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Albania's European Integration and Civil Society Impact

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate and propose strategies for the effective involvement and support of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the European integration process. The primary focus is to understand the challenges faced by CSOs, explore collaborative approaches, and present recommendations for policymakers to foster a more inclusive and transparent integration process. The main approach involves undertaking a comprehensive review of existing literature, case studies, and interviews with key stakeholders, including representatives from CSOs, government officials, and experts in European integration. The study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamics between CSOs and the broader institutional framework through this multi-faceted approach. In conclusion, this paper provides a holistic overview of the challenges and opportunities in enhancing CSO participation in European integration.

Keywords: Civil Society, European Integration, Albania, European Union, Cooperation, Institutions

Introduction

This study explores the significant role of non-state actors in the European integration process, with a specific focus on Albania as a candidate for EU membership. It aims to analyse the contributions

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made by various non-state actors in Albania, including civil society organisations, think tanks, businesses, and grassroots movements towards the country's progression into the EU. The study highlights the opportunities and challenges these actors present and how their engagement can influence Albania's path towards EU accession.

Albania, situated in Southeast Europe, transitioned from communist isolation in the early 1990s, embarking on a path of democratic and economic advancement. The pursuit of EU membership has been a pivotal driver behind Albania's political, social, and economic reforms. Accession to the EU promises benefits such as increased trade, foreign investments, and access to EU funding and developmental programs. As Albania aligns its policies and institutions with EU standards, non-state actors play a crucial role in supporting these efforts, fostering inclusivity, and promoting participatory integration.

Despite the progress already made, challenges persist on Albania's journey to EU accession, including concerns regarding corruption, judicial reform, and political polarisation. This underscores the importance of non-state actors in bolstering reform agendas and facilitating integration with the EU. These actors contribute unique perspectives, expertise, and advocacy skills, complementing governmental initiatives and driving positive transformations.

The study begins by outlining Albania's path towards European integration, highlighting milestones, challenges, and the significance of EU accession for the country's development and regional stability. It then categorises and defines the diverse, non-state actors actively engaged in Albania's European integration, emphasising their roles in advocating reforms, offering expertise, and fostering citizen participation. The study explores how these actors enhance democratic engagement, advocate for transparency, and contribute specialised knowledge and innovative solutions essential for EU accession. Additionally, it addresses challenges such as representation issues, potential conflicts of interest, and the necessity of effective coordination among actors.

The study concludes by emphasising the pivotal role non-state actors play in Albania's European integration and identifying emerging trends in their engagement. It offers insights for policymakers and stakeholders as regards harnessing these actors' potential effectively while mitigating associated challenges, ensuring a successful and inclusive journey towards EU accession.

The Role of Civil Society in the European Integration of Albania

Albania's journey towards European integration reflects its enduring ambition to attain full membership within the European Union. This trajectory commenced with its 2009 application for EU candidate status, which subsequently led to the initiation of negotiations for the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA). The primary objective of the SAA was to encourage political, economic, and institutional transformations within Albania, facilitating its harmonisation with EU norms and legislative frameworks. The harmonisation of legislation is a demanding process because it focuses on two issues, the first of which is the transposition of EU legislation into domestic laws. The second issue is related to the establishment of structural and administrative capacities. It requires a dedicated extra budget and trained staff to return to the issue of harmonisation of legislation (Xhuvani, Mecalla, 2023).

The EU used the same model as in the previous enlargement round in the Western Balkans to promote and enhance democracy, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights and to influence the implementation of essential reforms (Bregu, Gjinko, 2024).

The Berlin Process Summit, which was initiated by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014, was held for the first time in a non-EU country, namely, Albania. Signs of a growing awareness on the part of the EU emerged as early as September 2023, when the EU's foreign policy chief, Joseph Borrell, welcomed a 2030 deadline for the next enlargement, expressing hope that this would generate momentum both within the EU and among the candidate states (Marku, Teqja, 2024).

Domachowska concludes that the Western Balkans still have a long way to be granted membership as this requires the leaders of the region's states to introduce the necessary reforms, especially since the subsequent reports of the European Commission indicate stagnation in this area (Domachowska, 2021).

Across time, a spectrum of non-state actors have been involved in the EU integration process, including civil society organisations, businesses, think tanks, academic institutions, and grassroots movements. These entities have played an active role in the European integration process by advocating for increased collaboration and communication, impacting policy choices, and fostering cross-border discussions. With the evolution of the EU, the significance of these non-state actors' roles is expected to grow more prominent (Berisha, Kelmendi, 2021).

The opportunities for non-state actors in European integration are manifold, including such activities as empowering democracy and engaging citizens whereby non-state actors act as intermediaries between citizens and institutions, fostering engagement through dialogues, public debates, and conveying citizens' issues to policymakers. Leveraging technological advancements, these actors are poised to play a pivotal role in shaping a more participatory and inclusive European democracy.

In Albania, non-state actors have demonstrated notable expertise in bolstering democracy and citizen participation locally. Civil society organisations, community groups, and grassroots movements have played a pivotal role across Albania, encouraging civic involvement and empowering citizens to engage actively in decision-making processes. These local and regional entities consistently facilitate open dialogues within communities, organising public debates and advocating for the incorporation of citizens' concerns into policymaking (Reçi, 2024).

It is worth noting that 70% of the EU legislation for Albania's accession must be implemented at the local level in Albania. Therefore, this type of local and regional civic engagement may prove instrumental for Albania's successful EU accession (European Movement in Albania, 2020).

Beyond enhancing citizen participation, non-state actors may also act as citizen watchdogs by monitoring government actions and holding officials accountable for decisions. By scrutinising government policies and advocating for transparency, those actors contribute to a more accountable and responsive system of governance in Albania. In the future, non-state actors in Albania will play an even more crucial role in shaping the democratic landscape. As digital technologies continue to advance, non-state actors may use data analytics and online mobilisation to reach a larger audience and engage citizens from all parts of the country. This will not only enhance democratic participation but also guarantee that the voices of marginalised and underrepresented groups are heard and taken into account in the decision-making process.

Technology will continuously enhance the non-state actor role. With the advancement of technology and increased internet penetration in Albania, non-state actors will be able to use digital platforms to expand their abilities to foster a more participatory and inclusive democracy. Platforms such as online discussion forums, social media, and virtual town hall meetings will enable Albanian citizens to stay informed, participate in discussions, voice their opinions, and express their concerns to policymakers in a more accessible and convenient manner.

Transparency and the public sharing of information, essential documentation, and reports regarding the negotiations and screening

process for each chapter should characterise the whole EU-accession-talks process. Only in this way can the process be monitored by civil society and ensure that citizens are informed about what is being negotiated and the costs and advantages of each decision. The level to which non-state actors, such as civil society organisations, businesses, universities, and others, are involved in the negotiations is determined by the government's desire to incorporate them. Therefore, it is imperative that CSOs strongly demand and act upon their right to participate in policymaking and agenda-setting. In theory, these parties contribute by providing technical assistance, monitoring, and communication. The empowerment of civil society would also increase the chances of Albania joining the EU (Kasmi 2021).

By specifically looking at recent EU members, non-state actors may gain insights on how to positively support Albania's EU accession by the lessons learned from the EU accessions of EU Member States Bulgaria and Romania. Recent changes in the EU accession process stipulate that Albania must achieve these corruption and democracy reforms *before* its EU accession. Because non-state actors act at the local and regional level, they may be uniquely positioned in Albania to engage and inform citizens at the local level to promote and encourage the achievement of the required EU reforms. This may require looking for specific opportunities to assist and support the Albanian government's EU accession efforts and even require identifying gaps or blind spots in its EU accession and determining how best to address those gaps or overcome those blind spots.

It would not be the first time that a non-state actor has taken a proactive role in effectively changing the landscape in Albania by sharing its perspective. G. Bădescu's 2024 article *Difficult Heritage in South-eastern Europe* looks at the critical role of a non-state actor, an NGO called Cultural Heritage Without Borders, in preserving the Spaç prison site in Albania when state actors declined to do so in the face of the prison needing immediate preservation efforts (Bădescu, 2024). The context of Cultural Heritage Without Borders preserving Spaç prison without government support was notably preceded by the following brief write up of Albania's so-called "difficult heritage" – "For decades, Albania had not taken the steps that many other transition countries have gone through opening secret police files; initiating a truth and reconciliation commission; undertaking a concerted effort to find and identify the bodies of those who had forcibly disappeared; or reinterpreting the art and artifacts of Albanian Communism through a reflexive gaze. Within this context, sites of memory, such as Spaç Prison, have taken on a particularly important role in shaping the discussion over memory and heritage-making for Albania's recent past" (Eaton, 2018).

Consequently, Cultural Heritage Without Borders acted quickly, deploying a grassroots, bottom-up approach in order to preserve the site. It held workshops, brought together diverse stakeholders, and secured emergency preservation funds. In this instance, two different perspectives from Albanian history were preserved, one by a non-state actor and one by a state actor: the NGO preserved the perspective of the political prisoners at Spaç, while the Albanian government preserved the perspective of communist perpetrators at the House of Leaves, also known as the Museum of Secret Surveillance in Tirana. Non-state actors are critical in preserving and promoting the voices and perspectives of those less powerful individuals that, for various reasons, state actors do not acknowledge. A comprehensive and inclusive representation of civil society perspectives requires the actions of non-state actors. Indeed, non-state actors play a vital role in contributing expertise and fostering innovation, particularly in complex policy areas where their specialised knowledge complements the work of EU institutions. Think tanks, research centres, and academic institutions are invaluable sources of insights on intricate policy issues, aiding evidence-based decision-making processes.

In the Albanian context, non-state actors have demonstrated exceptional proficiency in offering expertise and relevant knowledge to inform public policies. Think tanks, research centres, and universities have also been instrumental in providing specialised knowledge on political and socio-economic issues within the country. Moreover, they conduct thorough analyses and independent studies, identifying emerging challenges and proposing potential solutions. This research-backed expertise aids policymakers and stakeholders in making well-informed decisions.

Specifically concerning European integration, Albanian think tanks and research institutions contribute expertise across various policy domains essential for EU alignment. They analyse priorities including judicial reform, healthcare system enhancements, environmental standards implementation, and other crucial aspects pertinent to Albania's European integration. With advancements in technology and enhanced collaboration with their European counterparts, non-state actors are poised to expand their contributions in expertise and innovation, benefiting from shared experiences and best practices from EU Member States.

Addressing global challenges is paramount for the EU and Albania alike, with issues such as climate change, migration, and cybersecurity requiring collective action and cross-border cooperation. Non-state actors are well-positioned to engage in such collaborative efforts, leveraging their networks and expertise to tackle these challenges effectively. As Albania progresses towards EU accession, the active

involvement of non-state actors in addressing global challenges will be crucial, ensuring alignment with EU policies and contributing to the country's integration process. CSO advocacy continues to be strong and, despite persistent challenges, CSOs actively engage in decision-making and policy-making processes at the local and national levels. Some policy advocacy initiatives demonstrated CSOs' persistence in articulating and advancing the interests and priorities of various communities and the sector itself. In general, CSOs at the national level continue to have stronger advocacy and lobbying capacities than CSOs at the local level. At the same time, CSO advocacy was hindered by the highly polarised political situation in the country. In several cases, political actors hijacked civil society protests to further their political agendas and manipulated the conversation to weaken public support and even dissolve movements (IDM, 2020).

Challenges and Risks

The following literature items indicate that there are also perceived challenges and risks associated with non-state actors' participation in the European integration process:

Democratic Legitimacy in Albania's Path to European Integration: The active involvement of non-state actors in Albania's European integration process raises concerns about their democratic legitimacy, a concern inherent to any organised body expressing political viewpoints. While said actors can bolster democratic participation by facilitating public dialogue and advocating for transparency, questions regarding their accountability and representation may arise. Achieving a balance will necessitate ensuring that these actors operate transparently and inclusively, representing the diverse interests and needs of Albania's populace. Strengthening mechanisms for public consultations, citizen engagement, and feedback will be vital to uphold the democratic legitimacy of non-state actors throughout the integration process.

Lobbying and Special Interests in Albania's Progress Toward European Integration: The engagement of various non-state actors, including corporate entities, introduces challenges related to lobbying and potential conflicts of interest. In Albania, effective regulation and oversight of lobbying activities will be crucial to prevent undue influence on policy decisions that could prioritise specific interests over the broader public good. Implementing transparency measures, such as publicly disclosing lobbying efforts and financial contributions to both governmental and non-state entities, can ensure that all stakeholders' voices, including civil

society organisations and businesses, are heard without compromising the integration process's integrity.

Coordination and Cohesion in Albania's Path to European Integration: Albania's journey towards EU accession may face coordination challenges, particularly considering the diverse interests and priorities among multiple stakeholders, including various non-state actors. Often, there is a lack of meaningful stakeholder participation in the process, leading to a cycle of mistrust where both public administration and non-state actors blame each other. Addressing this requires fostering a culture of collaboration and inclusivity, whereby all stakeholders are actively engaged and their contributions are considered, thus mitigating the challenges of coordination and promoting cohesion in the integration process.

Consequently, effective coordination mechanisms are vital to align efforts and foster cohesive strategies, both among non-state actors and between non-state actors and government entities such as Desk Officers. Engaging in regular, structured dialogue and cooperation platforms can facilitate coordination between civil society organisations, businesses, academia, and government institutions. Additionally, encouraging partnerships and joint initiatives among non-state actors in Albania may contribute to a more coherent and inclusive approach to the European integration process. As the role of non-state actors in European integration evolves, Albania can expect several significant trends to come about:

Digital Transformation for Enhanced Engagement: Technological advancements are poised to revolutionise how non-state actors engage in Albania's European integration. Digital platforms will facilitate broader and more efficient communication, collaboration, and mobilisation of citizens across borders. E-participation tools and online platforms will enable wider engagement, allowing Albanian citizens to contribute their perspectives and ideas, thereby enriching the democratic nature of the integration process. The Albanian government's planned e-governance initiatives, outlined in the Strategy of Digitalisation as the third pillar of "Transformative Digitalisation", are set to further enhance this digital transformation (Kosta, Qirjako, 2019).

The Empowerment of Grassroots Movements: Grassroots movements in Albania will continue harnessing social media and digital tools to influence public opinion and drive policy changes. These movements can mobilise citizens and advocate for their interests, exerting influence on decision-makers both nationally and within the EU. Empowering grassroots movements will foster a more inclusive and participatory approach to European integration in Albania.

Climate and Sustainability Advocacy: In light of the urgent need to address climate change and environmental concerns globally, environmental organisations in Albania will intensify their advocacy efforts for ambitious green policies and sustainable practices. Collaborating with state institutions and other non-state actors, these organisations will work towards aligning Albania's environmental policies with EU standards and regulations, contributing significantly to the country's sustainable development and EU accession prospects.

Strengthening Regional and Local Engagement: Non-state actors in Albania recognise the pivotal role of regional and local engagement in the European integration journey. Utilising a bottom-up approach, these actors will strive to enhance citizen participation at the local level, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment in shaping Albania's integration path. Regional and local initiatives will complement national endeavours, fortifying Albania's ties and integration with the wider European community.

Methodology

This research paper has adopted a comprehensive mixed-methods approach to investigate the significant role of non-state actors in Albania's European integration. The study began with an extensive literature review, systematically analysing academic articles, reports, and relevant publications to establish a theoretical foundation. This theoretical framework informed the research questions and set the stage for subsequent empirical investigations. The strategy of inquiry encompassed both qualitative and quantitative methods, incorporating case studies to provide real-world examples and a survey to gather broader insights. The literature review critically examined existing research, theories, and key concepts related to non-state actors' involvement in European integration, contributing to the theoretical framework that guided the study. Case studies were selected based on relevance, diversity, and significance to illustrate the impact of non-state actors in various sectors, such as civil society organisations, think tanks, businesses, and grassroots movements. These cases offered concrete examples of how non-state actors influence policy decisions and contribute to Albania's alignment with EU standards.

In parallel, a survey was conducted among 26 local and national non-profit organisations operating in Tirana and other municipalities, including the Civil Society Development Center Durres; Beyond Barriers, Albanian Skills, INAC Elbasan, Another Vision – Elbasan, the Altri Center,

the Gender Alliance for Development Center, the Youth Vlora Center, Informal Zone Association SHIZI, New Epoch Fier, New Intellectuals, Hope Shkoder, Arka Center Shkoder, “Hapa te lehte” center Vau i Dejes, Youth Movement for Democracy, Puke, the Center for Youth Progress, Kukës, Rias, Pogradec, Women in Development, and Korçë, among others. The structured questionnaire covered aspects such as the nature of CSO involvement, their perceived opportunities and challenges, and an overall impact assessment. The survey provided quantitative data to complement the qualitative insights gained from the literature review and case studies.

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations in the research. The sampling technique for the survey employed purposive sampling, potentially introducing biases in the representation of non-state actors. The qualitative data, particularly in the case studies, may be subject to interpretation bias, although efforts have been made to mitigate this through triangulation and reflexivity. Additionally, the dynamic nature of the European integration process and the limited timeframe for the research may impact the depth of insights gathered. Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted contributions and challenges faced by non-state actors in Albania’s journey towards European integration.

Analysis and Results

The prepared questionnaire held particular importance in the context of this paper for several key reasons. Firstly, it aimed to identify and analyse the role and impact of civil society organisations in Albania’s European integration process. The questionnaire was designed to provide a comprehensive and detailed insight into the contribution of these organisations in advocating for reforms, engaging citizens, and addressing global challenges, including climate change, migration, and cybersecurity.

Secondly, this study provided an in-depth analysis of the perceived successes and challenges that civil society organisations face during their engagement in the European integration process. Qualitative questions were designed to reveal the complex dynamics of CSO participation while quantitative questions provided an objective assessment of their effectiveness.

Thirdly, the authors’ analysis of the questionnaire results served as a crucial data source for this paper. The experiences and knowledge gathered will contribute to developing a strong, sustainable argument on how civil society organisations can play a key role in improving the European integration process in Albania.

Twenty-six Civil Society Organisations responded to this anonymous online survey, and represent both large and small municipalities across Albania, including Tirana, Elbasan, Durrës, Korça, and Kukës.

The survey results found that the twenty-six participating Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have a diverse focus across several key areas that reflect a commitment to improving social conditions and human rights along the spectrum of need. For instance, showing a strong emphasis on human rights, 76.9% of CSO responses indicate that they conduct activities and projects aiming to protect and represent these rights. Social justice is another crucial aspect of CSO work, extending their efforts to address social challenges and improve community conditions, with a concentration of 46.2%. Additionally, CSOs have a significant focus on health, as 30.8% of responses revealed the promotion of overall well-being and health in their communities. Civic engagement is another top priority for CSOs, with 30.8% of responses indicating their efforts to involve citizens in decision-making processes and contribute to the development of a participatory civil society. These areas reflect CSOs' ongoing responsible commitment and endeavours to address the diversity of community needs and challenges.

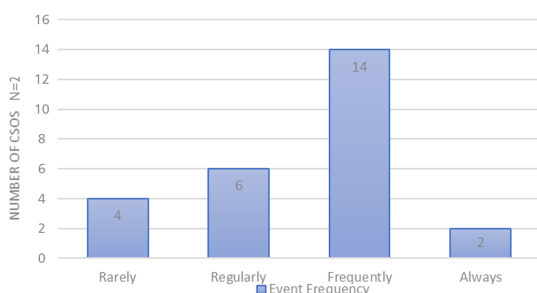


Figure 1. The Frequency of Public Events Held by CSOs

Source: Authors' compilation based on data collected from their questionnaire.

When it comes to the frequency of organising public events or other initiatives to encourage citizen participation, the survey responses highlighted a proactive approach by Civil Society Organisations. Figure 1 shows the results of this question about event frequency; a majority, 53.8% of CSO respondents to be precise, indicated that such engagement events are frequently organised, reflecting a continuous effort to involve the community. Moreover, 23.1% mentioned that these activities are scheduled regularly, suggesting consistent initiatives to promote civic involvement. Only 15.4% of CSOs reported that they rarely organised events for civic

participation. This result underscored CSOs' commitment to fostering an active and participatory community by organising events that encourage citizens to be involved in various aspects of societal development.

Next, as shown in Figure 2 below, each CSO's self-reported advocacy effectiveness for reforms related to European integration revealed diverse opinions among the respondents. More than one-third of the survey respondents, 34.6%, indicated a moderate satisfaction level, giving themselves a rating of 3 for advocacy effectiveness. Another quarter, i.e., 26.9% of respondents, expressed a high level of satisfaction with their effectiveness, assigning themselves a rating of 4. A smaller percentage of respondents, just 15.4%, gave the highest rating of 5 for advocacy effectiveness. Overall, these responses highlight varied degrees of confidence in the effectiveness of CSO advocacy efforts.

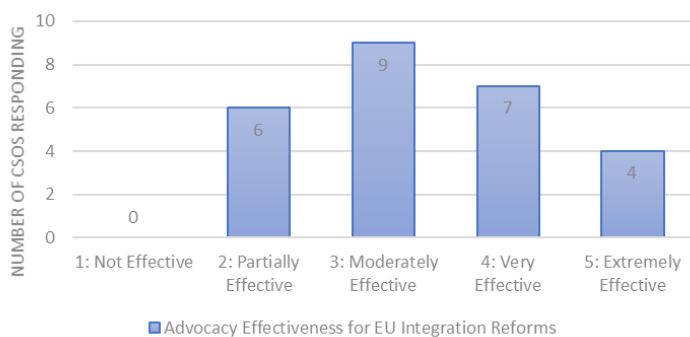


Figure 2. The Perceived Effectiveness of CSO Advocacy for Reforms Related to European Integration

Source: Authors' compilation based on data collected from their questionnaire.

This result suggests areas that may benefit from further study. Additional research is needed to identify the cause(s) of variations in CSO perceived effectiveness. For example, is there a connection between a CSO's self-reported advocacy effectiveness on a topic and its frequency of public events? This question was beyond the scope of this paper's research. Further studies could foster improved CSO advocacy effectiveness. Next, the survey looked at a given CSO's satisfaction level with its advocacy impact on political decision-making, measured on a scale from 1 to 5. Responses again reflected diverse perspectives among respondents. A notable 42.3% expressed a moderate level of satisfaction, assigning a rating of 3. Additionally, 23.1% indicated a high level of satisfaction, providing a rating of 4. Only two organisations, or 7.7%, selected the highest score of 5 for this category. On the other hand,

19.2% of CSOs were somewhat satisfied, assigning a rating of 2. These responses highlight varying degrees of contentment with the influence of CSO advocacy on political decision-making processes, showcasing both strengths and areas that may benefit from further improvement. The specific causation behind these self-reported advocacy results is, as above, beyond the scope of this paper. However, additional research is needed into how CSOs measure actual impact on political decision-making and what factors influence high versus low scores on perceived impact. External benchmarks might also be useful here, to assess the perceived CSO impact on political decision-making with an objective measure of advocacy impact on decision-making, such as new, local regulations or improved social services.

The evaluation of a CSO's success in promoting citizen involvement in the European integration process, measured on a scale from 1 to 5, also indicated varying perceptions among CSO respondents. Figure 3 shows the distribution of these results. Specifically, a notable 38.5% expressed a moderate level of success, assigning a rating of 3. About one-quarter of respondents, 26.9%, indicated a moderate level of success, providing a rating of 3. On the other hand, 19.2% reported they were only somewhat satisfied, assigning a rating of 2.

These responses underscore the diverse perspectives on the extent of success in encouraging citizen participation in the European integration process, suggesting both positive achievements and areas for potential enhancement. Importantly, since the majority of responding CSOs report moderate success or higher, this suggests that the majority of CSOs are successfully engaging local constituents on relevant issues regarding European integration.

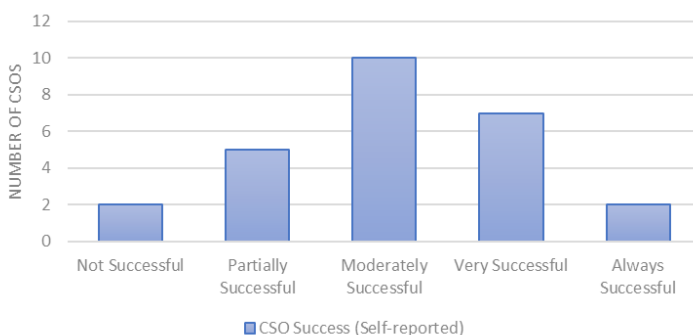


Figure 3. CSO Success in Promoting Citizen Involvement in the European Integration Process

Source: Authors' compilation based on data collected from their questionnaire.

Looking across these survey questions above, the results show that the majority of survey respondents view themselves as having a moderate or higher degree of success in their activities. This result indicates a positive and measured outlook on CSOs' current-and-future role in Albania as it continues its accession journey toward EU membership. The qualitative responses aligned with this view is that CSOs are experiencing success, even in the face of significant political & financial constraints. In both the quantitative and qualitative responses, there is optimism about the initiatives underway.

Next, the survey gauged CSOs' views on knowledge and expertise. The first question on knowledge was about the importance of the role of researchers, academic institutions, and businesses in their contribution to evidence-based policy knowledge needed for EU membership. Figure 4 below depicts these results. The majority of survey respondents, a substantial 65.4% of participants, rated this role with the highest importance, emphasising the crucial contribution of these entities.

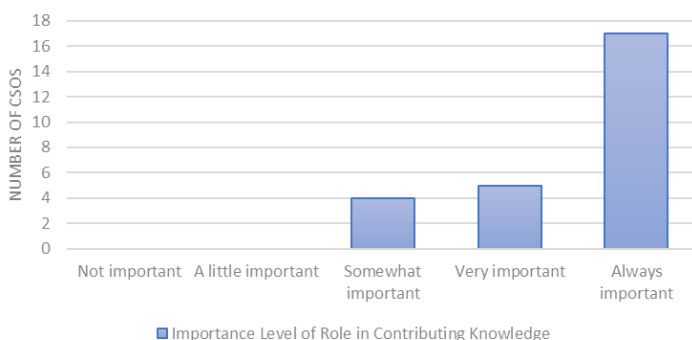


Figure 4. The Importance of the Role of Researchers, Academic Institutions, and Businesses to Contribute Evidence-based Policy Knowledge Necessary for Albania's EU Membership

Source: Authors' compilation based on data collected from their questionnaire.

Additionally, 19.2% of CSOs assigned an importance rating of 4 to this role, indicating a widespread acknowledgment of the valuable role played by researchers, academic institutions, and businesses in shaping policies based on substantial evidence. The collective opinion shows CSO recognition of these stakeholders as vital contributors to the development and implementation of informed policies relevant to the EU accession process.

The follow-on survey question of "Do you often collaborate with researchers or academic institutions to gain better knowledge?" had a broader distribution, indicating a learning opportunity for many CSOs

to collaborate with researchers and academic institutions on experiential knowledge relevant for Albania's EU accession. These results are depicted in Figure 5 below.

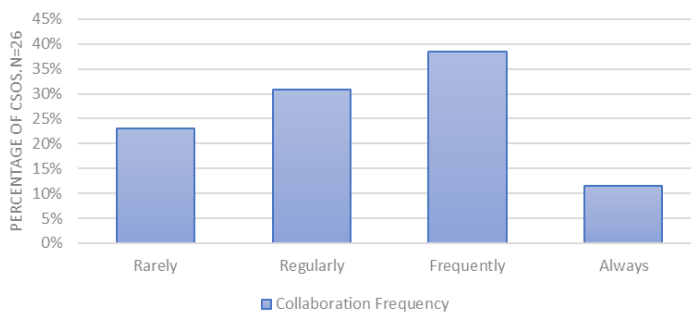


Figure 5. The Frequency of CSO Collaboration With Researchers or Academic Institutions to Gain Knowledge

Source: Authors' compilation based on data collected from their questionnaire.

38.5% of CSO participants stated that such collaboration occurs consistently, and another 11.5% stated collaboration occurs “always”, indicating an ongoing engagement with academic and research partners. Next, 30.8% of CSOs marked “often” for the frequency of collaboration. This highlights an opportunity for more active and frequent cooperation with researchers and academic institutions among some CSOs to enhance knowledge. Another 23.1% of CSO respondents acknowledged that they rarely collaborated with researchers or academics, indicating a need for continuous improvement and enrichment of insights within CSOs. Overall, the collective feedback indicates that CSOs recognise the importance of researchers and academics and have a commitment to fostering strong ties with this community, with some room for improved engagement and learning. This survey did not delve into why some CSOs have broader involvement with academia. That question could yield interesting results that might inform future relationship-development efforts. Another area of additional investigation could be a study of perceived CSO levels of success/effectiveness mapped against the level of engagement with academia, researchers, and business entities. A future question to be posed is one which asks whether a causal connection exists between the frequency of engagement with these entities and a CSO's perceived and/or actual success. Certainly, each entity possesses unique insights that could inform CSO efforts.

On global challenges, many CSOs are actively engaged in addressing the topics of climate change, migration, and cyber security within the

context of European integration. The survey responses reflect a balanced involvement on these issues, with 30.8% giving a rating of 3, or moderate engagement, and an additional 30.8% selecting higher levels of engagement, with 15.4% each selecting either a 4 or a 5 on the scale. This result signifies a substantial level of CSO dedication toward tackling issues of global significance. These organisations' proactive and comprehensive stance on global challenges underscores CSOs' contributions to broader global goals within the framework of European integration. However, there is room for improvement among some CSOs, as more than a third of CSO respondents indicated "low" or "no involvement" in these issues. Because the survey was anonymous, this question was not mapped to a CSO's primary mission. A CSO's lack of involvement in these issues might simply indicate a more granular focus on immediate local needs. The responses to this question may evolve as Albania gets closer to EU accession.

CSO perceived effectiveness against these global issues is broad. Of the CSOs involved in these global issues, a significant majority, 61.5%, rated their activities at a 3 or above in terms of effectiveness: Specifically, 30.8% rated their efforts as 3 on the scale, 19.2% gave a rating of 4, and 11.5% gave a rating of 5, indicating a significant, overall effectiveness of the initiatives. The required iterative nature of all CSO activities can be seen in the 23% of CSO organisations which rated their activities on climate change, migration, and cyber security with a "low" effectiveness score. These are massive and evolving challenges with complex dynamics. Continuous learning and adjustment are required to enhance and refine CSOs' strategies and tactics to address these major global challenges in the context of European integration.

The survey also included several open-ended questions. The first question, on the role of CSOs in advocating for reforms in the European integration process, generated a range of replies. These revealed that CSOs play a range of diverse yet crucial roles in this process, including acting as consultants, catalysts, and coordinators. Key areas of influence include addressing issues such as illegal immigration, corruption, and participatory governance. Furthermore, CSOs have served as conscientious advocates via initiating actions and ensuring the responsible and reflective progression of the European integration process, aligning it with citizens' needs and aspirations. Specific functions highlighted include monitoring and reporting, advocacy, mediation, participation in consultations and dialogue, education, awareness-raising, networking, and international cooperation.

Within these qualitative responses, the role of raising awareness within society was emphasised, with a focus on the importance of organisations

in providing expertise, consciousness-raising, and knowledge-sharing. That CSOs function as watchdogs, pushing for the improvement of public policies at both central and local levels, is a recurring theme. CSOs have actively engaged in advocating for legal reforms, aligning local legislation with European standards, and contributing to public service quality, gender-based violence prevention, and environmental protection. These efforts are ongoing.

Specific CSO initiatives as regards Albania's EU integration have been particularly effective in promoting citizen involvement in the European integration process, with efforts concentrated on consultation, initiatives, and programs that facilitate integration conditions and align with European practices and legislation. The collaboration with researchers and academic institutions has been acknowledged as that which is contributing to better knowledge and understanding.

CSOs have actively provided knowledge towards supporting policies related to EU membership through various activities. These include training sessions, workshops, and academies aimed at enhancing the capacities of local governance units and relevant stakeholders. CSOs have played a crucial role in raising awareness and promoting active participation in reforms, particularly in areas such as education, global challenges such as climate change, cyber security, and sustainable development. Efforts have been made to inform citizens about the integration process, benefits, and challenges, with a focus on youth involvement. CSOs have engaged in consultations, workshops, and training sessions with local civil society organisations, the media, and local authorities. Their activities have contributed to strengthening local institutions, improving waste management, and aligning local legislation with European standards.

CSO training initiatives have empowered citizens with legal knowledge and various aspects of democracy, fostering active participation and informed decision-making. The organisations have actively collaborated with institutions, contributing to policy development and public awareness through forums, conferences, and sensitisation campaigns. CSOs have provided knowledge and expertise in order to support policies related to EU membership by creating continuous reports and analyses, organising public forums for open discussions, and collaborating with institutions to contribute to policy development. Their activities have focused on raising awareness, understanding, and citizen engagement concerning EU membership and related issues.

In summary, CSOs have played a multifaceted role in advocating for reforms in the European integration process, ensuring that citizens' voices are heard, and influencing positive changes in legislation and public

policies. The variety of roles, from advocacy to education and coordination, underscores the comprehensive impact of civil society organisations on shaping a transparent and democratic society in Albania.

Next, a question about the challenges faced by CSOs in their efforts revealed that CSOs involved in the European integration process have encountered myriad challenges that have impacted their active participation and effectiveness. One recurring issue highlighted by a majority of respondents is the “lack of information and promotion”. Many organisations face difficulties in accessing timely and relevant information about Albania’s EU accession process. The common understanding is that the desired data exists but that it is not being shared with CSOs in a timely, comprehensive manner. This lack of access to key information can cripple an organisation’s effectiveness. Not surprisingly, any lack of access to key information could therefore derail any CSO initiative designed to engage, inform, educate, and empower Albanian citizens about issues on Albania’s EU accession. This widespread lack of EU-accession information among Albania’s CSOs indicates an urgent need for improved data transparency from those who possess the relevant EU accession information. Of note, a question for future study is whether CSOs’ lack of access to information negatively impacts the effectiveness of CSO initiatives. It would be a subject for further study if there are examples of any CSOs that were able to identify proxy data to bolster their European integration initiatives, despite the lack of access to governmental data. Such proxies might be developed by accessing best practices from other EU Member States, academics, or relevant business partners. This type of problem-solving by identifying success stories is so-termed as “bright spots” by Dan and Chip Heath in their best-selling book *Switch* (Fast Company, 2010).

Adding to this information-access challenge, another significant challenge is the “lack of interest and non-inclusion of institutions”. This limited attention from state actors contributes to the overall challenge of fostering awareness and engagement among the public. Some CSOs find it challenging to generate interest in European integration topics, and the non-participation of institutional actors further complicates the collaborative nature required for successful integration efforts.

In the realm of education, CSOs shared in the qualitative replies that they face “challenges in education development”. This encompasses difficulties in promoting inclusive and quality education that aligns with the standards set by the European Union. The slow progress in educational reforms contributes to the overall complexity of the integration process. Due to limited funding and limited government support, CSOs struggle

to implement education reform that would undoubtedly enhance the lives of young Albanians. This education issue, coupled with the specific challenge of youth indifference, reveals a massive civil society gap in Albania, and an informed, civic-minded youth is critical for Albania, both for its growth as a country and as a functioning member of the European Union. Engaged youth are the country's leaders of tomorrow. CSOs are positioned to address the "indifference of youth" towards EU integration through strategies that increase youth engagement and foster a sense of responsibility and participation in the integration process.

Next, the challenge of "political interruptions and stigmatisation" reflects how disruptions caused by political administrations' negative aspersions cast toward civil society organisations can decrease the effectiveness of CSOs; coordinated CSO activities face obstacles due to inconsistent political support and potential stigmatisation. "Low public interest and indifference of local authorities" present additional hurdles for CSOs. The lack of public interest, combined with a perceived lack of importance from local authorities, hampers efforts to engage the broader community in European integration activities. While CSOs contribute to the integration process, "limited local-level activity development" inhibits their impact. Challenges in developing and sustaining activities at the local level hinder the effectiveness of these organisations in contributing to the broader integration agenda.

Lastly, the "lack of continuous engagement and support from state institutions" represents an overarching challenge. Limited support and inconsistent engagement from state institutions hinder the ability of CSOs to operate effectively and contribute meaningfully to the European integration process.

In conclusion, these challenges underscore the multifaceted nature of CSOs' involvement in European integration. Addressing these issues requires collaborative efforts, increased financial support, and a more inclusive and supportive environment for civil society organisations to thrive and contribute positively to the integration process.

Conclusions

This study delved into the pivotal involvement of non-state actors in Albania's path toward European integration, emphasising their contributions in addressing global challenges and upholding democratic principles. Through a thorough review and analysis, it was revealed that non-state actors in Albania consistently play a vital role in addressing key issues pertinent to Albania's EU integration, including climate change,

migration, and cybersecurity. Furthermore, these actors actively promote democratic engagement by facilitating public dialogues and advocating for transparent governance practices.

The research also highlighted perceived challenges associated with non-state actors' participation, including concerns about democratic legitimacy, lobbying, and coordination. To address these challenges, non-state actors must strive for inclusivity, transparency, and effective coordination among diverse actors.

Importantly, 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, information sharing, 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 organisations push for ambitious green policies aligned with EU standards. Additionally, regional and local citizen engagement will continue to increase, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment among citizens.

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