

## POLITICAL CULTURE LEGACY HINDERING EUROPEANIZATION EFFORTS IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, the democratization efforts required for EU integration have been challenged by authoritarian regimes' persistence across some Southeast European countries. This study focuses on Albania as a case study, examining the endurance of political and administrative cultural legacies within its public institutions. Despite numerous reforms aimed at EU integration and democratization processes, institutional transformation remains impeded by outdated behavioural attitudes, concepts, and mindsets.

The efficacy of democracy is intrinsically linked to the adherence to fundamental principles within the realm of Public Administration, encompassing key values such as meritocracy, impartiality, professionalism, and a steadfast commitment to public service. Moreover, a resilient judiciary is pivotal in upholding integrity by acting as a bulwark against malfeasance and procedural impropriety. Additionally, the autonomy of the media and the empowerment of civil society are indispensable requisites for sustaining a robust democratic framework. Collectively, these elements serve as the bedrock for establishing and perpetuating a well-functioning democratic system.

Various scholars highlight that political culture can impact the implementation of good governance practices, values, and behavioural methods.

This research delves into the challenges Albania, an early-stage EU aspirant, encounters over three decades as it endeavours to adopt EU norms during the transformation of public institutions. The study considers the influence of

internal hindrances, including political memory and past legacies, on the reform process and the Europeanization of Public Administration. By analysing these factors, the research aims to gain insights into the negative internal dynamics and provide recommendations for fostering a democratic political culture that strengthens institutions through effective reforms.

**Keywords**

Europeanization efforts; Good governance; Obstacles; Political culture; Public institutions; Reforms.

**1.INTRODUCTION**

Transitioning countries like Albania face obstacles in transforming their institutions and implementing the normative dimension of Europeanization. The internal challenges that public institutions encounter stem from the influence of political memory and past legacies, which can hinder the adoption of good governance practices, values, and behavioral methods. Furthermore, the current environment significantly affects the ability of institutions to undergo successful transformation. Various factors, including the history of the state-building process, political culture, psychological resistance, and the presence of an egocentric mindset within informal political interactions, influence this. Factors that contributed to the challenges faced by transitioning countries range from competing interests, resource constraints, “the absence of a widely-accepted reform model” (Dhembo 2014, 13) as noted in various “post-communist countries” to the lack of political will. Moreover, “the unstable legal framework on public administration in Albania contributed to slower and less efficient implementation outcomes (Dhembo 2014, 13).

In addition to technical aspects, various factors contribute to psychological resistance towards institutional reforms. These include the fear of the unknown and uncertainty regarding potential disruptions, concerns about the loss of power or status, trust and mistrust in the intentions or effectiveness of the reforms, and attachment to the past. Transitioning societies, such as Albania

with a totalitarian inheritance, often demonstrate resistance towards change due to their preference for the familiar, even if it is flawed or unproductive. The reluctance to accept and engage in reforms can be attributed to past experiences that prioritize political control and weaken governance, leading to the impairment of mechanisms such as checks and balances. In many cases, there may be a need for more exposure to or knowledge of the best reform models. Strong cultural or historical identities and attachment to the past might cause people to oppose institutional changes. According to Peters (2010, 36), deeply ingrained traditions and practices in government hinder reform efforts, even when informed by organization theory. Public administration is shaped by culture at societal, political, and administrative levels, influencing organizational behaviour and the relationship between elites and the bureaucracy. Political culture is "the psychological dispositions of individuals: 'attitudes towards the political system and its various parts, and attitudes towards the role of the self in the system'" (Verba 1963, 13) that continuously shape the way individuals and groups understand and participate in the political system of a society. As culture evolves, its interaction with politics continuously reshapes the government's role (Peters 2001, 34). Political memory and political culture are closely related, as collective memories often shape and reinforce certain aspects of political culture. According to author Gjeta (2021, para.12), the regime change in Albania resulted in the emergence of power negotiation and transfer. The new political elite after the 90s had to coexist and share power with the remnants of the dictatorship. Unlike other Eastern Bloc countries, Albania did not complete the transitional justice process by failing to "meet its obligations in this process, resulting in the understandable consequences of an unfiltered and uncontrolled transfer of human resources from the dark period of dictatorship."<sup>1</sup>The communist era persists as an enduring political memory, which influences and perpetuates particular

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<sup>1</sup> Karamuço, E. (13 September 2022), interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë.

political culture which continues to significantly affect Albanian society because "the confrontation with the truth and past has been degenerative and consequently caused cultural delays."<sup>1</sup>.

This study does not explore the waves of reforms on the path towards EU integration or reforms 'per se.' However, it suggests that the legacies of political culture have hindered reforms and transformation in Albania during EU integration. Despite numerous efforts to align with EU standards and norms/Europeanise and achieve democratic processes, outdated behavioural attitudes, concepts, and mindsets have impeded the transformation of public institutions. According to Radaelli (2003), Europeanization refers to the emergence and development of distinct governance structures at the European level, encompassing political, legal, and social institutions that formalize interactions among actors and policy networks. Schneider (2010) describes Europeanisation as the influential force, "the power of example," exporting European institutions, reforms, values, and standards to neighbouring countries. This process involves not only sharing these elements but also actively promoting and establishing them in the recipient countries, thereby exerting a significant influence on their political, social, and economic systems. Albania, in this regard, is a case of resistance to absorbing and implementing these normative aspects through reforms in public institutions.

Numerous scholars have examined the influence of political culture on bureaucratic behavior, decision-making processes, and administrative practices. Huntington (1973) and Hall (1986) explore how political culture shapes bureaucratic functioning and administrative practices in different societies. Huntington focuses on the broader influence of political culture, while Hall explicitly examines political culture's role in governing the economy in Britain and France. Moe (1990, 2005) has researched the relationship between political

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<sup>1</sup>Zogaj, B. (22 September 2022), interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë.

culture and bureaucratic behavior, emphasizing the impact of cultural norms and values on different political systems. Peters (1995, 2000, 2018) provides valuable insights into the role of political culture in bureaucratic dynamics.

In the case of Albania, there is limited elaboration on the legacies and role of political culture in shaping public institution practices and behavior precisely, as well as its influence on institution transformation. However, some Albanian scholars have explored shortfalls in PA (Elbasani 2008; Nunaj 2014, 2017) reforms in public administration, and the lingering effects of totalitarian political culture on Albanian society and lack of democratization (Kalemaj and Jano 2009; Pajo 2017; Husi 2015). These authors highlight the persistence of a specific political culture stemming from the totalitarian regime. As Kalemaj (2009, 237) suggests, anti-democratic political culture can distort democratic institutions, especially in countries with a history of severe totalitarian regimes like communist Albania. Therefore, further research on this topic is necessary to gain insights into the enduring nature of culture and its impact on ineffective reforms, informal connections, and flawed institutions. Democracy flourishes when political leaders refrain from undermining the separation of powers. Public Administration upholds principles of meritocracy, impartiality, and professionalism, with a strong dedication to serving the public. A strong judiciary serves as a check against corruption and can penalize wrongdoing, while an independent media and civil society contribute to government accountability and legitimacy. Nevertheless, in certain Southeast European countries, "the absence of political culture," which "has resulted in low levels of governmental accountability and legitimacy," has allowed autocrats to flourish and contributed to the weakening of democracy (Dzankic 2019, 13), while posing significant damages on public institutions, hindering their transformation and impacting their performance.

### 1.1.State Administration in Albania. Institutions and Legal Framework

State administration in Albania consists of institutions such as the Council of Ministers apparatus, ministries, central institutions, territorial branches, and the

administration of the prefect. The organization and operation of the Prime Minister's Office are regulated by a separate law (Law No. 90/2012). Civil service management for central institutions is handled by the Department of Public Administration (DAP), while independent institutions manage their own personnel departments (Law no. 152/2013, article 2).

Public administration, in the subjective sense, refers to a collection of subjects fulfilling the public function and addressing the general interests of the population, including central, local, and independent institutions. Civil servant status applies to employees in state administration, independent institutions, or local government units, with exceptions outlined in Article 2 of Law No. 152/2013.

Instead of approaching administration from a divisive approach that focuses on the individual or categorization of institutions, this study takes a holistic view of administration, considering it as a unified entity shaped by the legal framework, principles, and norms. It aims to understand the contextual factors that contribute to deviations from the public interest and hinder achieving public goals, exposing the shortcomings of previous reforms. The analysis focuses on how political memory and culture influence power dynamics, governance effectiveness, and institutional transformation in Albania, examining historical processes, political and administrative culture, and egoism within bureaucratic and political roles. The objective is to determine how these factors contribute to political interference and disruption of institutional transformation. The main research question is: To what extent do specific key factors influence the transformation of institutions, mainly through reform efforts, and subsequently impact the performance of Public Administration in Albania?

## 1.2 Methodology

The examination relies on qualitative data from primary and secondary sources to gain insights into the research topic. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, research projects, reports, and media articles providing evidence on the study theme. This research methodology is supported by primary data from

interviews conducted as a part of previous research carried out in the frames of a Group Research Project titled "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance," led by the George C. Marshall Centre between April and November 2022. I actively participated in this group research endeavour, specifically conducting extensive case study research on "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interactions." The previous research is the foundation on which the present study is based, and most of the examination is extracted. As only an executive summary report was released after the project, more than 80% of the elaboration and data analysis from interviews remained untapped and unfeatured; hence, this present research must be carried out and published as a significant contribution to the topic it elaborates.

The interviews involved engaging with former and current officials from various structures within the Public Administration and experts in the field. These discussions were conducted in-depth through personal communication and served as a valuable source of empirical evidence, drawing upon the interviewees' experiences, observations, expertise, and knowledge. It should be emphasized that this study incorporates solely the expert opinions from 12 interviewees elicited from these participants, who were prone to elaborate more extensively on past historical and political legacies in the process of institutions' Europeanization and transformation.

These interviews reveal the impact of past legacies as political memory on political culture and the challenges they pose in transforming values, practices, and characteristics from the previous administrative system towards a contemporary one. In the case of Albania, insights emerge regarding the hindrances created by outdated legacies in the historical-cultural context, impeding efficient EU reforms and institutional transformation. The research findings contribute to understanding the context and improving the cultural environment that undermines efficient administration and reform efforts. The analysis provides recommendations on mechanisms to change the current

organizational culture and enhance the performance of the Public Administration for impartiality and efficiency.<sup>1</sup>

## **2.DURABILITY OF CONTEXTUAL FACTORS: IMPACT OF POLITICAL INTERFERENCE IN BUREAUCRATIC APPARATUS AND REFORMS.**

*“who and what we are as individuals, communities or nations is indelibly formed by our sense of history and the way individual and collective memory is understood, commemorated and propagated” (Smith 2006, 36).*

The repeated calls, especially from the EU and the international community regarding the Western Balkans countries, highlight concerns over the modernization and efficiency of their Public Administration. The countries in Southeastern Europe have a complex history characterized by wars, divisions, injustices, contractions, exploitation, ethnic cleansing, and long-standing enmity. “Idiosyncratic conditions,” including “political, economic, religious, and cultural revolutions,” have shaped the norms of political culture in this region (Čepo 2019).

Considering historical and political-cultural disrupters in the post-90s reforming process, the SEE countries aimed to shift from authoritarian governance to modern, market-based systems (Liebert et al. 2013, 2). However, they encountered challenges in the realm of public management. Efficient public management is crucial for good governance, public welfare, and economic

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<sup>1</sup> To obtain comprehensive insights into the research methodology design and execution, readers are encouraged to consult Annex 1, placed in the concluding section of this article.



viability. Political interference in bureaucracy exposes deficiencies, emphasizing the need to scrutinize reform shortcomings. Understanding the complex interplay of historical, cultural, and social legacies is essential in grasping this compromised process. These "complex interdependencies" explain the lack of efficiency and modernization in Public Administration, particularly in Albania (Vasiljelic 2019, 17).

Husi (2015) highlights the challenges faced by public administration and reforms, such as a lack of tradition, poverty, and high unemployment rates. Consequently, parties promise jobs to their supporters and their family members as a means to secure votes.

Unlike other countries in the Balkans, Albania declared its independence in 1912, almost a century later than other countries, emerging from a "long history of invasions and foreign rule." This "was one of the factors used to exploit the country by Albania's Communist dictator Enver Hoxha" (Eaton and Roshi 2014, 312).

During Enver Hoxha's regime, an authoritarian system was established that exerted strict control and repression throughout governance, resulting in a persistent culture of nepotism and loyalty-based clientelism that has endured beyond the regime's collapse. The contextual factors established during this period significantly influenced the governance and public management culture, as observed in the ongoing process of institutional reform. "Unchanged traditions exhibit a prevailing reverence, attentiveness, and intimidation towards the "primus" as an authoritative figure in such structures."<sup>1</sup> This historical legacy has shaped the political and administrative spheres, impacting their operations during the transitional period. Former members of the repressive regime exploited their positions of influence, infiltrating and subverting various sectors, including government structures and public administration. According to Amy (2022), the enduring consequences of the

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<sup>1</sup> Gashi, Sh. (31 August 2022), interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë.

communist mentality, stemming from a long-lasting dictatorship, are evident in the governance structures, resulting in a pervasive lack of trust, denial, and deceit in daily life. The “authoritarian power structures” (Amy 2022, Par. 9) manipulated institutions for personal gain, obstructing the establishment of transparent and accountable practices that prioritize public welfare. Continuing in such a mindset, the captured institutions perpetuated the interests of influential figures rather than fulfilling their intended purpose of serving the greater good. In this sense, “the fundamental norms of good governance and institutional accountability have yet to be clearly identified and effectively established”<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, insufficient implementation of transitional justice mechanisms and unresolved historical issues have worsened the issue of captured institutions. Perpetrators of abuses during the totalitarian era have maintained positions of power because “the party and cult of personality have been observed to function as an unquestionable leader” (Amy 2022) - facilitating and perpetuating the capture of these institutions. Individuals with questionable backgrounds have been known to exploit their positions, potentially impeding establishing transparent and accountable governance structures while consolidating their influence and protecting themselves and their allies. Challenges such as corruption, manipulation, impunity, and failing to address past wrongdoings have hindered efforts to establish accountable governance systems.

Although the alarm raised by international reports (IDM 2016; GRECO 2020; TI & ID 2020; Trading Economics 2022; IRI 2023; FH 2023) and various authors (Zhillia 2016; Luli 2020; Morabito 2023; Balliu 2023; Jusufi 2023), on corruption and significant implications on the economy, clientelist schemes and good governance, it still persists with very slight improvements in 2023. As per Huntington (1973), corruption signifies the absence of effective political

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<sup>1</sup> Karamuço, E. (13 September 2022), interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë.

institutionalization, with public officials lacking autonomy and coherence, subordinating their institutional roles to external demands (1973, 59).

According to TI and IDM (2020), state capture rests on three pillars: (i) a network of clientele or clientelist relationships, (ii) corrupt judicial proceedings, and (iii) tailor-made laws. (2020, 8) The latter are designed or amended to serve the interests of a privileged few, often influential individuals or groups. "Tailor-made laws prioritize private interests over the public good, often without public consultation or consideration for sustainable economic growth" (Transparency et al. 2020, 8). Conversely, they can facilitate and legitimize the issuance of illegal orders. When those in power can manipulate the legal framework in their favour, they may exploit this authority to issue orders against established legal norms and principles. As Titini observes, "institutions today mirror authoritarian structures, with leaders assuming absolute power and perceiving the law as inconsequential."<sup>1</sup> Reforms sound ineffective because they "employ anti-pluralist strategies to transform public administration systems, undermining bureaucracy's neutrality and promoting illiberal norms, according to Bauer et al. (2021, 5). The conflation of tailor-made laws and illegal orders may further exacerbate the erosion of democratic institutions, foster a culture of impunity, and perpetuate corruption. Furthermore, the last 10-12 years (according to the data collected on cases and laws in this period by TI and IDM) (p. 6) affected the implementation of public administration reforms to improve transparency, efficiency, and accountability.

The forthcoming analysis examines the historical state-building process, political culture, and the egocentric mindset between politics and bureaucracy interaction as barriers to change in Albania. Despite 33 years of transition, these factors continue to impede the successful implementation of reforms for

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<sup>1</sup> Titini, E. (15 September 2022), interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë.

promoting transparency, accountability, and professionalism within public institutions.

### **3.STATE-BUILDING AND POLITICAL SYSTEM EVOLUTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR ALBANIA'S ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM**

Albania's political structures and institutions have developed within a relatively brief period as an independent state. During the interwar period (monarchy period), a functional administration composed of technocrats emerged. Many of these employees were educated in Western countries and demonstrated a solid commitment to serving their nation with a progressive mindset.

During that period, professionals enjoyed a highly esteemed status while constitutional foundations were established. However, these achievements were short-lived due to the subsequent communist regime. "In the 1930s, Albania had a politics-free administration due to the ban on political parties. However, political interventions and identification dominated the following period."<sup>1</sup>

The post-WWII communist state replaced the previous administration with a politically-oriented one. This new administration consisted of employees loyal to the communist regime, educated in communist allied countries in the east, and with modest socio-economic status relative to the living standards of that time. During this period, "the state apparatus was purged, many officials being imprisoned and, over time, almost all pre-communist time officials removed"(Idrizi 2022)<sup>2</sup>. The communist administration in Albania aimed to exert

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<sup>1</sup> Krasniqi A. (30 September 2022). Interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the case study research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë,Albania.

<sup>2</sup> İdrizi I. (23 August 2022). Interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the case study research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal

political interference for ideological and party control. It established a class-oriented and centralized system, seeking to transform employees into obedient individuals accountable for any betrayals within their ranks. According to Eriksen (2022), the public administration was closely monitored by a network of party cells and state security units (2022, 28). According to the 1976 constitution, Albania was a "state of the dictatorship of the proletariat" (Article 2). The socialist order was based on Marxism-Leninism principles (Article 3), with the Party of Labour of Albania as the sole leading political force (Article 3). The constitution also emphasized the principle of "class struggle" (Article 4) (Idrizi 2022)<sup>1</sup>.

Consequently, it was an inherent expectation that the functioning of the state administration would primarily orient towards serving ideological and political objectives.

In such conditions, the natural reaction of extreme fear of any opposition was evident, and resistance, including "to illegal orders, diminished steadily"(Eriksen 2022, 8).

In the light of these developments, the idea of how the bureaucratic apparatus should function was materialized in an expression: When the party speaks - the bureaucracy remains silent!<sup>2</sup>

In Albania, "the influence of Stalinism drove the communist party to exert greater control over every aspect, including state administration, compared to other Eastern Bloc countries after Stalin's death". (Idrizi 2020)<sup>3</sup>

With the regime change in the post-90s, this inheritance persisted, carrying some traits of this period.

If in communism, "the class struggle, people with a so-called "bad biography" were deprived of such working positions and, usually, heavily discriminated

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Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë, Albania.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>2</sup> Translation in Albanian: Kur flet partia - nuk flet burokracia!/Kur flet klasa nuk flet burokracia!

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*. Personal communication (23 August 2022)

when interacting with the state administration" (Idrizi 2022), in transition, this division in PA was inherited and used to identify between the leftist` and `rightist. As absurd as it may seem, the intention to create such division was not as absurdly projected.

In the post-90s era, "the administration in Albania became susceptible to political parties' influence, with the concept of the state as a source of profit and comfort ."(Krasniqi 2022).<sup>1</sup> The boundaries between political parties, the state, and the administration became indistinct.

In the new pluralistic conditions, winning parties or coalitions would completely restructure the administrative system, using divisive labels like "right" or "left." However, the persistence of two categories - namely, old ideological and cultural traits, as well as actors from the previous system - hindered a clean break from the past during the formation of the new system.

The first category is linked to the experience and legacy of the 50-year totalitarian regime. This culture created psychological resistance and a way of life that could not be easily abandoned. "The product or the consequences of heritage activities" (Smith 2006, 83) and the mentality that remains in the memory and activities of the people after a rapid change cannot be easily done!

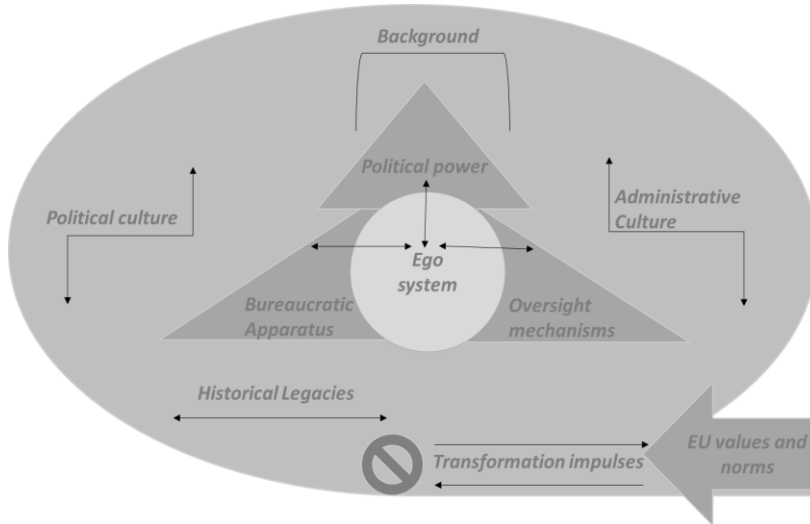
Moreover, these elements are constantly "created, and continually recreated (rather than simply 'maintained')," being built into "social networks and relations that themselves bind and create a sense of belonging and identity" (*ibid*) and also a sense of tradition continuation related to these products and living elements that reflect in behaviours and attitude towards social, political, knowledge and change.

The second category involves a preventable process that could have been mitigated by "the involvement and infiltration of actors from the previous regime in reforming the emerging system and its institutions" (Gjinali 2022). The persistence of such elements was influenced by the experience of many remaining employees. The historical, cultural, and social legacies play a crucial role in understanding the enduring characteristics and political norms that have

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*. Personal communication (30 September 2022)

shaped the current realities. These challenges, rooted in the broader contextual background, provide valuable insights into the interplay of factors that have influenced and shaped the present (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Determinant Obstacles: Transforming Values, Norms, and Traits from Past to Present

Source: *Original elaboration designed by the author*

The inherited political culture from a repressive regime has shaped a self-centered foundation in the state-building process. This self-centered system prioritizes personal interests over the public good, disrupting noble goals and interfering with independent structures. As depicted in (Figure 1), this dynamic enables the consolidation of political power, eroding checks and balances and impeding transformative reforms. These imbalances consistently undermine good governance, promoting autocratic rule and democratic regression (Figure 1).

During the interview, Shehi (2022), a Member of Parliament and also the Chairman of the "Movement for National Development" party, when discussing the administrative culture during the communist regime, expressed that "in

terms of efficiency, there was more accuracy and responsibility. The administration and its structures were more stable."<sup>1</sup>, because it was a one-party-state controlling system for almost half of the century - vested in political-ideological-class orienting elements. Employees could only be dismissed or appointed with the party and other branches' responsible approval.

"There was a kind of fear about tasks performing and accomplishing (Shehi 2022)<sup>2</sup> because of strict monitoring. Accountability was given in the party organization, and a personnel's office controlled the career with multiple subordinate branches: The Party Organization, executive bodies, and State Security.

With the introduction of pluralism in the post-90s, public servants' loyalty shifted towards political parties, leading to potential long-term consequences for the public when power changed hands without considering these implications.

In the current period, these products of the past, which have shaped the existing mentality, continue to impact political interference and behaviour in Public Administration. "Politics remains fundamental in the government's approach to administration, influencing and impacting public institutions for the past 30 years".<sup>3</sup>

In the Balkans, there is a prevalent perception that the law enforcement system is utilized for partisan political motives. According to Eriksen's study, such shreds of evidence are noted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro (Eriksen 2022, 8, 12). "Such claims are not fundamentally new. They fit into a long-standing tradition across the Western Balkans". One of the

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<sup>1</sup> Shehi D. (20 September 2022). Interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*. Interview - Personal Communication

<sup>3</sup> Beqa M. (05 September 2022). Interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë.



hindering mechanisms for these trends would be "a strong rule of law" as "an essential precondition for high-quality democracy" (*ibid*) and good governance. "In most of these countries, "little respect for formal legislation is a key feature of political culture." (Eriksen 2022, 24) In the state-building phase of many Western Balkan countries, unstable political environments, inadequate institutional development, and weak rule of law led to a prevalent political culture that favored informal arrangements over formal legal frameworks. As Husi (2015) notes, Albania exposes weak rule of law and frequent government interference; hence, administrative powers and discretion become profitable due to the lack of legal certainty and abrupt changes in laws and regulations (303). Generally, these nations encountered challenges in establishing effective governance systems, ensuring stability, and managing the transition from authoritarianism. Consequently, informal networks and personal connections became crucial for exerting influence and acquiring power. Relying extensively on these informal channels often resulted in disregarding established legal frameworks, regulations, and transformative actions. This led to a political environment where formal legislation is not consistently upheld or implemented.

#### **4.THE NEXUS OF POLITICAL CULTURE AND ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE: IMPACT ON REFORMS**

The lack of regard for formal legislation in Albania's political culture hampers the implementation of efficient reforms and institutional Europeanization, hindering progress and alignment with European standards. The long-standing influence of political culture directly impacts the administrative culture. A political spoilage culture characterized by a disregard for formal legislation and a reliance on informal practices can seep into the administrative culture. In "the inclusive definition "administrative culture" is understood as the modal pattern of values, beliefs, attitudes, and predispositions that characterize and identify

any given administrative system.” (Dwivedi 1999, 19) The given system is the lively organism indicating past and continuity.

During the transition, political actors prioritized personal connections, informal networks, and inefficient policies over merit-based decision-making, leading to appointing public servants needing more qualifications and expertise. As (Husi 2015) notes, political parties in power continuously face the same dilemma: maintain a professional public administration by meeting EU criteria and risk alienating party members or hire loyalists with limited expertise. However, with each change in power, the public administration is rebuilt according to the preferences of the new government. As a result, administrative processes are compromised, leading to inefficiencies, corruption, and a lack of accountability. The existing inherited norms needed to be adaptable to new standards, reforms, and the establishment of new institutions. Nonetheless, the creation of new structures and legislation in the 90s did not align with this transformation of norms. As a result, the transition in the Public Administration sector was prolonged, which in turn may have contributed to an extended transitional period and a defective democracy overall. Elbasani (2008) argues that the bureaucratic criterion in EU enlargement had little impact on a country's path to membership based on administrative reforms. Political criteria were prioritized over administrative ones, allowing deliberate ambiguity in rejecting accession. Parallely, the society lacked a robust political culture necessary for recognizing and assimilating emancipatory norms. This gap consistently hindered society and impeded the flow of essential feedback. "Under communism," the concept of "public interest" was absent from socialist legal theory. The inability to differentiate between the formal state system and the personal/political interests of the incumbent leadership resulted in a "culture of power" (Eriksen 2022, 32).<sup>1</sup> Southeast Europe's "culture of power" resembles Almond and Verba's concept of a "subject culture." It involves a solid attachment to the ruling leadership but a lack of awareness about the importance of mediating agents such as political

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<sup>1</sup> For more explanation, see: "Breach of law as a government policy" (5.2-*Informal political norms*), authored by Svein Eriksen.

parties, civil society, and citizens in a functional democracy. In Albania, the lack of knowledge resulted in a lack of action and expectations for change. This was due to an oppressive culture that suppressed the development of evaluation skills. During these years, there was "prevalent support for authoritarian values and the rule of strongmen" (Kapditzic 2019, 7).<sup>1</sup> In the domestic context, one can observe "a tendency among the ruling political elites to seize the economic, structural, and cultural resources of the state" (Dzankic 2019, 14). It is necessary to explain that the Patronage and clientelist networks develop and operate through active roles, where the self-interested individual in power gives commands, and the public servant in Public Administration receives or accommodates those commands. Elbasani (2008) states that domestic actors are reluctant to relinquish the benefits of replacing administration with their own supporters when in power, merely paying lip service to EU conditions and international pressures for change (120).

Such a political culture legacy has continuously reflected anti-values such as "subordination, exclusion, personalized trust, and a strong sense of hierarchy" (Liebert et al. 2013, 25–26), while "equity, social responsibility, and accountability" were hard to deliver in frames of governance responsibilities and bureaucratic efficiency – during continuous reformation. "The new administrative system" (Liebert et al. 2013, 25–26) faced several waves of reforms during 32 years of transition. In the promising patterns to building and enhancing integrity and professionalism in the civil service troupe, the frequent dismissals and position changing of employees, including in strategic sectors (security sector), shaped the opposite side. Being efficient and professional as a bureaucrat, it is not reflected as "the ability to create public good and improve citizens' living conditions," although "the needs of citizens are to a certain degree represented in public policies, but often in a twisted or misinterpreted way" (Liebert et al. 2013, 25–26).

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<sup>1</sup> In a common understanding, when talking about the "strongmen," it can refer to leaders of political parties, representatives of the government cabinet, and influential actors in the economic life, connected to politics and automatically to the administration.

These elements can be linked to the previous regime as Idrizi (2016,288) states that the communist regime's party-state apparatus showed discrepancies. Unlimited power, neglect of rules, and a bloated bureaucracy caused chaos, deviating from typical bureaucratic rule. This detachment led officials to prioritize obedience over societal needs, with institutions becoming disconnected from social reality. Gashi highlights the presence of a bloated bureaucratic apparatus and identifies similar elements within the current public administration too.<sup>1</sup> In three decades, "depoliticization and de-partyization were nominal, as the administration remained politicized. It functioned as a tool for politics, closely tied to political affiliations. (Nunaj 2017, 194)

The disconnect between institutions and social realities, combined with a focus on individual interests, impeded public administration's responsiveness and effectiveness- hindering the successful transition towards a democratic and accountable governance system.

## **5.UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICAL POWER-BUREAUCRACY RELATIONSHIP AND THE CHALLENGES OF INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION**

The historical context discussed above influenced the interactions between self-interested individuals in power and those with administrative authority. In any society, both elected and appointed officials are responsible for prioritizing public duty over personal agendas. This is crucial given public functionaries' important role in the public sphere, governed by public law. They should fulfil their responsibilities independently, free from illegal political demands or pressures.

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<sup>1</sup> Gashi Sh. (31 August 2022). Interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë.

Discussing responsible politicians and bureaucrats in Albania and other Southeast European countries can be challenging. Both categories often exhibit self-centered behaviors, prioritizing personal interests and utilizing connections for rapid personal and status gains. This behavior can be characterized as *arriviste*<sup>1</sup>, - undermining the notion of responsible governance, when acting for their interests (making use of connections for rapid personal and status). In such cases their “egoism transforms from a psychological condition to a normative condition - (determination of behaviors and objectives that leads to achieving personal interests).” (Luli 2023, 8). This relationship and interplay can lead to decreased citizen involvement in politics, growing disenchantment with democracy, and increased skepticism towards democratic institutions and representatives (BIEPAG 2017, 12).

Illicit or unofficial interactions involving these connections subvert the established hierarchical governance structure and establish informal social norms that diverge from the expected moral ethics of political representatives and public servants. To gain a normative understanding of their objectives, it is crucial to examine the operational dynamics of these individuals. As Husi (2015, 303) notes, when faced with the choice between honest work in the public service with little reward and uncertainty, or engaging in bribery and potentially prospering without consequences, a pragmatic individual would likely opt for the latter option.

From a political and societal standpoint, these egoistic motivations in such roles greatly impede the advancement of bureaucratic missions, outcomes, and

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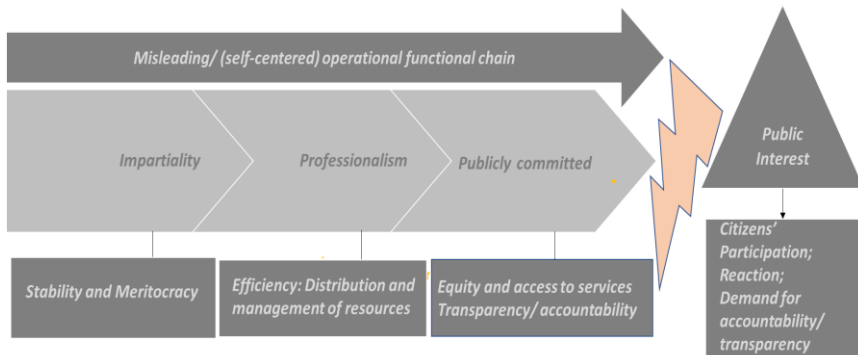
<sup>1</sup> *Arriviste* word meaning: According to dictionary.com, a person who has recently acquired unaccustomed status, wealth, or success, especially by dubious means and without earning concomitant esteem.

Yourdictionary.com: A person who has recently gained power, wealth, success, etc., and is regarded as an upstart; parvenu.

Collins's dictionary: You describe someone as an *arriviste* when you criticize them because they are trying very hard to belong to an influential or important social group to which you feel they have no right to belong.

Cambridge Dictionary: a person who is trying to move into a higher class in society

reforms in enhancing institutions - undermining social unity and generating inequalities in individuals' access to public services. (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Erosion of Good Governance: Impediments in Public Management

Source: *Original elaboration designed by author*

Political interference may disregard administrative principles, deviating from the public interest, and using restructuring and reforms as a disguise for unfair dismissals undermines the bureaucracy's mission. This discrepancy between formal rules and resistant realities erodes trust in institutions, reduces incentives for transparency and accountability, and diminishes citizen engagement.

Unjustified terminations and improper appointments during political power transitions impede the formation of a capable and unbiased administrative class. Nunaj (2017, 178) highlights missing data in DAP's annual reports, including information on civil service employees, temporary contracts, candidate participation in competitions, administrative court decisions, and reasons for dismissals. This lack of transparency can disrupt sustainability and efficient performance among civil service staff.

Within various institutions and agencies, three distinct categories of public employees emerge: the opportunistic individual, the acquiescent one, and the diligent individual who upholds integrity:

1. The "arriviste" individual exploits political connections to advance personal interests, often with economic benefits. They strategically leverage these

connections for career progression, acquiring relevant training, and obtaining influential positions. Nunaj (2014) refers to them as "political gadgets" in certain cases.

2. As a complacent employee, one occupies a secure and unchallenging position, enjoying a sense of reassurance and stability regardless of their performance. This lack of accountability for detrimental impacts on the institution or state budget is highlighted (Nunaj 2014). In either scenario, the practice of relying on personal connections, such as "being a relative or acquaintance of someone in a position of power," is observed. Additionally, "adhering to a standardized career system" is not prioritized and is often regarded as unfamiliar (Nunaj 2014).

3. Competent bureaucrats, equipped with impressive CVs, exist within the work environment. They diligently adhere to legal frameworks, rules, and documented procedures. However, their approach may be considered "out of fashion" in the given context (Nunaj 2014).

Individuals in this category may frequently face atypical responsibilities assigned by their superiors. In such cases "professionals' self-censorship is concerning as they fear political retaliation from politicized superiors, leading them to withhold their views when expertise is needed".<sup>1</sup> The existence of multiple classifications among civil servants, along with disparities in treatment and advancement incentives, can lead to qualified individuals feeling unmotivated, lacking ambition, unevaluated, and becoming less committed to their sectors. Most of them encounter "limited opportunities for career growth and professional development"<sup>2</sup>. However, "the competent category of civil servants plays a crucial role in ensuring the functional efficiency of institutions,

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<sup>1</sup> Beshku K. (04 October 2022) Interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë.

<sup>2</sup> Karamuço, E. 13 September 2022, interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë.

especially during a country's integration process into the European Union" (ibid). This is primarily due to the need for specific qualifications and competencies of employees to align legislation and policies with the EU *acquis*. "In transitioning countries, where institutions are weak, the institutions vest the integrity and the ethical values of the person leading them."(Beqa 2022)<sup>1</sup>

The trinomen helps understand the political power-bureaucracy relationship in specific contexts and why normative institutional aspects in aspiring EU countries have not led to institutional transformation. As Dafa (2021, 4) highlights, loopholes in civil service legislation are deemed to allow governing parties to unfairly influence recruitment, appointment, and arbitrary implementation of provisions in the Civil Servant Employer Law. This indicates why politization of Civil Service may lead to discrepancies in the implementation of professional ethics and efficient performance. The observed exemption "from horizontal and vertical coverage of certain government institutions" (Dafa 2021, 4) raises concerns about transparency in their functioning and staff recruitment, given their strategic importance and susceptibility to corruption (Dafa 2021, 4). Through this examination, valuable insights emerge regarding the underlying issues for the quality of reforms and the overall state of public institutions. Furthermore, these dynamics negatively impact institutional norms, good governance, accountability, and public trust.

## 6.CONCLUSIONS

Democracy requires solid institutions and a legal framework based on the rule of law. However, Southeast European countries are currently facing challenges in meeting these prerequisites, resulting in a regression of democratic practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Beqa, M. 05 September 2022, interview (personal communication) with the expert. Questionnaire on the case study research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë, Albania.



Weak democracies create an environment conducive to the rise of autocrats. This destructive cycle gradually erodes the essential elements necessary for a well-functioning democracy, including state consolidation and checks and balances mechanisms. The implications of these conditions are numerous, including low accountability, limited public engagement, ineffective reforms, and weak public policies. The absence of a robust civil society and meaningful public consultation exacerbate these challenges, impeding institutional consolidation and hindering progress towards desired democratic outcomes. Data analysis highlights enduring challenges faced by public institutions linked to political memory. In Albania, state-building, political culture, and officials' behavior shape the current political and institutional landscape. Understanding the motivations behind (un)democratic practices and reforms is crucial. This phenomenon is common to Albania but observed in countries with poor legacies and normative models. Historical and political factors, including the legacy of a totalitarian regime, have influenced Albania's state-building process. The process of European integration advocates for adopting democratic norms, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law in aspiring member states. However, implementing these norms faces significant hurdles when confronted with political memory and deep-rooted legacies (often overlooked) that have shaped the institutional framework over time.

Interview data on present institutions reveals remnants of past interference, including actors, norms, culture, and traditions. Respondents confirm the significant influence of state-building experience and enduring legacies on political and administrative developments after the regime change.<sup>1</sup>It was reiterated that there existed "no possibility to start from zero" (Gjinali 2022), as the administration's continuous operation could not be halted. However, a qualitative filtering process right from the outset (such as fulfilling transitional

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<sup>1</sup> Krasniqi A.; Beqa.M; Nunaj T.; Titini E; Gjinali A.; Derguti M.; Beshku, K.; Gashi Sh.; Zogaj B. Personal communication. (August - September 2022) Interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the study case research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë, Albania.

justice obligations) would have been instrumental in deterring certain actors from undermining the culture of the nascent institutions. This necessitated an inevitable "confrontation with the past and with the self" (Zogaj 2022)<sup>1</sup> to circumvent any "cultural delays" (*ibid*). The findings suggest a lack of willingness, a deficiency in a reform-oriented mindset, and "a lack of long-term vision."<sup>2</sup>, particularly among the political elite, to fully disengage from the past and initiate a thorough reform process. Notably, the organizational culture remains burdened by "lingering echoes from the past in the functioning and management of the Public Administration, characterized by an outdated 'divide and control' approach" (Karamuço 2022)<sup>3</sup> that has impeded the diffusion of fundamental norms of good governance and institutional responsibility. Moreover, it is worth highlighting that "the role of the superior/chief remains remarkably crucial as it represents a politically influential figure capable of delivering solutions" (Derguti 2022)<sup>4</sup> when citizens are confronted with service deficiencies or seek responses from these institutions. The prevailing culture still reflects a significant degree of centralization.

As explored in this study, the post-regime change situation in Albania was characterized by resistant elements that prolonged the transition. After the

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<sup>1</sup> Zogaj, B. (22 September 2022), interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë, Albania.

<sup>2</sup> Titini, E. (15 September 2022), interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë, Albania.

<sup>3</sup> Karamuço, E. 13 September 2022, interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë.

<sup>4</sup> Derguti, M. 01 September 2022, interview with the expert. Questionnaire on the research "Shortfalls in Public Administration: Understanding the Background of Informal Interaction." for the Group Research Project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance." Tiranë.

“Zeitwende” in the Eastern bloc, Albanian society demonstrated a strong desire for transformation towards EU integration. While Albania embarked on a path of change earlier than other Western Balkan countries, the legacy of the totalitarian regime hindered progress. Despite efforts to align with the European model in various aspects, historical and political memory influenced politics, governance, and reform- resulting in a hybridized system that fell short of a complete transition to democracy. Consequently, the authentic characteristics of the political and administrative culture of the previous regime continued to endure. In this context, politics never fully reconciled with history. Despite the persistent demand for change, a sense of normalcy returned with a passive continuity.

## 7.RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Promoting Comprehensive Study of Communism and its Legacies:** There is a pressing need in Albania to prioritize specialized academic platforms, research institutes, and comprehensive publications in Albania to study communism and its lasting impact. Further exploration of the political culture is needed to recognize and comprehend factual aspects. This will support democratization efforts and assess disentanglement from totalitarianism.
2. **Educating and Engaging Citizens:** Introduce informative lectures in Albanian elementary and secondary schools about the crimes, consequences, and genocide of the communist dictatorship. This will help Albania foster historical awareness and prevent the perpetuation of similar political cultures.
3. **Implementing targeted awareness campaigns:** Promote citizen awareness and engagement through targeted campaigns by academia, media, and civil society. Emphasize the importance of citizen participation, transparency, and accountability in political processes to build trust and empower individuals in shaping the public sphere.

4. **Foster public consultation and engagement:** Encourage meaningful public consultation and engagement through mechanisms like citizen assemblies and participatory budgeting to empower citizens and enhance trust in democratic institutions. For participatory democracy and sustainable development, Albania should listen to citizens and translate their desires into long-term programs within the rule of law, fostering a culture of continuous principles learning in public institutions.
5. **Comprehensive Reassessment and Gap Analysis:** Conduct a thorough assessment of the existing administrative culture, institutional frameworks, and practices. Identify the gaps and weaknesses that hinder effective reforms and institution-building. This analysis should consider the historical context and past legacies influencing the current situation.
6. **Consultative workshops with Civil Servants:** The Department of Public Administration, in collaboration with civil society actors, should organize consultative workshops involving focus groups of civil servants. These workshops should aim to gain insights into the challenges faced by civil servants in their daily work, such as workloads, illegal orders, external influences, task assignments, career progression difficulties, and sustainability within the civil service system.
7. **EU monitoring and pro-active role:** The EU should increase administrative reform monitoring and auditing by adding a political focus to address public administration reform challenges. Taking proactive measures is crucial for addressing ongoing issues and fostering sustainable progress.
8. **Transparent and Participatory Reforms:** Involve stakeholders (civil society, academia, private sector) in shaping and implementing reforms. This participatory approach ensures ownership, legitimacy, and diverse perspectives for sustainable solutions.
9. **Strengthening Institutional Checks and Balances:** Strengthen oversight institutions (judiciary, anti-corruption bodies, ombudsman offices) to promote accountability and discourage malpractices in PA. Investigating and holding accountable those involved in corruption or abuse of power is imperative.

10. **Future research** should explore the dynamics between political power and the bureaucratic apparatus in different sectors to understand their implications on governance, policy implementation, and public service effectiveness. This will provide valuable insights to inform policy decisions on developing an autonomous bureaucratic apparatus.

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**Annex 1.****Methodology details and list of experts interviewed:**

The questionnaire consisted of two sections with distinct purposes. The primary section aimed to gather opinions and observations from experts and current or former employees regarding the contextual background focused on political culture. Specifically, it sought to determine whether previous influential legacies continue to shape the administrative culture after the regime change.

On the other hand, the secondary section of the questionnaire focused on exploring how

politics influenced public administration in practice. It aimed to assess the interviewees' perceptions regarding political interferences, the interactivity between political representatives and bureaucrats, and the extent to which they observed them in their work. However, it is essential to note that this aspect is not addressed in this particular elaboration.

Twenty-five participants (16 subject-matter experts and nine current or former employees from public institutions) were interviewed. In the present research, data from 12 interviewees (subject-matter experts) provide valuable insight into the scope of the current study. The interviewees are subject matter experts with extensive knowledge of historical legacy, state-building process, political culture, administrative science, and EU integration process, and some of them have work experience in public administration. Interviews were realized through personal communication individually.

**Interview dates and location: August - September 2022, Tirane, Albania**

Interviewers come from specific backgrounds (Civil Society, Academia, Media, Political/Administrative Field).

**Table 1.**  
**Experts List:**

<b>1) Prof. Dr. Afrim Krasniqi</b>	(Academia/Civil Society/ Public Administration) – Political scientist/researcher/observer (Institute of Political Studies)
<b>2) Msc. Ardit Gjinali</b>	(Politics/ Media/ Public Administration) Political Scientist, expert/opinionist/observer
<b>3) Msc. Besjan Zogaj</b>	(Academia/ Public Administration)- Political Scientist/Observer (Professor at European University)
<b>4) Dashmir Shehi</b>	(Politics/Public Administration)-Member of Parliament (Movement for National Development Party)
<b>5) Dr. Edlira Titini</b>	(Academia/ Civil Society) - Law expert/Political Scientist (Professor at Military Academy in Albania)
<b>6) Prof. Assoc. Ervin Karamuço</b>	(Academia/Media/ Civil Society/ Public Administration) Expert in Law and Administrative Science (Professor at University of Tirana – Faculty of Law)
<b>7) Dr. Idriz Idrizi</b>	(Academia) Historian (Professor at University of Vienna & Institute for the Studies of Communist Crimes and Consequences in Albania (ISKK))
<b>8) Prof. Assoc. Klodiana Beshku</b>	(Academia/Public Administration) Political Scientist/researcher/ author (Professor at University of Tirana)
<b>9) Doc. Menduh Derguti</b>	(Academia and Politics) - Historian/ Former Professor (retired) former/politician-MP, researcher, of history books author at the high school level
<b>10) Dr. Mentor Beqa</b>	(Academia, CS, Media/Public Administration) Political Scientist/ observer/ researcher (Professor at Aleksander Moisiu University)
<b>11) Msc.</b>	(Academia and Media) - Political

<b>Shpendi Gashi</b>	Scientist/Observer/Opinionist (Visiting Professor at University of Tirana)
<b>12) Dr. Teuta Nunaj</b>	(Academia and Media) - Economist (Professor of Economy and Administrative Science at Marin Barleti University)

**"The views and opinions expressed in this study are solely those of the author and do not reflect the views of any institution or organization."**