Non-State Actors' Impact on Albania's European Integration: Contributions, Opportunities, and Challenges

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Abstract

This paper investigates the important influence of non-state entities in the process of European integration, particularly regarding the situation in Albania. The objective is to evaluate how different non-state actors in Albania, including civil society organizations, think tanks, businesses, and grassroots movements, have played a role in the nation's pursuit of European integration. The paper seeks to emphasize both the opportunities and challenges that these entities present, and how their participation can affect Albania's route towards EU membership.

Albania, located in Southeast Europe, transitioned from years of communist isolation in the early 1990s. Since that time, the country has embarked on a revolutionary path towards democracy and economic growth. The desire for EU membership has served as a main catalyst for Albania's political, social, and economic reforms. The European integration process provides numerous advantages, such as improved trade prospects, foreign investment, and access to EU funding and development initiatives. As Albania works to align its policies, legislation, and institutions with EU standards, the participation of non-state actors has been vital in fostering these efforts and ensuring that the integration process is more inclusive and participatory.

However, the path to EU membership has been riddled with challenges. Albania has encountered scrutiny regarding issues like corruption, judicial reform, and political division. These difficulties highlight the importance of the involvement of non-state actors in advancing the country's reform agenda and its integration with the EU. Non-state actors offer distinct perspectives, expertise, and advocacy capabilities that complement governmental initiatives and promote positive transformation.

Keywords: Social Sciences, EU Accession, EU Membership, Western Balkans Non-State Actors

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. ***Research Question:*** How have non-state actors contributed to Albania's European integration process, and what opportunities and challenges arise from their involvement?

1.2. ***Discussion/Resolution Approach:*** The paper will begin with an overview of Albania's European integration journey, highlighting key milestones, challenges, and the significance of the EU accession process for the country's development and regional stability.

Next, it will define and classify the various non-state actors in Albania that have actively participated in the European integration process. This section will discuss the roles played by civil society organizations, think tanks, businesses, and grassroots movements in advocating for reforms, contributing expertise, and promoting citizen

engagement. The EFB (European Funds for The Balkans) aids in validating the effectiveness of the EU enlargement policy throughout the Western Balkans, enhancing regional collaboration among civil society organizations founded on solidarity and dialogue driven by demand. It offers resources and platforms for knowledgeable and empowered citizens to advocate for accountable institutions and democratic governance. The emphasis is on ongoing reforms in the policies and practices of Western Balkans countries as they progress toward EU membership. (BiEPAG, (2023), *Through the Labyrinth of Regional Cooperation : How to Make Sense of Regional Integration in the Western Balkans, pg.15*)

The discussion will delve into the opportunities presented by non-state actors in Albania's integration. It will emphasize how these actors enhance democratic participation by providing platforms for public dialogue, advocating for transparency, and fostering citizen engagement in the decision-making process. Additionally, the paper will explore how think tanks, academic institutions, and businesses contribute specialized knowledge and innovative solutions to shape evidence-based policies required for EU accession.

Furthermore, the paper will address the challenges and risks associated with non-state actors' involvement, such as issues of representation, potential for special interests, and the need for effective coordination between various actors.

In the context of Albania, the paper will specifically examine the role of non-state actors in addressing global challenges, including climate change, migration, and cybersecurity. Examples of initiatives and collaborations undertaken by these actors in tackling these challenges will be presented. To provide a comprehensive analysis, the paper will discuss case studies and concrete examples of how non-state actors in Albania have influenced policy decisions, promoted democratic values, and contributed to the country's alignment with EU standards and regulations.

Finally, the paper will conclude with a summary of the findings, highlighting the crucial role of non-state actors in Albania's European integration process. It will offer insights into how policymakers and stakeholders can harness the potential of these actors effectively while mitigating potential challenges to ensure a successful and inclusive journey towards EU accession.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1. Overview of Albania's European Integration Journey

Albania's goal of integrating into Europe has been marked by its ambitions to achieve full membership in the European Union. This journey commenced with the country's request for EU candidate status in 2009, which was succeeded by the initiation of negotiations for the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA). The purpose of the SAA was to encourage Albania to undertake political, economic, and institutional reforms, aiding its alignment with EU standards and regulations. Historically, non-state actors include a wide range of entities, such as civil society organizations, businesses, think tanks, academic institutions, and grassroots movements. These groups have taken an active role in the European integration process, advocating for stronger collaboration, influencing policy choices, and encouraging transnational dialogue. As the EU progresses, their influence is expected to grow even more significant. (*Berisha, L., & Kelmendi, K. (2021). The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Enhancing Democratic Participation in the EU Integration Process: The Case of Albania. European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research, 8(2), 250-265*)

2.2. *The opportunities for non-state actors in European integration are manifold:*

Bolstering Democracy and Citizen Involvement: Non-state entities act as bridges between the public and governmental bodies. They promote citizen participation by creating spaces for conversations, stimulating public discussions, and relaying citizens' issues to decision-makers. With future technological innovations, these entities are anticipated to assume an even more vital role in fostering a participatory and inclusive democracy in Europe.

    In Albania, non-state entities have demonstrated significant effectiveness in strengthening democracy and citizen involvement. Civil society organizations, local groups, and grassroots initiatives have been instrumental in encouraging civic participation and enabling citizens to engage actively in the decision-making processes.(Popa, L. I., & Hoxha, E. (2020). Grassroots Movements and Their Role in Shaping Public Opinion: A Case Study of Albania's European Integration. International Journal of Politics and Governance, 10(3), 139-156). They have created avenues for open conversation, organizing public discussions, and advocating for the incorporation of citizen concerns into the policymaking process. With technological advancements and growing internet access in Albania, these non-state actors will continue to utilize digital platforms to promote a more participatory and inclusive democratic process. Online discussion forums, social media platforms, and virtual town hall meetings will enable citizens to share their views, engage in debates, and convey their concerns to policymakers in a more accessible and convenient way.

    Additionally, non-state actors can serve as monitors, overseeing governmental activities and ensuring that officials are held responsible for their choices. By examining policies and promoting transparency, these entities enhance a governance system in Albania that is more accountable and responsive. In the years to come, non-state actors in Albania will assume an even more essential role in influencing the democratic framework. As digital technologies progress, they will leverage data analytics and online mobilization to connect with broader audiences and involve citizens from every region of the country. This will not only bolster democratic involvement but also guarantee that the perspectives of marginalized and underrepresented communities are acknowledged and integrated into the decision-making process. Furthermore, non-state actors in Albania can also collaborate with their European counterparts, exchanging knowledge and best practices in promoting citizen participation and good governance. By learning from experiences in other EU member states, Albanian non-state actors can further enhance their proficiency and contribute to a stronger European democratic framework. (*Çabej, E., & Murati, R. (2020). Non-State Actors and Their Influence on Policy Decisions in Albania's EU Integration Process. Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, 11(6), 185-198*)

    Expertise and Innovation Contributions: Non-state actors frequently possess specialized knowledge and skills that can enhance the efforts of EU institutions. Think tanks, research centers, and academic entities can provide important insights into complex policy matters, aiding in evidence-based decision-making.

    In Albania, non-state actors have demonstrated notable capability in enriching public policies with their expertise and knowledge. Think tanks, research centers, and universities have significantly contributed specialized insights into the nation's political and socio-economic challenges. These organizations often carry out detailed analyses and independent research on both challenges and opportunities facing Albania. Their research not only identifies issues but also suggests possible solutions, providing

essential information that supports policymakers and stakeholders in making well-informed and substantiated decisions.

In the realm of European integration, Albanian think tanks and research institutions lend their expertise on a range of policies and reforms needed by the EU. For instance, they may evaluate the priorities and obstacles surrounding judicial reform, enhancing the healthcare system, applying European standards for environmental protection, and other vital issues pertinent to Albania's European integration.(*European Commission. (2021). Albania 2020 Report*)

In the future, advancements in technology and increased collaboration between Albanian research institutions and their European counterparts will lead to an enhanced role for non-state actors in the areas of expertise and innovation. By partnering with EU think tanks and research centers, they will gain insights from the experiences and practices of other EU member states, enabling them to create innovative solutions to the challenges faced by Albania.

Confronting Global Challenges: The EU is dealing with many global issues, such as climate change, migration, and cybersecurity. Non-state actors are ideally situated to participate in cross-border collaboration and unified efforts to effectively address these challenges.. *(IOM (International Organization for Migration). (2022). Migration Governance and EU Integration in Albania: Challenges and Opportunities)*

The European Union (EU) faces a range of global challenges that necessitate joint action and collaboration among its member nations. As Albania advances in its efforts to join the EU, it also encounters these urgent issues that call for proactive involvement and adherence to EU policies and regulations. Non-state actors in Albania are particularly well-placed to make a significant contribution to tackling these global challenges and aiding the country's integration into the EU.

Climate change represents a major threat to both the EU and Albania. Increasing temperatures, severe weather patterns, and environmental deterioration have extensive effects on ecosystems, economies, and livelihoods. Non-state actors in Albania have taken a leading role in promoting awareness about climate change and pushing for sustainable practices. (*Shtjefni, E., & Mema, G. (2019). Climate Change and Non-State Actors in Albania: Initiatives, Challenges, and Prospects. Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning, 21(6), 832-848*)

Civil society organizations have launched environmental initiatives aimed at encouraging eco-friendly practices and sustainable development. They have facilitated public rallies, workshops, and educational events to engage both citizens and policymakers. Furthermore, grassroots movements have been actively involved in reforestation efforts and environmental cleanup projects, fostering community-led actions to tackle climate change at the local level.

In addition, think tanks and academic institutions have carried out research on how climate change affects Albania's environment and economy. Their evidence-based recommendations for policy have played a role in shaping government strategies to reduce climate risks and align with the EU's climate objectives.(*Nako, A. (2021). Think Tanks and Evidence-Based Policymaking in Albania's EU Accession Process. European Policy Analysis, 8(2), 132-147*)

However, there are also challenges and risks associated with non-state actors' participation in the European integration process:

- **Democratic Legitimacy in Albania's European Integration**: In Albania, as non-state actors actively participate in the European integration process, concerns about democratic legitimacy arise. While these actors can enhance

democratic participation by providing platforms for public dialogue and advocating for transparency, questions may be raised about their accountability and representation. To strike a balance, it will be essential to ensure that these actors operate in a transparent and inclusive manner, representing the diverse interests and needs of the Albanian population. Strengthening mechanisms for public consultations, citizen engagement, and feedback loops will be crucial to maintain democratic legitimacy in the integration process. (*Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania. (2022). Albania's EU Integration Journey: Milestones, Challenges, and Perspectives*)

- **Lobbying and Special Interests in Albania's European Integration**: The participation of various non-state actors, including corporate entities, can present challenges related to lobbying and potential special interests. In Albania, effective regulation and monitoring of lobbying activities will be imperative to prevent undue influence on policy decisions that may prioritize specific interests over the broader public good. Instituting transparency measures, such as public disclosure of lobbying efforts and financial contributions, can help ensure that the voices of all stakeholders, including civil society organizations and businesses, are heard without compromising the integrity of the integration process. (*Xhafa, G., & Halimi, A. (2022). Lobbying Regulation in Albania: Strengthening Transparency and Accountability in the EU Integration Process. European Journal of Public Affairs, 26(1), 91-108*)

- **Coordination and Cohesion in Albania's European Integration**: Albania's journey towards EU accession may encounter coordination challenges, especially considering the diverse interests and priorities of multiple stakeholders, including various non-state actors. In many instances, stakeholders do not actively contribute, and when they do, their input is often overlooked. This situation has created a cycle of distrust in the interaction and consultation process, with both parties (public administration and non-state actors) pointing fingers at each other for the lack of collaboration, as desk officers assert that stakeholders are uncooperative while stakeholders claim that desk officers fail to engage and include non-institutional actors. (*Elezi, G.2022, Institutional Coordination and compliance in the EU accession process of Albania, pg. 199*)

Effective coordination mechanisms will be vital to align efforts and foster cohesive strategies. Engaging in structured dialogue and cooperation platforms can facilitate coordination between civil society organizations, businesses, academia, and government institutions. Additionally, encouraging partnerships and joint initiatives among non-state actors can contribute to a more coherent approach to the European integration process in Albania.

As the role of non-state actors in European integration evolves, Albania can expect several significant trends:

- *Digital Transformation for Enhanced Engagement*: Advancements in technology will play a pivotal role in reshaping how non-state actors participate in Albania's European integration. Digital platforms will enable wider and more efficient communication, collaboration, and mobilization of citizens across borders. E-participation tools and online platforms will

facilitate broader engagement, allowing Albanian citizens to contribute their views and ideas, thus enhancing the democratic nature of the integration process. E-governance is already planned by the Albanian governance through Strategy of Digitalization, third pillar "Transformative digitalization". (*Kosta, E., & Qirjako, D. (2019). Cybersecurity and Non-State Actors: A Case Study of Albania's Digital Resilience. Journal of Cyber Policy, 4(1), 71-86*)

- *Empowerment of Grassroots Movements*: Grassroots movements in Albania will continue to leverage social media and digital tools to exert influence in shaping public opinion and driving policy changes. These movements have the potential to mobilize citizens and advocate for their interests, thereby influencing decision-makers both at the national and EU levels. The empowerment of grassroots movements will promote a more inclusive and participatory approach to European integration in Albania.

- *Climate and Sustainability Advocacy*: Given the growing urgency of addressing climate change and environmental issues globally, environmental organizations in Albania will amplify their voice in advocating for more ambitious green policies and sustainable practices. These organizations will collaborate with both state institutions and other non-state actors to align Albania's environmental policies with EU standards and regulations, contributing to the country's sustainable development and EU accession prospects.

- *Strengthening Regional and Local Engagement*: Non-state actors in Albania will recognize the importance of regional and local engagement in the European integration process. Emphasizing bottom-up approaches, these actors will seek to involve citizens at the local level, promoting a sense of ownership and empowerment in shaping Albania's integration journey. Regional and local initiatives will complement national efforts and strengthen Albania's integration with the broader European community.

3. CONCLUSIONS

This paper explored the crucial role of non-state actors in Albania's European integration journey, focusing on their contributions in addressing global challenges and promoting democratic values. Through a comprehensive analysis, it was evident that non-state actors in Albania play a significant role in tackling issues such as climate change, migration, and cybersecurity. They actively engage in cross-border cooperation, advocate for sustainable practices, and support migrants and refugees. Additionally, these actors enhance democratic participation by providing platforms for public dialogue and advocating for transparency in governance. The findings also highlighted challenges associated with non-state actors' participation, including concerns about democratic legitimacy, lobbying, and coordination. To address these challenges, ensuring inclusivity, transparency, and effective coordination among diverse actors will be critical.

Moreover, the study identified emerging trends that will shape the future role of non-state actors in Albania's European integration. The digital transformation will empower these actors through enhanced communication and collaboration tools, enabling wider citizen engagement. Grassroots movements will continue to wield influence through social media and digital advocacy. Climate and sustainability advocacy will gain prominence as environmental organizations push for ambitious

green policies aligned with EU standards. Additionally, regional and local engagement will gain importance, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment among citizens.

Open Discussion/Question for Further Research: While this paper provides valuable insights into the role of non-state actors in Albania's European integration, further research is warranted to delve deeper into certain aspects:

1. Impact Assessment of Non-State Actors' Initiatives: To gauge the effectiveness of non-state actors' efforts in addressing global challenges and promoting democratic values, conducting impact assessments of their initiatives and collaborations would be valuable. Evaluating the tangible outcomes and policy changes resulting from their engagement would offer valuable insights into their influence on Albania's European integration.

2. Democratic Accountability and Representation: Exploring mechanisms to enhance democratic accountability and representation of non-state actors in decision-making processes will be essential. Further research could examine the effectiveness of public consultations and feedback mechanisms in ensuring that diverse societal perspectives are taken into account during policy formulation.

3. Lobbying Regulation and Transparency: In-depth research on the regulation of lobbying activities in Albania would be beneficial. Understanding the existing mechanisms and exploring ways to enhance transparency in lobbying interactions between non-state actors and policymakers can mitigate potential risks of special interests overshadowing the broader public good.

4. Coordinating Non-State Actors' Efforts: To promote effective coordination among non-state actors in Albania, examining successful collaboration models and best practices would be insightful. Identifying factors that contribute to cohesive strategies and joint initiatives will help optimize the impact of their collective efforts.

5. Digital Transformation and E-Participation: A comprehensive study on the potential of digital transformation and e-participation tools in enhancing non-state actors' engagement and citizen involvement would be valuable. Understanding the barriers and opportunities of these digital tools can guide policymakers in harnessing their potential for a more inclusive integration process.

6. Environmental Organizations and Sustainability Advocacy: Further research on the role of environmental organizations in shaping green policies in Albania and their collaboration with state institutions can shed light on the country's progress towards sustainable development and environmental alignment with the EU.

7. Regional and Local Engagement: Investigating the impact of regional and local engagement in Albania's European integration would contribute to understanding the dynamics of decentralized decision-making processes. Examining how localized initiatives complement national efforts can provide valuable lessons for fostering a sense of ownership and active citizenship.

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