.

Level of Knowledge on Blockchain and Cryptocurrencies

The interviews showed that only 35% of managers had in-depth knowledge of Blockchain and its operation in online bookings. This approach ensures that the findings are not only academically rigorous but also practically relevant for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and tourism professionals seeking to modernize their operations. A larger portion, approximately 50%, had a general understanding and recognized Blockchain mainly for its use in cryptocurrency payments such as Bitcoin or Ethereum. The remaining 15% had insufficient knowledge and expressed the need for detailed training. These findings indicate that awareness of the full potential of Blockchain in hotel management is still limited, highlighting an urgent need for technological education and structured training programs for hotel managers.

One manager from Tirana admitted: *"I hear about blockchain in the news, but for me, it is only connected with Bitcoin. I don't really know how it can help my hotel with bookings."* Another from Shkodër noted: *"We know that technology is changing, but without training we cannot be sure how to use it effectively."* These findings indicate that awareness of the full potential of blockchain in hotel management is still limited, highlighting an urgent need for technological education and structured training programs for hotel manager

Interestingly, coastal hotels, which deal with a higher percentage of international visitors, reported slightly higher awareness compared to small rural guesthouses. Managers in these areas are more exposed to international payment issues and thus more open to blockchain-based solutions.

Perceptions of Blockchain Benefits in Tourism

Managers familiar with Blockchain identified several key advantages:

- Transparency and reliability of bookings: 70% of participants considered this benefit crucial for increasing customer trust and eliminating potential errors in booking records (Alonso-Muñoz, 2025). One manager remarked: "If customers see the booking on a blockchain, they will not worry about overbookings or delays in confirmation. This will improve our reputation."
- Reduction of intermediaries and costs: 60% stated that the system could lower fees typically paid to external booking platforms, thereby increasing net profits for small and medium-sized enterprises. Some managers noted that commission fees from platforms like Booking.com, which can reach up to 15–20%, place a heavy burden on small hotels. Blockchain, by facilitating direct bookings, could reduce these costs significantly.
- Security and fraud prevention: 55% of managers valued that recording every transaction on Blockchain reduces the likelihood of double bookings or falsified data, strengthening hotel credibility and client relationships (Maythu, 2024).

In addition to the main advantages, some managers highlighted supplementary benefits, such as more efficient management of loyalty programs, improved internal audits, and reduced operational errors due to process automation. A manager from Durrës emphasized: *"With automation, I will have less stress with accounting. Everything will be written in the system."*

Willingness to Adopt

Despite limited knowledge, interest in adopting Blockchain has increased: 65% of managers expressed willingness to implement the technology in the future, especially when combined with cryptocurrency payment systems for international clients. Most emphasized that successful implementation requires detailed training, practical guidance, and a clear strategic plan for technology integration.

A coastal resort manager stated: *"We are interested to try, especially for foreign guests who already use crypto, but we need a clear plan from the government and support in training our staff."* This sentiment was echoed by smaller guesthouse owners, although they admitted that costs and technical complexity remain concerns.

Perceived Key Challenges

Managers identified several obstacles that could hinder Blockchain adoption:

- Lack of technological knowledge: 55% of participants felt uncertain about managing the system and smart contracts, indicating a need for practical courses and implementation support.

- Cryptocurrency volatility: 40% expressed concern over rapid changes in the value of digital currencies, which could affect hotel revenues and costs.
- Legal and regulatory barriers: 35% mentioned the lack of clear guidance from Albanian authorities on using Blockchain and cryptocurrencies in tourism, emphasizing the need for national policies and legal frameworks.

A small hotel manager from Shkodër remarked: *"We cannot experiment with something if the law is not clear. What happens if a client pays in Bitcoin and the value changes tomorrow?"*

Comparative Analysis and International Context

When placed in a global perspective, the Albanian findings align with those in other developing tourism markets. Studies in Latin America and Southeast Asia also show low technological literacy, high enthusiasm for innovation, and major concerns about volatility and regulation. For example, García-Murillo & MacInnes (2020) reported that Colombian hotel managers expressed similar doubts about cryptocurrency fluctuations but were open to pilot projects once local governments introduced supportive frameworks.

By contrast, in countries such as Spain and Switzerland, early blockchain pilots in tourism demonstrated that once clear regulations and training programs were introduced, adoption increased significantly. These comparisons suggest that Albania could achieve similar progress through a combination of government support, pilot initiatives, and staff capacity building.

Summary of Key Findings

The table below summarizes the percentages of participants for each aspect examined:

Aspect	Percentage of Managers Mentioning It
In-depth knowledge of Blockchain	35%
General knowledge	50%
No knowledge	15%
Transparency and reliability	70%
Reduction of intermediaries and costs	60%
Security / fraud prevention	55%
Willingness to adopt	65%
Lack of technological knowledge	55%
Cryptocurrency volatility	40%
Legal / regulatory barriers	35%

Overall Interpretation

From the interview analysis and the summarized table, it is clear that there is limited awareness but a high interest in adopting Blockchain and cryptocurrencies in the tourism sector. Managers identify concrete benefits for operational efficiency and customer trust, but they emphasize the need for training, practical guidance, and clear regulations for successful implementation. These results are consistent with the international literature, which suggests that the adoption of Blockchain in tourism is feasible only when combined with technological knowledge, a secure system, and legal support. Researchers indicate that countries implementing national policies and training programs for hotel managers are more likely to succeed in integrating Blockchain technology.

The findings of this study suggest that Albania has significant potential to adopt Blockchain in the tourism sector, but this requires a clear national strategy, training for managers, and the establishment of a supportive legal framework for the use of cryptocurrencies and smart contracts in tourism businesses.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that, although knowledge of Blockchain and cryptocurrencies among hotel managers in Albania is limited, there is a strong interest in adopting the technology. This finding aligns with international literature, where various studies show that low technological awareness is a common barrier to implementing Blockchain in the tourism sector. However, when training and supportive strategies are provided, adoption increases significantly (Folgieri, 2025; Alonso-Muñoz, 2025). These parallels suggest that Albania is not unique in its challenges and can draw valuable lessons from countries that have already embarked on blockchain adoption journeys.

One of the most important findings is that the perception of Blockchain's advantages is stronger among managers with intermediate or advanced knowledge of the technology. For instance, those who understand the functionality of smart contracts and the use of cryptocurrencies express high confidence in cost reduction and increased transparency in reservations (Maythu, 2024). This suggests that staff education and training can be a key factor for successful adoption. Investing in capacity-building initiatives, such as workshops, certification programs, and partnerships with universities, could help managers and staff gain the technical expertise needed to implement blockchain solutions confidently. Universities in Albania could play a central role in this process by integrating blockchain modules into tourism and management curricula, thus preparing a new generation of digitally skilled professionals.

The results also show that cryptocurrency volatility remains a major concern for managers. This phenomenon is confirmed in international literature, which highlights financial risks and the need for security mechanisms when using digital currencies (García-Murillo &

MacInnes, 2020). To address this, Albanian policymakers and industry associations could encourage the use of stablecoins or blockchain-based payment systems pegged to the euro. Such tools would minimize volatility risks while retaining the benefits of fast and low-cost international transactions. Additionally, insurance schemes or partnerships with fintech companies could provide hotels with safeguards against currency fluctuations, further encouraging adoption.

Another significant aspect is the willingness to adopt. Results indicate that most managers are open to change and perceive blockchain as an opportunity to improve operational efficiency and customer trust. This is consistent with the literature, where the use of blockchain and smart contracts is considered a solution that can reduce intermediaries, improve reservation management, and lower operational costs (Folgieri, 2025; Alonso-Muñoz, 2025). However, willingness alone is not sufficient. Without clear regulations, reliable infrastructure, and tailored training programs, adoption risks stalling at the level of good intentions. Policymakers must therefore create an enabling environment that bridges enthusiasm with practical implementation.

Policy support is a cornerstone for successful adoption. The government of Albania should consider developing a national blockchain strategy for tourism, with three main pillars: (1) regulatory clarity, (2) capacity building, and (3) pilot initiatives. Regulatory clarity is essential to provide hoteliers with confidence that blockchain-based payments and smart contracts are legally recognized and enforceable. Capacity building requires investment in training programs for managers, accountants, and IT staff. Pilot initiatives could be launched in high-tourism regions such as Tirana, Shkodër, and the Adriatic coast to demonstrate blockchain's effectiveness in real-world conditions. These pilots could be co-financed by public institutions, universities, and private hotel associations.

Integration with other digital technologies offers additional potential. Blockchain should not be seen in isolation but as part of a broader ecosystem of tourism innovation. For example, combining blockchain with Artificial Intelligence (AI) could enable predictive analytics for customer preferences, allowing hotels to create personalized offers while securing data on immutable ledgers. The Internet of Things (IoT) could be linked to blockchain for real-time monitoring of hotel facilities, energy consumption, and customer services, ensuring transparency in resource use and sustainability. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) could complement blockchain by mapping tourist flows and integrating blockchain data on bookings and payments, enabling smarter and more sustainable tourism management. Together, these technologies would position Albania at the forefront of digital tourism innovation in the Western Balkans.

Sustainability is another critical dimension. Blockchain can improve sustainability practices by ensuring transparent tracking of resources, certifying eco-friendly suppliers, and guaranteeing that revenues are fairly distributed among local communities. For example, blockchain can verify whether food supplies are sourced locally or whether a hotel complies with eco-certification standards. This transparency enhances Albania's ability to market itself

as a sustainable tourism destination, which is increasingly important as environmentally conscious travelers seek authenticity and ethical practices. Aligning blockchain adoption with the global push for sustainable tourism would give Albania a competitive advantage in attracting high-value visitors.

The European Union provides a valuable framework for Albania to follow. The EU has issued recommendations for blockchain adoption in the hospitality industry, emphasizing interoperability, consumer protection, and cybersecurity (European Commission, 2022). By harmonizing its regulations with EU standards, Albania could not only attract more tourists but also strengthen its case for EU integration. Participation in EU-funded digitalization projects could further accelerate the deployment of blockchain-based solutions in tourism, providing financial support and access to best practices.

In line with international literature, this study suggests that successful adoption of Blockchain in tourism requires the combination of three key factors:

- Adequate technological knowledge and skills among staff.
- Secure and immutable systems for reservations and payments.
- Legal and regulatory support that facilitates the use of digital technologies.

This integrated approach can help Albania modernize its tourism sector and enhance competitiveness at an international level.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study analyzed the potential of Blockchain and cryptocurrencies in the Albanian tourism sector, focusing on hotel managers' perceptions and willingness to adopt these technologies. The findings reveal a paradoxical situation: knowledge of blockchain remains limited, yet interest in adoption is high. This suggests that Albanian tourism is at a crossroads. On the one hand, the industry faces persistent challenges such as dependency on intermediaries, lack of transparency, and payment inefficiencies. On the other hand, blockchain provides a tangible opportunity to address these issues through decentralization, automation, and secure transactions.

Despite the opportunities, the study also highlights significant challenges. The lack of technological knowledge is the most pressing barrier, leaving managers uncertain about how blockchain systems and smart contracts function. Concerns about cryptocurrency volatility and the absence of a clear legal framework further complicate adoption. Without training, regulatory clarity, and technical support, blockchain risks being perceived as a futuristic concept rather than a practical solution. The findings therefore confirm that enthusiasm alone is insufficient; adoption requires supportive conditions at multiple levels

The results suggest that ensuring successful implementation requires:

- Comprehensive training for managers and operational staff to guarantee effective use of smart contracts and cryptocurrency payment systems, as well as to reduce technological uncertainty and operational errors (Folgieri, 2025).
- National strategies and clear regulations that support the use of Blockchain and cryptocurrencies by creating an appropriate legal framework and providing guidance for risk management and correct implementation of the technology (García-Murillo & MacInnes, 2020).
- Development of secure and user-friendly platforms that minimize usage risks and cryptocurrency volatility, enabling direct benefits for businesses and customers, and improving the online reservation experience (Maythu, 2024).

The use of Blockchain and cryptocurrencies offers a significant opportunity to modernize the Albanian tourism sector by increasing customer trust and enhancing operational efficiency. This study supports the idea that a combination of technological education, supportive policies, and the use of secure technologies can increase the sector's potential to compete in international markets (Alonso-Muñoz, 2025).Moreover, the implementation of Blockchain can serve as a model for other regions facing similar challenges, demonstrating that the adoption of innovative technologies is not limited to developed countries but can be an effective tool for increasing efficiency and transparency in tourism within a local context. Integrating smart contracts and cryptocurrency payments can transform how reservations and transactions are managed, reducing administrative costs, increasing financial efficiency, and creating a safer and faster experience for tourists (Folgieri, 2025; Maythu, 2024).

This study also emphasizes the importance of an integrated approach, where technology adoption is not solely a technical issue but involves legal, educational, and operational dimensions. Hotel managers need the opportunity to fully understand the advantages and limitations of Blockchain and cryptocurrencies, while authorities must create a supportive environment for safe use that also encourages innovation and competition.

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INTEGRATION OF ADVANCED TECHNOLOGIES IN ALBANIAN EDUCATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Rapid advancements in technology have brought profound transformations in how education is delivered and experienced globally. This study explores the integration of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR), and various digital tools into the Albanian education system. The main objective is to analyze how these technologies impact the learning experience of students and teachers, while also evaluating the opportunities and challenges posed by this digital shift. The methodology is based on theoretical analysis and document review, including academic literature, official education policies, and current practices in Albanian educational institutions. Special attention is given to the use of digital platforms, teacher training programs, and equitable access to technology, particularly in rural or underserved areas. The study examines how technology influences students' cognitive, social, and emotional development, while also highlighting issues such as device dependency, reduced attention spans, and the decline of face-to-face social interaction. The digital divide remains a significant concern, as unequal access to resources can exacerbate existing educational disparities. In the end, this paper aims to promote a critical reflection on the role of advanced technologies in education and to offer recommendations for inclusive, ethical, and sustainable policy approaches. The findings advocate for a balanced integration of technology that supports not only academic achievement, but also the holistic development of learners in the digital age.

Keywords: *Digital education, social inclusion, digital ethics, educational technology, Albania, education policies, equity in education.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid technological transformations of the past decade have profoundly reshaped education systems worldwide. Digital tools, artificial intelligence (AI), virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR), and online learning platforms are no longer peripheral innovations, but central elements of contemporary debates on educational reform (Bates, 2019; UNESCO, 2024). Albania, as a post-socialist country undergoing continuous institutional transition, is likewise confronted with the imperative of integrating advanced technologies into its schools. This process, however, raises critical questions regarding not only opportunities, but also structural constraints, socio-economic disparities, and ethical dilemmas.

The aim of this study is to examine the integration of advanced technologies in the Albanian educational system, assessing both their transformative potential and their inherent risks. Particular attention is devoted to the impact on teaching practices, student engagement, and equity of access across different regions of the country. In a society increasingly mediated by digital interactions, the fundamental issue arises: does technology enhance learning and prepare young people for a digital future, or does it deepen inequalities and weaken the social and human dimension of education? (Bates, 2019; UNESCO, 2024).

Drawing on academic literature, official strategies, and comparative case studies, the paper provides a critical reflection on the Albanian context. The National Education Strategy 2021–2026 (MASR, 2021) articulates ambitious goals for digital transformation, yet implementation has been uneven. Rural schools struggle with connectivity and infrastructure, while urban schools face overcrowding and insufficient teacher training (Dervishi, 2002; Tushi, 2017). Comparative analyses with Romania and North Macedonia highlight similar challenges in infrastructure, funding, and pedagogical adaptation.

International organizations such as UNESCO, OECD (2020), and the World Bank emphasize that digitalization requires more than access to devices: it demands teacher professional development, inclusive pedagogies, and ethical safeguards. Countries like Estonia and Finland illustrate contrasting but successful models—Estonia prioritizing technological integration within curricula, and Finland embedding equity and student-centered learning as guiding principles. Albania, however, remains at an earlier stage, where institutional fragility and uneven policy enforcement complicate digital inadequate financing.

Beyond infrastructure, ethical concerns require urgent attention. The use of AI-driven platforms raises issues of surveillance and data privacy, while the unequal distribution of digital resources risks amplifying social exclusion (Haidt, 2024). In Albania, where institutional capacity remains limited, these risks underscore the importance of contextualized research that evaluates not only the transferability of global models but also their adaptability to local realities.

LITERATURE AND NATIONAL POLICIES

Global developments in educational technology have placed significant emphasis on the potential of digital tools to transform teaching and learning. Authors such as A. W. Bates (2019) highlight the importance of the strategic use of technology in instructional design, including personalized student experiences, improved access to learning materials, and the capacity to build interactive learning environments. According to UNESCO (2024), technology can act as a "tool in the hands of youth," provided that its use is purposeful, equitable, and adapted to the cultural and socio-economic context of the country.

In Albania, the integration of technology into education has been addressed in the official document *National Education Strategy 2021–2026* (MASR, 2021), where one of the main objectives is the modernization of educational infrastructure and the gradual inclusion of digital tools in the teaching and learning process. The strategy acknowledges the crucial role of technology in improving the quality of education and emphasizes the need for continuous teacher training and the digitalization of curricula.

However, the practical implementation of these objectives remains uneven and is often hindered by the lack of sustainable investments, particularly in schools located in rural areas (MASR, 2021).

The absence of adequate devices, reliable internet connectivity, and quality training resources for teachers continues to be a major challenge for the effective integration of technology in the classroom (OECD, 2020).

Another important strand in the literature is the critical framing of technology: it is not always a neutral or universally beneficial solution (Bates, 2019). While in developed countries the use of AI and VR/AR is expanding, in contexts such as Albania it is crucial to carefully assess which technologies genuinely address the needs of students and teachers, without creating dependency or exclusion.

In summary, while the literature offers advanced visions for the future of technology-assisted education, and Albanian policies have recognized this need at a strategic level, the gap between aspiration and concrete implementation remains significant (MASR, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory-analytical design, a methodological approach particularly appropriate for understanding the complexities of integrating advanced technologies into the Albanian education system. The purpose is not only to describe existing practices, but also to critically interpret them in light of contemporary sociological theories and institutional objectives.

The research relies primarily on document analysis, focusing on national strategies, policy frameworks, and international reports issued by organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, and the Ministry of Education Sports and Youth(MASR). This desk research provides

systematic insights into how digital transformation in education is conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated. By situating Albania's experience within broader theoretical debates on digital pedagogy, social equity, and institutional change, the study develops an analytical framework that connects the local context with international trends.

The choice of a qualitative design is justified by two factors. First, Albania's digital education reform remains in its early stages, where quantitative indicators alone are insufficient to capture the depth of the phenomenon. Second, qualitative methods allow for a more nuanced understanding of teacher attitudes, student engagement, policy implementation, and ethical concerns—dimensions that would remain obscured in purely statistical approaches.

Despite its strengths, the methodology faces certain limitations, including reliance on secondary data and the absence of large-scale empirical testing. Nevertheless, triangulation through multiple sources strengthens the reliability and credibility of the findings. This design is particularly appropriate, since it emphasizes theory-building, contextual interpretation, and critical reflection, which are essential for grasping the dynamic interplay between technology, society, and education in Albania.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

A multidisciplinary framework is employed, combining principles of digital pedagogy, technology-enhanced learning, and ethical as well as sociological perspectives on educational innovation. The analysis focuses on:

- Enhancing learning practices through digital platforms and tools;
- Promoting inclusive digital education, highlighting both opportunities and limitations for different student groups;
- Ethical concerns in the use of AI, including data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and personalized learning;
- The cognitive, emotional and social effects of technology on students (Bates, 2019; UNESCO, 2024).

Thematic Focus

The study concentrates on three key areas:

- Digital platforms in pre-university and higher education (e.g., Moodle, Google Classroom, Akademi.al), with attention to adoption, pedagogical flexibility, and learning outcomes;
- Technological capacity of teachers and students, focusing on digital skills, training, technical support, and institutional barriers;
- Equity in access, examining disparities between urban and rural areas and the impact on marginalized groups, as well as the role of public policies in ensuring fair access to resources (OECD, 2020).

Analytical Approach

Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns, contradictions, and gaps between policies and actual practices. Source triangulation (academic literature, institutional documents, and school-based evidence) was used to strengthen credibility and validity.

INTEGRATED TECHNOLOGIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON ALBANIAN EDUCATION

The integration of advanced technologies in Albanian schools represents a multidimensional process that combines technological, pedagogical, and ethical considerations. The adoption of digital platforms such as Moodle, Google Classroom, and Akademi.al has been inconsistent, reflecting disparities in infrastructure, institutional readiness, and teacher training. For instance, urban schools like *Hasan Koçi* in Durrës - supported through the EU4Schools project - have effectively implemented smart boards and interactive applications such as Kahoot and Quizizz to enhance student engagement and formative assessment (UNDP, 2024). By contrast, rural schools in Pogradec face infrastructural barriers, including unreliable internet connectivity and limited availability of devices, which constrain the pedagogical potential of platforms like Akademi.al (UNDP, 2024).

Teacher preparedness emerges as a decisive factor in the success of digital reforms. While surveys reveal that only 35% of Albanian teachers feel confident using technology effectively, 57% express a willingness to adopt new digital tools (UNDP, 2024). Initiatives such as Digital Focal Points in vocational schools and the MesoVet platform, which digitized more than 50 vocational subjects, provide positive examples where AI tools have been integrated into lesson planning and interactive teaching practices (Skills for Jobs, 2023). However, these remain fragmented initiatives rather than systemic practices.

Beyond technical integration, the use of technology raises social and ethical challenges. The Education Technology Hub at *Andon Zako Çajupi* School in Tirana introduced tablets and digital boards to create a "technology library" supporting inclusive education (UNICEF, 2021). Yet, teachers reported the absence of clear guidelines on digital safety and ethical standards. Similarly, the SELFIE for Teachers project demonstrated that only 40% of teachers felt adequately prepared to address issues of digital privacy, data misuse, or problematic student online behavior (ETF, 2024). These findings highlight the urgency of embedding digital ethics and human rights education into teacher training programs, ensuring that innovation promotes not only efficiency but also inclusivity and responsibility.

The findings confirm both notable achievements and persistent gaps in Albania's digital education ecosystem. Platforms such as Akademi.al and Google Classroom became indispensable during the COVID-19 pandemic, expanding access to educational resources and enabling continuity of learning. Nonetheless, challenges remain evident: inconsistent connectivity, insufficient teacher professional development, and the absence of systemic institutional support continue to hinder effective technology integration (Kozina, 2007; MASR, 2021).

Emerging technologies such as AI and VR/AR are currently at an experimental stage. Pilot initiatives in a handful of urban schools show that VR-based learning increases motivation and comprehension, particularly in science subjects. Yet, these remain isolated and unsustainable due to high costs, limited expertise, and lack of curricular integration. AI-driven tools for adaptive learning are even less widespread, raising concerns that Albania risks falling further behind international trends unless innovation is strategically supported.

A significant divide persists between urban and rural education. Rural students often lack devices, depend solely on mobile phones, or experience poor internet connectivity. This exacerbates educational inequalities, reflecting global findings that technology, without equity-focused policies, tends to reinforce existing social gaps (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Meanwhile, urban teachers report that large class sizes constrain the pedagogical benefits of digital platforms, making individualized learning difficult even in well-resourced schools.

Overall, the Albanian experience demonstrates that while progress has been made, digital transformation remains fragmented and uneven. The integration of technology will require not only material investments, but also systemic strategies to ensure that equity, ethics, and pedagogy evolve alongside innovation.

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES: LESSONS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

The integration of advanced technologies in education is a global phenomenon, but outcomes vary across contexts. Estonia and Finland have demonstrated sustainable models by embedding digital literacy nationwide and aligning technology with student-centered pedagogies (European Commission, 2022; Finnish Ministry of Education, 2021). In Southeastern Europe, Serbia and North Macedonia leveraged EU-supported initiatives to introduce digital platforms and pilot artificial intelligence in classrooms, highlighting how international cooperation can accelerate reforms (UNESCO, 2024). Romania and Bulgaria, sharing Albania's post-socialist legacy, initially struggled with infrastructural gaps but invested in national digital teacher academies financed through EU structural funds, showing the importance of capacity building (World Bank, 2022). By comparison, Albania continues to rely heavily on donor-driven projects and lacks long-term systemic investment. The comparative perspective underscores that Albania's progress depends on balancing external partnerships with stronger national ownership and accountability.

In examining best practices, Estonia's example is particularly noteworthy because digital transformation was not treated as a separate initiative, but as an integral part of national education policy. The state invested early in digital infrastructure, cyber-literacy, and continuous teacher training, ensuring that technology served as a pedagogical tool rather than a superficial add-on. Finland adopted a holistic approach that integrated

digital literacy with broader values such as critical thinking, collaborative learning, and inclusion, demonstrating that technological reforms must be accompanied by cultural and pedagogical shifts.

Meanwhile, countries in the Western Balkans illustrate how EU frameworks can serve as accelerators for reform. Serbia, through partnerships with the European Training Foundation, created pilot projects for AI-assisted personalized learning. North Macedonia, on the other hand, implemented blended learning platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic, which later became part of its national curriculum. These experiences reveal the dual role of crises and external funding in catalyzing innovation, while also exposing the risks of dependency on short-term projects.

For Albania, the lessons are twofold. First, systemic reforms require internal political will and sustainable budgeting mechanisms that go beyond donor cycles. Second, the Albanian case demonstrates the necessity of investing in human capital—particularly teachers—since technological reforms without well-prepared educators risk deepening inequalities rather than reducing them. Learning from the trajectories of its neighbors and frontrunners like Estonia and Finland, Albania must develop a context-sensitive model that combines external cooperation with robust national strategies. Only then can digital transformation move from being project-based, to becoming a durable element of educational modernization.

Ultimately, comparative insights emphasize that Albania must shift from fragmented interventions toward a coherent long-term vision. This requires transparent governance, inclusive decision-making with teachers and students, and continuous evaluation to ensure digital transformation benefits equity, quality, and democratic participation in education.

DISCUSSION: SOCIAL ASPECTS OF TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION IN ALBANIAN EDUCATION

The integration of technology in the Albanian education system is not merely a technical or pedagogical issue, but represents a profound transformation in how educational relationships are built, social inclusion is experienced, and equity of opportunity is shaped. Social aspects of technology integration remain sensitive due to significant regional disparities, limited resources, and low levels of digital literacy in certain communities. Technology has introduced new forms of communication between teachers and students through platforms like Google Classroom and Akademi.al, yet these tools cannot fully replace direct interpersonal interaction. For example, in the nine-year school "Andon Zako Çajupi" in Tirana, the use of tablets has supported independent learning, but teachers observed decreased collaboration and reduced emotional expression in the classroom, highlighting the need for technology to enhance, rather than substitute interaction (UNICEF, 2021). A major social challenge is unequal access, which reinforces existing divides between urban and rural areas and within communities themselves. Reports from schools in Pogradec

and Tropojë indicate that lack of internet connectivity, devices, and technical support has left many students excluded from the benefits of technology-assisted learning (UNDP, 2024). Vulnerable groups, such as children with disabilities and students from Roma and Egyptian communities, face additional barriers due to insufficient tailored content and inadequate teacher training programs, resulting in superficial digital inclusion. Ethical and social dimensions are often overlooked; the SELFIE for Teachers project found that a large proportion of Albanian teachers feel unprepared to manage issues related to online misconduct, privacy protection, and data ethics, which exposes students to risks such as cyberbullying, technological dependency, and inappropriate content (ETF, 2024). The absence of written school policies on digital ethics represents a serious gap with long-term social implications, especially for young learners whose moral awareness and identity are still developing. Schools also have the potential to serve as community hubs that provide support not only to students, but also to parents, communities, and local actors. In Albania, this role is still developing, yet initiatives such as the one at the vocational school "Pavarësia" in Vlora, where digital support units guide colleagues and the wider community, demonstrate the potential to transform schools into socially and technologically inclusive spaces (Skills for Jobs, 2023). Expanding this model could help rebuild weakened social connections through awareness activities, mentoring, and the involvement of parents in digital education, ensuring that technology contributes positively to both learning and community cohesion.

The social dimension of technology integration in education is a crucial aspect that is often overlooked in public policies. Technology can serve as a force for empowerment and inclusion, but it can also act as a means of exclusion if not accompanied by clear and supportive measures. Therefore, any strategy for the digitalization of education should be evaluated not only for its technical efficiency, but also for its social and ethical impact.

Technology integration in education is not limited to curriculum reform; it represents a profound transformation in the social and psychological dimensions of schooling. For students, digital tools expand opportunities for autonomy, creativity, and self-directed learning. Interactive platforms and multimedia applications support active engagement, while online collaboration enables the development of transversal skills such as critical thinking and communication. Yet, these benefits are accompanied by significant risks. Overreliance on digital devices has been linked to social isolation, stress, reduced attention spans, and unhealthy patterns of device dependency (UNICEF, 2021). Students who lack access to technology frequently experience exclusion and feelings of inferiority, reinforcing pre-existing educational inequalities.

For teachers, digitalization generates both opportunities and challenges. On the positive side, it facilitates efficiency in lesson planning, access to diverse resources, and cross-school collaboration. However, it also produces psychological pressures, particularly when training is insufficient. Many educators report stress arising from the fear of technological obsolescence and anxiety about managing digital risks such as cyberbullying, data privacy, and misinformation (OECD, 2020). The absence of clear institutional frameworks

and professional support often exacerbates these pressures, leading to teacher fatigue and even resistance to innovation. International experience provides useful lessons: in Estonia, schools function as community digital literacy hubs, engaging parents alongside students to promote intergenerational trust and digital resilience (European Commission, 2022). Similar models could be adapted in Albania, where schools could serve as anchor institutions not only for teaching, but also for community-wide digital literacy, helping to mitigate structural inequalities.

The social dimension of digital education in Albania is deeply intertwined with issues of inequality, cultural norms, and institutional trust. Sociological theories offer important insights into these dynamics. Merton's strain theory explains how the gap between aspirations promoted by digital discourse and the lack of resources to fulfill them may foster frustration and disengagement among disadvantaged students (Merton 1938). Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital highlights how unequal access to digital skills reproduces educational hierarchies, privileging students from better-resourced families while reinforcing the marginalization of vulnerable groups (Bourdieu 1986).

Gender disparities also remain pronounced. Boys are more often encouraged to pursue technology-related subjects, whereas girls frequently encounter implicit discouragement or lack of role models. Although digital education has the potential to empower girls, the absence of gender-sensitive policies risks reinforcing existing inequalities. Vulnerable groups - including Roma children, rural students, and learners with disabilities - face compounded barriers such as the absence of devices, inaccessible content, and insufficient institutional support. Digital inclusion in Albania therefore requires targeted policies, including subsidized access to devices, development of accessible digital curricula, and teacher training programs oriented toward equity and diversity.

The psychological dimension of digitalization is equally critical. Albanian youth are increasingly exposed to risks of cyberbullying, online harassment, social comparison, and digital dependency. Haidt (2024) emphasizes that social media has fundamentally reshaped adolescence, intensifying anxiety, depression, and competitive self-comparison. These global trends are visible in Albanian schools, where teachers and school psychologists report growing cases of stress, aggression, and reduced capacity for sustained attention. At the same time, technology can be a powerful enabler of creativity, collaboration, and student voice. The challenge lies in ensuring balanced and guided use. To address these risks, schools need to integrate digital literacy and mental health education into curricula, establish psychological support services, and promote safe online practices.

In sum, technology integration in Albania must be understood not only as a technical reform, but also as a transformation that touches the core of social relations, equity, and student well-being. Without a deliberate focus on social justice, gender equality, and psychological resilience, digitalization risks reinforcing existing inequalities, rather than reducing them.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The integration of technology in Albanian education continues to face significant barriers, the most pressing of which are the lack of sustainable infrastructure, insufficient teacher preparation, and fragmented policy implementation (OECD, 2020; MASR, 2021). Many schools, particularly in rural and mountainous areas, operate with unreliable internet access, outdated computer laboratories, or complete absence of devices. Such disparities reinforce structural inequalities between urban and rural students and undermine the objective of providing equitable opportunities for all.

Teacher training is another critical challenge. Although digital literacy has become an international priority, in Albania digital pedagogy is rarely embedded in formal teacher education. In-service training programs remain sporadic, donor-driven, and unsystematic. As a result, many teachers rely on individual initiative or peer support, which produces uneven levels of competency. Without institutionalized, continuous professional development, teachers cannot fully utilize the pedagogical potential of advanced technologies.

Policy frameworks such as the National Education Strategy 2021–2026 set ambitious targets for digital transformation. However, implementation often remains inconsistent. Funding shortages, lack of monitoring mechanisms, and political instability contribute to weak enforcement of reforms. This discrepancy between written strategies and practical realities undermines the credibility of national education policy.

Looking toward the future, Albania faces a strategic crossroads. If reforms proceed incrementally, the digital divide will persist, weakening educational outcomes and limiting national competitiveness in a global knowledge economy. Alternatively, a comprehensive reform agenda - combining sustained investments in infrastructure, institutionalized teacher training, inclusive digital curricula, and community engagement - could transform the Albanian school system.

International experiences provide valuable lessons. Estonia's success derived from long-term investments in broadband access and teacher capacity-building, while Finland's model demonstrates how embedding equity into digital initiatives prevents exclusion. Romania's reliance on EU partnerships illustrates the importance of international cooperation in accelerating reform. Albania can adapt insights from these cases while tailoring them to its socio-economic context, cultural values, and institutional capacity.

Ultimately, the future of technology integration in Albania depends on the ability to view digitalization not as a series of isolated projects, but as a systemic transformation requiring coordination between government, schools, families, and international partners. By embracing a holistic vision, Albania can shift from being a passive recipient of technological change, to becoming an active architect of digital education reform.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has analyzed the integration of advanced technologies into the Albanian education system through a combination of sociological, pedagogical, and policy perspectives. The findings highlight a dual reality. On the one hand, Albania has made progress in adopting digital platforms and piloting innovative practices, particularly in urban schools. On the other hand, persistent gaps remain in infrastructure, teacher preparedness, and policy enforcement, which limit the systemic impact of these reforms.

The analysis confirms that technology is not a neutral instrument, but a social force that both reflects and reshapes existing inequalities. In contexts where resources are scarce and policies fragmented, digital initiatives risk reinforcing social hierarchies, rather than reducing them. Unequal access between urban and rural schools, gender imbalances, and barriers faced by vulnerable groups such as Roma students or children with disabilities, demonstrate how digital reforms must be accompanied by equity-focused measures.

At the same time, Albania's experience reveals important opportunities. With targeted investment in broadband infrastructure, sustained teacher professional development, and inclusive digital curricula, the country can accelerate its alignment with European educational standards while addressing its local socio-economic challenges. International experiences - from Estonia's nationwide digital literacy programs to Finland's equity-centered reforms - show that success depends on coherent long-term strategies. Albania can draw on such models, while tailoring reforms to its unique institutional and cultural context.

The social and psychological dimensions of technology integration remain particularly critical. Pedagogical practices are evolving, yet risks of technological isolation, digital dependency, and weak regulatory frameworks on privacy and online safety persist. The absence of comprehensive protocols on digital ethics underscores the need for stronger institutional capacity and cross-sectoral collaboration.

In conclusion, technology in education should not be conceived merely as the adoption of new tools. It is a catalyst for broader social transformation, demanding a systematic, sensitive, and inclusive approach. The integration of digital tools, artificial intelligence, and online platforms holds immense potential to enhance teaching quality, foster student creativity, and expand access to knowledge. However, these benefits will only be realized if reforms are embedded in equity-driven policies, supported by adequate infrastructure, and implemented through a clear vision of preparing students not only for a digital economy but also for a socially responsible and democratic future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the comprehensive analysis of Albania's progress and persistent challenges in integrating advanced technologies into education, a number of detailed recommendations can be articulated. The first and most fundamental priority is the strengthening of infrastructure and connectivity.

Digital transformation cannot succeed without reliable and equitable access to technology. Expanding nationwide broadband, particularly in rural and mountainous areas, is indispensable if Albania is to bridge the existing digital divide. Reliable internet access must be treated as a basic educational right, not a privilege. Equally important is the equitable distribution of digital devices. Special government funding schemes, supported by international donors, should be established to ensure that disadvantaged students and vulnerable communities are not excluded from the digital transition. Without such targeted interventions, there is a high risk that the process of digitalization will reproduce, rather than reduce, the very social inequalities it aims to overcome.

A second area of focus is the investment in comprehensive teacher training. The successful integration of technology depends not only on infrastructure but also on human capital. Teacher professional development should systematically embed digital pedagogy into both pre-service and in-service training. This training must go beyond simple technical instruction on how to operate devices or use platforms. Instead, it should emphasize innovative methods of teaching that incorporate digital tools to encourage critical thinking, collaborative learning, creativity, and inclusive classroom practices. Teachers need to be empowered to see technology as an enabler of pedagogical transformation, not as a burden. Long-term mentoring programs, peer-to-peer learning networks, and communities of practice are necessary to build teachers' confidence, foster professional solidarity, and reduce resistance to innovation.

Equity and inclusion must also be at the heart of Albania's digital education reforms. The design and implementation of policies should pay particular attention to vulnerable groups, such as Roma children, students with disabilities, and learners from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds. Tailored measures are required, including subsidized or free access to devices, the development of accessible digital content, and the provision of assistive technologies. Moreover, curricula should be culturally sensitive and inclusive, recognizing and respecting the diverse backgrounds of students. Without a deliberate effort to reach the most disadvantaged, the risk of permanent exclusion from the opportunities of digitalization is significant, thereby deepening existing social divisions.

Equally urgent is the need to introduce ethical and regulatory frameworks. The rapid rise of artificial intelligence and data-driven platforms in education has created new challenges related to privacy, surveillance, and the protection of student data. Albania must establish clear legal and institutional guidelines to safeguard children and young people in digital environments. Schools should be equipped not only with technical infrastructure but also with robust policies on online safety, prevention of cyberbullying, and the cultivation of responsible digital citizenship. Embedding principles of digital ethics into school curricula will help prepare students to navigate an increasingly complex and surveilled world responsibly, critically, and ethically.

In parallel, fostering regional and international partnerships should become a strategic priority. Albania stands to benefit enormously from closer cooperation with European Union institutions, UNESCO, the OECD, and neighboring countries in the Western Balkans.

Such partnerships can provide technical expertise, financial support, and opportunities for knowledge exchange. By learning from successful models in Finland, Estonia, or other EU states, and adapting them to its local context, Albania can avoid duplication of efforts, accelerate its digital reforms, and ensure policy coherence. Regional collaboration in particular could allow for shared platforms, joint training initiatives, and cross-border projects that promote innovation and solidarity.

Another critical element is the establishment of systematic monitoring, evaluation, and research mechanisms. Digital reforms must be accompanied by continuous assessment to measure their impact on students, teachers, and communities. Independent research institutions and universities should be engaged to conduct in-depth studies on the social, psychological, and pedagogical consequences of technology in education. Such evidence is essential not only for accountability but also for policy refinement, enabling decision-makers to identify unintended consequences and adjust strategies accordingly. A dynamic and evidence-based approach will ensure that reforms remain relevant and responsive to changing realities.

Finally, Albania must adopt a holistic vision of digital education. Technology integration should not be understood as a mere technical upgrade but as a systemic transformation that connects infrastructure, pedagogy, inclusion, and ethics. Schools must foster a broader culture of digital literacy and digital citizenship, equipping students not only with technical skills but also with critical awareness, creativity, and civic responsibility. Interdisciplinary modules on digital ethics, online collaboration, and community engagement should be integrated into the national curriculum. This will ensure that young people emerge not only as competent users of technology but also as thoughtful, responsible, and active participants in the digital society.

In conclusion, the integration of advanced technologies in Albanian education represents both an immense opportunity and a profound challenge. By addressing infrastructure gaps, investing in teachers, embedding inclusivity, introducing ethical safeguards, fostering partnerships, and building a culture of evaluation and holistic digital literacy, Albania can move toward a model of education that is equitable, innovative, and sustainable. Such an approach will align the country with global standards while responding to the specific needs of its own society, preparing future generations to thrive in the digital age.

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A GLOBAL OVERVIEW ON SYSTEMS ENGINEERING STUDIES WITH A FOCUS ON THE EUROPEAN MASTER IN SUSTAINABLE SYSTEMS ENGINEERING (EMSSE)

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of Systems Engineering (SE) and the integration of System-of-Systems Engineering (SoSE) paradigms into educational programs worldwide. Over the past fifteen years, SoSE has emerged as a critical framework for addressing complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence in modern infrastructures and societal challenges. The study examines current SE and SoSE curricula, highlighting the necessity of embedding systemic thinking, resilience, and sustainability within engineering education. By mapping representative programs across Europe and North America, it identifies key trends and pedagogical strategies that align academic content with industrial and societal needs. The European Master in Sustainable Systems Engineering (EMSSE) serves as a central case, exemplifying interdisciplinary mobility and sustainability-oriented learning outcomes. Furthermore, the paper introduces the Controller Placement Problem in Software-Defined Networks (SDNs) as an illustrative case study that bridges theory and practice through optimization, fairness, and robustness modeling. The work contributes to shaping future SE curricula that prepare graduates to design, analyze, and sustain complex socio-technical systems capable of responding to emerging global challenges.

Keywords: *Systems Engineering; System-of-Systems Engineering; Curriculum Design; Sustainability; Robust Optimization; Controller Placement Problem; EMSSE*

INTRODUCTION

Systems Engineering (SE) stands at the intersection of multiple disciplines, providing a holistic and integrative approach to designing, analyzing, and managing complex engineered systems. In an era increasingly defined by digital transformation, urban mobility, energy transition, and cybersecurity, the demand for professionals capable of thinking systemically and acting across domains is growing rapidly. Universities and industries alike are recognizing the necessity for educational programs that not only transmit theoretical foundations but also cultivate the ability to apply systems thinking to real-world problems.

Over the past fifteen years, two complementary paradigms have emerged as critical extensions of traditional SE: Complex Systems Engineering (CSE) and System-of-Systems Engineering (SoSE). These paradigms explicitly address the growing complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence of modern infrastructures, institutions, and technologies (Jamshidi 2017). By focusing on the dynamic interactions between autonomous yet interrelated systems, SoSE introduces essential principles such as interoperability, governance, resilience, and emergent behavior—elements increasingly present in the design of smart cities, critical infrastructures, and distributed digital ecosystems.

The relevance of SoSE spans multiple domains. In the energy sector, hierarchical decision-making frameworks enable the integration of renewable resources and distributed networks, enhancing sustainability and efficiency (Carli, Dotoli, and Pellegrino 2016). In transportation, SoSE contributes to robust trajectory control and coordination in autonomous vehicle platoons, improving safety and performance under uncertainty (Bozzi et al. 2021). In manufacturing, it supports reliability evaluation and emergent-behavior modeling within flexible production systems (Bozzi et al. 2023). Furthermore, cyber-physical systems leverage SoSE architectures—such as holonic overlays—to ensure adaptability and collaboration between heterogeneous components (Bonci et al. 2018). Collectively, these studies underscore the breadth of SoSE's applicability, from infrastructure resilience to digital transformation, and demonstrate how systemic thinking can inform the design of sustainable, intelligent, and adaptive systems.

Despite this progress, many educational programs still face the challenge of effectively bridging theory and application. Curricula often emphasize modeling, optimization, and lifecycle management but may lack integration with real-world case studies that reflect the societal, industrial, and ethical implications of engineering decisions. As engineered systems become more interdependent, future professionals must master not only analytical tools but also competencies in decision-making under uncertainty, cross-domain collaboration, and sustainable design. Consequently, universities are increasingly called to reformulate their programs by embedding SoSE paradigms, problem-based learning, and application-driven education that prepare graduates for the complex socio-technical environments defining the twenty-first century.

The objective of this paper is to contribute to this educational transformation by providing an overview of how SoSE principles can be integrated into SE curricula. The study

aligns academic training with industrial practice and societal needs through a structured framework that connects foundational knowledge with application-oriented learning. As an illustrative component, the paper introduces the Controller Placement Problem (CPP) in Software-Defined Networks (SDNs)—a real-world optimization challenge that exemplifies how fairness, robustness, and resilience can be taught within a SoSE-oriented curriculum (Ballasheni et al. 2025). By linking theory and practice, the paper offers insights for designing programs that equip graduates to analyze, govern, and sustain complex systems in an increasingly uncertain world.

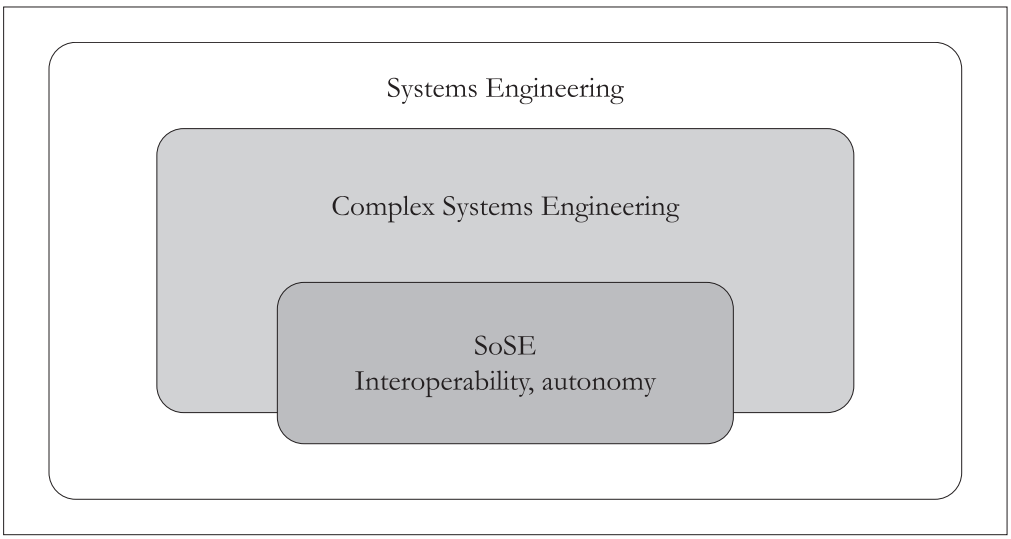


Figure 1. *SE provides foundational principles, CSE addresses complexity and resilience, while SoSE extends to governance and interoperability across systems-of-systems*

FRAMEWORK FOR REVIEWING AND DESIGNING SOSE-ORIENTED CURRICULA

Methodology

In developing a methodology for reviewing and designing curricula that integrate System-of-Systems Engineering (SoSE) paradigms, this study focuses on identifying how existing Systems Engineering (SE) programs respond to the challenges of real-world complexity and societal transformation. Rather than merely listing available degrees, the analysis aims to extract recurring patterns, conceptual paradigms, and pedagogical elements that can guide the formulation of new or reformed programs (Jamshidi 2017).

The review follows three main stages:

Mapping-Analysis

A mapping analysis was conducted to identify representative bachelor's and master's programs in SE and related domains such as Complex Systems Engineering (CSE) and SoSE across Europe and North America. The focus was on accredited programs listed under international engineering education networks, including EUR-ACE and ABET, as well as institutional repositories and official program websites (European Master in Sustainable Systems Engineering [EMSSE] 2023).

Content-Analysis

A qualitative content analysis examined course structures, learning outcomes, and specialization tracks. Particular attention was given to modules explicitly addressing complexity, interconnectivity, resilience, sustainability, and interdisciplinarity, which are essential attributes of SoSE-oriented education (Jamshidi 2017). This step enabled the clustering of programs into thematic categories—such as *control and automation*, *networked systems*, *sustainable design*, and *cybersecurity*.

Comparative-Evaluation

A comparative framework was then developed to assess how these programs reflect (i) alignment with industrial and societal challenges, (ii) inclusion of application-driven modules or capstone projects, and (iii) emphasis on system-level thinking and problem-solving. This structured approach ensures that the review supports not only descriptive insight but also prescriptive guidance for curriculum development.

Key considerations for SoSE integration

Integrating SoSE paradigms into SE curricula requires balancing foundational engineering knowledge with cross-disciplinary capabilities (Jamshidi 2017). While traditional SE programs emphasize system design, modeling, and verification, SoSE-oriented programs extend this focus to four additional dimensions:

- Interoperability and governance – enabling collaboration among autonomous systems, institutions, and stakeholders.
- Resilience and sustainability – preparing engineers to anticipate, absorb, and recover from disruptions across infrastructures.
- Complexity and emergence – equipping students with tools to analyze, simulate, and manage emergent behaviors in dynamic environments.
- Socio-technical awareness – embedding ethics, policy, and societal impacts within engineering decisions.

These dimensions should be reflected across three curriculum layers, forming a vertical integration model:

Curriculum Layer	Focus	Examples
Core foundations	Systems theory, modeling, optimization, and decision-making	Mathematics, Systems Theory, Operations Research
Integrative modules	Cross-domain subjects bridging disciplines	Cyber-Physical Systems, Networked Infrastructures, Digital Twins
Applied learning	Practice-oriented courses fostering real-world engagement	Project-based courses, Case Studies, Capstone Projects

This structure ensures that students progressively move from analytical foundations to integrative and applied competencies, gaining a systemic understanding of complexity and design.

Regional and institutional insights

A preliminary review of academic programs across Europe and North America reveals diverse interpretations of SE and SoSE:

- In Western Europe, universities such as TU Delft, Politecnico di Milano, and the University of Twente emphasize *sustainability* and *digital transformation* as central pillars of SE education (EMSSE 2023).
- In Northern Europe, institutions such as Tallinn University of Technology and Aalto University integrate computer and control engineering, reflecting regional strengths in ICT and automation.
- In North America, leading programs at MIT, Purdue University, and Georgia Tech adopt an *enterprise systems perspective*, focusing on large-scale integration, lifecycle management, and model-based systems engineering.

These regional variations highlight that there is no single blueprint for SoSE education. Instead, curricula must remain context-sensitive, adapting to local industrial ecosystems and policy frameworks while adhering to global standards of systems thinking and sustainability (Jamshidi 2017).

Towards an educational framework

The outcomes of this comparative review inform the development of a SoSE-oriented educational framework that aligns academic content with practical relevance and societal value. The framework advocates for:

- Embedding complexity analysis and systemic design methods in early semesters (Jamshidi 2017).
- Integrating case-based and project-based learning to foster applied problem-solving.
- Encouraging multidisciplinary collaboration through joint modules across engineering, computer science, and social sciences.
- Establishing strategic partnerships with industry, municipalities, and public institutions to ensure curricula remain responsive to evolving technological and societal challenges (EMSSE 2023).

This structured approach supports the creation of educational programs that serve both society and industry, preparing graduates to operate effectively in complex, uncertain, and interconnected environments.

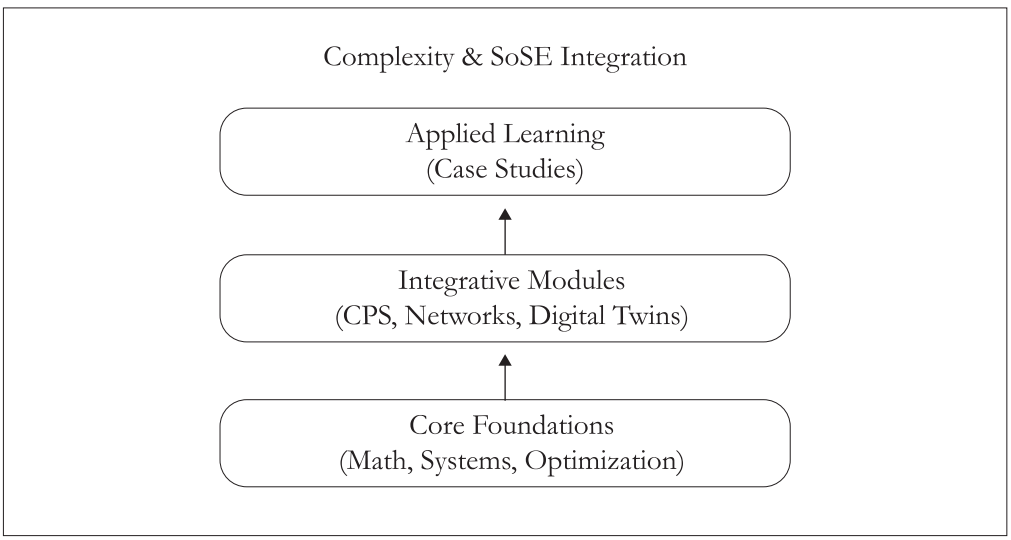


Figure 2. *Compact framework for embedding SoSE within SE curricula: Foundations, Integration, and Apllication linked via complexity analysis and case-based learning.*

DEFINITION OF A SYSTEMS ENGINEERING DEGREE WITH INTEGRATED SOSE PARADIGMS

In today's engineering landscape, the ability to design and manage complex, interdependent systems have become a fundamental professional competency (Jamshidi 2017). Modern infrastructures—such as transportation networks, energy grids, and communication systems—are not isolated entities; they form *systems of systems*, characterized by autonomy, heterogeneity, and emergent behavior. Consequently, a Systems Engineering (SE) program that integrates System-of-Systems Engineering (SoSE) paradigms is essential to prepare graduates capable of addressing the multifaceted challenges of the twenty-first century.

The proposed curriculum framework embeds SoSE principles at both the Bachelor and Master levels, emphasizing the progression from foundational knowledge to advanced, application-oriented competencies. The program seeks to balance technical depth, systemic thinking, and societal relevance, ensuring that graduates can design, analyze, and sustain complex socio-technical systems aligned with industrial and societal needs (European Master in Sustainable Systems Engineering [EMSSE] 2023).

Bachelor level

A bachelor's program in Systems Engineering with integrated SoSE paradigms typically spans three years and comprises 180 ECTS credits (EMSSE 2023). The undergraduate curriculum focuses on building a strong foundation in analytical, technical, and systemic competencies, enabling students to understand and model complexity from the earliest stages of their education.

Year 1 – Foundational Sciences:

Mathematics, Physics, and Computer Science form the analytical basis for system modeling and quantitative reasoning. Students are introduced to Systems Theory, establishing a conceptual understanding of interconnections and feedback mechanisms across diverse domains (Jamshidi 2017).

Year 2 – Core Engineering and Design:

The second year deepens this foundation through Control Systems, Electronics, and Programming for Systems Modeling, linking theory with practical design. Courses on Engineering Design, Optimization, and Sustainability in Engineering expose students to decision-making under constraints and introduce sustainability as a cross-cutting theme (Carli, Dotoli, and Pellegrino 2016).

Year 3 – Integration and Application:

Advanced modules such as Complex Systems Analysis, Introduction to SoSE, and Socio-Technical Systems prepare students to address engineering challenges that extend beyond single systems (Bonci et al. 2018).

Project-based courses and a Bachelor Thesis (15 ECTS) allow students to apply their learning in interdisciplinary teams, frequently in collaboration with industry partners.

By graduation, students are expected to:

- Identify and model interdependent systems.
- Analyze complex interactions and emergent behaviors.
- Apply control and optimization methods in multi-domain contexts.
- Recognize societal and environmental implications of engineering decisions.

Master level

The Master's cycle extends over two years (120 ECTS credits) and focuses on strategic, tactical, and operational dimensions of SE, enriched by SoSE paradigms. The program aims to transform students from system analysts into system architects and integrators, capable of leading multidisciplinary projects and designing resilient, sustainable infrastructures.

Year 1 – Advanced Theoretical Modules:

Students engage with System Architecture and Design, Complexity Management, Model-Based Systems Engineering (MBSE), and Resilience Engineering, developing expertise in systemic modeling and design optimization.

Year 2 – Specialization and Application:

Learners consolidate their competencies through specialization tracks—such as *Cyber-Physical Systems*, *Sustainable Mobility*, *Energy Systems*, and *Digital Infrastructures*—and through case-based learning.

Within this structure, application projects (e.g., the Controller Placement Problem in Software-Defined Networks) serve as experiential learning tools (Ballasheni et al. 2025). These case studies immerse students in real-world challenges where optimization, fairness, and resilience must be balanced under uncertainty and potential disruptions. A Master's Thesis (30 ECTS) concludes the program, requiring students to design and evaluate solutions to complex problems in collaboration with academic or industrial partners (EMSSE 2023).

Paradigms for integration

Across both study cycles, several paradigms and competencies are central to the proposed framework:

- Systems thinking and complexity awareness – understanding interactions, feedback loops, and emergent properties.
- Interdisciplinary collaboration – bridging technical, organizational, and societal domains.
- Digitalization and cyber-physical integration – leveraging information and communication technologies and data-driven methods.
- Resilience and sustainability – designing systems that withstand disruptions and ensure long-term viability.

Embedding these paradigms within SE curricula enables universities to educate engineers capable of addressing real-world complexity, contributing to industries that rely on intelligent, adaptive, and interconnected systems.

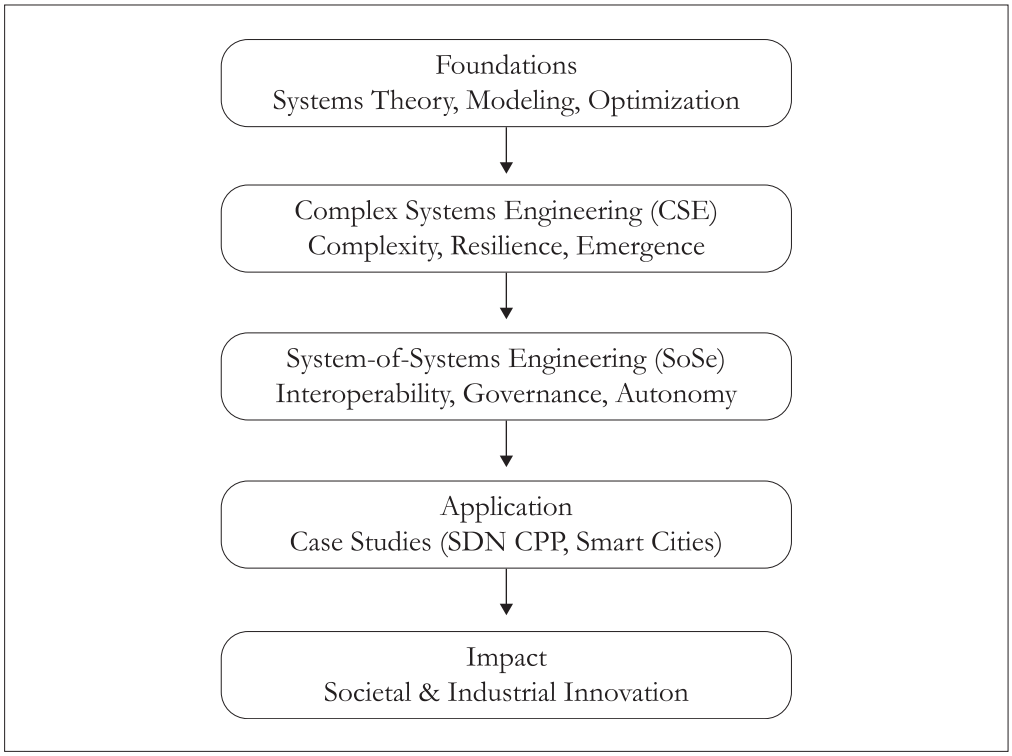


Figure 3. *Evolution of learning layers in Systems Engineering education*

APPLICATION CASE STUDY: FAIR AND ROBUST CONTROLLER PLACEMENT UNDER UNCERTAINTY

Context and motivation

Bridging theory with practice is a cornerstone of Systems Engineering (SE) education. Within this pedagogical approach, the Controller Placement Problem (CPP) in Software-Defined Networks (SDNs) serves as an illustrative example of how complex optimization challenges can be addressed through robust and fairness-aware modeling (Nace et al. 2023). SDNs decouple the control and data planes, enabling centralized decision-making through a limited number of controllers. The strategic placement of these controllers directly affects latency, resilience, and service equity across the network. Designing a placement strategy that ensures consistent performance under failure or attack scenarios exemplifies a robust optimization challenge and provides an effective teaching tool for courses on resilience engineering and complex system design.

Uncertainty modeling and probabilistic framework

In realistic environments, SDN nodes may experience disruptions due to random failures or targeted cyber-attacks. To capture this behavior, the CPP is reformulated under uncertainty through a probabilistic coverage model (Nace et al. 2023). Let $G = (V, E)$ denote the network

topology, where V represents nodes and E the connecting links. Each controller candidate $i \in V$ and switch $j \in V$ is associated with a coverage probability $p(i, j)$, representing the likelihood that j remains connected to i following an attack.

These probabilities are estimated from a finite set of simulated scenarios S, each describing a distinct pattern of node disruptions. For each scenario $s \in S$, a binary indicator $a_s(i, j)$ specifies whether connectivity between i and j is preserved. The empirical probability is then defined as:

$$p(i, j) = (1 / |S|) \sum_s a_s(i, j)$$

This formulation transforms the deterministic CPP into a stochastic optimization problem, encouraging students to engage with scenario-based modeling and risk-informed decision-making. Students are further invited to propose an AI-based or statistical estimator for $p(i, j)$ and use its uncertainty to define a robust uncertainty set for optimization.

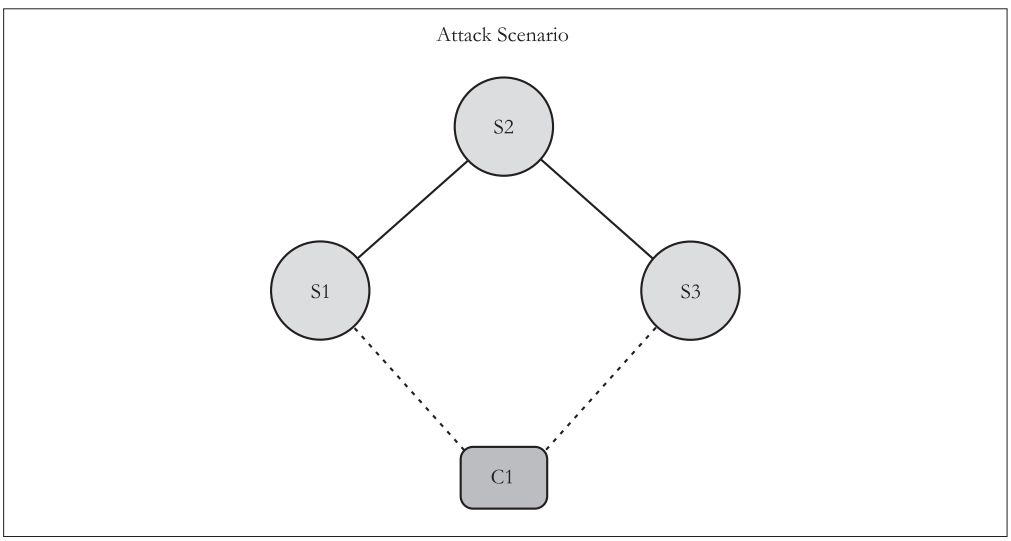


Figure 4. *Illustration of uncertainty modeling in SDNs*

Fairness and robust optimization formulation

Classical CPP models primarily aim to minimize latency or maximize coverage, which can inadvertently create systemic inequities - some nodes may face persistently higher disconnection risks. To address this limitation, the Equitable Controller Location Problem (ECLP) extends CPP by embedding fairness objectives within a robust optimization framework.

Two fairness paradigms are adopted:

- Lexicographic Fairness (LF): minimizes the maximum disconnection probability across nodes, ensuring that no region remains systematically underserved.
- Proportional Fairness (PF): minimizes the sum of logarithmic disconnection probabilities, balancing efficiency with equity.

To strengthen resilience under worst-case disruptions, a robust variant of PF introduces an uncertainty set $\mathcal{P}$, constraining the maximum number Γ of controllers that can be simultaneously affected (Ballasheni et al. 2025):

$\min_x \max_p \sum_j \log q_j(x, p)$

where $q_j(x, p)$ denotes the residual disconnection probability of node j given placement x and scenario p. This bi-level optimization problem exemplifies adversarial modeling and exposes learners to resilience-oriented system design.

Solution methodology

The pedagogical workflow mirrors the standard stages of robust optimization (Laporte, Nickel, and Saldanha da Gama 2015):

- Modeling: define a Mixed-Integer Linear Program (MILP) with decision variables $x_i \in \{0,1\}$ for controller selection and $y_{ij} \in \{0,1\}$ for node-to-controller assignment.
- Reformulation: derive the robust counterpart through dualization, translating adversarial uncertainties into linear constraints. Logarithmic PF terms are linearized using coefficients $\alpha(i, j) = \log(1 - p(i, j))$.
- Solution: implement the MILP in solvers such as CPLEX, Gurobi, or Pyomo. The PF objective can be efficiently approximated via a heap-based selection algorithm with complexity $O(|V| + M \log |V|)$ (Ballasheni et al. 2025).

This approach provides students with hands-on experience in formulating and solving robust optimization problems, reinforcing theoretical understanding with practical computation.

Numerical implementation and analysis

The models were evaluated on benchmark topologies, including COST, France, and CONUS networks, under multiple attack scenarios involving four to ten disrupted nodes (Ballasheni et al. 2025). Key performance indicators (KPIs)—coverage, fairness, and resilience—were assessed across Baseline, LF, PF, and Robust-PF formulations.

Key results:

- Worst-case coverage improved by up to 30 percent compared to classical formulations.
- Disconnection variance across nodes decreased by 40 percent, yielding more equitable service.
- The Robust-PF model maintained ≥ 95 percent coverage under the most severe attack conditions.

These findings demonstrate that combining fairness and robustness yields networks that are both more equitable and resilient to uncertainty.

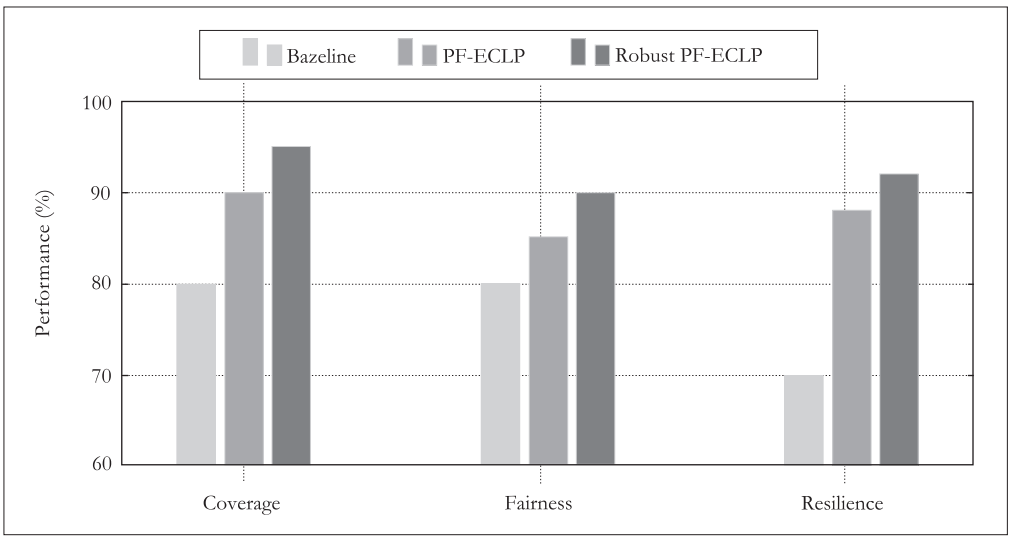


Figure 5. *Performance comparison under attack scenarios*

Pedagogical integration

As a teaching module, the ECLP case study can be delivered through four interconnected phases:

- Conceptualization: identify sources of uncertainty and define fairness objectives.
- Modeling: develop MILP formulations integrating probabilistic and robust components.
- Implementation: solve models using optimization software and analyze computational performance.
- Reflection: interpret trade-offs among latency, coverage, fairness, and resilience, and discuss ethical as well as societal implications of fairness in networked systems.

By engaging with all phases—from conceptual modeling to numerical evaluation—students acquire comprehensive competencies in robust optimization, probabilistic modeling, and data-driven decision-making. These skills are essential for modern SE practitioners responsible for designing resilient, adaptive, and equitable infrastructures.

CONCLUSIONS

The landscape of Systems Engineering (SE) education reflects the very complexity it seeks to address. This paper has examined how System-of-Systems Engineering (SoSE) paradigms can be embedded within SE curricula to respond more effectively to societal and industrial challenges. Through a comprehensive review of academic programs and the development of an integrative framework, several conclusions emerge that highlight both achievements and opportunities for improvement in this evolving field.

First, the study underscores the diversity of approaches adopted across universities worldwide. While some programs emphasize *control, automation,* and *networked systems*, others prioritize *sustainability, digitalization,* and *socio-technical perspectives*. This diversity demonstrates that there is no single blueprint for SE education; instead, curricula must be context-sensitive, tailored to regional priorities while remaining anchored to global standards of quality and accreditation.

Second, both Bachelor and Master levels play complementary roles in preparing engineers for complexity. Undergraduate programs provide strong foundations in mathematics, physics, and core engineering disciplines while introducing students to systems theory and conceptual design. At the Master's level, curricula expand into advanced domains such as resilience, complexity management, and digital infrastructures, offering students opportunities to specialize and engage with real-world applications through capstone projects and research theses.

Third, the integration of case-based learning emerges as a crucial mechanism for connecting theory and practice. The Controller Placement Problem (CPP) in Software-Defined Networks (SDNs), discussed in this paper, illustrates how an abstract optimization challenge can be transformed into a pedagogical tool. Through such application-driven modules, students gain hands-on experience in decision-making under uncertainty, resilience engineering, and fairness-aware design—skills that are indispensable for addressing the multifaceted challenges of modern infrastructures.

A recurring theme across the reviewed programs and proposed frameworks is the pervasive role of sustainability and resilience. Engineers of the future must not only optimize systems for performance and efficiency but also ensure that their designs are environmentally responsible, socially equitable, and adaptable to disruption. Embedding these principles

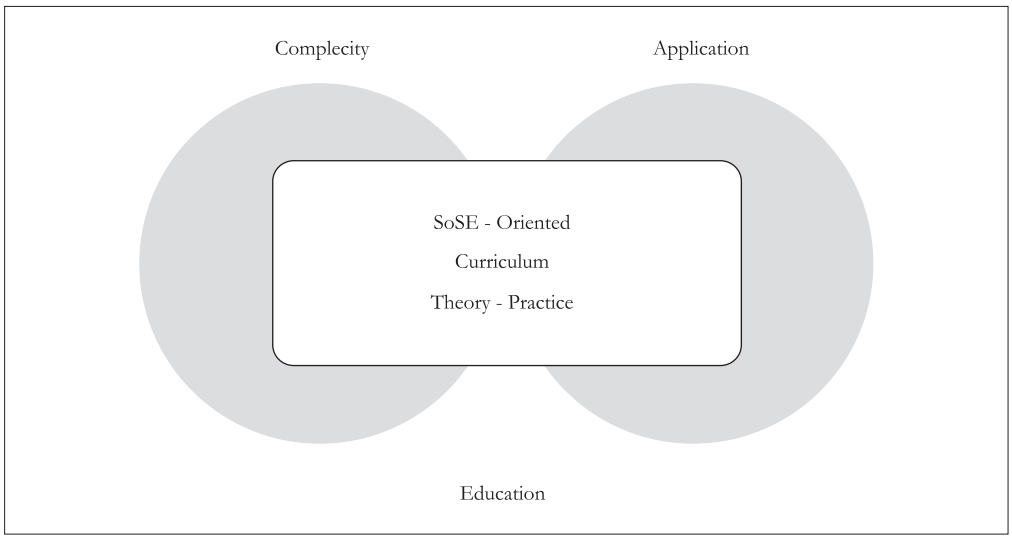


Figure 6. *Interaction between complexity paradigms, educational design, and real-world applications*

across educational pathways is no longer optional but a defining characteristic of modern SE education.

Looking ahead, the evolution of SE education will likely be shaped by emerging technologies such as *digital twins*, *artificial intelligence*, *Internet of Things (IoT)* integration, and *cyber-physical systems*. Moreover, stronger collaboration between academia and industry, supported by mobility programs and international partnerships (such as those developed within European initiatives), will further enable students to acquire global perspectives and adapt to diverse industrial and cultural environments.

In conclusion, Systems Engineering and System-of-Systems Engineering education stand as a backbone for innovation and resilience in an increasingly interconnected world. By aligning academic training with real-world applications, embedding complexity and sustainability as core paradigms, and fostering cross-disciplinary collaboration, educational programs can prepare graduates to become system thinkers and problem solvers.

The work presented here—partially supported by the READ Initiative—highlights how educational innovation can serve as a bridge between theory and practice, ensuring that future engineers are equipped to design, govern, and sustain the complex socio-technical systems of tomorrow.

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TEACHING CULTURE AND LANGUAGE IN AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

In foreign language education, cultural competence is increasingly recognised as essential for achieving communicative proficiency. This paper explores various methods of integrating culture into language teaching, emphasising the dynamic link between language and its cultural context. Traditional approaches, such as transmitting facts about customs and traditions, are compared with more contemporary, learner-centred strategies that prioritise experiential learning, intercultural dialogue, and critical reflection. The study examines the application of cultural instruction through authentic materials, task-based learning, and digital media, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. Emphasis is placed on the teacher's role as a cultural mediator and the importance of developing students' intercultural sensitivity. The findings endorse a multidimensional approach to cultural education, advocating for teaching practices that enhance cultural awareness, empathy, critical thinking, and linguistic skills.

Key words: *Culture, approach, language, instruction*

INTRODUCTION

While different approaches to teaching culture and language have been discussed among scholars, it remains crucial that the choice depends on three main factors, which are the situation in which the language is taught, learners' age and command of a foreign language, and the teacher. Referring to Stern's definition (1992), he clearly explains three situations in which the teaching of culture through language can take place.

In language classes, culture is taught while pupils are physically and frequently mentally isolated from the second culture. In this instance, cultural education gives the students context and background information while also assisting them in seeing the real world. This appears to be the most typical scenario for cultural instruction in many nations, including Albania.

A circumstance that prepares a pupil for a visit or work in a new setting is used to teach culture. The student is more eager to learn and is mentally better equipped while being physically distant from the culture. Given the European Union's expansion and the increased options for youth to study and work elsewhere, this circumstance might become far more prevalent than it was previously.

In a cultural context, such as with immigrants or students learning in a target language community, culture is taught. In order to prevent cultural misunderstandings, students in this situation require additional assistance in adjusting to the foreign environment. According to Brown (2000), this scenario is ideal for teaching second languages and cultures. It is not the simplest to plan, but it is advised.

As explained in the first situation, some of the best activities might be, for example, watching videos, movies and TED Talks, and reading and discussing literary and newspaper passages. In the case of the second and third situations, learners need various skills in cultural practices which could be better developed through role plays, dialogues and drama. Each of the situations defines the range of topics to be considered for teaching and, at the same time, defines the aims of teaching culture.

Secondly, a teacher must bear in mind the students' age, maturity, command of language, and educational level. Referring to Byram (1997a), he emphasises that "teaching and learning aims which include 'understanding', 'tolerance', 'empathy' and 'related notions' presuppose a psychological readiness in learners which may be age-dependent, may be influenced by social factors, and may be furthered or even inhibited by exposure to a foreign culture and language." While Durant (1997) states that "enhanced language proficiency is essential", especially when learners wish to continue their studies independently outside the classroom.

Overall, it is upon the teacher's decision for the choice of an approach and a method, which often depends on his/her preferences as well as the level of preparation. Byram (1997a) states that "the teacher should be aware of the nature of the challenge to learners' understanding of their culture and identity." If educators want to educate learners towards intercultural learning, they have to be intercultural learners themselves in order to achieve the best outcomes.

TEACHING CULTURE THROUGH SOME OF THE MOST COMMON APPROACHES

Throughout history, various approaches to teaching culture have been observed; some have faded over time, while others remain prominent. Generally, these are divided into two main categories: one that concentrates solely (or mainly) on the culture of the country whose language is being studied, called the mono-cultural approach, and the other that involves comparing learners' own culture with that of others, known as the comparative approach.

However, according to Risager (1998), these two umbrellas support even broader categories, and he classifies them into four significant approaches to teaching culture:

The intercultural approach has been increasingly recognised since the 1980s and is based on the idea that culture is best learnt through comparison and deals with the relations between the learners' own country and the country where the language is spoken. It may include comparisons between the two, and it develops learners' understanding of both, which enables them to function as mediators between the two cultures.

The multicultural approach draws on the idea that several cultures exist within one culture, and it includes a focus on the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the target country/countries as well as on the learners' own. Such an approach emphasises the principle that cultures are not monolithic.

The transcultural approach is the third approach. The fundamental tenet of this is that globalisation, migration, widespread tourism, global communication networks, and economic interdependence have all contributed to the interweaving of cultures in the modern world. The fact that many individuals use other languages as lingua francas is another indication of this. Therefore, the foreign language is treated as an international language in the transcultural approach. Teaching students how to use it for worldwide communication is its primary goal. One could argue that in this instance, there is absolutely no need to associate the foreign language with any particular culture.

All these approaches provide learners mostly with factual information and only offer an "interesting sidelight" to the foreign culture (Chastain 1988).Several methods focus on different facets of a particular culture or on helping students acquire particular abilities. The following methods focus on educating children about the nation's culture while also encouraging them to make comparisons with their own.

USEFUL TECHNIQUES FOR CULTURE TEACHING IN AN ENGLISH CLASS

Stern (1992) discusses cultural teaching methods and divides them into eight categories, which consist of:

1. Establishing an authentic learning environment in the classroom (for instance, by using realia exhibits and exhibitions); 2. supplying cultural data (such as cultural cluster, culture aside, and culture capsule); 3. cultural problem solution (culture assimilator, for instance); 4. emotional and behavioural elements (e.g., mini-drama and drama); 5. cognitive methods (student research, for instance); 6. the function of the humanities and literature (e.g., reading books and watching movies); 7. Exposure to the target culture in real life (for instance, native speakers attending class, pen pals, and international travel); 8. Utilising cultural community resources (e.g., the everyday environment can be used as a resource when learning a foreign language in the target-language community). While Hughes (1994) proposes eight "vehicles" in the list of methods for teaching cultural awareness, he believes they are the most useful. However, let's list some of the easiest ones to run with the students in class, as there are "so many founts of knowledge subject to rational inquiry."

The WebQuest is an inquiry activity where students use the Internet to obtain most or all of their information. March (1998) asserts that WebQuests were created to make efficient use of students' time, to emphasise the use of information rather than its search, and to assist students' thinking at the levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

The CultureQuest is another web-based activity which involves students in inquiry-based classroom projects, the aim of which is to explore other peoples and cultures. It seeks to promote better understanding and appreciation of other cultures.

The quiz is helpful for learning new content, but it can also be used to assess what the teacher has already taught. Cullen emphasises that it doesn't matter if students obtain the correct response or not, but by making predictions, they will be more curious to find out.

Cultural teaching is most effective when theory meets practice. Stern (1992) outlines broad methods, Hughes (1994) highlights the most practical ones, while WebQuest and CultureQuest bring inquiry and cultural exploration into the digital age. Together, they demonstrate that combining creativity, accessibility, and real-life engagement fosters deeper cultural awareness.

OTHER SOURCES FOR TEACHING CULTURE

Hughes' (1994) list of techniques for teaching cultural awareness includes eight "vehicles" which he considers the most practical. Chastain (1988) entitles the chapter where he describes methods of teaching culture. Modes of presenting culture, using the terms 'approach' and 'technique' interchangeably.

Literary readings: In the past, the primary source for teaching culture was literature. The importance of literature has decreased as a result of the increased interest in the social sciences. Additionally, some people believe that historical literature cannot be used to understand modern culture (Seelye).

Newspapers and magazines: The cultural and factual substance of newspapers and magazines makes them significant (Chastain, 1988). Teachers can gain valuable cultural insights from newspaper headlines, ads, editorials, sports sections, and weather reports, according to Hughes (1992). Newspapers should, if at all possible, be available for students to peruse or use for class tasks in language classes. Using newspaper texts for activities has the benefit of exposing pupils to real language.

Movies/Videoclips: Video clips and movies give students the chance to see behaviours that aren't as clear in written materials. They also offer a more up-to-date and thorough view of a culture. Films provide "an authentic window on foreign culture," according to Stempleski (1994). Film helps students understand both language and cultural concerns at the same time.

Songs: In foreign language education, songs are frequently used to teach grammar and vocabulary, but they can also be used to explore culture. Chastain (1988) asserts that people's moods, hobbies, and lifestyles can be reflected in the lyrics and music. When students

actively participate in singing or debating the lyrics, songs are more effective. Billy Bragg's songs provide plenty of conversation starters for teaching British culture.

The Internet: Zhao (1996) states that "students can gradually become members of the community of English language speakers, in the same way that they might through other forms of immersion in a culture by engaging in web-based activities." However, kids need to be educated about computer-assisted activities. Warschauer (2001) warns that "leaving learners to their own devices on the internet is unlikely to bring satisfying results," since more experienced students often plateau at the level of conversational speaking and cursory "netsurfing," while novices tend to give up in exasperation. Activities conducted online must be sufficiently complex to support individual decision-making, collaboration, and effective communication.

Overall, cultural teaching can draw on many resources—literature, media, songs, films, and the Internet—all offering unique insights into daily life and values. These materials help students connect language learning with real cultural contexts and foster deeper intercultural understanding when used purposefully and properly.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the integration of culture into language teaching is vital for developing learners' communicative competence and intercultural sensitivity. Each method contributes uniquely to fostering understanding, empathy, and critical reflection, while also strengthening language skills. Ultimately, the teacher's role as a cultural mediator is essential in selecting and combining approaches that make cultural learning both meaningful and accessible. By embracing a multidimensional perspective, language education can prepare students not only to use the language effectively but also to engage with diverse cultures in an informed and respectful way.

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TYPOLOGICAL STRUCTURAL SEMANTICAL FEATURES OF THE GERUND IN RUSSIAN IN COMPARISON WITH ALBANIAN AND ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The studying of gerund, as an undeveloped form of the verb in the Russian language, as a synthetic language, in a way similar to the corresponding forms in other languages, as in our case in this treatise, in Albanian and English, the first as a mainly synthetic-analytic language and the second, as a mainly analytical language, in addition to the common aspects between these languages, there are also significant differences from structural-semantic and lexical-semantic viewpoints. In this study, the Russian gerund examined in confrontation with the corresponding forms of Albanian and English, due to the significant differences that are observed between them. From the approaches it is noted that in general, the expressive forms of Russian gerund partially correspond to the synthetic and analitic forms in English, such as: ***читая*** (Russ.) / reading (Engl.), ***прочитав*** (Russ.) / having read (Engl.), while in Albanian, analytical forms are found almost everywhere, such as: ***читая*** (Russ.) / duke lexuar (Alb.) and ***прочитав*** (Russ.) / duke pasur lexuar (pasi ka lexuar, pasi lexoi) (Alb.). The comparative study of the Russian-Albanian and English gerund above languages is concretized with lexical-semantic models, which facilitate the work in the teaching process for its understanding and use as quickly as possible.

Keywords: *form, feature, structure, gerund, approach, teaching*

GENERAL ISSUES

Following a previous study on the participle as an invariable form of the verb in Russian and Albanian[1], this paper examines the gerund of the Russian language in relation to Albanian and English. This review is of particular value because the study of this verb category in the comparative aspect in the three above-mentioned languages, as languages with semantically and typologically-structurally differentiated natures, such as, for example, Russian as a synthetic language, Albanian as a synthetic-analytical language and English with a mainly analytical nature, helps not only in the examination of one language in relation to the other in the manifestation of the above phenomenon (conjugation), in order to discover the commonalities and differences of each, but also in the implementation of the results achieved in many practical aspects of the use of each language in its use in discourse, in translation, in the processes of teaching them as foreign languages, etc. Identifying differences in particular helps to find methodological paths in learning a foreign language, to overcome interferences, mainly caused by the negative influences of the mother tongue on the other language being learned as a foreign language.

It should be noted that, like the participle, the gerund in each language mentioned above, have long been the subject of separate studies in the three given languages, but limited within each language, while the results of the of treatments have been embodied in the relevant scientific grammars of a descriptive nature[2], as well as being implemented in school grammars for teaching the mother tongue[3], where scientific knowledge is generally given in an exhaustive and more or less complete manner. Of course, these studies on the non-inflective forms of the verb in each language have also illuminated many problems related to the verbal system as a whole. In addition, the work has continued on problems of applying knowledge for each language, looking at them in terms of comparison with other languages[4], not only for cognitive purposes, but also for teaching purposes, carried out on the basis of the approach method.

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[1] E. Shehu, "Vlerat didaktike të vështrimit të pjesores ruse në përqasje me shqipen", mbajtur në Kongresin Shkencor Ndërkombëtar me temë, *"Gjuha turke si ura e komunikimit Ballkanik dhe Mediteran"*, Tiranë, 2024.

[2] a. D. Rozental,"*Современный русский язык*", c. 244-245, Москва, 2005;
b A. Тихонов, *"Совремменный русский язык",* (Морфемика, Словообразование, морфология), с. 393-398, Москва, 2003;
c. Agalliu, F., Angoni, E., Demiraj, Sh., Dhrimo, A., Hysa, E., Lafe, E., dhe Likaj, E. *Gramatika praktike e gjuhës shqipe,* (Vol. I), fq. 336-337, Tiranë, 2002.
d. R. Huddleston & G. K. Pullum, *The Cambridge grammar of the English language,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
e. Кутузов, Л., *Практическая грамматика английского языка,* ГЕРУНДИЙ / GERUND (с.108-118), Москва, 1998.
f. М. С. Александрович: *Все правила английского языка,* Москва: АСТ– 318, [2] с. ISBN 978-5-17-079446-1, Герундий (The Gerund) (c. 202 -215), 2014.
g. R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum, G. Leech & J. Svartvik, *A comprehensive grammar of the English language,* London: Longman, 1985.

[3] R. Murphy, *English grammar in use* (5th ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

[4] a. M. Çeliku, "Karakterizimi i formave të pashtjelluara në gjuhën e sotme shqipe (gerundi)", në SF, Tiranë, 1984/1.
b. M. Çeliku, "Trajtat e përcjellores në gjuhën e sotme letrare shqipe", në SF, Tirana, 1984/2..

In this study, attention is initially drawn to the general and common aspects and features of the gerund in the three given languages, where, among other things, the idea is highlighted of how invariable forms, so to speak, fixed in a limited number of units, express thought in a typified manner from one language to another, which makes invariable verbal forms easily modeled with the corresponding forms of the language or languages that are approached in a synthetic or analytical manner.

In general, it should be noted that the gerund in the three above languages is an invariable form of the verb, which combines the characteristics of the verb and the adverb. In Russian, the gerund enters the system of verb forms, having the grammatical categories of tense, diathesis, but also aspect, and in the sentence it preserves the direction of the verb, *брать книгу - беря́ книгу* / *mora librin - duke marrë librin, взять книгу - взяв книгу* / *marr librin - pasi mora librin, подойти к столу - подойдя к столу* / *afrohem në tryezë - duke u afruar drejt tryezës* (*pasi u drejtova drejt tryezës*). In English *-ing-form*: has the present tense: *taking the book* / *duke marrë librin* and the past tense: *having taken the book* / *duke pasur marrë librin.*

From the similar forms of the Russian gerund with the corresponding forms in Albanian, it is observed that the gerund in Albanian has the category of present or past tense and the diathesis of the verb, as: *duke marrë librin, duke pasur marrë (pasi mora) librin* (the aktive past).

THE FORMATION OF THE GERUND IN THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE AS THE BASIC LANGUAGE OF APPROACH, COMPARED TO THE CORRESPONDING FORMS IN ALBANIAN AND ENGLISH

The gerund of the imperfect aspect in relation to tense and diathesis, as well as the corresponding forms in Albanian and English

The gerund of the imperfect aspect[5] in Russian it is formed from the subject of the present tense of the verb (in the third person plural form) with the help of the suffix -a (-'a): *кричат - крича́* / *bërtasin* (they) *- duke bërtitur* / *scream - screaming, гремят - греми́* / *zhurmojnë - duke zhurmuar* / *thunder - thundering, играют - играя* / *luajnë - duke luajtur* / *play - playing.* As can be seen from the above examples, from the structural point of view, the gerund of the imperfect aspect in Russian appears in synthetic forms, such as: *играя* (несов.), *крича́* (несов.), while in Albanian the corresponding forms are structurally analytical: *duke luajtur* (*duke* + participle), *крича́* (*duke* + participle), while in English they take the suffix -ing of the verb: *play - playing* (the verb + -ing, as a suffix in all cases).

With the exception of the above cases, some forms of the gerund in Russian, formed from verbs *знать* / *di* / *know* , *давать* / *jap* / *give*, as well as from verbs with related topics

[5] И.М. Пулькина, *Учебник русского языка для студентов-иностранцев,* Издательство "Советская наука", с. 441-487, Москва, 1957.

ставать / *bëhem* / *become*, are created with the help of the suffix ***-а*** from the stem of the participle: ***создавать - создавая, признавать - признавая, заставать - заставая***.

In Albanian, the function of the gerund (accompanying action) usually expressed by: using the participle with "*duke*" (the construct "*duke* + *participlë*"), or with any structure with the verbal connection like: *duke ditur / knowing, duke dhënë / giving, duke krijuar / creating, duke pranuar / receiving*, for example: *Ai fliste duke dhënë këshilla. / He was speaking, giving advice. Ai ecte duke ditur rrugën. / He walked knowing the way. Ai punonte duke krijuar diçka të re. / He was working on creating something new.* So, in Albanian grammar, this is treated as a compound adverb of manner[6] (a form of the verb that expresses the manner or circumstance of the main action).

In English, the same idea is expressed with the present participle (-ing form) which is used as a shortened adverb: *knowing, giving, reating, admitting. He walked, knowing the way. He spoke, giving advice. He worked, creating new ideas.*

Regarding the functioning of gerund, of the imperfective adverbs, it should be noted that in Russian they are not formed from all imperfective verbs. Thus, for example, verbs with the stem in the infinitive in ***-а*** *(**драть** - **деру** / zihem / quarrel, **врать** - **вру** / gënjej / lie)* (and other verbs that do not form a gerund), as well as verbs with the topic in ***-и*** (as: ***бить*** */ rrah / beat, **вить** / përdredh / wring*) and some other verbs. These cases show that the formation of the gerund in Russian is not a completely regular process, but depends on the internal structure of the verb stem and on the historical features of its development. For this reason, accurate knowledge of the use of such forms requires a detailed skill in the morphological and aspectual analysis of Russian verbs.

Compared to languages like Albanian and English, where similar forms (like "*duke* + *participlë*" or *"-ing form*") can be formed from almost any verb, Russian presents a more limited and less predictable system, which requires good knowledge of the verb paradigm.

It should be noted that it is followed in ***-а*** *(`-а)* from the stem of the imperfect aspect have no tense form, that is, morphologically they do not express shades of time; they express only the values of aspect and diathesis. In a sentence, the exclusion of the gerund is understood as simultaneity with the action marked by the verb-predicative, such as: ***В постели лежа́, Вальтер Скотта глазами пробегает он*** */ I shtrirë (duke qënë i shtrirë) në shtrat, ai vrapon me sy përmes Walter Scottit (Pushkin)/ Lying in bed, Walter Scott runs his eyes over him,* ***Трава пошла мягче, и Левин, слушая, но не отвечая и стараясь косить как можно лучше, шел за Титом*** */ Bari u bë më i butë dhe Levin, duke dëgjuar, por pa u përgjigjur dhe duke u përpjekur të kositë sa më mirë, ecte pas Titit (L. Tolstoy) / The grass became softer, and Levin, listening but not answering and trying to mow as best he could, followed Titus.*

Gerund forms of the imperfect aspect in Russian[7] can rarely also take the suffix ***-учи***, but these gerunds, except ***будучи*** */ duke qënë / being*, are not common in today's Russian

[6] See 2. c.

[7] See 2.a.; 5.
b.Т.Ф. Куприянова, Знакомтесь: деепричаастие, Санкт-Петербург, 2002.

language. They are perceived as archaisms, or as a means of stylization for popular speech, such as: *Ждёт-пождёт с утра до ночи, смотрит в поле, инда очи разболелись глядючи, с белой зори до ночи* / *Pret, e pret nga mëngjesi deri në darkë, shikon në fushë, deri sa sytë të jenë lodhur duke parë, nga agimi deri në darkë (Pushkin)* / *Waits and waits from morning until night, looking at the field, even his eyes hurt from looking, from white dawn until night.*

The gerund of the perfect aspect in Russian in relation to tense and diathesis with the corresponding forms in Albanian and English

Gerund forms of the perfect aspect in Russian[8] are formed from the infinitive or past tense of verbs of the perfect aspect and form three main forms of the gerunds:1) With the suffix *-в* formed from by the theme ending in a vowel: *: упасть - упав, упавши* / *bie - pasi ra, pasi ka rënë* / *fall - having fallen; дать - дав, давши* / *jap - pasi dha* / *give - having given;*

2) With the suffix *-ши* for stems ending in consonants (*г, к, з, с* and *р*): *испечь - испекши* / *pasi u poqën* / *after having baked; изнемочь - изнемогши* / *pasi u plogështua* / *after having grown weak - exhausted; запереться - запершись* / *pasi u mbyll* / *after having locked oneself in.*

3) With the affix *-я* for themes ending in consonants, except for those in the back of the tongue: *обрести - обретя́* / *pasi morën* / *after having gained; отвезти - отвезя́* / *pasi transportuan* / *after having transported; пройти - пройдя* / *pasi kaloi* / *after having passed.* As can be seen from the above comparative examples in the three languages from the three groups above, it is clearly understood that almost all the gerunds of the perfect aspect in Russian, as synthetic forms, correspond in Albanian to analytical forms of the type *duke* + *verb* in the simple past tense, in English it is formed with the form *after* $_{+}$ *(-ing* form of verb) such as for example: *дав* / *pasi dha* / *after having given* in contrast to the gerund of the imperfect aspect of the type: *давая* / *duke dhënë* / *giving.* As can be seen from the comparison *duke* and *pasi* (of Albanian) and English (*-ing*) are opposed, interchanging with each other in a typified way, which makes them schematically modeled in all three languages: *-я, -а* (imperfect aspect) / *duke* (+ participle) and with (*-ing-form*), like: *в* (perfekt aspect) / *pasi* (+ verb in the simple tense). This presentation facilitates their treatment in these languages, by implementing typified and schematically presented models. In addition, there are also fluctuations in the formation of gerund from unproductive verbs with *-нуть* (for example, *высохнуть*/*dry out, оглохнуть*/*go deaf*). The gerund of these verbs can be formed from the stem by retaining the suffix *-ну-,* like: *высохнув - высохнувши* / *pasi u tha* / *after having dried, оглохнув - оглохнувши* / *pasi u shurdhua* / *after having got def, намокнув - намокнувши* / *pasi u lag* / *after having gotten wet.*

[8] See 5.

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE GERUND IN RUSSIAN LANGUAGE WITH THE CORRESPONDING FORMS IN ALBANIAN AND ENGLISH

In the Russian language, the gerund as an invariable verbal form expressing an additional action, which accompanies or follows the main action of the main verb, has a circumstantial function (indicating the manner, time or cause of the action) or a second predicative, always maintaining the order of the subject with the main action. Its use is very frequent in the Russian artistic style, giving the sentence a color of fluidity and expressiveness.[9]

- Shows the way of action: ***работая усердно*** → *"duke punuar me zell" (working hard)*;
- Indicates the time of action: ***прочитав документы*** → *"pasi lexoi dokumentet"(after reading the documents)*;
- Express the cause of action: ***не зная подробностей*** → *"duke mos ditur detajet" (without knowing the details);*
- Determining the action condition: ***приложив усилия*** → *"duke bërë përpjekje" (making an effort);*
- Characterization of accompanying circumstances: ***улыбаясь*** → *"duke buzëqeshur" (smiling);*

In Albanian, the gerund has a temporal meaning conditioned by the temporal meaning of the governing verb. Since the action expressed by it is usually confirmed at the same time as that of the governing verb, the gerund, depending on the context, can have the meaning of the present, the past, or the future. For example,: *Një zë, që iu duk tepër i njohur, po pyeste duke u afruar. Po vjen një ditë që pjeshka e pjekur dhe e mbushur plot me lëng, del nga fletët e pemës, ku qëndron fshehur e, duke zbuluar gjithë bukurinë e saj, duket sikur i thotë udhëtarit, që kalon aty pranë:* "*Këputmë e futmë në gji*!" (*A voice, which seemed very familiar to him, was asking as it approached. There comes a day when a ripe peach, full of juice, emerges from the leaves of the tree where it is hidden and, revealing all its beauty, seems to say to the traveler passing by: "Pluck it and put it in your bosom!"*)

This supercompound form[10] will be called the perfect tense of the gerund; in contrast, the form of the type by washing can conventionally be called the present tense of the gerund.

The gerund is also used in analytical verb forms constructed with the participle of the auxiliary verb *jam* in the present or imperfect tense of the indicative mood.

[9] К. Л. Васильевна, *Книга о грамматике. Русский язык как иностранный,* Издательство Московского, Москва, 2025.

[10] Agalliu, F., Angoni, E., Demiraj, Sh., Dhrimo, A., Hysa, E., Lafe, E., dhe Likaj, E. *Gramatika praktike e gjuhës shqipe,* (Vol. I), fq. 336-337, Tiranë, 2002.

In addition to these cases, the gerund is used in construction[11]:

- With a modal function: "*duke ecur në mënyrë të çuditshme"(walking strangely);*
- With a time function: *"duke kaluar përpara dyqanit"(passing by the store);*
- With causal function: "*duke mos ditur ç'të bënte"(not knowing what to do);*
- With conditional function: "*duke vepruar (= po të veproni) kështu" (acting (= if you act) like this);*
- With the function of the predicate determiner: *"duke ikur shpejt" (running fast);*
- The gerund is also used relatively frequently to express a secondary action, which is semantically coordinated with that of the leading verb: *Ti ishe atje - tha kronikani duke zgjatur [= dhe zgjati] dorën. (You were there - said the chronicler, extending [= and extended] his hand.) Arkitekti ngrinte vazhdimisht dorën, duke treguar [= dhe tregonte] një rreth sipër kokës së tij. (The architect kept raising his hand, pointing [= and pointed] to a circle above his head.)*

In English, the gerund is used to express an additional or accompanying action, often in a concise or condensed manner, and can express:

- Mood: *smiling, he entered the room →"duke buzëqeshur, ai hyri në dhomë"*;
- Time: *having read the documents, she left the office →* "*pasi lexoi dokumentet, ajo u largua nga zyra"*;
- Cause: *not knowing the details, he hesitated →"duke mos ditur detajet, ai hezitoi"*;
- Condition: *putting in effort, you will succeed →* "*duke bërë përpjekje, do të keni sukses*";

The essential features of the gerund in Russian and Albanian with English corresponding forms in relation to each other.

One of the essential features that motivates a general approach to the appearance of the gerund in the above languages with different typological-structural natures, especially in relation to English as an analytical language is conected particularly to the cases when the main clause, on which the gerund depends is placed in a temporal relation with it, precedes its meanings, is performed mainly with it or even after it in time. Regarding this phenomenon, where the verbal character of the gerund is clearly highlighted, we can provide some simplified examples:

Rus.: *Читая книгу он подчёркивал новые слова. = (Он читал и он подчёркивал*)

Al.: *Duke lexuar librin, ai nënvizonte. = (Ai lexonte dhe njëkohësisht ai nënvizonte*)

Engl.: *Reading the book he was writing down the words. = (He was reading and he was wroting down*)

Looking at these sentences in their use in discourse (in speaking or writing), as well as in the process of teaching each of the above languages as a foreign language, a certain difficulty

[11] See 10.

appears in adapting the gerund of the actions of both the subject (in each language), as well as the belonging of both verbal forms (the verb itself and the gerund) to the same part of speech (noun, pronoun in the function of the subject, which can be schematically presented as follows:

Russian.:	Albanian:	English:
Он ↘ *Читая подчёркивал* (читать)	Ai ↘ duke lexuar nënvizonte (lexon)	He ↘ was reading was writing down (read)

This fact is very important to keep in mind in its practical use by the speaker in discourse, as well as by the teacher (for each of these three languages, when each is taught as a foreign language), because in many cases the speaker or student may mistakenly match the verb of the main sentence with another subject, such as in Russian: ***Входя в комнату, был слышен шум***. Alb.: *Duke hyrë në dhomë (unë), u dëgjua një zhurmë.* Engl.. *Entering the room (I), a noise was heard.*)

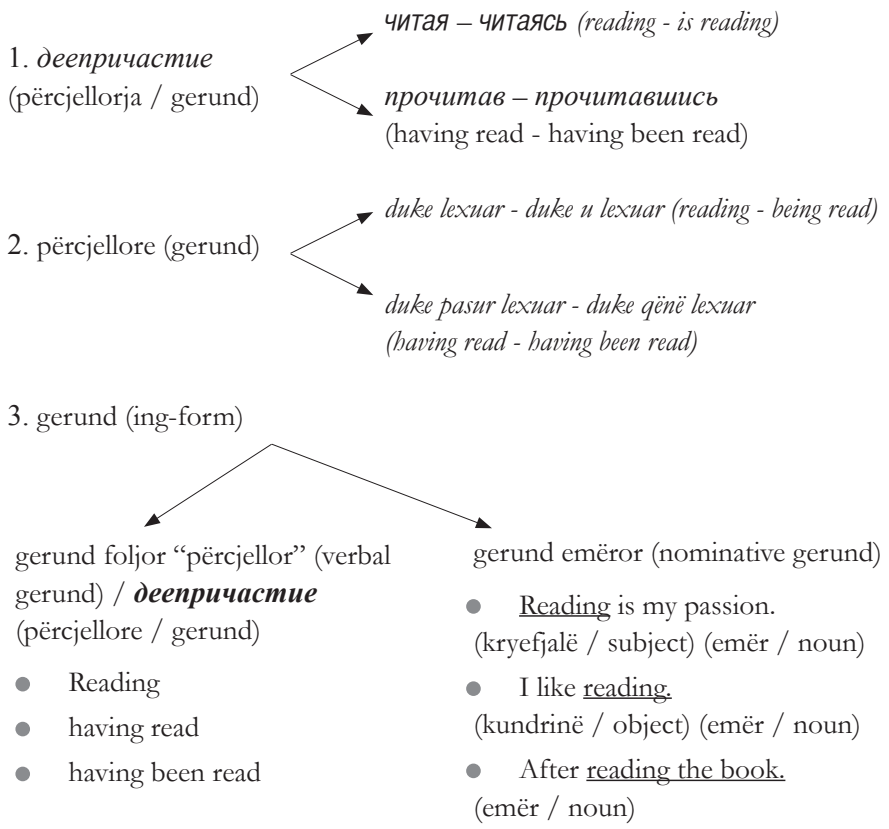
The two main features mentioned above in the three languages, in any case, when they are viewed in a "*one-to-one*" contrast (which emerges from the above illustrations with examples and schematically presented), a special problem arises, in the case when the English gerund in the given functions, as a verbal fact, is put in focus of the manifestation of other functions of one of the categories of invariable forms of the verb, such as the gerund (English). It is often treated in a generalized way as the *ing-form*, where not only its functions are included, where it appears in verbal functions (which can also be called the "*verbal*" *gerund*, presented above), but also in its other non-verbal functions.

Viewed from this point of view, "the English gerund", taking into account its many functions (i.e. not only verbal ones), could be divided into two groups: in the "*verbal*" *gerund* that corresponds to the above conception, which coincides with the above features similar to Russian and Albanian, and in the *"non-verbal" gerund*, which is not the subject of treatment in this study, but leaving it for a later treatment, we are briefly presenting some main functions, putting the semantic-typological-structural correspondences in Albanian and Russian[12]:

- As a participle: Learner *reading* the book; (Nxënësi *që lexon* (që + folje)): Ученик, *читающий* (*читать* + *ющ* + *ий* = *pjesore*);
- As a noun: *Reading* is my passion.; *Të lexuarit (leximi)* është pasioni im; *Чтение* - моя страсть;
- With functions with conjunctions (prepositions): *By reading* the book → *Duke lexuar* librin; *After reading* the book → *Pasi lexoi* librin (*Pasi ka lexuar* librin.);

[12] К. Качалова, Е. Израилевич, *Практическая грамматика английского языка,* (Герунлий), с. 324-341, Москва, 1959.

Summarizing and schematically modeling Russian relations: деепричастие (“përcjellore”) / Alb.: përcjellore (“деепричастие” (Rus.) / gerund (ing-form)) we present it as follows:



We emphasize that the approach of both verb forms, the participle[13] and the gerund[14], with adequate typified forms, especially viewed from a structural-semantic perspective, helps to present them schematically as modeled, which, relying on the typified forms, creates facilitating conditions for explaining them, remembering them, and applying them in use, especially in the process of learning the above languages as foreign languages.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, we can emphasize that the observation of the gerund in relation to several languages, as treated as such in the study in question, in Russian, Albanian and English, has multiple values. Its approach to these languages sheds light on the deepening and

[13] See 1.

[14] See this Study.

expansion of knowledge about them, as a separate category, but also by extending to the verb as a variable and complex category. This is motivated by the fact that, although the verb inflection as an invariable form, has limited grammatical means in its identifying forms, such as in Russian *-я, -в / -ясь, -вшись*, in Albanian in modeled forms like *duke + participle / pasi + verb*, in English only *-ing* (like *-ing-form*), It has a high density of use, especially in the written form of the language and, as such, has cognitive value for the advanced stages of foreign language learning and the translation of artistic and scientific literature.

The Russian gerund is more independent and formally distinct, maintaining an invariable and clear grammatical function, while Albanian and English use analytical constructions to express the same relationships. From this comparison, Russian can serve as a scientific basis for studying the functions of the gerund and for understanding how other languages express secondary or accompanying actions within sentences.

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TEACHER TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: NEW MODELS FOR EMPOWERING EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

In the rapidly evolving landscape of education, the role of the teacher is undergoing profound transformation. Traditional models of teacher training and professional development are increasingly insufficient to meet the demands of a dynamic, technology-driven, and learner-centered environment. This paper explores emerging models of teacher professional development that prioritize continuous, personalized, and collaborative learning. Drawing on recent research and global best practices, it examines innovative approaches such as micro-credentialing, mentorship networks, blended learning environments, and communities of practice. These models emphasize educator agency, reflective practice, and adaptive expertise as central pillars in empowering teachers to navigate the complexities of modern classrooms.The study also reviews case studies from diverse educational contexts where these models have been successfully implemented. Special attention is given to the integration of digital tools and generative AI in professional learning, which offer opportunities for personalization, access to global resources, and continuous feedback. However, the discussion highlights ethical considerations, including equity, teacher autonomy, and the digital divide, which must be addressed for these innovations to be sustainable and inclusive.The analysis emphasizes the importance of aligning professional development initiatives with broader educational reforms and strategies. Institutions and policymakers must recognize that investing in teacher growth has a direct impact on student outcomes and overall school performance. Moreover, supporting professional communities that transcend national boundaries fosters cultural exchange, innovation, and resilience in the global teaching profession.Ultimately, the paper argues for a paradigm shift toward sustainable, context-responsive professional development that positions teachers not only as recipients of knowledge, but as active co-creators of educational change. By fostering reflective practice, supporting collaborative

learning, and encouraging adaptive expertise, these new models empower educators to respond more effectively to the challenges of 21st-century classrooms and to shape the future of education.

Keywords: *teacher empowerment, professional development, training models, lifelong learning, micro-credentials, reflective practice.*

INTRODUCTION

Education in the 21st century is experiencing a transformative shift that challenges long-standing assumptions about the role of the teacher, the nature of knowledge, and the goals of schooling. Far from being a mere transmitter of information, the teacher is increasingly recognized as a facilitator of learning, a designer of engaging environments, and a mediator between knowledge, technology, and the learner's lived experience. This paradigm shift demands that teachers continuously adapt their skills and pedagogical practices in order to meet the diverse and evolving needs of students.

Professional development has historically been positioned as the main instrument for ensuring that teachers remain effective in their roles. In the late 20th century, many educational systems introduced large-scale workshops, centralized training programs, and standardized certification schemes as strategies for teacher improvement. While these efforts provided a foundation, they were often criticized for being too rigid, top-down, and disconnected from teachers' daily realities. Teachers frequently attended professional development events without opportunities to apply new knowledge in practice or to reflect critically on its relevance. This has led to growing dissatisfaction with traditional approaches and to calls for more dynamic and responsive models.

The challenges facing teachers today are multidimensional. The rapid integration of digital technologies into education has created both opportunities and pressures. Teachers are expected not only to master new tools but also to integrate them meaningfully into pedagogy. Additionally, classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse due to globalization, migration, and social change. This diversity requires teachers to develop cultural competence, differentiated instructional strategies, and inclusive practices. Moreover, educational reforms worldwide increasingly emphasize competencies such as creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration—skills that cannot be effectively cultivated without teachers who themselves engage in lifelong learning.

Scholars of educational change, such as Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan, emphasize that teachers must be treated as active agents of change rather than passive implementers of externally imposed reforms. Concepts such as teacher agency and reflective practice highlight the necessity of equipping educators with the tools and autonomy to make informed decisions about their professional growth. Reflective practice, as theorized by Donald Schön, suggests that teachers learn best when they critically examine their own

experiences, experiment with new strategies, and engage in dialogue with peers. In this sense, professional development is not simply about knowledge acquisition but about fostering adaptive expertise and resilience in complex, real-world contexts.

Another dimension of the discussion involves the alignment of teacher professional development with broader educational policies. Policy frameworks that promote teacher empowerment, recognize micro-credentials, and support collaborative networks can play a decisive role in sustaining innovation. Without institutional and systemic backing, even the most promising models may remain isolated pilot projects rather than catalysts for structural change. International organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD stress that teacher learning must be embedded in long-term strategies for educational quality and equity.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze both the limitations of traditional models and the potential of emerging alternatives. It seeks to show how innovations such as micro-credentialing, mentorship networks, blended learning environments, and communities of practice can better respond to the challenges of contemporary education. By drawing upon case studies and comparative research, the paper demonstrates how these approaches can foster continuous, personalized, and collaborative learning for teachers. At the same time, it addresses the integration of digital tools and generative artificial intelligence into professional learning, considering both the opportunities and the ethical challenges that accompany technological transformation.

Ultimately, this study argues that the future of education depends on the capacity of teachers to evolve as lifelong learners, reflective practitioners, and co-creators of knowledge. Professional development, when reimagined as a sustainable, context-responsive, and empowering process, becomes the cornerstone of building resilient education systems. Such a vision requires a shift away from fragmented and episodic training toward coherent and adaptive strategies that place the teacher at the center of educational change. By engaging with these issues, the paper contributes to ongoing debates about how to prepare educators for the uncertainties and opportunities of the future.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO TEACHER TRAINING

Historical Context

The roots of teacher training can be traced to the establishment of normal schools in the 19th century, created to standardize pedagogical practices and ensure that teaching was grounded in a uniform body of knowledge. These schools were designed to produce a professional class of teachers who could faithfully implement state-approved curricula. Over time, ministries of education expanded these practices by introducing compulsory certification, in-service training, and national examinations. This legacy of centralization remains deeply ingrained in many systems today, where teacher training is framed as a regulatory requirement rather than an organic process of professional growth (Goodson 2003).

Features of Traditional Training

Traditional professional development is usually top-down, expert-driven, and episodic. It is often delivered in formats such as lectures, workshops, or policy-orientation sessions. The implicit assumption is that professional knowledge can be transferred from external experts to teachers, who are expected to apply it with little adaptation. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) identify this as the knowledge-for-practice model, where teachers are passive receivers of pre-packaged strategies. Another defining feature is uniformity. Most traditional sessions are designed for large groups of teachers and do not differentiate according to context, grade level, or subject area. This one-size-fits-all approach often results in limited applicability. Additionally, these trainings are usually short-term, taking place once or twice a year, with minimal follow-up or mentoring support (Borko 2004).

Strengths of Traditional Approaches

While much criticized, traditional training has played a foundational role in mass education. It provides a baseline of competence, ensuring that all teachers have access to common information about curricula, policies, and instructional methods. It also allows for efficiency, as governments and institutions can disseminate reforms to thousands of teachers simultaneously. For many systems—particularly those with scarce resources—centralized workshops remain the most feasible mechanism for professional outreach.

In contexts of curriculum reform, traditional approaches serve as essential communication channels. For example, the introduction of competency-based curricula in many European systems during the early 2000s was often facilitated through large-scale training sessions that oriented teachers to the new frameworks (Day 1999).

Critiques and Limitations

Despite these strengths, evidence suggests that traditional models are insufficient for developing the adaptive expertise needed in today's classrooms. Their episodic nature means that teachers rarely have the opportunity to integrate new practices into their routines. Without consistent mentoring or peer support, professional growth is superficial.

Scholars also argue that these models fail to encourage collaborative learning. Teachers attend sessions as individuals, often without opportunities to exchange experiences or engage in joint problem-solving. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (2011) note that effective professional development must be "sustained, collaborative, and embedded in practice," criteria rarely met by traditional methods. Another major critique involves the absence of teacher agency. By framing educators as passive implementers of external knowledge, traditional training undermines professional autonomy and discourages innovation. Teachers frequently report that workshop content feels irrelevant to their daily realities, particularly in diverse classrooms where standardized methods fall short.

International Perspectives

Globally, traditional models have taken different forms but share common weaknesses. In many developing contexts, donor-funded programs emphasize large seminars to disseminate content quickly. While cost-effective, these often lack mechanisms for follow-up, leading to little classroom impact (Villegas-Reimers 2003). In wealthier countries, traditional workshops persist but are criticized as "checkbox exercises" rather than authentic opportunities for growth. For example, in the United States, teachers often attend mandatory professional days with little evidence that such sessions translate into improved learning outcomes (Desimone 2009).

Towards New Paradigms

The persistence of traditional approaches illustrates both their practicality and their limitations. They provide foundational knowledge but do not foster continuous learning, reflective practice, or adaptive expertise. As a result, scholars and policymakers increasingly argue for new paradigms of professional development that are teacher-centered, practice-oriented, and collaborative. These emerging models—such as micro-credentialing, mentorship, blended learning, and communities of practice—seek to empower teachers as active co-creators of knowledge and change agents in their institutions.

EMERGING MODELS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In recent years, professional development has been reconceptualized as a process that should be sustained, contextualized, and teacher-driven. Traditional models, centered on one-time workshops or top-down directives, are increasingly seen as inadequate for equipping teachers to handle the complexities of contemporary classrooms. A new wave of approaches emphasizes personalization, collaboration, and the integration of digital technologies. Four models are especially prominent in the literature and in practice worldwide: micro-credentialing, mentorship networks, blended learning environments, and communities of practice. Each provides a distinct lens on how to strengthen teacher learning, yet they are most effective when combined into a hybrid ecosystem.

Micro-credentialing and personalized pathways

Micro-credentialing has emerged as one of the most innovative approaches to teacher professional development. These credentials, sometimes referred to as "badges" or digital certificates, recognize mastery of specific skills or competencies that teachers can immediately apply in their classrooms. They embody a shift toward lifelong learning, enabling teachers to chart individualized learning pathways rather than rely solely on standardized, episodic training opportunities. According to OECD's 2019 TALIS report, micro-credentials align with the global trend of building professional capital through modular, flexible certifications that better reflect classroom realities (OECD 2019).

The appeal of micro-credentialing lies in its personalization. Teachers can pursue credentials in targeted areas such as project-based learning, digital assessment, or inclusive pedagogy, tailoring their professional development to the needs of their students. Evidence from the United States, particularly the Digital Promise initiative, shows that teachers engaging in micro-credentialing report greater engagement and stronger transfer of learning into practice (Berry and Byrd 2019). Similarly, in Australia, micro-credentials have been used to address inequities in rural and remote regions, where access to traditional training is limited, offering teachers flexible opportunities to develop competencies that are formally recognized within the system.

Yet, micro-credentialing is not without challenges. Without robust frameworks, these credentials risk fragmentation and a lack of recognition across institutions. Critics argue that the emphasis on individual pathways may inadvertently reduce opportunities for collective growth unless they are integrated into broader professional learning communities (Levy 2021). Despite these concerns, micro-credentialing represents a significant step toward professional development that is both teacher-centered and context-responsive.

Mentorship networks

Mentorship has long been valued in teacher induction, but recent developments expand its scope beyond traditional dyadic relationships between novices and experienced mentors. Emerging models increasingly envision mentorship as a networked practice, where teachers connect with peers, senior colleagues, and even international partners in both face-to-face and digital environments. This shift reflects a sociocultural understanding of professional development as relational and collective rather than hierarchical.

Evidence of the impact of mentorship networks is compelling. In Finland, new teachers are systematically paired with trained mentors during their induction period, contributing to the country's consistently high levels of teacher satisfaction and retention (Sahlberg 2011). In Canada, provincial mentorship programs link teachers across schools and districts, fostering cross-pollination of pedagogical practices and strengthening communities of support (Kutsyuruba and Walker 2015). In China, mentorship is institutionalized as part of national education policy, with financial incentives provided to mentors and formal recognition of their role in professional development.

The power of mentorship networks lies in reciprocity. They recognize that learning does not flow exclusively from expert to novice, but that experienced teachers can also gain insights from new entrants, particularly in areas such as technology integration. This dynamic aligns with Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice, where knowledge circulates multidirectionally within professional groups. Still, structural challenges persist. In many systems, mentors carry full teaching loads without compensation or time allocation for their additional responsibilities, leading to uneven quality of mentoring (Ingersoll and Strong 2011). To ensure sustainability, mentorship networks require formal recognition, resources, and integration into school cultures.

Blended learning environments

The integration of digital technologies into professional development has facilitated the growth of blended learning environments, which combine online and face-to-face modalities. This model offers both flexibility and richness, enabling teachers to access global resources and self-paced modules while also engaging in collaborative discussions and in-person workshops.

The advantages of blended professional development became especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when school closures necessitated continuity through online learning platforms. Studies indicate that blended professional development provides greater accessibility for teachers in remote or underserved regions while also supporting differentiation, as participants can progress at their own pace (Trust and Whalen 2020). For example, Singapore's national teacher training system integrates blended learning by combining digital courses with structured in-school learning circles, thus merging individual study with collaborative reflection (Tan 2021).

Nonetheless, blended learning environments face persistent obstacles. The digital divide remains a barrier in many regions, with limited internet access and inadequate digital literacy preventing equitable participation. Moreover, if poorly designed, online components risk reducing professional development to passive information consumption, undermining opportunities for reflection and practice (Kennedy 2019). Successful blended models require intentional design that balances content delivery, interactivity, and sustained engagement.

In countries such as Finland and Estonia, blended professional development has become a cornerstone of national teacher training policies. Finland emphasizes inquiry-based learning, where teachers use online modules to explore research questions that are then discussed in in-person workshops. Estonia, on the other hand, has leveraged its advanced digital infrastructure to create nationwide platforms that host professional development courses for all teachers, ensuring equity of access. These cases illustrate that blended learning can thrive when embedded within a coherent national strategy.

For small or developing countries like Albania, blended environments present both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, they allow teachers from remote or rural areas to access the same high-quality resources as their colleagues in urban centers. On the other hand, uneven digital infrastructure and limited budgets create barriers to equitable implementation. Addressing these issues requires targeted investment in broadband access, teacher digital literacy programs, and ongoing technical support.

The potential of blended learning is particularly significant for diaspora education. Teachers working with Albanian communities abroad can join synchronous online workshops led by experts in Tirana or Prishtina, while also participating in local in-person sessions organized by diaspora associations. This hybrid model not only bridges geographic distance but also strengthens transnational networks of educators who share common cultural and linguistic goals.

Blended professional development also fosters international collaboration. For instance, joint programs between universities in Albania and institutions in Germany or the United States could combine virtual lectures with short-term mobility opportunities. Such initiatives enhance not only the competencies of teachers but also the global visibility of Albanian education and culture. By situating blended learning within a framework of educational diplomacy, Albania can strengthen its soft power and international partnerships.

Finally, sustainability remains a key concern. While many pilot projects in blended learning have shown promise, few have been institutionalized within long-term policy frameworks. Policymakers must ensure that blended professional development is not viewed as a temporary response to crises, but as a permanent feature of teacher education. This requires integrating blended approaches into accreditation systems, aligning them with national curricula, and providing stable funding streams. Only then can blended environments realize their potential to democratize access, foster innovation, and create resilient professional development ecosystems.

Recent global initiatives highlight the growing role of blended professional development in addressing educational equity. The OECD's Education 2030 framework emphasizes that teacher learning must be lifelong, digitally supported, and collaborative. Similarly, UNESCO (2022) has called for blended training models as essential tools to bridge the gap between advanced and developing education systems. These frameworks position blended learning not as an optional practice, but as a necessary foundation for future-ready teachers.

In practice, several large-scale projects showcase the transformative power of blended environments. For example, the European Schoolnet Academy offers MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) to teachers across EU member states, combining online courses with national workshops. In the United States, the Learning Forward initiative provides hybrid coaching models that pair digital modules with local mentorship. These cases illustrate that when blended professional development is embedded within systemic strategies, it generates lasting impact at scale.

Finally, emerging technologies are reshaping blended professional development in real time. The integration of artificial intelligence tools into online modules enables personalized feedback, adaptive assessments, and data-driven insights into teachers' progress. Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are increasingly used to simulate classroom scenarios, giving teachers opportunities to practice instructional strategies in safe, interactive environments. By adopting such innovations, Albania could leapfrog traditional barriers and provide its educators—both domestically and in the diaspora—with cutting-edge professional development that is competitive at a global level.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE ROLE OF AI IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Digital tools and platforms for teacher development

Digital transformation reshapes professional development not only through access to platforms but also through pedagogical innovation. Beyond MOOCs and repositories, digital platforms facilitate synchronous peer observation, collaborative lesson design, and feedback cycles. For instance, European frameworks such as DigCompEdu emphasize teachers' digital pedagogical competence as essential for continuous growth (Redecker 2017). In Albania, national programs are aligning with these standards, embedding digital competence benchmarks into professional evaluations, thus signaling a systemic recognition of technology as integral to teaching.

Recent developments demonstrate that digital platforms are moving beyond static repositories to create interactive ecosystems of teacher learning. For example, the European School Education Gateway offers teachers opportunities to participate in virtual exchange programs, peer-to-peer observation, and collaborative resource design, all integrated with national professional development frameworks. These tools not only support individual growth but also foster transnational professional communities, aligning with broader European integration objectives.

At the same time, emerging innovations in artificial intelligence are transforming how professional development is designed and delivered. Adaptive platforms such as Coursera for Teachers and Microsoft's Education Insights provide real-time analytics on teacher engagement, highlight areas where additional support is needed, and personalize professional development pathways. In Finland, AI-powered systems are already being piloted to analyze classroom interactions and provide teachers with constructive feedback on their instructional strategies. Such practices illustrate how AI can shift professional learning from reactive to proactive, anticipating needs rather than merely responding to them.

For Albania, digital transformation offers a unique opportunity to leapfrog structural limitations in its professional development system. Diaspora teachers, who often lack access to continuous training, could benefit from hybrid platforms that combine AI-driven learning modules with synchronous workshops delivered by universities in Tirana or Prishtina. Additionally, partnerships with global edtech companies could accelerate the localization of cutting-edge platforms, ensuring that Albanian teachers—both at home and abroad—participate in the global flow of digital pedagogical innovation. Embedding such initiatives into Albania's National Strategy for Teacher Development would position the country not only as a beneficiary but also as a contributor to international knowledge exchange.

Emergence of generative AI in teacher development

Generative AI is increasingly being piloted as a tool to provide personalized and scalable support for teachers. In the Netherlands, for example, AI-powered chatbots are used to

simulate parent–teacher conversations, helping educators practice communication strategies in a safe environment. In the United States, systems such as TeachFX analyze classroom dialogue and generate real-time suggestions on teacher questioning techniques, promoting more interactive pedagogy. These initiatives show that generative AI can complement traditional mentoring by offering continuous, low-cost guidance.

Beyond classroom coaching, generative AI also assists in curriculum design and assessment. Tools like ChatGPT or EduAI are being used by teachers in Spain and Finland to co-create lesson plans, generate differentiated assignments, and even design formative quizzes tailored to student profiles. This reduces the administrative burden on teachers, freeing them to focus on deeper instructional planning. However, scholars caution that such tools must be integrated thoughtfully to avoid over-reliance on automated outputs and to preserve teacher agency in decision-making.

For Albania, the integration of generative AI into teacher education remains an emerging but promising field. Pilot discussions at the University of Vlora and the University of Tirana indicate interest in embedding AI-assisted modules in pedagogy courses. This could democratize access to high-quality training for both urban and rural teachers. Yet successful implementation requires investment in digital literacy, strong ethical frameworks to protect data privacy, and professional codes of conduct that define how AI tools should be used responsibly in educational contexts.

Benefits and advantages of digital and AI-enhanced PD

The benefits of digital transformation extend well beyond efficiency; they reshape the scope of professional development into a global and collaborative endeavor. In Scandinavia, cross-border teacher networks use AI-powered translation tools to exchange practices in real time, overcoming language barriers and fostering cultural competence. For Albanian teachers, particularly those in the diaspora, this global connectedness ensures exposure to innovative methodologies and strengthens their dual role as cultural ambassadors and pedagogical leaders.

Digital and AI-enhanced professional development also promotes equity. UNESCO (2022) highlights that AI-supported platforms can extend high-quality training to marginalized and underserved communities at a fraction of traditional costs. In South Africa and India, for instance, teachers in remote regions are accessing continuous coaching via blended AI systems that adapt training materials to local contexts. For Albania, similar strategies could ensure that educators in rural areas or smaller municipalities benefit from the same resources as their peers in Tirana, thus narrowing the rural–urban divide.

Another key advantage is sustainability. Unlike episodic workshops, AI-enabled professional development generates continuous data that can inform national policy and systemic reforms. Ministries of Education in countries like Singapore and Estonia are already using AI dashboards to track teacher progress, identify areas of need, and align professional development with curriculum reforms. If Albania integrates similar systems, it could

establish a feedback loop between classroom practice and policy, ensuring that reforms are evidence-based and responsive. This alignment would not only modernize professional development but also advance Albania's EU integration goals by synchronizing with European standards of digital and educational innovation.

Challenges and ethical considerations

One of the most pressing challenges in AI-enhanced professional development is the issue of data privacy. Teacher–student interactions, when recorded and analyzed by AI tools, create large datasets that may include sensitive information such as performance patterns, personal identifiers, or socio-emotional markers. In the European Union, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) sets strict standards for handling such data, but compliance remains uneven across member states. For Albania, adopting robust data protection frameworks is essential to ensure that digital and AI systems in teacher development respect privacy and ethical norms. In addition, clear protocols for consent, anonymization, and data storage should be developed so that educators and students alike feel secure in engaging with AI-powered platforms.

Another ethical dilemma concerns the potential for algorithmic bias. If AI systems are trained on datasets that reflect dominant cultural or linguistic practices, they may unintentionally marginalize minority perspectives or reinforce stereotypes. For example, studies from the United States have shown that AI grading systems sometimes favor certain linguistic registers, disadvantaging bilingual or non-native English speakers. Similar risks could emerge in Albania if AI systems are not localized and carefully monitored. The creation of ethical oversight committees within universities and ministries could help mitigate these biases by auditing datasets and ensuring that AI models incorporate diverse linguistic and cultural realities.

A third concern relates to teacher agency and professional autonomy. While AI tools can provide valuable insights, they should never replace the professional judgment of educators. Over-reliance on automated feedback risks disempowering teachers and reducing professional development to a mechanistic process. To avoid this, professional learning should frame AI as an assistive partner rather than an authority. Embedding critical AI literacy into teacher education programs would empower teachers to evaluate, adapt, and contextualize AI recommendations while maintaining ownership of their practice. In this sense, ethical professional development must balance innovation with human-centered pedagogy, ensuring that AI enhances rather than undermines the teacher's role.

Case Study: University of Vlora and Lifelong Learning Initiatives

The University of Vlora provides an illustrative example of how higher education institutions can drive national digital transformation in teacher development. Its involvement in EU-funded projects such as CRED4TEACH demonstrates the value of cross-border

partnerships, allowing Albanian educators to access best practices from European peers. Through hybrid courses and online modules, Vlora has extended its reach beyond pre-service teachers to include continuous training for in-service teachers across different regions of Albania. In this way, the university not only responds to immediate training needs but also lays the foundation for a culture of lifelong learning that aligns with European standards.

A key feature of the Vlora model is its ecosystemic approach. Rather than treating digital professional development as a series of isolated workshops, the university has created networks that integrate research, teaching, and community outreach. For instance, pilot projects have tested the use of AI-assisted feedback tools in lesson design, while collaborative hubs bring together local schools and education authorities to reflect on results. This holistic model strengthens trust between academia and the teaching profession, ensuring that innovations are contextually relevant and tailored to the realities of Albanian classrooms.

In addition, the Vlora experience highlights the importance of capacity building among educators and administrators. The university has invested in training academic staff to design and implement AI-enhanced learning modules, thereby ensuring that innovation is not limited to imported models but grows from within the Albanian context. These efforts have been accompanied by awareness-raising campaigns and community dialogues that emphasize ethical responsibility, inclusivity, and teacher autonomy in the digital era. By embedding these principles, Vlora ensures that professional development is not perceived as a top-down imposition but as a collaborative and empowering process for all stakeholders.

Moreover, the University of Vlora demonstrates that sustainable digital transformation requires integration with broader socio-economic strategies. Its collaborations with municipalities, local education authorities, and regional development agencies illustrate how professional development initiatives can generate spillover benefits beyond the academic sector, fostering innovation ecosystems that support both education and local communities. By aligning its programs with Albania's European integration agenda, the university also contributes to enhancing the country's international reputation as a proactive participant in global discussions on digital pedagogy and AI ethics. This dual role—local innovator and international partner—makes the Vlora model a valuable case study for national reform.

Finally, the Vlora model underscores the importance of long-term institutional commitment and policy alignment. Temporary projects, though impactful, cannot replace structural reforms that embed digital professional development into the core mission of universities. By integrating digital pedagogy into curricula, research agendas, and governance frameworks, the University of Vlora sets an example of how innovation can become a permanent feature of the academic landscape. If supported by national policy and adequately funded, such initiatives could evolve into centers of excellence that not only train teachers but also influence broader educational reforms across Albania.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The reconfiguration of teacher professional development into more personalized, collaborative, and digitally enhanced formats has profound implications for educational policy. Governments and institutions must not only recognize these shifts but also create enabling environments where innovative professional development models can thrive. At the policy level, three central imperatives emerge: aligning national standards with global frameworks, investing in sustainable infrastructures, and fostering partnerships between higher education, schools, and international organizations.

One critical implication concerns the alignment of professional development with broader educational reforms. Policies must ensure that teacher learning is not isolated but directly tied to curriculum reforms, student assessment standards, and national education strategies. International frameworks such as UNESCO's Futures of Education and the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey provide benchmarks for embedding teacher professional development into systemic reforms (OECD 2019; UNESCO 2021). In Albania, this alignment has become increasingly visible through national strategies that prioritize digital competence and pedagogical innovation as part of the EU integration agenda. However, as critics note, policy rhetoric often surpasses implementation. Without consistent monitoring and evaluation, teacher development risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative (Fullan 2016).

A second implication relates to infrastructure and resources. Policy must guarantee equitable access to digital platforms, AI-enhanced tools, and mentorship opportunities. This requires investment not only in technology but also in teacher preparation and ongoing support. Albania's "Digital Education Project," coordinated in partnership with UNESCO, exemplifies how targeted investment in ICT infrastructure and smart classrooms can enhance teacher readiness across the country. Yet the Albanian case also shows persistent disparities between urban and rural areas, where connectivity and resource availability remain limited (Cipi, Qarri, and Cipi 2021). Thus, digital transformation in professional development cannot succeed without parallel investments in social equity and resource redistribution.

Higher education institutions, particularly universities, play a pivotal role in shaping future directions. The University of Vlora illustrates how universities can act as hubs of professional development, coordinating lifelong learning initiatives, piloting micro-credentials, and serving as regional centers for innovation. Policymakers should formalize these roles by embedding universities into national teacher training frameworks, ensuring continuity between pre-service and in-service training. Such partnerships strengthen coherence, efficiency, and scalability. At the same time, university-led initiatives must avoid over-centralization, as excessive dependence on a few institutions can stifle diversity and responsiveness. A pluralistic ecosystem where multiple actors contribute to teacher PD is more sustainable in the long term.

Looking forward, policies must also address the ethical governance of AI in education. As generative AI becomes more embedded in teacher development, questions of data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and teacher autonomy demand regulatory attention. Policymakers

must establish safeguards to ensure AI enhances rather than diminishes professional judgment. Moreover, the commercialization of AI platforms calls for policy frameworks that prioritize open-source or publicly accessible systems, preventing professional development from becoming a market-driven privilege. The critical question is not whether AI should be used, but how it should be governed to ensure professional agency remains central (Williamson and Piattoeva 2022).

Finally, future directions emphasize the need for resilience and adaptability. Education systems must anticipate rapid technological changes and global disruptions, as the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated. Policies should build teacher development systems that are flexible, scalable, and responsive to both local contexts and global challenges. This means embedding professional learning into broader agendas such as sustainable development, social inclusion, and lifelong learning. Ultimately, empowering teachers as reflective agents of change requires policies that are not merely reactive but visionary, embedding professional development into the very fabric of educational reform.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has examined the transformation of teacher training and professional development in the context of a rapidly changing educational landscape. Traditional models, while valuable in their historical role, have proven insufficient to address the complex demands of the 21st century. Instead, emerging models such as micro-credentialing, mentorship networks, blended learning environments, and communities of practice demonstrate greater capacity to empower teachers through personalized, continuous, and collaborative approaches. Digital transformation, particularly through the integration of generative AI, has further expanded the possibilities of professional development, providing new avenues for reflective practice, adaptive expertise, and global collaboration.

The case of Albania, and particularly the University of Vlora, highlights both opportunities and challenges in adopting these models. While there is clear alignment with European frameworks and increasing institutional commitment to digital competence, persistent disparities between urban and rural schools, as well as resource constraints, reveal the structural barriers that still impede equitable access. These findings reinforce the importance of context-responsive approaches that adapt international best practices to local realities rather than importing them wholesale.

From a policy perspective, three insights emerge clearly. First, teacher professional development must be embedded within broader educational reforms rather than treated as a separate initiative. Curriculum innovation, assessment standards, and teacher growth must advance in parallel, supported by systemic monitoring and evaluation. Second, equity must be at the heart of professional development strategies. Without targeted investment in infrastructure and inclusive access, technological innovations risk deepening existing inequalities. Third, universities must be recognized as central actors in lifelong learning ecosystems. By connecting

pre-service preparation with in-service training, higher education institutions can serve as sustainable hubs for professional innovation and teacher empowerment.

At the same time, the integration of generative AI introduces new ethical challenges. Policies must safeguard teacher autonomy, ensure transparency in algorithmic processes, and prevent over-commercialization of professional development platforms. Only through critical governance can AI function as a tool of empowerment rather than control.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are advanced:

- for policymakers: develop long-term frameworks that integrate teacher professional development into national strategies, align them with eu benchmarks, and invest in equitable digital infrastructures that reach all regions of the country.
- for universities: strengthen their role as hubs of professional development by offering micro-credentials, hybrid learning opportunities, and ai-supported reflective practice, while collaborating with schools and ministries.
- for schools and teachers: cultivate professional communities of practice that sustain collaborative learning and encourage experimentation with digital and ai-enhanced tools in ways that are ethically sound and pedagogically meaningful.
- for international organizations: provide sustained support for context-sensitive reforms in countries like Albania, where alignment with european standards must be accompanied by investments in equity and sustainability.

In conclusion, teacher empowerment in the 21st century requires a paradigm shift that views teachers not only as recipients of training but as co-creators of educational change. By embedding reflective practice, supporting collaborative networks, and harnessing the potential of digital transformation responsibly, education systems can ensure that professional development becomes both sustainable and transformative. The future of education depends on the capacity to invest in teachers as adaptive professionals who are equipped not only to respond to present challenges but also to shape the evolving landscape of global learning.

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IMPLEMENTATION OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES IN PEDIATRIC IMAGING: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The development of new technologies in medical imaging has significantly advanced diagnostic capabilities, particularly in pediatric patients. These innovations offer enhanced image quality while reducing risk; however, their application in children presents specific challenges due to higher sensitivity to radiation, limited cooperation during imaging procedures, and the need for personalized approaches. This paper explores the practical, technical, and ethical challenges associated with the use of advanced modalities such as low-dose CT, accelerated MRI, advanced ultrasound, and artificial intelligence (AI) in pediatric imaging.

Through a review of current literature and clinical experience, the study presents actionable strategies to address these challenges. These include the development of pediatric-specific imaging protocols, ongoing staff training, creation of child-friendly environments, and the integration of AI to optimize scanning parameters and streamline image interpretation. The findings underscore the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to ensure safe, effective, and ethical imaging care for pediatric patients. Modern imaging technologies, when applied thoughtfully and responsibly, can significantly enhance diagnostic accuracy while minimizing potential harm.

INTRODUCTION

Pediatric imaging has undergone major technological advances aimed at reducing harm and improving diagnostic accuracy. Children's anatomy, radiosensitivity, and motion susceptibility require the adaptation of imaging methods and the integration of newer technologies. This extended article includes graphical illustrations, structured tables, and a dedicated RX section.

Table 1. Comparison of Emerging Pediatric Imaging Technologies

Technology	Clinical Use	Advantages	Limitations
Low-dose CT	Trauma, lung disease	90% radiation reduction	High equipment cost
Fast MRI	Neuro, abdomen, MSK	Sedation reduction	Longer acquisition than CT
Elastography	Liver, thyroid	Non-invasive stiffness	Operator dependent
CEUS	Liver, trauma	Zero radiation	Limited regulatory approval
AI	Detection & segmentation	Automation, speed	Bias, dataset limitations
3D Printing	Surgical planning	High precision	Expensive

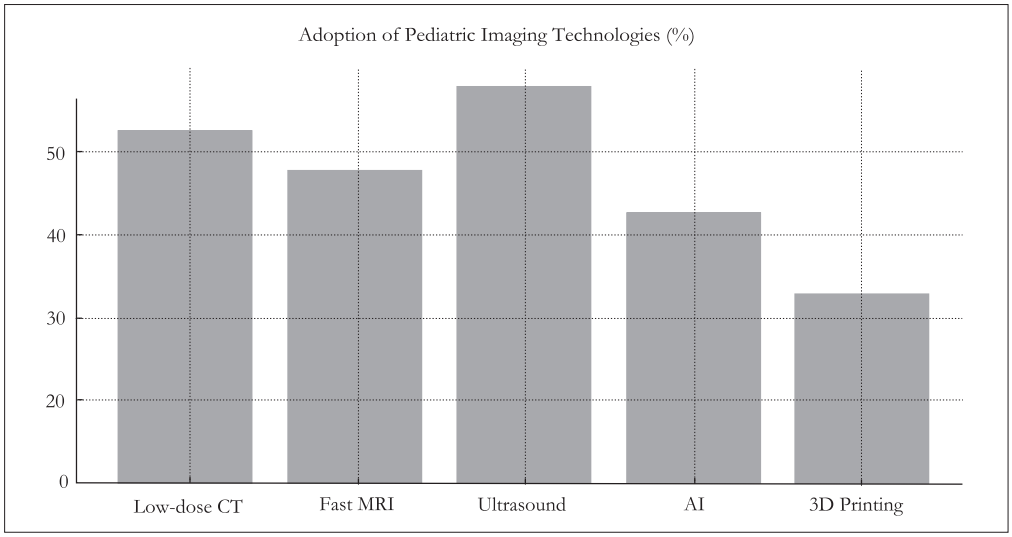


Figure 1. *Adoption of Pediatric Imaging Technologies*

EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

This section provides expanded details on each modality, incorporating scientific accuracy.

Low-Dose CT

Ultra-low-dose CT incorporates iterative reconstruction, photon-counting detectors, and tin filters, achieving up to 90% dose reduction. It is valuable in lung imaging, trauma, and congenital anomalies.

Fast MRI

Fast MRI sequences reduce exam duration, decreasing sedation need. Motion-corrected imaging improves pediatric neurologic and abdominal studies.

Fast MRI platforms allow sedation-free imaging for children older than three years and generate diagnostic-quality images in minutes.

Elastography & CEUS

High-frequency probes, elastography, and CEUS expand diagnostic capability without radiation. Ultrasound remains the primary modality for neonates and infants.

Elastography quantitatively measures tissue stiffness, while CEUS safely evaluates microvascular perfusion.

Artificial Intelligence

AI aids the detection of pneumonia, fractures, hemorrhage, and tumors. AI-based reconstruction improves image quality while reducing radiation. Ethical concerns persist regarding pediatric datasets.

3D Printing and VR

3D printing is widely used in congenital cardiac disease and orthopedic deformities, enabling precise surgical planning.

Implementation challenges include radiation concerns, motion artifacts, high equipment cost, limited availability in low-resource regions, ethical issues with AI, and insufficient specialized training.

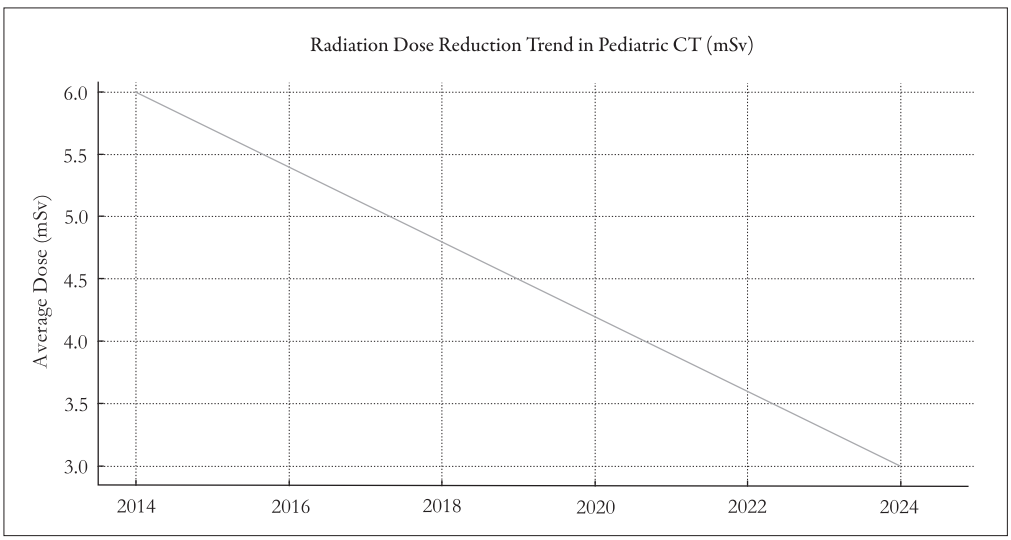


Figure 2. *Radiation Dose Reduction Trend*

PEDIATRIC RADIOGRAPHY (RX)

Digital radiography in pediatrics has advanced through dose-efficient detectors, automated exposure control, and AI-based patient positioning. These tools minimize repeat exposures and improve soft-tissue contrast.

DISCUSSION

Advanced technologies greatly enhance diagnostic workflows but introduce ethical and financial challenges. AI requires pediatric-specific datasets to avoid algorithmic bias. Artificial intelligence (AI) in medical imaging has rapidly expanded in recent years; however, very little AI has been dedicated to pediatric imaging.

Few products indicate whether they are validated for children, and pediatric imaging requires careful adaptation due to age-specific variability.

Of the >200 AI software as a medical device cleared by the FDA currently listed in the online ACR Data Science Institute catalog, only 6 (3%) indicate that they are intended for pediatric use.

There are no computer-aided diagnosis radiology products authorized for pediatric use. Kids' medical needs and body sizes change a lot as they grow, and their organs and bones look different at each age. These differences make interpreting pediatric medical images challenging for radiologists who aren't specialists.

As children grow, their bone marrow, skeletal patterns, thymus, brain metabolism, and organ blood flow all change. These developmental differences affect how medical images look and must be considered when designing AI tools. Differences in blood vessel size and circulation also mean that contrast agents need to be tailored for pediatric patients to achieve good imaging results.

The findings highlight that emerging technologies significantly improve diagnostic safety and precision in pediatric imaging. Radiation optimization remains essential, with low-dose CT and AI-based dose monitoring reducing long-term cancer risk. Motion challenges can be mitigated using fast MRI sequences and child-friendly environments. However, disparities in low-resource regions hinder technology adoption. Tele-radiology, refurbished equipment, and regional collaborations offer practical solutions. Ethical issues in AI—including privacy, consent, and algorithm transparency—must be addressed through robust frameworks. Training remains a critical component of implementation, requiring investment in pediatric-specific education.

CONCLUSION

Emerging imaging technologies will continue reshaping pediatric care. Equitable global implementation must include policies for access, dose management, and ethical AI integration.

AI for pediatric radiology is far behind adult applications, so timely action is needed to make pediatric AI tools accessible, safe, effective, and reliable for children. Actively involving pediatric radiologists is crucial both to mentor others who care for children and to ensure that AI systems reflect the unique nuances of pediatric practice. Their expert guidance will be key to how pediatric AI tools are designed, validated, and adopted.

Small centers with few specialists and limited funding will find it much more difficult to implement new imaging methods and pediatric AI–based techniques.

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THE ROLE OF DIGITALIZATION IN STUDENT BEHAVIOUR AND THE MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Digitalization is fundamentally transforming both the management of higher education institutions (HEIs) and student behavior. The integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) has reshaped how HEIs deliver services, manage resources, and interact with students. Across Europe, institutions are increasingly using digital platforms to enhance efficiency, transparency, and personalized student support. These tools offer real-time access to academic records and services, promoting greater student engagement, self-regulation, and accountability (Aydin, 2022; Jisc, 2023).

This review synthesizes recent academic literature to identify the benefits and challenges of digital transformation in HEIs. Key advantages include flexibility, data-informed decision-making, and inclusive access to education. Yet, significant challenges persist, such as digital literacy gaps, resistance to change, and infrastructure inequalities (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2023). Emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, machine learning, and analytics are also being adopted to support adaptive learning and strategic planning (García-Peñalvo et al., 2022; Rospigliosi, 2023).

Findings suggest that effective digitalization requires not only technological upgrades but also organizational culture change and continuous capacity building. Understanding the impact of digital tools on student engagement and institutional performance is critical for policymakers and educators aiming to modernize higher education systems.

Keywords: *Digitalization; higher education; student behavior; ICT; AI; transformation*

INTRODUCTION

As the digital world continues to mature, higher education institutions have undergone rapid transformations to survive in the ever-changing and complex digital ecosystem. Increasing focus is placed on digitalization to enhance institutional competitiveness, student-visits, and even administrative performance (Laurillard, 2013; Marginson, 2018). As highlighted in the Digital Education Action Plan 2021 - 2027, the European Commission (2020) focused on digital transformation and the need to properly situate higher education within the broader digital transformations of society.

These abstract reviews the literature on the behavioral impact of digitalization on students and its use for the management of institutions. Through a synthesis of international scholarship and regional perspectives, with a focus on Europe and Albania, this review highlights the benefits, challenges, and cultural implications of digital transformation in higher education.

DIGITALIZATION AND STUDENT BEHAVIOR

One great example of the impact digitalization has had on higher education is the change in students' behavior. There is evidence to suggest the use of digital tools has changed the ways in which students learn, engage, and interact with any learning content on (Bond et al., 2021). Today, students learn and engage with content with academic descriptions in more ways than ever which has increased their independence as well as their mobility and availability to learning resources.

Digitalization encourages students to undertake self-directed learning. Students are now more in control of the pace of their learning and how their study schedule is organized. Students can access their learning resources, performance indicators, and peer/staff comments in real time (Laurillard, 2013). This encourages active learning and personal responsibility for learning. The "digital native" perspective myths should be broken. Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017) argues that the misconception that all students have access to advanced digital skills should be corrected. Digital competencies are a result of learning and go through several stages of development.

Digitalization is said to change the social structures of higher education as well. There is evidence of the development of peer enforcement complemented using online social collaborative resources. On the contrary, the development of remote learning because of the COVID 19 pandemic has been associated with the emergence of social isolation and a lack of motivation (Crawford et al., 2020). This means that the changes in behaviors... are exacerbated by the increased availability also come with more complex psychological and social challenges.

MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Looking through the lens of institutions, the adoption of digital platforms enables the universities to para processes, eliminate excess red tape, and improve transparency (Selwyn, 2016). The LMS, student relationship management systems, and data dashboards enable HEIs to assist in data driven personalized support supervision as well as track performance of the institutions.

Graduates and Administrative Heads can further streamline management processes through digital infrastructure allocation. Big data and predictive analytics enable decision makers to supervise expenditure focused on determining at-risk students and evaluating program impact (Marginson, 2018). These techniques resonate with the worldwide movement in higher education towards evidence-based management.

Across Europe, HEIs has adopted digital systems to respond to the requirements of competitive and knowledge-based economies. The situation in Albania illustrates the opposite 'digital divide' scenario: though much progress has been made, cultural lag and infrastructural deficits still pose a challenge for complete digital integration (Shkembi, 2022).

One of the 10 biggest improvements noted from the process of digitalization in managing higher education is improvement in administration productivity. Digital technologies, such as ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) Systems and LMS (Learning Management Systems) help in the centralization of data collection and workflow process. This enables the streamlining of workflows by reducing bureaucratic redundancies (Laurillard 2013). This streamlining save time in communication and enables the staff to focus more on teaching and research activities.

More openness also serves as an advantage. Digital systems provide students with payment systems and other administrative services, loosening blockages and processes within institutions. This improves transparency and accountability, as well as the overall relationship between the students and the institution (Marginson 2018)

Digitalization supports the transition from experience-based to evidence-based governance. According to Bond et al. (2021), higher education institutions (HEIs) can ascertain student performance, ascertain potential dropout risks, and determine the need for action through predictive analytics. For instance, predictive analytics can identify at-risk students so that timely action can be taken by the institution to provide them support services through mentoring programs to reduce attrition.

At the strategic level, data analytics guide the management of resources, faculty workload, and curriculum resources. This has been especially useful in the context of the massification of higher education, whereby institutions need to meet the standards of quality and growth in student enrollment (Marginson, 2018).

The installation of technology infrastructures is vital, but not the foremost driver of success of digitalization in HEIs. It is the management and the cultural ethos of the organization

that matter the most. The simplification of the prediction of technology adoption failure by leaders to diffusions in the "institutional" culture is the argument positioned by Selwyn (2016). It is the misconception of digitalization as a managerial apparatus of control as opposed to a mechanism of support that has led to the emergence of apprehension by faculty, fears of surveillance, and concerns for academic freedom (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017).

Successful leaders should adopt comprehensive approaches to management that promote participation of faculty, administrative workers, and students. This approach fosters not just support but digitalization of the HEIs for the primary purposes of pedagogy of the institution and is not implemented as an administrative burden (Laurillard, 2013).

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF DIGITALIZATION

The digitalization of higher education offers a multitude of advantages which have been pointed out by numerous studies.

Having flexibility means that students and staff can access digitalized resources anytime and anywhere which enhances mobility. Online learning facilitates both synchronous and asynchronous learning which makes education more broad-based. Laurillard, 2013.

New platforms have the capacity to increase equity in access, especially for underserved populations. As a result of digitalization, barriers such as geography and socio-economic status are no longer hindrances for adult learners and learners from non-traditional backgrounds. European Commission, 2020.

The ability to collect and analyze large datasets through digitalization enhances evidence-based decision-making and strategy development. Data-driven decision-making improves the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching, student (and learning) support, and the institutional mechanisms at higher education institutions (Bond, 2021).

In the interest of adaptive learning, new technologies such as artificial intelligences (AI) and machine learning can provide learners with real time support that responds in real time to distinct needs of the learners (Selwyn, 2016).

European Perspectives and the Albanian Context:

Even with the advantages that technology brings with it, it brings new challenges too.

One challenge that is removing this gap is the digital literacy gap. There are many people in the faculty as well as the student body that do not have the skills to properly utilize technology. This situation will increase inequality and decrease inclusivity (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017).

There are also changes that come with technology that do not encourage its adoption. Negative attitude toward the emergence of new digital technologies that enhance changes to

the conventional techniques of teaching is considered as stagnation (Selwyn, 2016). Likewise, slowness to adopting new innovative techniques is known as institutional stagnation.

The lack of digital resources in some of the European countries is part of the infrastructure gap. Advanced digital resources are one of the many advantages that universities in the rest of Europe possess in comparison to Albania and other developing regions (Shkembi, 2022).

There have also been new issues that have come up. Things like student consent and the use of drones in the classroom are some of the few things that people have been thinking about recently (Marginson, 2018).

Throughout Europe, universities have incorporated digitalization into their operations at the institutional level, as part of the broader national and regional strategies. The European Commission (2020) considers digital education a policy priority, connecting it to both competitiveness and inclusion. Advanced digital infrastructures in countries like Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands include integrated learning, AI-driven assessment, and virtual classrooms (Crawford et al. 2020).

As a transitional area, Albania is at the border of 'developed' and 'developing' countries. Research shows that the higher educational institutions in Albania acknowledge the importance of digital transformation, however their implementation is inhibited by financial limitations, lack of sufficient infrastructure, as well as sociocultural factors, or backwardness (Shkembi, 2022). There are gaps in faculty training, student support, and institutional leadership that need to be filled.

This comparative approach underscores Albania's digitalization as part of Europe, with particular attention to the context-sensitive needs of strategies.

Emerging Technologies in Higher Education:

The future of digitization within higher education is interlinked with transformative technical innovations. Tools of Artificial Intelligence are increasingly used to support one's learning with personalized pathways while providing real time feedback and enhancing the accuracy of assessments (Bond et al., 2021). Predictive analytics allow universities to forecast student success and retention, as well as strategize the allocation of resources.

Apart from AI, immersive technologies like VR and AR offer the opportunity to learn by doing medicine, architecture, and engineering. Blockchain technologies are also being explored for secure and seamless credential verification, as well as the management of academic records (Selwyn, 2016).

All the above innovations imply that the role of digitalization in teaching pedagogy, governance and the institutional identity of the school will likely transition from being a supportive role to being the primary transformative driver.

DISCUSSION

Recent scholars highlight that digitalization is much more than a change in the technology used by institutions, it involves a change in culture (Selwyn, 2016; Castells, 2010). Institutions that fully invest in digitalization are expected to adopt values such as flexibility, collaboration, and governance by data.

Laurillard (2013) articulates a more nuanced framework. Digital tools do not lead to better outcomes by default. There are still gaps in policy, institutional culture, and pedagogy that technologically enhanced environments fail to address, and the digital divide is certainly one of them, as seen in Albania.

With the advent of an analytics culture, ethical issues such as data- driven decision making are required to improve operational efficiency. This further accentuates the need to discuss surveillance culture and the need to protect student information and privacy (Marginson, 2018).

All in all, the status quo of digitalization for any aspect of governance is to capitalize it as an inclusive form of technological advancement that comes with both challenges and advantages. Inclusivity, critical thinking, and a change of culture is the only optimal path to achieving the advantages.

CONCLUSION

The literature review shows how digitalization can impact the behavior of students and the administration of higher education institutions. It also shows how the potential of engagement, flexibility and efficiency is counter-balanced by the problems of illiteracy, resistance, inequality and ethics.

Unlike Albania, which shows how the lack of resources can restrict the potential of integrated digital strategies, European universities showcase the potential of integrated strategies. Digital transformation is further emphasized by the digitalization of education, particularly the use of AI, VR, and blockchain.

More research is needed to understand the impact of digitalization on educational practices and identify the cultural changes it brings to the higher education system. Emphasizing innovation while critically addressing the risks of digital transformation will be necessary to ensure the predicted promise of higher education transformation to result in more inclusive, efficient and flexible systems.

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WHEN ALGORITHMS MEET SOCIETY: EXAMINING SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION OF ALGORITHMIC SYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) holds immense potential to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by improving efficiency, optimizing resource allocation, and enabling data-driven decision-making. AI solutions offer transformative benefits to improve, among others, healthcare systems (SDG 3), agricultural productivity (SDG 2), and clean energy transitions (SDG 7). Furthermore, government agencies worldwide are increasingly utilizing algorithms to improve the efficiency of their public services, such as granting parental leave or providing access to social services. However, such positive views of these algorithmic systems' effects have been called into question, with a growing body of evidence suggesting that they can contribute to injustice, discrimination, racism, poverty, and inequality. While governmental agencies are increasingly implementing such systems, research on their societal impact remains limited. This gain in understanding is particularly critical for Albania, where the ongoing digitalization efforts are fundamentally shaping public services. As such, there is an urgent need to examine the impacts of these systems on different segments of Albanian society, particularly vulnerable populations who may face additional barriers to accessing these digital public services. Adopting a dignity lens, this paper offers a thorough review of the some of AI-driven digital platforms. We explore the potential claims and affronts that such platforms may enable for the Albanian citizens as well as we chart our future path.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence (AI); Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Algorithmic governance; Digital public services; Ethical implications of AI; Human dignity*

INTRODUCTION

The recent appointment of the first AI minister in the Albanian Government[1] marks a shift in how governments are approaching AI systems. AI is no longer viewed as just a technical matter, but it is becoming a political and societal issue that requires careful governance (Rinta-Kahila et al., 2022). This political move is indeed aligned with the increasing deployments of AI solutions in government agencies to enhance the efficiency of public services provided to citizens (Marjanovic et al. 2021; Nagtegaal 2021; Noble 2018). While these technologies promise improvements, they also raise important governance and ethical questions, such as who may be excluded, who stands to benefit, who is accountable, and whether the core social values, such as dignity, fairness, and inclusion, are being reshaped (Diakopoulos 2016; Hoffmann 2019, Marjanovic et al. 2021).

A central premise of our work is that technology—and algorithmic systems in particular—has a dual nature. On one hand, algorithmic systems can enhance efficiency, reduce corruption, personalize services, and expand access to information and resources (Fan et al, 2023; Vinuesa et al, 2020; Nishant et al, 2020; Marjanovic et al., 2021; Alexiadou, 2024). For instance, digital platforms can simplify administrative procedures, reduce the need for physical presence in government offices, and make services available outside standard opening hours. This would benefit citizens who previously might have faced geographic, financial, administrative, logistical or social barriers. On the other hand, the same systems can introduce new forms of exclusion and vulnerability (Fügener et al., 2021; Hoffmann, 2019; Malmio, 2024; Köchling & Wehner, 2020; Nagtegaal, 2021; Busuioc, 2021; Noble, 2018). Interfaces that are designed without considering language, literacy, or disability can unintentionally exclude already marginalized groups. Complexity of functions and use can worsen understanding and create new barriers for technology challenged individuals.

Much of the existing literature and policy debate surrounding AI and algorithmic systems has focused on security, privacy, and technical robustness (REF). The focus in this paper is to adopt a human dignity lens perspective when assessing such systems (Leidner and Tona, 2021). Rather than treating users as passive recipients of technological solutions, we consider them as agents whose claims, vulnerabilities, and responses must be understood and respected. This perspective would allow us to capture (potential) harms and benefits that might not be visible through traditional risk-based or security-oriented frameworks. In this study, we seek to answer the following research question: W*hat potential claims and affronts to dignity may be enabled by AI-driven digital platforms for citizens in Albania?*

Our analysis is grounded in concrete cases of algorithmic and AI-driven platforms embedded in governance and organizational settings within the Albanian context. By presenting the main use of these platforms, we aim to understand how they may simultaneously expand and constrain possibilities for dignified and inclusive social participation.

[1] https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cm2znzgwj3xo

The structure of the paper is as follows. We provide a brief literature overview on AI/ algorithmic systems and societal implications, followed by the theoretical perspective adopted for this study. We then present our findings in detail and conclude with the plans for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Government agencies worldwide are increasingly utilizing algorithms to deliver public services, from healthcare to education, from grating parental leave to providing access to social services (Marjanovic et al., 2021; Alexiadou, 2024). It is widely recognized that Artificial Intelligence (AI) holds immense potential to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by improving efficiency, optimizing resource allocation, and enabling data-driven decision-making (Fan et al, 2023; Vinuesa et al, 2020; Nishant et al, 2020). Some studies highlight AI's potential to create new opportunities, such as improving access to services, distributing resources more fairly, or driving innovations that benefit marginalized groups (Ferreira et al., 2020; Di Vaio et al., 2024). These findings reflect the potential of algorithmic systems to help close gaps in access and participation. Such research typically represent a literature stream that addresses AI for Social Good (AI4SG).

However, many other authors warn against being overly optimistic about AI, noting that the "AI for good" narrative can hide deeper structural inequalities or shift responsibility from institutions onto technology itself (Moore, 2019; Saetra, 2022; Fügener et al., 2021). Malmio (2024) echoes these concerns, pointing out that while AI is often framed as a tool for social progress, issues of fairness and human dignity are only addressed indirectly. Other authors raise issues like injustice (Hoffmann, 2019) and increased insecurity (Malmio, 2024), discrimination, racism, poverty, and inequality (Köchling & Wehner, 2020; Nagtegaal, 2021; Busuioc, 2021; Noble, 2018), increased polarization, biased decision-making, or diminished social resilience and stability (Goh & Vinuesa, 2021) originating from the AI deployment in the public sector. These issues are linked to opaque algorithms, biased data, and exclusionary practices and are considered to have serious social consequences, from unequal access to jobs and healthcare to a loss of trust in institutions (Benjamin, 2019; Shelby et al., 2023). Wirtz et al. (2019) underscore this trend, mapping ten application areas in the public sector and four central dimensions of challenges: AI Technology Implementation; AI Law & Regulations; AI Ethics; AI Society. While they emphasize the value creation potential of AI in service delivery and decision-making, their framework also illustrates the complexity of governing these systems responsibly. Malmio (2024) emphasizes that such harms are hard to pinpoint because they emerge from the complex interaction between technology and existing power structures, highlighting that true inclusion cannot be achieved through technical fixes alone.

Many of these challenges are already being studied in specific contexts. Zhorzholiani (2025) finds that AI in Georgia's public sector presents ethical challenges like bias and

privacy concerns, but initiatives in capacity-building and pilot programs show promise for transparent and accountable governance. Maslesa et al. (2025) explore the ethical challenges of using AI in municipal social services in Sweden, emphasizing concerns around fairness, bias, transparency, accountability, and the need for human oversight. They show that while AI can support decision-making, it should remain a tool subordinate to professional judgment. The study suggests practical measures, such as training staff in ethical AI use, establishing clear guidelines, ensuring transparency, and involving civil servants in the design and development of AI systems. Telsac and Ari (2025), while analyzing AI use in 13 jurisdictions, show that in order for AI to reduce bias in public administration, attention should be given to the way AI systems are trained, in order to avoid the risk of amplifying rather than reducing existing social inequalities. Their examples show how algorithmic systems' actions, if fed by biased and incomplete datasets, can worsen the vulnerable positions occupied by individuals. Other studies point out that the advantages of algorithmic systems often remain concentrated in technologically advanced countries and among powerful corporations, leaving inequalities largely unaddressed (Fosso Wamba et al., 2021; Verdegem, 2024).

Addressing these issues, many authors argue on ways to ensure that AI is developed and used in ways that promote ethics, social values and inclusivity (Moon, 2023). Authors argue that algorithmic systems must be guided by principles such as transparency, accountability, and explainability if they are to support human dignity (Floridi et al., 2018; OECD, 2023). However, translating these principles into practice remains a challenge. Vinuesa et al. (2020) warn that values reflected in AI design are often uneven, shaped by local data availability and political context. Alexiadou (2024) highlights the need for clear ethical frameworks that respect human dignity, autonomy, decision-making, and privacy. Similarly, Malmio (2024) finds that while ethical commitments are widely invoked, they frequently remain at the level of abstract guidelines rather than being embedded in concrete design and governance practices. Latonero (2018) argues that grounding AI development in human rights is essential for promoting broad social benefits and protecting human dignity. While human rights provide a strong foundation, they cannot address all potential risks or unforeseen impacts of AI. Effective AI governance requires integrating human rights principles into both the design and deployment of AI systems, considering the organizational and social contexts, and acknowledging that AI may also shape the future understanding of human rights.

Overall, the literature presents a complex picture. While algorithmic systems have the potential to promote sustainability by supporting fairness, inclusion, and human dignity, they also risk reinforcing existing inequalities. A common message is that interdisciplinary approaches are needed, ones that put social values at the heart of AI design and governance. By embedding ethics and inclusion into these systems, algorithmic technologies can meaningfully contribute to sustainable and socially just outcomes.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

To conceptualize dignity in relation to algorithmic systems, we draw on the CARE theory developed by Leidner and Tona (2021). CARE is an acronym that captures four interrelated dimensions: Claims to dignity, Affronts to dignity, Responses, and Equilibrium.

Claims to dignity refer to the ways digital technologies, including algorithmic systems, are used to treat people with respect, provide access to resources and opportunities so that they can participate in decisions that affect them. Within algorithmic systems, examples of claims to dignity may involve equal treatment by automated processes, providing people with explanations regarding particular decisions, or making people's voices heard.

Affronts to dignity refer to the conditions that hinder or deny these claims. In algorithmic contexts, affronts may include opaque decision-making, discriminatory outcomes, stigmatizing categorizations, or interaction designs that make individuals feel inferior, invisible, or powerless. For example, being repeatedly misidentified by a system, or being unable to access essential services due to complex digital requirements, can be experienced as humiliating.

Responses capture how individuals and groups react when their dignity is violated. These responses can range from quiet acceptance to active resistance, complaint, or collective action aimed at changing policies and systems. Observing these responses provides insight into the perceived legitimacy of algorithmic systems and into the social mechanisms through which users attempt to restore or protect their dignity.

Finally, Equilibrium denotes a more stable state in which claims and affronts to dignity are balanced in such a way that individuals feel respected and included, and institutions maintain their legitimacy. In our study, we use this concept to think about how algorithmic systems might be redesigned and governed to better align with human dignity over time, rather than simply avoiding the most egregious harms.

DATA AND METHOD

Empirically, our research takes the form of an exploratory study of three AI-driven platforms that are central to the interaction between citizens and public or organizational services: E-Albania, SMIP, and E-filling. These platforms are representative of broader trends in digital governance, where online portals and automated procedures mediate access to administrative services, information, and regulatory processes.

Using the CARE framework, we identify potential claims and affronts to dignity that such platforms may produce. We pay attention to both inherent dignity, which is tied to the basic worth of individuals as human beings, and behavioral dignity, which concerns how people are treated based on their actions, compliance, or perceived deservingness (Leidner and Tona, 2021).

The exploratory nature of our study allows us to generate rich and context-sensitive insights. Our findings feed into a first screening of these platforms, where ethical aspects will be assessed through a follow-up study, including a survey of users of these platforms and an informed interviews framework with experts in the field. The results of this screening are presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3.

Table 1: E-Albania Platform

E-Albania platform			
Description	Forms of Dinity	Claims to dignity	Affronts to dignity
e-Albania is a governmental electronic platform that provides access to a wide range of public administration services online. It aims to automate and replace some of the in-person bureaucratic processes. Sustainability aspects: It represents Albania's effort to digitize governance and promote efficiency, transparency, and accessibility in public service delivery.	Behavioral Dignity: "living a life of virtue; what is considered virtous is determine by society, family, friends etc". (Leidner and Tona, pg. 346)	Citizens have access anytime to requesting certificates (and others) from home.	Citizens with limited digital skills or poor internet access might feel ashamed or depended on others to access the platform.
		Citizens are able to complete bureaucratic tasks independently, showing the virtue of being a 'good' citizen.	The expectation that 'everyone should use e-Albania' might stigmatize those without literacy and can result in marginalization.
		The platform reduces opportunities for bribery which sets/ maintains moral virtues of honesty.	Loosing personal interactions, as the platform makes you talk with a robot instead of a human being.
	Inherent Dignity: "All human beings are entitled to moral respect" (Leidner and Tona, pg.346)	Interacting with the same online interface means that all citizens are treated equally.	Concerns about data protection and privacy as citizens do not have visibility on how it is stored and used.
		Citizens can manage sensitive requests privately, such as requesting marital certificate.	Errors in the system can trap citizens with no clear path for correction.
			Mandatory reliance on the system might limit individual autonomy, as citizens must participate in the digital platform.

Table 2: SMIP Platform

SMIP Platform			
Description	Forms of Dignity	Claims to dignity	Affronts to dignity
The SMIP platform (Sistemi i Menaxhimit të Informacionit Arsimor – Pre-University Information Management System) is Albania's national digital infrastructure for managing data across the pre-university education system. Sustainability aspects: Designed to modernize school administration and improve transparency, SMIP enables teachers to record grades, attendance, and behavioral notes in real time, replacing the traditional paper-based registers with an integrated digital logbook	Behavioral Dignity: living a life of virtue; what is considered virtous is determine by society, family, friends etc. (Leidner and Tona, pg. 346)	Facilitating communication between teachers and parents.	Reconfigures relationships of accountability and visibility among teachers, students, and parents.
		Increase efficiency and saves time due to accessibility of data without the need for face to face meetings.	Teachers and parents with limited digital skills or poor internet access might feel ashamed or depended on others to access the platform.
		Increases environmental awareness, because of its paperless functions	Creates rigid relationships because of lack of personal interactions
	Inherent Dignity: All human beings are entitled to moral respect (Leinder and Tona, pg.346)	Balancing transparency and oversight.	Raises issues about privacy, data accuracy, and the potential for algorithmic bias.
			Promotes quantitative evaluations rather than qualitative as most inputted information is related to grades rather than behaviors.

Table 3: E-filling Platform

E-filling			
Description	Forms of Dignity	Claims to dignity	Affronts to dignity
The e-Filing tax system in Albania represents a central component of the country's digital fiscal governance reform, designed to modernize the interaction between citizens, businesses, and the tax administration. Managed by the General Directorate of Taxes. Sustainability aspects: the system enables taxpayers to electronically register, declare, and pay taxes through an integrated online portal and mobile application.	Behavioral Dignity: living a life of virtue; what is considered virtous is determine by society, family, friends etc. (Leidner and Tona, pg. 346)	Automated data collection, pre-filled tax returns, and real-time invoice reporting	Redefined relationships of accountability between the taxpayer and the state
		Automation of compliance and audit functions	Citizens with limited digital skills or poor internet access might feel ashamed or depended on others to access the service.
		Reducing opportunities for corruption and administrative error	Obscured locus of responsibility when errors occur.
	Inherent Dignity: All human beings are entitled to moral respect (Leinder and Tona, pg.346)	Transparent, equitable, and rights-preserving governance in the digital economy	Data protection, system reliability, and algorithmic oversight emerge as critical concerns
			Sensitivity of financial and personal information

CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

In this paper, we examine the relationship between algorithms and society, with a particular focus on social sustainability by adopting a human dignity lens. Doing so, we investigate access to resources, participation in decision-making, and recognition of individuals and groups as worthy, capable, and equal members of society.

The analysis presented in this paper is intended as a step toward a more dignity-centered approach to AI and algorithmic governance. We conduct an initial screening of three platforms that facilitate public services within the Albanian governance system. We identify potential claims and affronts to dignity. Ultimately, our goal is to encourage the development of algorithmic systems that contribute to, rather than undermine, the ethical conduct of their implementation. The cases examined here suggest that such a perspective is both necessary and sensitive, and that paying attention to dignity and inclusion can open up new directions for responsible AI design and governance.

The next part of our research will move forward to a wide survey of users of these platforms in order to identify how these aspects of are perceived. We will conduct this survey through

a series of informed interviews with experts and practitioners in the field of information technology, artificial intelligence, and digitalization. Through these insights, we will be able to draw conclusions regarding the manifestation of CARE theory in the Albanian context.

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FLUX: SOCIETAL FORCES SHAPING ALBANIAN MUSIC

Toward a new theory, axiom and formula envisioning
music as a large integrated diachronic spiral ecosystem, inspired by the water cycle*

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MAPPING THE FLUX

As the Pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus observed, *panta rhei* — everything flows; nothing remains static. Music, too, is not a frozen archive but a living flow, always returning, always renewing. Flux Theory takes its central inspiration from a naturalistic philosophical concept — the water cycle: vernacular aquifers and springs that feed rivers, rivers that gather in cultural lakes and seas, seas that open to oceans, vapors rising into the atmosphere, and rain falling back to the ground, creating new heritage.

Music across the world represents this cycle, Albanian music too. Flux Theory suggests that folk, sacred, classical, and contemporary repertoires can be understood within a single circulating cycle, much like the water cycle. Instead of separating traditions into distinct categories, it highlights their continuities and transformations as phases of the same flow. In this way, music is not seen as progressing in a straight line, but as a process of resonance and renewal between past and present; a palimpsestic ecological system of circulation, in which modern cultural forms evolve by reabsorbing previous layers—variable or invariable strata.

Methodologically, this study draws from cultural musicology, ethnomusicology, and ecomusicology, prioritizing context, meaning, relation and process. In this respect it follows the hermeneutic orientation of Carl Dahlhaus, who insisted that music history is a dialectical and interpretative act, while also engaging with Jacques Attali's view of music as prophecy, Philip Bohlman's reflections on nationalism and identity, and Steven Feld's acoustemology of place.[1] Feld introduced the concept of *acoustemology*—a portmanteau of acoustics and epistemology—to describe sound as a way of knowing and being in the world. In this

* This research project in musicology by Doc. Elvis Peçi is part of a doctoral study project to be carried out in collaboration and mentorship from Prof. Arben Llozi (Faculty of Music, University of the Arts, Tirana) and Dr. Elida Dakoli (Dallas Baptist University, USA), with the support of a READ Fellowship in 2025.

[1] Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression,* 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); and Steven Feld, *"Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea,"* in Senses of Place, ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1996), 91–135.