



ALBANIANS AND THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL MODEL

Disadvantages, obstacles, challenges and visions

Piro Misha



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The present study - Part of a set of studies about the actors in the Albanian democracy

At the beginning of the year 2014 the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung brought into life, together with leading experts of six distinguished organizations and Think Tanks, a long term project. The aim of this project is to create and stimulate a political and social discussion in Albania about the EU Integration.

A long-term Project in several stages

The starting point of the contemplation was the perspective that Albania desires to be soon a full EU member, with an economic and social developed society. More than 80% of the population aims at this goal. To reach it Albania must fulfil, *inter alia*, the minimum social standards of the EU – the so called European Social Model (ESM). **These standards can only be reached if all involved parties of the society along with politics and administration act jointly, namely that they foster a trusting and cooperating relationship between each other.** In order to become an EU member the requirements are high and can just be reached through the cooperation of all participating actors.

On this regard, the long-term project was planned in several stages. They should overlap in time to interweave results from the discussions of the actors with the project work. From this point of view the project stays dynamic and is co-designed by those who are participating in the discussions. Starting point – the first stage – was the assumption that a democratic, social and economic successful society can only develop if all actors act on the foundation of trust, democratically orientated and with the willingness to develop an active cooperation. If the cooperation occurs, the EU membership

will be achieved easily. This is why all actors respectively were interviewed about their stands, engagement and commitment the above mentioned principles and the other involved groups. In this manner three different studies were created.

The first stage: Studies about the main actors

The first study is based on a representative survey in the **population**, a fundamental actor for building up democratic relations. The second study is based on a survey with employees of the public administration in all levels of employment and in all regions - with the self-concept of the **administration** as a service provider for citizens and state. The third study enters uncharted territory. With the background knowledge that **political parties** are the backbone of democracy, members of all three main political parties represented in the parliament were interviewed regarding the present situation and about discussions within their parties. In spite of the fact that this survey cannot - because of self-evident reasons – base on representative data, nevertheless allows a clear view on the leading political protagonists.

The second stage: Potential for similarities and oppositions

The results of these studies are supposed to be seen in correlation with each other to shed light on potentials and shortcomings for a future interaction of these three main groups within democracy. In this discussion should be included the findings of the public debate during the first stage. To a certain extent a “**Manual for Public Debate on Democracy in Albania**” is supposed to be delivered. This working title hints that the working book delivers less answers and recommendations but rather poses questions and stimulates suggestions because the process between the actors is not limited by time. The process is a constantly dynamic one, where always new aspects come into play.

The third stage: The public - lectures, debates and discussions

Public debates and information events - based on the first findings - complete the project work. These events take also place to continuously include new stimulations and findings in the project work. Altogether there will be debates in schools and universities as well as in the public media with representatives of all groups. Policy papers will equally contribute to the important political as well as social debate.

This project path is already part of its objective: **active involvement of all actors in one common discourse**. It is not about finding quick solutions or just an exchange of statements, it rather aims at developing and building up reciprocal trust. Otherwise stated: this endeavour tries, with this genre of public debates, to **ameliorate the rapport of actors - Politics, administration and citizens - and to be conducive for a more efficient cooperation in the organization of a social and democratic society**.

The third stage is certainly organized in an open manner, time and content wise. The project is mainly activated by how far the named actors in this society are ready to get involved in the public with their claims and wishes, their visions and fears.

From this point of view, the project will accompany the Albanian politics for a little while on their way to the EU and will support them. An inevitable component of a democratic debate is that this does not always work smoothly. But one thing always got confirmed: the best friend of a positive development is a critical and constructive dialogue between the actors who have mutual respect for each other.

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1. Introduction: Why this study?

The communist regime in Albania fell in 1991 under the shouts of the students of the University of Tirana “We want Albania to be like the rest of Europe!” Albania’s membership in the European Union has since remained the main aspiration of the majority of Albanians. In fact, all surveys show that Albanians are among the most enthusiastic people when it comes to supporting the EU integration project. The percentage of those in favor of integration as a rule is above 90 percent¹. Furthermore, almost all political parties in Albania hold EU integration at the top of their political programs and consider it to be the major, strategic objective of the country.

Nevertheless, after this has been said, it is quite normal to raise a simple question: If one looks beyond the EU integration rhetoric, are Albanians in fact aware of what integration entails in reality, in economic, social, political and cultural terms?

Are they really aware of the fact that European integration is above all a process which implies a need for a series of deep and all encompassing changes to Albanian reality itself? Even changes to ideas and customs whose roots may reach deep into the past, especially when it comes to the relationship between citizens and

1. Instituti Studimeve Ndërkombëtare, Shqipëria dhe Integrimi Europian, Tirane, 2015

the state, the law, the balance between the rights citizens enjoy and the obligations they bear? Are Albanians sufficiently informed about the main values and principles that constitute the foundations upon which the European Union was built and which have made it possible to have peace, development, welfare, economic, but also social, progress for more than half a century?

Have the many changes that have taken place in Albanian society during the last two decades always been in the right direction, a service to its “europeanisation” as it were?

What are the main obstacles that stand in the way of our effort to adopt a European social model? Are the challenges we face political, economic, institutional, social or cultural in nature? And lastly, what role has the political class played during this period? What about other important actors in Albanian society?

On June 24th 2014, at long last, Albania was finally granted EU candidate status, five years after it first applied. No date has been set yet for it to open membership negotiations, but nevertheless, one can say that now, despite the many obstacles and difficulties that remain, Albania’s European Union perspective is clearer than it has ever been.

So, this is exactly the right moment for Albanian society to find answers to these questions, take stock of what has been achieved and what needs to be corrected, and especially of the reforms that are needed in order to bring about the changes that are required to meet the standards demanded by EU integration.

It is exactly what this project, initiated by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, together with the experts and directors of six local organizations and thinktanks attempts to do: provide answers to these questions. The project produced three studies based on surveys carried out to explore three different issues, but in their entirety they contribute to create a much more correct idea of the problems Albanian society faces today and, consequently, of the challenges that still lay ahead in its path towards European Union integration. The first study, carried out by the Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS), authored by Sashenka Lleshaj and Alba Çela, is titled "*Toward a New Definition of the Social Contract*". The second study, by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM), authored by Elona Dhëmbo, is titled "*Public Administration in Albania: Between Politics and the Citizen*". The third study, authored by Afrim Krasniqi and Ardian Hackaj, is titled "*Internal Democracy in Albanian Political Parties*". All three surveys were carried out in 2014. All three are underlined by the conviction that integration means first and foremost modernization, development, democratization and Europeanization of the country's life. What is even more important, all three share one objective which unites them as complementary part of the same project: to compare Albanian reality, the various actors and factors that operate in it, to the standards the country must achieve in order to build what is known as the "European Social Model."

This fourth report, part of the same project, aims to synthetize the findings of all three works mentioned above and, by relying on a number of additional studies and research carried out by other authors, to present a broader picture of this moment in time in

Albania's transition, while comparing it at the same time with the parameters of the European Social Model, which will ultimately serve as the standard with which Albania will be measured in order to decide whether it is ready to become a member of the European Union.

In any democratic country, it is imperative for politics to know what citizens think about it and what they expect from it. Such surveys are the foundations upon which programs are drafted, policies are built, and priorities and objectives are determined. But in the case of the three surveys and studies that constitute this project, their value goes far beyond a mere evaluation of the performance of any given government. They constitute a valuable instrument that can assist in understanding some of the most important aspects of Albania's transition, its direction, fluctuations, contradictions, and above all, the challenges that await us as we try to bring to a conclusion a process upon which we embarked on the very morrow of the fall of communism. This is precisely what this fourth, merger report, aims to achieve: analyze the findings of the three surveys and studies, in order to draw attention to the challenges that Albania faces as it strives to fulfil its people strategic objective of joining the European Union.

2. What is the “European Social Model”?²

The European Union is not just an economic and political union. It is above all a union of values. Indeed this is the fundamental principle around which the idea of a common European market took shape, giving life in the distant year 1951, to the birth of the European Economic Community which at the time consisted of just six countries: Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxemburg and Holand. There are 28 countries in the European Union today, but the vision upon which it was built remains the same: the common vision of the founding fathers of a united Europe, who believed that the only way to end conflicts and guarantee a sustainable peace in a continent that had just emerged from a bloody war, was to create a common decision-making and cooperation system that would secure economic and social development and progress, based on the principle of solidarity and social cohesion. In fact, despite the differences that may exist between the various countries and regions that make up the European Union, what does stand out is their shared belief in a social organization that can guarantee a society that is as fair as possible; that guarantees respect for the fundamental rights of citizens; and that guarantees social

2. See “The Past and Future of the European Social Model”, Christoph Hermann and Birgit Mahnkopf, Institute for International Political Economy Berlin, 2010.; László ANDOR, European Commissioner responsible for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Strengthening the European Social Model?, Conference “Progressive Paths to Growth and Social Cohesion. A Future Agenda for Eastern and Central Europe” - Vilnius, 11 November 2013

protection and social dialogue as the instrument that preserves social equilibria in society.

This is what is known as the “European Social Model”, at the heart of one finds the principle that the purpose of economic development cannot be to enrich a tiny group of people, as was the case in the past. It should rather serve to guarantee the general wellbeing of society and to avoid excessive social and economic differences, thus preventing development and economic gain from being carried out at the expense of the weakest segments of society.

In a nutshell, the “European Social Model” is a political, social and economic structure, present in almost all EU member countries, whose distinguishing feature is the so-called Welfare State, which, to put it differently, is a model where the state has the obligation to guarantee to all its citizens welfare, social protection and respect for the rights they enjoy under the law. Documents such as the *The Treaty of the European Community* and *The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights*, etc, are the fundamental documents that provide the legal basis for this model.³

Indeed, in a sense one can say that the “European Social Model” constitutes the very essence of the vision upon which the European Union was built; a vision against which every country and people that aspires to join the Union must continually compare itself in order to understand whether it is on the right path towards EU membership.

3. See European Union, EU Treaties, www.Europa.eu

3 The difficult path towards a model

The objective of the first phase of the project “Albanians and the European Social Model” by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, was to present the views and opinions of some of the main actors in Albanian society, who in one way or another have influenced and continue to influence the pace of the country’s progress towards the objective of EU integration. All three studies that make up the project, through the analysis, surveys and recommendations they present, offer undoubtedly a decent amount of data that can be used to gain a better understanding of the problems and difficult challenges that Albania faces or, what is more important, will have to face in the coming years as it strives for integration.

However, in a sense the findings of these three studies represent just some instant pictures, in other words, they represent what these important actors think today, at this point in time. But in order for these findings to be read, evaluated and analyzed properly they must be placed in the proper context. Only by doing this can one gain an understanding of the reasons, causes and historical, economic, political, social and cultural factors that have given birth, have nurtured and continue to sustain many of the phenomena, mind-sets and behaviors that concern us.

This is the reason for this very brief sketch of the lengthy post communist transition of Albania, which underlines those elements

that are still relevant and continue to influence and shape the circumstances, contradictions, tensions, mentalities, achievements and failures of Albania's transition.

In the years 1990 – 1991, when the communist regime in Albania fell after ruling for almost half a century Europe was the main subject of every speech delivered by the new political leaders. Soon, all the new, political forces that appeared on the political scene, and even the former communists, declared that their strategic objective was to achieve integration into what was known at the time as the “Euro-Atlantic Alliance,” which included NATO alongside the EU. In fact, at the time, the majority of Albanians who had just emerged from communist rule thought that as soon as the regime collapsed, “Europe” would be within hand's reach and that their path towards a developed and modern society along the lines of Western societies would be relatively easy.

In fact it proved to be anything but easy. For the Albanians the post communist transition proved to be much more difficult and much longer than that of almost every other former communist country in Eastern of Central Europe. The reasons for this are many and of course this is not the place to go into a lengthy discussion about them⁴. But what can be said is that in the early 1990s, Albanians emerged from communist rule and embarked upon the path of change, burdened by the dramatic consequences of their past.

The autarchic strand of communism that ruled in Albania left behind a veritable economic disaster. Albania in the 1990s lacked those

4. See Piro Misha, “Cdo të thotë sot të jesh shqiptar”, Tirane, 2009

preconditions that a country and a people must have in order to be able to adopt a Western model of modernity. It lacked, first of all, that minimum of modern economic development that is needed in order to build up a liberal democracy based on a free market economy. In the early 1990s Albania was not just the least developed country in Europe, it was also a country that lacked a consolidated, urban middle class, which as is one of the pillars on which depends the social stability of any country. There existed no proper civic and bourgeois tradition, no independent institutions that would be able to guarantee a necessary level of stability that could, in turn, ensure a rather soft transition from one political system to another. Nor was there an elite able to lead such a poor and undeveloped country in its struggle towards modernity and building a liberal democracy. Indeed, as it is known, the political and intellectual elite that took over the leadership of the country after 1991 had emerged, almost in its entirety, from the elite of communist times, which meant that, generally speaking, its way of behaving and thinking remained completely conditioned by its past, reflecting directly on its previous experience. And what is even more important, there was no previous democratic experience to speak of.

Neither must one forget that in 1990 Albania was a mainly rural country, with the highest percentage of rural population in Europe (much higher in fact, standing at 70% according to official statistics). This was one element that very clearly set it apart from all former communist countries in Europe. As a matter of fact, this element explains why the change of systems in Albania was not just political or economic in nature, that is to say from a dictatorship into a capitalist democracy, from a closed and isolated society to an open

society, from a centralized economy to a market economy, which is what happened in most other former communist countries in Europe.

It was precisely this demographic structure of society that explains why once the pressure exerted by the dictatorship had been eliminated, a number of other transformative processes were chaotically set in motion; processes that were social, cultural, psychological and of course demographic in nature, and which caused problems, tensions, dilemmas and uncertainties that were of a special nature, indeed of a special pathology, and created that general state of social anarchy that constitutes one of the most significant and dramatic characteristics of the post communist transition in Albania.

In any case, this very short overview of some of the inherited factors that contributed, to some extent, to shape Albania's post communist transition would be incomplete if one does not include in it the isolation factor, which is perhaps the most dramatic feature of Albania's autarchic strain of communism. The most dramatic consequence of the country's immediate opening to the world was undoubtedly the fact that within the blink of an eye people became aware of just how poor they were compared to others. Suddenly, Albanians understood how deep was the gap that separated them from other people, even from neighboring people from their region. In other words, it was to be expected that Albania, despite certain similarities to other post communist countries, was nevertheless going to be a unique case, and that is why the transition from a form of autarchic communism to any other political and economic system

was going to be much harder. One must not forget, after all, that the country had never before in its history known any democratic or pluralistic experience upon which it could rely and use as a model.⁵

Although such factors did play a significant role, there is no doubt too that a significant part of the responsibility for the economic, social and cultural chaos that accompanied the emergence of democracy and pluralism in Albania lies with those who led the country during this period in time and who oftentimes tried to hide the inability of the state to control the country or the processes it was undergoing, behind liberal or neoliberal pseudo-theories that created a situation that did not differ all that much from anarchy. The worse sin of the political class that has ruled the country for the past 25 years is the distortion of the political, economic and social model that the Albanian people aspired towards. It is from this distortion that many of the problems still faced by the country today trace their origin.

“Albania’s neo-liberals thought that reconstruction could come by means of destruction,” wrote two American scholars, of Yale University, who in a book about post-communist transition in Eastern Europe, were very critical about a significant part of the pseudo-liberal policies that were applied in Albania during the 1990s. Their criticism was especially harsh about the so-called shock therapy strategy.⁶

This type of capitalism did indeed bring about a great outpouring

5. Idem. Pg 125 - 147

6. Burawoy, M & Verdery, K – Uncertain Transition, Yale University Press, 1999

of individual energy, but on the other hand, it also brought about a serious decay of public morals, massive parasitism and a mentality according to which one could get rich without too much effort, albeit using ways and methods that could be considered illegal; in fact, in the name of democracy and anti-communism it stimulated and encouraged a revival of some of the worse vices Albanians had inherited from their past.

In a society as fragile as that which existed in Albania after the fall of communism, shaken by the rapid and radical changes that were taking place, the relativization of the very concept of the law, the introduction of a chaotic mix of ideas and practices, brought about a state of anarchy and a deep moral crisis, a destruction of an entire system of values. It was this distortion that spawned the pyramid schemes and the drama that ensued. It resulted in the criminalization of important sectors of society and the cohabitation of politics and crime. It produced a symbiosis between a significant part of the central and local public administration with the newly emerging class of *nouveau riche* that was to a large extent arrogant and lacking in scruples. It brought about the gradual crumbling of the authority of the state, and eventually, of its very structure, as well as the loss of hope on the part of ordinary Albanians that one day things could become better. The most visible and dramatic consequence of this situation was the fact that more than 30% of the population lost their hope that things would change and chose to emigrate, leaving the country behind and spreading all over the world.

Extreme political polarization, the weakness of independent

institutions and especially of the justice system, an inability to compromise and the extreme economic and social polarization, corruption, the ever more obvious marginalization of certain social groups and areas, soon turned into serious obstacle standing in the way of the normal development of the country.

All of these are major challenges that stand need to be faced. Nevertheless, a quarter of a century after the fall of the system, despite the difficulties, distortion, deviation and even regress, if one bears in mind its starting point, Albania can perhaps be considered as the country that has undergone the deepest and most complete transformation of any former communist countries. It is important that although major problems and challenges still await a solution, Albanians have now embraced democracy not only as the most desirable form of governance, but also as the main objective of the country's political transition. There has never been a case in which political parties or other actors of importance have contested the legitimacy of the democratic institutions. The creation of a pluralistic parliament based on free elections, the establishment of the foundations of a market economy, the membership of Albania in NATO⁷ and especially the granting of EU candidate status one year ago⁸, are undoubtedly the great achievements of the Albanian transition. In other words, one can say that despite the fact that to date there is as yet no date for opening membership negotiations with the European Union, the country is now closer than ever to fulfilling its greatest aspiration.

7. Albania joined NATO in April 2009.

8. Albania received candidate status in June 2014

But this is also the right moment to become fully aware about the conditions the country must fulfill so that in a not very distant day it may achieve the objective of being accepted as a full member of the European Union.

Albanians are perhaps the most enthusiastic supporters of EU integration in the Balkans, but the time has come for them to be informed and become fully aware of the challenges they must face in order to fulfill the standards that are expected of them. In this context, they should also understand the standards of the so-called European Social Model, which is one of the most important components of European reality; one that Albanian society must achieve.

Nevertheless, it is important to note, that as the results of the three studies and reports show, nowadays there is a growing number of Albanians who have understood that the old dream of becoming part of Europe will become a reality only when Albanian society itself will become “Europeanized”, in other words, only after much of what has not worked, or has not functioned properly until now has been changed and corrected. And this demands, first and foremost, the inclusion, cooperation and mobilization of all the important actors in society that share the dream of Albania becoming a member of the European Union.

4. What do citizens expect?

The three studies that make up the project “Albanians and the European Social Model” provide answers to a number of important questions that concern one of the most important components of the democratic system: the expectations of the citizens from the integration process, or more generally, the expectations of the citizens from the state and its institutions. At the same time, they provide enough material to allow one to gain an insight and create an idea about the basic notions upon which are based these expectations and perceptions.

But above all, the findings allow one to answer a number of other questions, just as important, that concern the integration process:

Do the expectations of Albanian citizens take into account those changes that the society must undergo in order to gain full membership in the European Union?

Are Albanians sufficiently well informed about the standards their country must fulfill in this process?

When we say that more than 90% of Albanians (in other words, more than any other people knocking on the doors of Europe) are in favor of integration should this be interpreted as an indication that the overwhelming majority of Albanians really shares the same

visions and the same values on the organization of society as those upon which the EU is build as a unique political and economic union?

And lastly, do they understand the meaning of concepts such as “European social model,” social state, welfare state?

Although there have been in the past numerous studies and surveys, mainly political or economic nature, by domestic or foreign authors, it must be said that the studies or surveys that have focused on the problems relating to social developments in Albanian society have been very rare or very narrow in scope, focusing exclusively on certain sectors. That is why one can say that this project has an added value. The study and survey authored by Sashenka Lleshaj and Alba Çela, titled “*Toward a New Definition of the Social Contract*” which targets the attitudes of citizens in general, is of particular value to this chapter as well as to some of the following chapters.

In any case, the value of the information that this project has gathered is manifold. First, it takes a picture as it were, that contains a multidimensional overview of Albanian society in 2014, in other words, in the aftermath of the parliamentary elections that took place in June of 2013. Of great interest are the findings of the study and survey on the internal democracy of Albanian political parties at a time when there is a lot of debate on the very model upon which Albanian parties are build and the role that they play.⁹

9. Afrim Krasniqin and Ardian Hackaj, “Internal Democracy in Albanian Political Parties”

Second, the findings serve as some sort of barometer that allows one to understand the attitude of citizens vis-à-vis the performance of the government as well as of the state, or more generally, of its institutions. But it is at the same time a barometer that measures the views of citizens on a number of issues that have been hotly debated in recent years and that concern a number of problems of strategic importance to the development of the country in the future, such as for instance the discussions on the privatization of many of the most important sectors in the service industry, on the relationship between the private and the public, on the model and objectives of taxation (flat tax versus progressive taxation), and so forth. In other words, it gives one an idea on the point of view of the citizens and on the model of development that should be followed. In this respect, Albanian politicians should read these findings carefully.

Third, by presenting the vision of citizens on the future development of the country, in a sense the project brings forth a panorama of the general level of political culture that prevails in Albanian society. This is an important element in order to evaluate the level of democracy in Albania, and, at the same time, the challenges that concern inherited mind-sets and behaviors that Albania must face as it strives for social emancipation.

What are some of the main conclusions one can draw from the findings of the three surveys and studies that make up the project “Albanians and the European Social Model”?

First, it shows what are the main concerns and issues the country faces today from the perspective of the citizens. The result, which is revealed by the survey carried out by AIIIS does not come as a surprise. The overwhelming majority of those interviewed (87 percent) think that unemployment is the single, biggest problem the country faces today. Poverty comes second with 75 percent. On the other hand more than half (53 percent) view the justice system as the most serious problem followed by concerns about the low standards in health care.¹⁰ According to the authors, the panorama presented by the 2014 survey is almost exactly the same at that of 2013. This leads one to assume that the problems thus identified are not new to the respondents, they have a history, and continue to be a source for concern.

The second conclusion that immediately draws the eye while reading the findings of the studies concerns the situation of democracy in the country. In fact, the project does not bring anything new in this regard, but it does once again confirm the data that has been presented in other studies on the same subject: a majority of Albanians are of the opinion that they live under what political literature on the post communist transition refers to as a “hybrid regime” or a partial democracy. The AIIIS survey found that 72 percent of those interviewed shared this perception.¹¹

This conclusion is concerned, and especially the fact that only a minority chose the extreme answers to the question, (i.e. perceiving the country as fully democratic or fully non-democratic) while the

10. Sashenka Lleshaj and Alba Çelën, “Toward a New Definition of the Social Contract”, pg. 82-84

11. Idem, pg. 32

majority were positioned in the center, (opting for the “not fully democratic” option), with a relative increase compared to the 2013 survey, led the authors of the study to raise the question whether this fact can be interpreted as a positive development¹². This is indeed an interesting discussion which will be discussed at more length further on.

But undoubtedly, the most interesting conclusion that can be drawn from the findings of the three studies – one which is supported by a number of other studies too – is the fact that a quarter century after the fall of communism one can see that certain phenomena that were once considered to be transitory companions of transition, have by now transformed into permanent features of Albanian society that constitute serious obstacles to the development of the country on the one hand, and to the integration process on the other. Such is for instance the widespread lack of trust in state institutions, or more generally, that ambiguity that exists in the relationship between citizens and the state, that from 25 years has constituted one of the most worrisome phenomena of Albanian society and that is at the same time, without a doubt, an obstacle in the path towards integration.

The survey carried out by AIIS as part of its study on “*Toward a New Definition of the Social Contract*” presents some interesting data in this regard. Thus it appears that only 49 percent of Albanians have faith in the Albanian government, while the figure for those who have faith in the parliament is even lower, standing at 39 percent. Only a meager 15 percent of Albanians have faith in political

12. Idem, pg. 14

parties.¹³ However, the situation becomes much more worrisome when one observes the high levels of distrust citizens express about institutions such as the courts and the justice system in general, or the Central Elections Commission, which as is widely known, play a vital role in the normal functioning of a society and even more so of a democracy that is supposed to rely on the rule of law and free and fair elections.

A number of other distortions, such as corruption or partitocracy seem to have become permanent features of Albania's transition too¹⁴.

At point, a question comes naturally to mind: can one speak of an arch-challenge at this point in time, of a problem above all problems as it were, one from whose solution depends the untying of a series of other knots that block Albania's transition?

The answer seems to be yes. Because even by reading these three studies it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that the main, and perhaps most difficult, challenge Albanian society and democracy faces today is the building of a system of rule of law and the creation of a relationship of trust between citizens and state institutions, based on a correct understanding of the relationship between the rights a citizen enjoys in a democracy and the responsibilities he or she carries vis-à-vis society and the state.

This is in fact an issue that called for a solution from the very morrow of

13. Idem, pg. 15-16, 47 - 51

14. Krasniqi and Hackaj.

the collapse of the regime in the early 1990s, so that the obligations and collectivization that the dictatorship imposed would not make room for an alternative based on anarchy, social fragmentation and abuse, but rather, for social awareness, respect for the state and the law, as indispensable prerequisites for a functioning society. Unfortunately, despite the considerable changes that have taken place in Albanian society in the meantime, this issue has yet to find a satisfactory solution.

Of course the high levels of mistrust of citizens vis-à-vis the most important institutions of the state are a cause for concern, as well as a testimony of the high levels of dissatisfaction that exist about all institutions that offer services to the public. But there is perhaps another way to read these data too. Should they perhaps be interpreted as proof of a relative democratic maturity of society which now has higher expectations? If this is indeed the case, this dissatisfaction can be read as a healthy, positive pressure on the political class and, first and foremost, on the government and most important institutions of the Albanian state, that should see in it a demand, and support, by the public for undertaking a number of deep reforms with the objective of transforming the very nature and quality of the institutions that serve as the foundations of the democratic system.

This is a reading of the data that is justified by the fact that while Albanians are dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy in their country and with the way in which the institutions that make up this system are working, they continue to consider the democratic system and the market economy as the only possible alternatives

for their future.

This fact is also confirmed by an observation carried out lately in social media by the Development Program of the United Nations in Tirana¹⁵. According to it 70 percent of those interviewed are dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy in Albania. But the more interesting part is the way in which their report interprets the interplay between these two, apparently contradictory, findings. According to UNDP this shows that *“Albania is transitioning from the phase of the establishment of democracy and a market economy into a phase of their consolidation,”* and, again according to the same report *“it has reached what can be considered the point of irreversibility, but is faced with the serious challenge of functionality that in fact is identified as one of the main challenges of the present and of the future.”*

Such a conclusion seems to be supported by other indicators of the same survey concerning the citizens' attitudes towards a number of actions undertaken by the government at the end of last year, such as the action on the payments of electricity bills, the destruction of informal buildings, and others. According to this survey that was carried out online it appears that the overwhelming majority of people expressed their support for these actions despite the cost they carried.¹⁶

If one accepts the validity of this conclusion, it means that there is an

15. See the results of UNDP's Human Development Report, Tirane, 2015, pg. 15-16, pg. 48-49.

16. Idem, pg. 17-18.

ever growing number of Albanians that express their dissatisfaction with the reality that exists in the country because they compare it against the reality that prevails in the European Union. This, in turn, if interpreted in the right way, can constitute an important factor in support of reforms and change. Such an indicator would be of great importance at the moment when Albania would open its membership negotiations; a moment when, as the experience of other former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe who have already completed this phase successfully has shown, there await a number of reforms that by necessity demand a national consensus that is as broad as possible.

In this context, the value of a study such as *“Toward a New Definition of the Social Contract”* that as the authors write in the introduction *“draws an overview of the general attitudes of Albanian citizens vis-à-vis the state, institutions, public services, private services versus public services, and underlines the main attitudes of citizens vis-à-vis the welfare state, social solidarity”* is to be found in the fact that it summarizes the expectations of citizens regarding some of the pillars of the European Social Model.¹⁷ Indeed, these are sectors where deep reforms will be necessary, but their success with depend on *“taking into consideration the needs, opinions and views of citizens.”*

As was mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, a number of interesting conclusions can be drawn from reading the findings of the studies on issues such as the political culture of Albanian citizens, that is to say of the notions on which they base

17. Lleshaj and Çela, pg. 17-18

their attitudes, views and expectations with regard to the political, economic and social developments in the country.

In fact, all three studies offer a number of examples that show how in many cases the attitudes or expectations of citizens may appear contradictory and incoherent, based on hybrid concepts that can be explained by way of the influences of the communist past, but also by way of the contradictory experience they have lived through during the 25 years of post communist transition.

Thus, for instance, the majority of Albanians (65 percent) believe that the market economy is the right economic system for Albania, but at the same time a majority of those interviewed ask for an economic system where the state should be present to a considerable degree¹⁸. In fact, 84 percent of those interviewed, in other words an overwhelming majority, are of the opinion that “the state should regulate economic relations, the general rules of competition and trade, etc”. This means that most Albanian citizens are not so much in favor of a proper market economy as of a mixed system.

Along the same lines should be interpreted the fact that despite the dissatisfaction they express about the quality of most public services, the majority of respondents continue to believe that all services that are important to the lives of citizens to remain under state control.

There is little doubt that the notions Albanians harbor about

18. Idem, pg. 14, pg. 31-46

a significant state presence in the economy are to some extent influenced by a way of thinking that stems from their past. This mindset explains why approximately two thirds of those interviewed, when asked about the level of state interference in the economy, think that the state should interfere and intervene in the economy in order to determine the prices of goods or protect certain strategic businesses. Only 1/3 believe that the state should not do this in a market economy.

The same conclusion can be draw about the 77 percent of respondents who believe that the market should not be allowed to decide everything on its own, thus once again asking for a greater involvement of the state.

Thus at first glance, there would appear to be some sort of misunderstanding about the role that the state can and should play in a market economy, since respondents often appear to expect the state to solve everything. An example of this contradictory attitude is presented, for instance, in their responses and attitudes about the privatization of services, where on the one hand citizens demand that the state continue to carry all basic services, but with a higher quality, while on the other hand, do not think that they should pay anymore taxes to fund these improved services. In fact, when asked whether “taxes should be increased if this would bring about a higher quality of service” 51 percent were opposed.¹⁹

One can continue with a lengthy list of examples that illustrate the contradictory nature of many of the concepts that determine, albeit

19. Lleshaj and Cela.

dimly, the vision that many Albanian citizens have for the future. The reasons behind this phenomenon are many and complex, but also understandable. They certainly relate to the inheritance of half a century of communist rule, whose sudden collapse left behind a vacuum of legitimacy that nurtured the climate of anarchy that unfortunately characterized a good part of Albania's transition and that on occasion took a violent and destructive form, and refused any kind of authority. As known, the change of system brought about a dramatic crisis in the society's collective existence thus bringing into evidence not just a worrying lack of internal cohesion, but also serious crisis in the citizens' relationship to the state. It proved difficult for Albanian citizens to understand that the new system was not just about rights, but also about the obligations that citizens carry in a democratic society.

But it would be very simplistic to explain away the many contradictions that have characterized for the last two and a half decades the relationship between citizens and the law, as a lingering effect of communist past. There is little doubt that they also relate to a mind-set and a number of customs that are part of a problem that the Albanian state has faced from its very creation more than a century ago, which is the inherited culture of mistrust vis-à-vis the state, especially in the rural areas of the country.²⁰

But there is no doubt that the perceptions and attitudes expressed in the surveys are more than anything else borne of the experience of citizens during the 25 years of transition. Instead of reading them simply as products of a lingering influence of communist mentality,

20. See Piro Misha, quoted work.

they should be interpreted as a reaction against the disappointments that citizens have lived through during these decades when the political class on the one hand contributed to the distortion of the institutions of collective life with its populist policies, and on the other, proved incapable of undertaking the necessary reforms and prepare the right policies that would serve to return the faith of citizens in the state and its institutions.

One should also bear in mind that despite the satisfactory levels of economic growth for much of the past two and a half decades, and especially in the first decade of the 21st century, Albania's economic indicators continue to remain way below the European Union average. Thus for 2009 income per capita in Albania barely reached 27 percent of the EU's average for the country as a whole²¹, or 35 percent for the central region which is also the most developed area. When the data is analyzed at the district level it shows that on the one hand there is a significant gap between Tirana and the other districts, and on the other hand even in Tirana, GDP per capita barely reaches 45 percent of the EU average. It is thus a fact that Albania as a whole, and even its main centers, including the capital, are still far away from reaching the EU's average GDP per capita²².

This, naturally influences the expectations of Albanian citizens who today, as never before, have the possibility to compare their situation with that of the citizens of other European countries.

But despite these findings, something springs forth very clearly

21. See UNDP_Human Development Report 2014, Figurea 3.6.

22. Idem, pg. 13 – 14.

from the study: for all their rather contradictory attitudes vis-à-vis specific issues, Albanian citizens are generally in favor of a social state. Their main demand at the moment is for a radical change to state policy, which as is well know, has, to date, generally chosen to disregard the social dimension of its activity.

It is a significant fact that 72 percent of those interviewed, in other words a clear majority, are convinced that a just society is a society that shows solidarity for its weakest and most vulnerable groups. It is a vision for society that the political class, tempted as it has often been during the last decade from the siren song of neo-liberal or pseudo-liberal theories, should keep in mind from now on.

5. Citizens in a dysfunctional democracy

One of the most interesting findings of the survey titled “*Toward a New Definition of the Social Contract*” concerns the perceptions of Albanians about the level of democracy in the country. According to the figure only 36 percent of Albanians consider Albania to be a fully democratic country or a country that is more democratic than undemocratic. Although there has been a relative improvement, from 32 percent in 2013 to 36 percent in 2014, this figure clearly shows that a majority of Albanians are dissatisfied with the level of democracy in the country. (According to other sources, in a scale of 0 to 10, (where 0 means not democratic at all and 10 means fully democratic) the average evaluation of Albanian about the level of democracy in their country is 4.2.²³

Of course, the authors of this study are right when they remind us that this figure is not unusual in the case of so-called hybrid regimes that have been a feature of the post communist transition in Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, according to them, by comparing the data for 2014 with that for 2013 one can conclude that it would make sense to say that “Albania is emerging from its transition or that the transition period in fact has ended, but these developments need more time to be reflected in the perceptions of the citizens.”²⁴ Bearing in mind the many discussions and debates

23. Transformation Index BTI 2014, Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014

24. Lleshaj and Cela, pg. 13 – 14.

about the duration of transition,²⁵ it would be rather hasty to draw this conclusion. All the more so since the surveys carried out in the project make it clear that citizens perceive that it is not simply that there are problems with the functioning of the democratic system, but the problems concern exactly those institutions that constitute the heart of the system.

For instance, there are enough reasons to feel concerned by looking at some of the findings of the survey carried out by AIIIS about the very high level of mistrust that exists vis-à-vis some of the pillars upon which the democratic system is built: the courts and justice system in general, the Central Elections Commission, Parliament and political parties. When asked in a straightforward manner whether the justice system in Albania delivers justice, 73 percent of respondents said no.²⁶

Indeed, by reading carefully the findings of the three studies it is not hard to see that most Albanians are of the opinion that it is the lack of rule of law that constitutes the main source of the malaise from which Albania's fragile democracy has suffered from years. Such a conclusion should not come as a surprise. It simply confirms an opinion shared by the overwhelming majority of Albanians: at the current stage of development of Albania's democracy, the lack of rule of law has become the major challenge facing Albanian society. The solution of many of the other problems in the country depends to some extent from the solution to this challenge. The lack of rule

25. Ardian Civici, "Shqipëria, një tranzicion i vështirë: Nga planifikimi i centralizuar dhe kolektivizimi drejt ekonomisë së tregut," Tirane, 2013

26. Lleshaj and Cela, pg. 15 – 16.

of law is also one of the main obstacles in the country's effort to reach the standards demanded by the EU integration process.

In fact, the gap between what is written in the law and its implementation in practice has constituted one of the most problematic chapters in the country's post communist transition and it still is so. What has changed is that at present Albania no longer has a lack of democratic institutions or contemporary legislation or democratic procedures. The problem is the abuse of the law and of the institutions for personal or political gain. This in turn exerts a direct influence on the whole political, economic and social milieu in the country, with dire consequences for the functioning of the democratic system, the market economy and public services for citizens.

It is precisely this situation that causes the average Albanian citizen to be skeptical and dissatisfied with the way in which democracy works in Albania. And the challenge becomes even more difficult given the fact that after a quarter of a century, unfortunately the culture of disrespect and impunity towards the law has put down roots in Albania's society and its mentality.

It is not a coincidence that precisely the rule of law is the main condition placed by the European Union on Albania, at first, in order to receive candidate status and then in order to open negotiations. It must be said that from 2010 the conditions demanded by Brussels have focused more and more on the issue of the rule of law. The decision of the EU to give Albania candidate status in 24 June 2014, after five years of waiting, was explained mainly with what were considered to be *"the successes achieved in reforms in the*

*area of the rule of law, especially reforms in the justice system, the fight against organized crime and corruption.*²⁷

It is well known that among the reasons that convinced skeptical states to approve of Albania's application for candidate status, of decisive importance were some successful operation that the Albanian government undertook on the eve of the decision. These were operations against the cultivation of drugs in Lazarat, which had become for years a symbol of illegitimacy and at the same time of the weakness of the state. Or the even more difficult operation to bring to an end the massive theft and abuse in the energy sector as well as some similar operations that gave cause to hope that something was beginning to change. And it seems that something is indeed beginning to change, at least in the mentality of the people.

A significant picture is presented by the data gathered during the survey that the UN Office in Tirana carried out in January 2015 which focused exactly on the measures undertaken by the government to "strengthen the rule of law." The survey was carried out online. People were presented with a series of questions in which they were asked to give their opinion on the latest measures undertaken by the government in order to bring to an end illegal construction, pay electric energy bills, on respecting traffic regulations, on non-smoking in public spaces, on enforcing legislation governing noise pollution from nightclubs, etc. In short, these were all situations on which the law was clear, but that had never been solved because of

27. European Commission (2014) On Albania's Progress in the Fight Against Corruption and Organised Crime and in the Judicial Reform. COM(2014) 331 final, pg. 11

a lack of will on the part of the responsible institutions, or the lack of political will to undertake measures that seemed unpopular.

Differently from what many people expected, or at least differently from the impression one got from part of the media where the loudest voices denouncing these measures were often those who in one way or another felt threatened by them, the survey showed that the overwhelming majority of Albanians supported them. Thus approximately 71 percent were in favor of the government's measures concerning the payment of electricity bills. 76 percent were in favor of the measures against illegal construction. The figure was even higher, reaching 89 percent, when people were asked about the measures aimed at enforcing traffic regulations or the law against smoking in public spaces where the level of support reached 91 percent.²⁸

The survey was carried out online, which means that it reached a rather limited age group, but its results were in a sense confirmed by the results of the most recent local elections where the ruling majority reached a clear victory in most municipalities in the country and was not punished for these measures that many thought would come at a significant electoral cost.

Of course, the challenge becomes more complex and harder when it comes to phenomena such as corruption which is an immediate consequence of the lack of rule of law, and is considered by citizens to be one of the major problems that the country faces today. The difficulty stems in the first place from the scale of the problem, but

28. UNDP Report, *idem*, pg. 40-45, figure 2.10

also from the fact that there is a widespread perception that in the past 25 years, despite the rhetoric and talk about fighting corruption, this phenomenon has never been dealt with seriously.

And the facts are clear. According to the Transparency International Perceived Corruption Index²⁹, Albania ranked 110th from 175 countries that were included in the report with a score of 33. Again, according to the report, citizens perceived the levels of corruption to be highest in the justice system, the police and the health system.

The impunity corruption seems to enjoy is clear to deduce from a simple fact: during the 2009 – 2013 interval, Albanian courts ruled on a mere 40 percent of the corruption cases brought to court by the prosecution. Furthermore, courts issued guilty verdicts and sentences on a mere 24 percent of the cases that were brought to court.³⁰

The causes for this situation are manifold and complex. For the purposes of this study it will suffice to focus on just one of the main actors: Albania's political parties. The reason for this is that political parties have been actors of great importance in the country's transition and are responsible to a large extent for the distortions from which Albania's democratic system continues to suffer; distortions that as this study and the survey on the internal democracy of political parties show, often trace their origins to the way in which Albania's political parties were established as well as

29. Transparency International, Corruption Perception Index 2014, Tirana, October 2014.

30. Data compiled from the "Cross Sectorial Strategy Against Corruption"

the way in which they function. The study that covered this area is a unique effort and gives a valuable contribution. It can potentially assist in correcting a model that has been adhered to until now by political parties, who have played and will continue to play a determining role in future developments in country as well as in the fight against phenomena such as corruption.³¹

Above all else the study identifies the phenomenon of partitocracy as one of the distortions that has had the most serious consequences on Albania's system of governance. For years now a system has been established in Albania in which political parties show a tendency to identify themselves with the state thus exerting their influence on any and all institutional and public decisionmaking.

The most important feature in this system is the dominant political culture that believes in a winner-take-all philosophy. A direct consequence of this pre-democratic type of political culture is the tendency of exerting political control on institutions and especially the tradition of political appointments in the public administration after every general election. Another consequence of this immense power exercised by the parties is the propagation of the tradition of replacing strong institutions with strong political leaders, of the personalization of politics and institutions, of the restriction of the space and possibilities of the public to control the government and defend its interests, as well as of the restriction of the space in which a vibrant civil society and an independent media can develop.

31. ACER and SELDI, Repor on evaluation of corruption in Albania, Tirana, October 2014.

There is little doubt that the phenomenon of partitocracy is one of the factors that has nurtured the skepticism of the public towards the very way in which independent institutions function. It has also contributed in a similar manner to render dysfunctional the public administration, as shown by the findings of the study "*Public Administration in Albania: Between Politics and the Citizen*".³² The findings show that despite a number of positive changes that have taken place in recent years, especially pertaining to the level of education and the adoption of a more contemporary legal framework, the Albanian public administration continues to be plagued by unstable and unpredictable careers, problems with corruption and political interference.

If one reads the findings of this study carefully, it is not difficult to reach the very same conclusion as the authors of the study: "*The great influence exercised by politics, which is largely accepted in the Albanian public administration, seems to have had a dominant contribution in the shaping and preservation of the majority of problems faced by the public administration in Albania.*"

32. For more see Elona Dhembo, "Public Administration in Albania: Between Politics and the Citizen," and Krasniqi and Hackaj

6. Fragmentarization of society and the lack of social cohesion

As was mentioned at the very beginning of this report, at the heart of the concept of the “European Social Model” one can find the principle that economic development should not serve exclusively to enrich a small group of people. It should rather guarantee a general welfare for society, thus avoiding excessive social and economic differentiation. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights³³, one of the basic documents in which the European Social Model is enshrined, clearly determines that the basic principles on which the European Union is built are freedom, equality and solidarity. It means that each member country has an obligation to implement these principles in order to guarantee social cohesion, ensure employment and a dignified standard of living and working conditions for all, social protection for those who need it, and fight poverty, marginalization and social exclusion.

The reason for listing these principles and obligations at this point was for it to serve as a reminder of the standards against which Albania will be evaluated at the moment when it will finally manages to open negotiations with the European Union. But what is the situation like at this point in time?

33. EU Charter of Fundamental Rights – obligatory upon memberstates by Treaty of Lisbon in December 2009. It includes what are deemed to be the fundamental rights of EU citizens.

In recent years there has often been a debate about the potential consequences to the social cohesion of Albanian society that could stem from deepening inequality, economic and social polarization, and consequently, the marginalization of certain social groups; a development that could lead to a fragmentation that carries serious consequences. In fact, there are those who claim that the long years of transition have in fact produced such a fragmentation and that it is already a reality in Albanian society. Although it is not easy to give an answer to this concern, it cannot be denied that there are already signs of a worrying fragmentation which are first and foremost the result of widespread poverty and lack of social development policies.

But let us have a closer look at this problem. When reading the findings of the study “*Toward a New Definition of the Social Contract*” it becomes obvious that for the ordinary citizen of Albania it is very clear which are the problems that demand an urgent solution: unemployment, poverty, justice, and the rule of law. The first two, have by now become a chronic problem of Albania’s transition and paradoxically their trend does not seem to be directly connected to the level of economic growth. Development without employment that is what a recent study calls this phenomenon.³⁴

According to official data it is true that after 2008 economic growth declined somewhat. This was due to a number of internal factors and policies, but especially because of external factors related to the effects of the global crisis on Albania’s economy. Nevertheless, during the last decade the country’s gross domestic production has almost

34. Human Development Report 2014. pg.54.

doubled. However, this level of economic growth, unfortunately, was simply not accompanied by any similar increase in employment. On the contrary, according to data by the Albanian Institute of Statistics during this same period employment levels declined significantly with more than 220 000 jobs being lost. The situation became worse especially after the economy slowed down in 2008 and demand for labor fell sharply. It resulted in a significant decline of income for numerous Albanian families. Only in the period between 2008 and 2009 the number of people employed fell by 123 000.³⁵

The more disturbing fact however is that this decline was felt more by two groups that are generally considered to be more vulnerable: youth and women. Thus, according to World Bank data during this period employment for the young declined by 8 percent, while employment for women declined by 5 percent. For women between the ages of 15 and 24 the decline in employment reached 11 percent. Unemployment levels for the young are up to two times higher than the national average.³⁶

Another problem that is directly related to this situation is the inequality of development. During its transition Albania has experienced economic growth of a level that made it climb up from a low income country, to an upper middle income country.³⁷

35. INSTAT, Labor Market Dynamics 2001-2011, Tirane, May 2014.

36. The world Bank Group, Albania – Systematic Country Diagnosis, Draft and Confidential, January 2015.

37. World Bank 2013 <http://data.worldbank.org/country/albania> Albania income level Upper middle income GDP level (current US\$ 12.90 billion 2013 Population, total 2.774 million, 2013. Income per capita for Albania is 9.225 USD.

Unfortunately this was not accompanied by evenly distributed levels of development for all and even less so by sustainable human development. On the contrary, during this period economic and social inequality have deepened and diversified even further. According to INSTAT approximately 14.3 percent of Albanians were estimated to be living in poverty in 2012, which meant that they subsisted on 4891 Lek/për month/per capita, an amount that constitutes the official poverty threshold.³⁸ The situation is made more complex by the so-called “geography of poverty,” i.e. the great differences that exists in the level of development between various regions in the country. This relates not just to absolute poverty, but also to other indicators such as water supply, sanitation, levels of education, and so forth. Serious differences in this sense exist especially between urban and rural areas, with rural areas being generally deprived of the majority of public services.

Again, according to INSTAT although, generally, non-monetary poverty has gradually declined because of continuous investment in the respective areas, one individual in every four still lacks running water in their habitation, or what is even worse, approximately 14 percent do not have any access at all to running water. Furthermore, the number of individuals who has uninterrupted access to energy remains under 70 percent of the general population despite the continuous improvements and the decline in electricity blackouts.³⁹

Nevertheless, it must be noted that according to the 2015 Indicators of Social Progress, Albania ranks 52nd among 133 countries that represent

38. INSTAT, Anketa e matjes së Standarteve të Kushteve të jetesës LSMS 2012, Tirane, March 2015

39. Idem

94 percent of the world's population. It is part of the group of countries with average social progress and with a score of 68.19, leaving behind countries such as Macedonia, Turkey or Bosnia Herzegovina.⁴⁰

The result of this lack of a social dimension in Albania's post communist transition can be seen even more clearly in another phenomenon; a phenomenon which, in fact, is in contradiction to the core principles of the "European Social Model" is build. An almost extreme economic polarization has arrogantly made its entrance in Albanian society. Its social implications are not difficult to understand. It would appear that Albania's post communist transition has served only to create a handful of rich individuals, who are gradually increasing their control on more and more important sectors of Albania's economy, politics and life. In a poor country such as Albania it is not difficult to understand that the extreme wealth of this very limited group has been gained at the expense of the rest of the population.

Thus, according to a report presented in Parliament by the Chairman of the Deposit Insurance Agency, it appears that in 2014 a mere 4 percent of Albania's citizens owned 60 percent of deposits in the country's banks. Approximately the same figure was reported in the previous year too.⁴¹

At the same time, according to "World Ultra Wealth Report 2012–2013", it appears that 55 individuals own wealth amounting to

40. Porter, M, Stern, S. Social Progress Index 2015, New York, March 2015

41. Ora news, 22.04/2015

seven billion dollars; an amount equal to half the country's GDP. According to this report, the wealth of Albania's millionaires grew by 4.1 percent despite the slowdown of the economy. The same report claims that as far as super rich individuals are concerned Albania is ahead of other countries in the region, such as Macedonia, Bulgaria and Montenegro.

These data would be more than sufficient to lead to the conclusion that Albania's post communist transition has lacked the very social dimension that constitutes one of the main demands of the European Social Model.

This situation of course, allows one to draw a number of conclusions.

First, despite the fact that Albania's political class has continuously declared membership in the European Union to be its major strategic objective, it has completely ignored one of the main components upon which the Union is build, i.e. the European Social Model and all that it entails. What is even more important, such indicators in the context of a society such as Albanian society, which emerged from communism as the poorest and least developed of any other in former communist Europe, and that consequently needed a well structured welfare system and social mechanism more than any other society in Europe, speak of a serious distortion of the model of development.

It would seem that even a measure implemented by the Socialist Party after coming to power in 2013, i.e. the introduction of a progressive taxation system, has not given any effects yet. The lack

of a just distribution of wealth in Albanian society is a consequence of the ambiguities that have characterized and continue to characterize the entire democratic system in the country. They have produced tensions that in the context of the continuation of economic stagnation threaten to produce risk factors that are social and economic in nature. Although there is little doubt that Albania has made progress towards building a new relationship between the state and its citizens, based on equality before the law, the problems with the lack of the rule of law make this situation all the more pressing. According to the survey carried out by AIIIS most respondents think that there are people who are above the law in Albania.⁴²

On the other hand phenomena such as social and economic polarization, poverty, deepening inequality, the social exclusion and marginalization of certain groups, categories and regions, are directly connected to some of the illnesses from which Albania's transition has suffered, such as corruption and crime.

42. Lleshaj and Cela, pg. 76. See also Arben Malaj and Vamir Gashi "Deepening inequality, a growing threat", Panorama, 12 June 2015

7. Is there a demand for a just and solidary society?

The answer to this question can be divided into two parts. On the one hand even a small amount of data suffices to understand how little attention has been paid and continues to be paid in Albania (despite some positive changes) to the more vulnerable and needy groups and categories. In order to illustrate this and to understand how far Albania is from meeting even the most minimal standards of any social model, it would be enough to present a brief overview of data concerning two groups that are generally considered to be among the most vulnerable in any society, i.e. children and the elderly.

Thus, although in 2010 the government approved the law “On the protection of children’s rights” and the normative acts stemming from it, the indicators of children’s welfare show that their situation continues to be worrisome⁴³. Albania continues to have the highest level of infant mortality and of mortality for children under the age of 5 in the Balkans. According to the latest statistics of the World Bank there are 13 deaths per 1000 in Albania, a figure that is at least double that of other countries in the region (7 for Bosnia and Herzegovina, 6 for Serbia, 5 for Montenegro, 6 for Macedonia).⁴⁴ There are also worrying problems that concern the attendance of primary education by children. In this area the country has experienced a dramatic decline since the beginning of transition. The situation remains

43. Human Development Report 2014, pg. 76

44. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.IMRT.IN>.

especially worrisome in rural areas and especially in remote areas where it would not be very far fetched to say that this service is almost nonexistent.

Of great concern too is the almost complete lack of attention by the state to the situation of children that are subjected to social exclusion, as for instance in the case of the so-called “street children”, of children isolated because of bloodfeuds, of children of poor families, of those who are subjected to violence and trafficking, of those lacking parental care, of the disabled, and more generally speaking of children living in rural areas as a whole. The situation of children belonging to the Roma and Egyptian communities is also very problematic. They live in a situation of almost complete social marginalization. In order to understand the consequences stemming from this situation, suffice it to say that 4.6 percent of all children between the ages of 11 and 15 are regular smokers.⁴⁵

Statistics also show that there are currently 93 000 elderly people that live alone, in very dire economic and social conditions, with almost no social services to assist them. In Tirana, a city with a population of almost 800 000, there are currently only 5 daycare centers for this category and they too are in rather poor conditions. Residential centers for the elderly are also very few and generally speaking fail to satisfy the high demands that there are for accommodation in such centers.⁴⁶

45. [http://www.observator.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2013/Varferia e fëmijëve ne Shqipëri- En2013.pdf](http://www.observator.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2013/Varferia_e_femijëve_ne_Shqipëri-En2013.pdf).

46. Human Development Report 2014, pg. 78-79.

A very serious problem which will become worse in years to come, concerns those elderly people who owing to the high levels of informality that have existed in the labor market during these years do not have the right to a pension. This means that this group, and especially the women, will experience a drastic reduction of their income in old age. A positive development in this area is the fact that in the beginning of 2014 the government finally undertook a pension reform which for the first time made provisions for a social pension for those over 70 years of age. It also contained incentives for people to formalize their employment and pay social security which will probably have a positive effect in the future.

The discussion could very well extend to other areas or aspects of life, but these facts suffice in order to make one understand that Albanian society is currently faced with a range of consequences stemming from the distortion of the model which ironically was justified in the name of fighting communism.

Of course, this is only one side of the story. The other side which comes to light from the data gathered by the study and survey carried out by the Albanian Institute for International Studies “*Toward a New Definition of the Social Contract*” presents a rather different panorama. While examining the responses of citizens, one gets the impression that something is changing and that a shift is taking place in Albanian society. An ever greater number of Albanians seem to be becoming aware that at long last something must change in this direction. Many of the responses may seem a bit contradictory at first glance, but in fact, they are simply expressions of the respondents’ dissatisfaction with the existing

situation. The message they send through this survey is that the time has come for an important correction to take place in Albanian society; a correction that begins from the demand for a more just society, for a more just distribution of wealth, for more social justice, more solidarity, social protection and equal opportunities for all.

Thus, for instance, 72 percent of respondents, a very high figure indeed, are of the opinion that the “state should assist the weakest members of society” while a further 36 percent are of the opinion that “nobody should be deprived of public services regardless of their ability to pay or not.”⁴⁷

An even higher percentage, amounting to 83 percent of respondents, think that the amount of money families receive by way of social welfare payments for unemployment is very low. As pointed out correctly by the authors of the study, such a high figure shows that citizens empathize with this situation despite their personal experience. In general, one can say that all answers to questions of this nature clearly show that the expectations of citizens are in favor of a more social state in which nobody should be excluded. A very high percentage thinks that the state should be responsible for the welfare of the disabled; 89 percent think that the state should guarantee suitable health care for all; 84 percent are in favor of social assistance for poor families; 78 percent demand “protection and special opportunities for weak and vulnerable groups in society,” and so forth. It is indeed encouraging to see that the overwhelming majority of Albanians are quite sensitive about the fate of those social categories that they perceive to be

47. Lleshaj and Cela, pg. 76 - 82

vulnerable and more prone to risks.⁴⁸

But of even greater importance is the fact that judging from the answers, Albania's citizens seem to be already aware that in order to build such a social state, there must be a change to the approach to economic and social development that has prevailed thus far; a change that entails a correction to the very model of development. With their demands and expectations Albania's citizens seem to be moving in the right direction, getting closer to those values and principles that underline the social model that underlines European model.

How can one draw this conclusion? Well, there is no other way in which to interpret the fact that 78 percent of respondents believe that the state should intervene in order to bridge the gap that exists between rich and poor, with 43 percent demanding the state play a more active role in this direction. Only a small minority had a negative reply to this question, i.e. they thought that the gap between rich and poor is an issue in which there should be no state interference. And, as the authors explain this group is made up mostly of people with high incomes who would consequently be affected by policies that aim to bring about a just redistribution of wealth.

In conclusion, the majority of Albanians believe that democracy is the right political system for Albania, and that a market economy is the right economic model. But on the other hand they demand that the state play a more active role than it has played so far. 57 percent of respondents say that they are dissatisfied with the standards of services offered by the Albanian state. But they are

⁴⁸. 56 em.

even more dissatisfied with the policies that Albanian governments have pursued over the past two decades and their attempts to hide their inability to guarantee proper public services, through the so-called privatizations which in fact have been nothing but attempts to shift responsibility for basic services such as education or health care, to the private sector where one has to pay for them. This is indeed an act that goes towards deepening the gap of inequality that exists in Albanian society. Perhaps, this explains what at first glance seems to be a rather contradictory attitude on the part of the respondents: although they are dissatisfied with the standards and quality of the public health or education systems, they still demand that these services remain public, i.e. that they are offered by the state.

A full 88 percent believe that the state should guarantee education, while 85 percent believe that health care should remain public. As far as education is concerned, the majority of respondents believe that “it should be public and financed through taxation.” Very few believe that education could or should be managed by private companies. And one should not forget that these answers come at a time when from a number of years the country has experienced the very widespread phenomenon of countless private education institutions at all levels of education. More or less the same situation prevails in responses relating to health care.

In fact, what one can say is that even though they might appear contradictory at first, the answers given by the majority of respondents are coherent when seen in their entirety. Thus, the fact that 70 percent of respondents believe that “those who earn

more should pay more”, i.e. support progressive taxation, is fully coherent with the panorama presented by the previous questions.

Conclusions

Although the findings of the three studies do not give one the opportunity to reach a conclusion on the level of information of Albanians about the European Social Model, they do make it clear that the majority of citizens wishes to live in a more just society that guarantees welfare for all and where there is more solidarity.

It would be unjustified, and to say the least hasty, to connect these findings to an inheritance of a communist mind-set. A quarter century has passed since the fall of communism and the majority of Albanians have either no memories or very vague memories from that period. In other words, it is difficult for the mind-set of that period to exercise such a serious influence nowadays as to determine the attitudes of people towards the problems they encounter in their day to day life and the expectations they have for the future. The explanation for this preference for a more social state than the one they have today, should first and foremost be seen as stemming from their disappointment with the wild capitalism they have lived through during the 25 years of transition.

But it is important to point out, that whether consciously or not, Albania's citizens are in favor of changes that would bring their society closer to those standards that it is expected to meet in order to progress in its Europeanization project. One can but hope that the Albanian political class will understand this message properly and undertake the right reforms that will allow a more rapid

social and economic development; one based on the values and principles upon which is built the welfare state that constitutes the distinguishing characteristic of all EU memberstates.

Furthermore, all relevant actors in Albanian society must understand that experience has shown this to be the only way in which the country's social cohesion can be guaranteed. It has also shown that social policies constitute the best way to build and preserve a sustainable democracy.

8. The EU integration process and its role in the transformation of Albanian society

It is a fact that despite the many problems that still remain to be solved, the changes that have taken place in Albania during its transition have been very significant. During this quarter century Albania has come a long way and this has brought it closer than ever before to the European Union.

It is now a NATO member and its citizens can travel freely to most European countries which means that they have fulfilled one of the most important dreams they had at the beginning of that process that is usually labelled as “integration” in common parlance.

What is even more important, on June 24th 2014, the foreign minister of 28 EU member states decided to grant Albania candidate status. In this way Albania joined the group of other Western Balkans countries – Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia – in the waiting list for opening negotiations with the European Union.

There is no doubt that to date this constitutes the most important historical moment in the Albanians aspiration to become part of the European family. It is at the same time a confirmation of the great political, economic and social changes that have taken place in the country over the last two and a half decades. Today Albania is a very different country from Albania in the 1990s.

But this date is significant for another reason too: although there

is still no date for opening negotiations, the granting of candidate status serves to keep alive the promise of European integration as an attainable and credible objective. The importance lies in the fact that Europe continues to be the main inspiration for developments in the country. For 25 years after the fall of communism integration was the main motivating force for change, the real catalyst of reforms. The promise of EU membership was and continues to be the real force for positive change while the EU itself was the authoritative monitor that kept in check the distortions and deviations along the road towards democratization and Europeanization, as well as an important and often decisive referee for solving the political tensions and crisis in the country.

Communism fell in the distant year 1991 under shouts of “We want Albania to be like the rest of Europe!” 25 years later the overwhelming majority of Albanians continues to be convinced that full integration in the European family continues to be the only path towards development, modernization and the security of the country. The duration of such an intermediate phase between candidate status and full membership is, in and of itself, no problem. In fact, Albanians have become more and more aware that the road to EU integration will be long and that it demands a series of great and deep changes from the country, especially as far as the functioning of the rule of law and the institutions is concerned, but also as far as the standards Albanian society must fulfill in order to implement what has become known as the European Social Model.

