

**POLITICIZING DEMOCRATIZATION  
IN ALBANIA  
A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE**

*Blendi Kajsii*

**Progetto di ricerca**

La Cooperazione italiana per la democrazia e la legalità  
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## PREMESSA

Il presente è il secondo di una serie di 3 *Working Papers* (28, 29 e 30) realizzati dal CeSPI nell'ambito del progetto di ricerca **'La Cooperazione italiana per la democrazia e la legalità nei Balcani occidentali'**, co-finanziato dal Ministero degli Affari Esteri – Direzione generale cooperazione allo sviluppo. La ricerca studia l'evoluzione recente della cooperazione italiana a sostegno dei processi di democratizzazione in **Serbia** e **Albania**, attraverso l'approfondimento di alcuni studi di caso. Sulla base dell'analisi svolta, essa intende delineare scenari di sviluppo ed elaborare specifiche raccomandazioni di *policy* per la cooperazione italiana nel contesto balcanico. In generale, la ricerca si pone come obiettivo quello di aumentare l'efficacia della cooperazione italiana a sostegno dei processi di democratizzazione nei Balcani occidentali.

Per la realizzazione della ricerca si è adottata una metodologia di studio di tipo qualitativo e multi-situata, attraverso la definizione di un quadro teorico di riferimento e di una metodologia di analisi *ad hoc*, l'analisi di studi di caso, la realizzazione di interviste strutturate a testimoni privilegiati, la realizzazione di missioni in loco ed il confronto con visioni locali.

Il *Working Paper* 29 approfondisce il tema della lotta alla corruzione in Albania, al momento una delle priorità nelle agende politiche del Governo e della Comunità internazionale. Il paper presenta i diversi approcci seguiti dai diversi attori, albanesi e internazionali, impegnati nella lotta alla corruzione e offre un punto di vista critico che dà rilievo ai limiti principali delle azioni realizzate in questa direzione.

Il lavoro è stato elaborato da **Blendi Kajsiu**, uno dei maggiori esperti di politica e di processi di democratizzazione in Albania. Ha collaborato alla definizione della strategia paese per USAID, alla redazione del rapporto 2005 di Freedom House "Nations in transit", è direttore dell'Istituto Albanese di politica, *advisor* presso il Ministero della Giustizia.

## INTRODUCTION

The title of this essay inaccurately suggests that there can be a local perspective on democratization, different and distinguishable from an international one. However, the two separate and distinct perspectives on democratization, one local and another one international more than anything else are simply analytical categories we shall use in order to provide a critical analysis of Albanian democracy as well as the role of the international community in this process. The title also suggests that democratization is one and the same process, but which can be viewed from different perspectives, when in fact in this paper we will argue the opposite; the concept of democratization is closely tied up with the transition paradigm which views it as a process that moves from the break up of an authoritarian regime, through transition and towards democratic consolidation. We argue that such an approach does not help us understand the dynamics of Albanian democracy. It ignores the political intricacies that constitute the so called democratization process. The transition paradigm does not provide the necessary space for us to understand what is happening politically in Albania, while as we argue in this paper, the political process is the cause and effect of democratic failures in the country. Through this paradigm democratic consolidation is analyzed primarily in terms of institutional building, consolidation and behavior. Politics is in turn considered as a process that either takes place within or amidst institution, neglecting the fact that politics is the process through which institutions come to life. As such in analytical terms it should be awarded primacy and needs to be emphasized much more in order to better understand the workings or failures of democracy. Politics, in its most simplistic definition as the process through which we determine “who gets what and when”, is the starting point not the end result of democracy and democratization. It precedes and creates institutions, although it is also shaped by them in turn.

Therefore, the failure to consolidate democratic institutions is above all a political failure. It is the outcome of complex political dynamics, which can neither be amended and even less be understood by focusing on their end result, failed institutions, which are above all the consequence of a dysfunctional political process whose malfunctioning they amplify and sustain. In fact often the two dynamics take place simultaneously. This is part of the reason why the order of priority is overturned; emphasizing institutions first, and politics second. Another reason is due to the fact that politics as a process can be hardly quantified into hard data that will later on be analyzed ‘scientifically’ by political scientists or bureaucrats. Politics is a domain that can be hardly transferred into the realm of ‘scientific objectivity’. This makes it very difficult to produce policy recommendations for policy makers that will inform democratization programs and efforts. It is no coincidence that the transition paradigm has outlived criticisms from academic circles and it still informs democratization efforts by donors and government agencies on the ground. Even more so if we take into consideration the fact that institutions and bureaucracies tend to develop resistance and reproduce their own necessity.

The end result is a problematic vicious circle. Democratization efforts, for a number of reasons that will be explored later on in the paper, neglect the political dimension of democracy, failing thus to strengthen institutions, which in turn contributes further to the malfunctioning of politics, producing an even greater need to strengthen institutions and so on. Thus, after almost 15 years of difficult transition Albania still does not enjoy a democratically consolidated electoral process, a fundamental institution of democracy. The last parliamentary elections despite the progress they marked over previous processes clearly indicated that the country has still to meet some basic democratization criterion, such as free and fair elections. Elections are a good example that many of the phenomenon Albania’s democratization has been going through can no longer be called transitional. Weak or failing institutions, eroding legitimacy of political institutions, distrust of political parties, corruption and a sustained political tension can no longer be considered temporary

distortions or symptoms of a transition towards democracy. It is becoming increasingly evident that these phenomena are not the symptoms but the product of the so called 'transition'.

What ties all these processes together is the political process, which the transition paradigm seems to ignore, viewing democratization primarily as a teleological process that magically moves towards consolidation. A framework that fails to explain why countries like Albania seem stuck in a grey area that cannot be called a consolidated democracy. A number of scholars have already called into question the validity of this paradigm arguing that it can no longer explain many of the political process underway in countries where democratic consolidation has not yet occurred after many years of transition.<sup>1</sup> The continuous focus on building institutions and strengthening the state that dominates analyses based on a transition model, ignores to a certain extent the politics through which these institutions come to exist. It is therefore the aim of this paper to focus on the political process, arguing that the major failure of Albanian democracy is political, not institutional. We argue that what threatens the most Albanian democracy today is the annihilation of the political debate. The current exclusive focus on anti-corruption rhetoric is only one example in this respect. A healthy and well functioning democracy is one with a vigorous political debate that takes place through and produces institutions focusing on different policy alternatives. This is a *sine qua non* for a democracy that delivers and does not simply produce disillusionment with the system. The absence of such debate will reduce politics to a rhetoric against corruption or to populism, which in turn threatens political institutions and democratic procedures that will eventually "stand on the way" of populist politics.

## 1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In order to understand the complexities of the present, it is important to throw a quick glance into the totalitarianism of the communist past of Albania. Risking to fall into historical determinism it is important to emphasize that many of the present day developments are still in part the result of the near communist past. Albania experienced one of the harshest communist regimes in Eastern Europe that ruthlessly imprisoned or eliminated all political dissidents. The Communist Party, later named the Labor Party, controlled all the means of communication and propaganda. It was present in every activity of the individual not only publicly but also through its notorious secret services. Private property was completely banned, along with religion. Farmers were forced to join cooperatives and collectivize their livestock. Many of the major public works, such as railways, irrigation systems or plantations, were executed through forced voluntary work by the population or youth. Everybody was expected to volunteer, which is why 'voluntary work' is quite a misnomer for the kind of work that was carried out. By abolishing private property, through forced collectivization and voluntary work the state excessively extended its domain at the expense of the private sphere of the individual, who was thus placed almost completely under its control.

Therefore, in most of its aspects Communism in Albania was a typical totalitarian system. While many communist countries in the eastern bloc experienced a very moderate degree of liberalization after the 60-ies, in Albania the regime grew increasingly totalitarian. Any real or alleged degree of opposition to the regime was severely punished. This is why by the 80s there were no underground movements or any informal organized opposition or even a very mild dissidence to the regime. All political dissidents were either shot or in prison. The situation was further compounded by the unprecedented isolation that followed after the break with China in the 70s. Albania remained a mystery to the outside world, while Albanians were completely cut off from developments in the rest of the world, until the fall of communism in 1991, when political pluralism was first allowed along

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<sup>1</sup> See Tomas Carothers (2002), "The End of the Transition Paradigm", *Journal of Democracy*. Vol.13, n.1.

with democratic elections,. In fact the end of the communist system in Albania came primarily from a combination of internal economic collapse and developments in the Eastern Bloc in general rather than from any organized dissidence from within the system.

The high degree of repression of the communist regime, the total isolation from the rest of the world, the abolition of individual liberties and the absence of a social or intellectual dissidence to the communist regime combined to produce a unique and at times quite painful transition dynamics for Albania. Democratization as a process took place more as a reaction to a past traumatic political experience rather than a systematic effort to build a liberal democratic regime. The process was further protracted due to the absence of any genuine experience of liberalism both political and economic. In the beginning when the opposition Democratic Party (DP) came to power after the first truly multi party elections on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1992, democracy was primarily understood as anti-communism. The Democratic Party itself brought together individuals and social groups from very different walks of life lacking any real ideological or interest based cohesion beyond a resounding cry against communism, which was now to be replaced by democracy. At the time the path to democracy was very clear; destruction of any communist reminiscences and freedom. A task that became increasingly complicated since in large part it would be carried out by former communist, for whatever political or intellectual elite existed in Albania at the time it was formed under the aegis of the Communist Party. However, the country held great promise in the early years of transition after the Democratic Party came to power. During the 1992–1996 economic growth reached two digit figures, partly due to the very low starting base, and partly as the private sector grew rapidly and the market began to be liberalized. Sweeping reforms started in most areas of governance. In terms of its progress towards a market economy Albania was often cited as a success story since it was ahead of the neighboring countries in economic reforms and privatization. Independent media began to develop although it immediately began to face undemocratic pressures from the authorities who were hostile to criticisms coming from the press and started to take to court and imprison journalists. Civil society also began to grow although it remained weak and almost entirely supported by international donors. Along with the media it served an important role as it voiced criticism against emerging undemocratic practices of the ruling Democratic Party, such as concentration of power in the hands of the than President Berisha and his control of the judiciary and other institutions that were supposed to be independent. Under the ethos of the war against communism the ruling party began to restrict some key civil liberties of its opponents, such as the right to run for office. The authoritarian tendencies of the government became more obvious and disturbing in the 1996 parliamentary election that were rigged in favor of the ruling Democratic Party. The government that came out of these elections violently crushed the protests of the opposition violently.

These elections were followed by the collapse of the pyramid schemes where most of the population lost their life savings. A frustrated opposition and an angry population combined to rebel against the government. This ended with the violent collapse of the entire state apparatus in 1997 which almost entirely wiped out the progress made to date. After the Socialist Party came to power in the 1997 parliamentary elections, the country began to rebuild itself from scratch. Progress was made in rebuilding state institutions and establishing rule of law. Media grew rapidly and civil society strengthened. Problems with free and fair elections continued although they continued to mark improvement over previous electoral processes, and produced a bitter opposition and a polarized political climate. However, the socialist rule was anything but authoritarian. The socialist approach to governance was far less confrontational and far more inclusive. In practice this meant that civil society representatives, media or businesses were no longer repressed but rather co-opted in sharing into the spoils of power. Thus, Albanian governance in many aspects became less authoritarian but also less transparent and accountable. It was now beset by increasing corruption and state capture, until this phenomenon began to produce tension and clashes between competing factions within the ruling Socialist Party. The economy began to suffer from unfair competition as state officials were using power for economic gains and the demarcation line between the

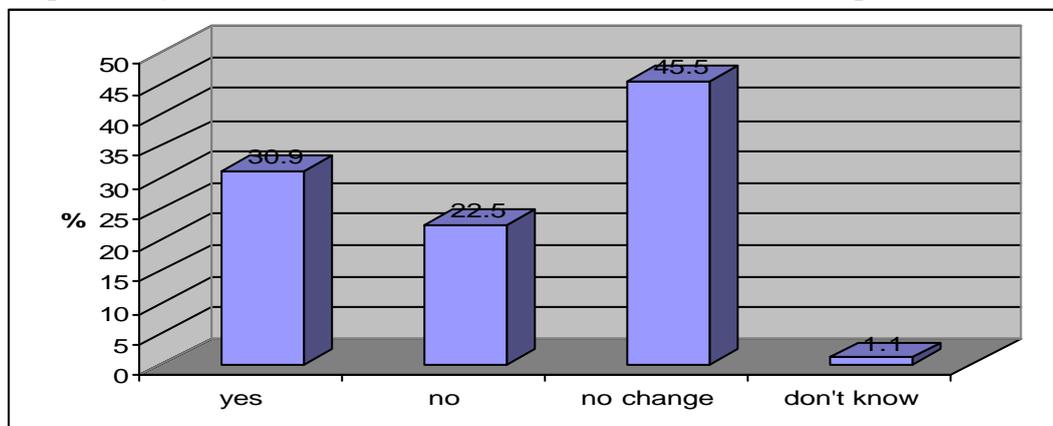
politicians, businesses and media blurred to an unprecedented degree. Albania began to be ranked first amongst neighboring countries in terms of corruption as the ruling SP focused more on its internal clashes rather than on governance.

All these factors combined with an aggressive new image and a clear anticorruption agenda of the opposition Democratic Party (DP) contributed to the electoral defeat of the Socialist Party in the 2005 parliamentary elections. It is still early to assess the work of the new government, especially since due to a protracted post election process it was only constituted in early September although elections took place on July 3<sup>rd</sup>. The new Prime Minister Sali Berisha and his cabinet ministers seem determined to fight corruption which they cite as the number one priority in their agenda. They have undertaken a number of punitive and restrictive measures that aim to restrict and penalize corruptive practices. A number of officials have also been imprisoned on corruption charges. However, in order to reduce corruption a series of reforms are needed in a variety of areas of governance, since after all corruption is the symptom of bad governance. So far most of the efforts against corruption seem to be focused on the punitive mechanisms, which at best might produce short term success. A number of economic, constitutional, judiciary and political reforms are needed beyond the political will to guarantee long term results in reducing corruption. Much more needs to be done in this respect as beyond the political will to fight corruption an improved system of governance is necessary to make reduction of corruption sustainable. After all corruption is the externality of a dysfunctional system of governance.

## 2. ANTICORRUPTION, OR THE END OF THE POLITICAL DEBATE

It is impossible to talk about Albanian democracy without mentioning corruption. By now it has become the trademark not only of the Albanian democracy, but the distinguishing features of all those countries that aspire to become consolidated democracies. The new government constituted in September 2005, came into office through a vocal promise to fight corruption. Every political and administrative measure taken so far by the new cabinet takes place in the framework of the fight against corruption. Reducing the level of corruption has become the number one priority of the current government. According to the survey conducted by the Albanian Institute for International Studies, the majority of respondents think that there is no change in the levels of corruption, although after the parliamentary elections of July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2005 a significant percentage thinks that corruption is being reduced. See Graph 1 below.

**Graph 1. Do you think that there is a reduction in the levels of corruption in Albania?<sup>2</sup>**



<sup>2</sup> Albanian Institute for International Studies (2006), *Albanian Democracy – In Search of Accountability*, Torana, p 20.

Corruption is often used and rarely defined. In Albania it has come to embrace a variety of phenomenon ranging from the bribe taken by street police to illegal tenders run by Government ministers. For the population at large corruption has become the symbol of every calamity that has befallen post communist Albania. Polls indicate that Albanians perceive many institutions as thoroughly corrupt. Customs, hospitals and financial police tend to lead the long list of institutions that are perceived to be corrupt. The percentage of those who report giving bribes to public officials is large and increasing. Corruption is everywhere and everything. It has become the target upon which people project almost all dissatisfactions, individual or collective. If something fails, it is due to corruption. If democracy in Albania does not work it is because of corruption. If you cannot find a job, it is because of corruption in the system. Therefore corruption is no longer viewed as the symptom of a dysfunctional democracy but rather as its cause. As a consequence the fight against corruption has turned into the panacea of all the problems Albanian democracy faces, as well as a subtle way to avoid discussion of concrete reforms and policies whose failure has brought about its growth. In fact the current approach to corruption has turned upside down the relationship between cause and effect. It is no longer the case that corruption is the outcome of failed reforms, such as in the judiciary for example, but rather the source of such failure. Therefore, we have to first get rid of corruption in order to successfully implement reforms, and not vice versa.

This is why the growth of anti-corruption rhetoric has increased the perception of corruption without actually reducing the level of corruption. Once corruption becomes everything, it is also nothing. As a consequence anti-corruption campaigns loose focus facing such a pervasive phenomenon that cannot be actually targeted. Therefore, the first task should be to produce a more narrow definition and better distinguish amongst different types of corruption. It is not very useful to categorize every systematic failure or abuse of power in general under corruption, although they might produce corruption as a consequence. In the same fashion it is counter productive to crowd in the same category phenomenon as different as petty corruption and state capture, which require different remedies. A better typology of corruption helps us view this phenomenon as a symptom of systematic failure rather than as an autonomous challenge. This means that corruption is the response of different actors, citizens, politicians or businessmen to the failures in different areas of governance. Bribes facilitate transactions in a dysfunctional and arbitrary tax or health system. Therefore, the best approach is not to declare war on corruption per se through a 'let's fight corruption' approach but rather to carry out reforms that address those systematic failures that bring about the proliferation of corruptive practices. Needless to say this is a far more complex, tedious and long term process than an open fight against corruption. Yet it is far more productive in the long run.

This does not require the proliferation of institutions and legislation that address corruption specifically. The country does not suffer from a dearth of legislation and institutions set up to fight corruption. What is needed and what is missing are genuine political reforms of specific sectors from education to health. However this can only be done successfully if there is a proper political debate on how these crucial areas can be reformed. Unfortunately a heavy focus on anti-corruption rhetoric makes such debate impossible. Policies are no longer proposed or evaluated on their political and institutional merit or efficacy, but rather as measures against corruption. In this way a real political debate with specific reforms in different areas is submersed into a political battle in which one party accuses the other of being corrupt. This produces a vicious circle in which because of the anti-corruption approach fewer reforms take place, which in turn produces more corruption that produces more anti-corruption rhetoric. In this way politics as a process is reduced to a debate over corruption, rather than as the process of representation of different interests, often in open conflict with each other. Eventually this contributes to higher levels of dissatisfaction with the political process and politics as a whole, which is viewed as a very corrupt process and profession adding to an already existing political apathy.

This makes it also increasingly difficult for policy oriented or programmatic debates to develop. Once politics is reduced to moral grounds between 'the good' and 'the bad' very few policy alternatives develop. Especially since policy alternatives grow out of genuine political debates that focus on political values and alternatives other than corruption. A reform of the public universities or of the health system requires above all a debate on political values, such equality or meritocracy, in order to determine through an open and inclusive process the role of the state, or lack thereof, in education or the health system. Thus, in order to determine how the public universities will be reformed first it is important to clearly determine the role of the state in education, the extent to which the private sector will develop, the criterion upon which universities will become accessible, whether the reform will focus on making higher education more qualitative or more massive. This calls for clashes of alternatives that in the end are based on clear political values, such as equality, meritocracy or competition and which affect in different ways different social groups. Instead, the debate focuses simply on how to eliminate corruption avoiding the political dimension, the bases upon which effective reforms can take place. Reforms which by increasing efficiency will also reduce corruption as a consequence. Lack of such reforms produces even more dissatisfaction with politics and an even greater growth of populist anti-corruption rhetoric, which fills the void created by the lack of policy alternatives, replacing ideology with morality.

### **3. ASSESSING INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY'S ROLE IN ALBANIA'S DEMOCRATIZATION**

One of the main difficulties in assessing the role of the international community in Albania's democratization is the fact that it consists of a large number of actors whose actions, interests and approaches are often at odds with each other. For the sake of focus and for the purpose of this paper, by international community we will understand major players in the Albanian political scene such as the European Union, OSCE, or the United States, as well as a number of major donor organizations that support Albanian civil society efforts in the area of democratization. Therefore, we will focus on two aspects of the international community impact in the Albanian democratization process. First we will explore its immediate intervention in the Albanian political scene. Secondly, we will assess the indirect impact by supporting democratization through the Albanian civil society sector. In the first case the focus will be on the Euro-Atlantic integration process, and particularly on the EU integration, which still remain the declared priority of every Albanian government. In the second case the focus will be on democratization efforts that take place outside of the political arena, which involve international and local donors and NGOs.

The most important instrument through which the international community affects and even conditions Albanian democratization is through the EU integration process. The underlying assumption of this approach is that EU integration and Albanian democratization are one and the same process. In this respect EU integration provides the roadmap that Albania has to follow in order to democratize. Supposedly this roadmap is detailed enough and contains specific policy measures and recommendations on a variety of fields ranging from public administration, to the judiciary system. All Albania needs to do is to follow the instructions, as they come in the Stabilization Association Reports. The whole process has a heavy administrative bias, and is quite apolitical. The remedies are all of an administrative or of a structural nature. They tend to ignore or avoid the internal political dynamic of the country. In fact in all the reports, or declaration by high level EU officials there is an emphasis on the need to overcome politics, arguing that politics should be less polarized, Albanian politicians should be more responsible and not politicize the process of reforms, or act along party lines. The focus is on strengthening state institutions, which in turn would serve to democratize and integrate Albania into EU.

This is reflected in the major shift that took place in EU aid assistance from the PHARE to the CARDS program. After the Kosovo crises in 1999 EU put integration on its agenda and focused its aid almost exclusively on building and strengthening institutions. “While there was a predominance of aid given to infrastructure during the period until 1997, this changed drastically with the introduction of CARDS assistance in 2001”.<sup>3</sup> Thus, almost the entire EU assistance is concentrated on enhancing Albania’s capacities to implement the Stabilization and Association Agreement. However, as Hoffman argues “[t]aking into account that Albania is one of the poorest countries in Europe and needs a strong economic growth to catch up with the rest of Europe, the almost exclusive concentration of the EU funds in areas necessary to the implementation of a future SAA seems not to be well suited to the needs of the country”.<sup>4</sup> In fact despite the considerable assistance that has been put into the area of strengthening institutions, they are still very vulnerable to the internal political dynamic, since after all institutions are the outcome of such dynamics and cannot be strengthened or built outside of it.

Besides its effectiveness, an apolitical approach exclusively focused on building institutions has indirectly contributed to deepening the gap between the political elite and the electorate. Since EU integration is viewed as the panacea of all evil in Albanian society it has been vigorously embraced by every government. As a result the priorities outlined in the EU integration process have become government priorities, at least on paper and in its rhetoric. However, these priorities do not necessarily reflect the priorities of the population at large. Almost every SAA report emphasizes the need to fight corruption, organized crime and trafficking. The 2002 SAA report concludes that Albania needs to “combat fraud, corruption and organized crime which threaten the stability of the Albanian state and ultimately of Albanian society”.<sup>5</sup> The 2003 report while praising the country for making improvements in controlling illegal immigration towards EU, underlines that “...trafficking in human beings, drugs and other forms of organized crime, as well as corruption in key areas such as the judicial system, customs and police remain matters of deep concern.”<sup>6</sup> In the same fashion the 2004 report states that of particular concern issues that “...include the fight against organized crime and corruption...”<sup>7</sup> It is therefore no surprise why the current government has the fight against corruption and organized crime as the top priority both in its program on paper and in its governance in practice. No matter how noble and deserving such battle cry the fact remains that neither corruption nor organized crime seem to be the top priorities for the public at large. This is not to argue that these issues might not deserve careful consideration on part of government, we are simply stating that there are other issues that concern the Albanian public more. Unsurprisingly, such matters have to do with infrastructure, jobs, reduction of poverty, and increased salaries. Yet, anti-trafficking and the fight against organized crime come up far more frequently in the speeches of the prime-minister than unemployment, although the latter is a much bigger and immediate concern for the electorate. See graph 2 below.

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<sup>3</sup> Hoffman, Judith (2005), “Integrating Albania: the Role of the European Union in the Democratization Process”. *Albanian Journal of Politics*, I (1): 55-74.

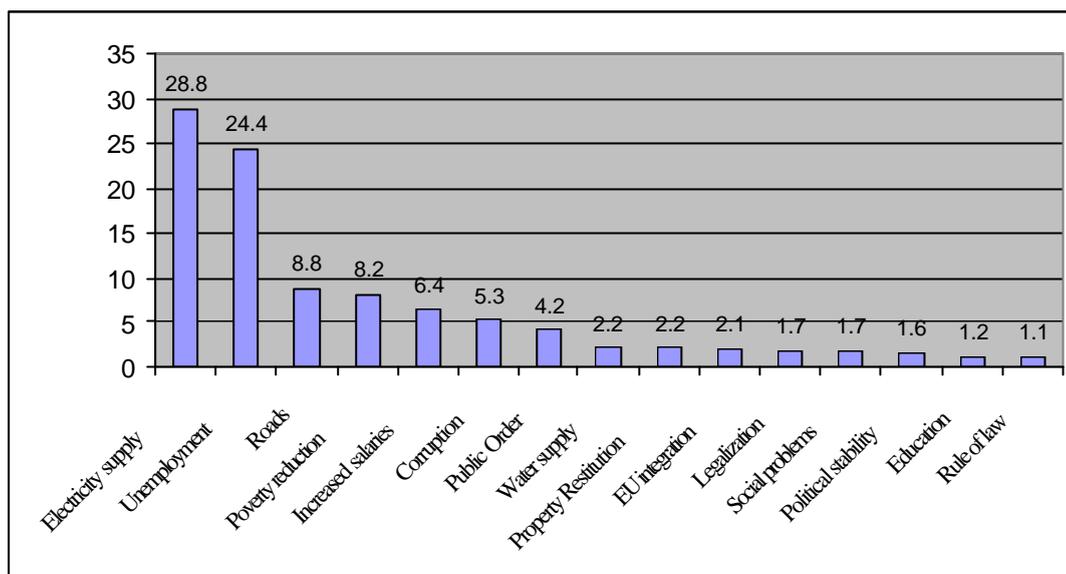
<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Commission of the European Communities. Commission Staff Working Paper (2002), *Albania – Stabilization and Association Report 2002*, Brussels p 1.

<sup>6</sup> Commission of the European Communities. Commission Staff Working Paper (2003), *Albania – Stabilization and Association Report 2003*, Brussels, p 1.

<sup>7</sup> Commission of the European Communities. Commission Staff Working Paper (2004), *Albania – Stabilization and Association Report 2004*, Brussels, p 1.

**Graph 2. Which is the main problem that the Government must solve today?<sup>8</sup>**



As the above graph shows the main concerns of the electorate pertain to economic development, rather than corruption or public order, which do not come first in their priority agenda. This might be indicative of the fact that the EU integration agenda might not, at least in the short term, reflect or address the concerns of the population. It could thus serve to widen rather than bridge the gap between those who govern and those who are being governed. This is not to say that the Albanian population is against EU integration, a number of survey attest to the contrary. However, there is a clear risk that the EU priorities regarding Albania's democratization, such as strengthening institutions, might not fit with local incentives or drives that are motivated by other priorities. This is even more so when integration becomes a cliché and a slogan that is used to avoid rather than stimulate concrete debates on reforming key sectors and stimulating economic growth. The EU integration serves to de-ideologize even further the political debate, since the focus is no longer on the political dimension of the reforms but rather on the administrative one. Since all the actors have EU integration as a policy priority the only real discussion that takes place is not one on concrete reforms, which would inevitably be a political debate, instead the focus is diverted on which political party takes you faster towards EU, or which political party becomes less corrupt in the process. In this way EU integration is misused and usurps the space that should be used to debate major reforms in areas such education or health services, which in turn produces even greater dissatisfaction and deepens the gap between the political elite and the electorate.

As the dissatisfaction with the political elite grows, there is even greater tendency on the part of the latter to rely on populist rhetoric, be it on EU integration or on anti-corruption. The consequence of such a development is much talk of reforms, but lack of any significant reforms, and thus more dissatisfaction with the politicians in general. Combined with the fact that most Albanian governments have stayed in power through compromised electoral processes this has further undermined their legitimacy with the electorate. In order to compensate for this they rely even further on the international community, often reflecting more the international rather than the local priorities. This in turn de-legitimizes them even further with the local population, setting in motion a vicious circle through which the more the government needs to legitimize itself, the more it turns to the international community, distancing itself from the local priorities and de-legitimizing itself even further. The end product is a greater democratic deficit, a process at the heart of which there is

<sup>8</sup> Globic Opinion (2005), *Poll # 1, Albanian Public Opinion*, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA. December.

lack of representation of the electoral concerns in the political process. This in turn means a political game that does not deliver.

While this empowers the international community to influence local politics, it does not necessarily produce more democratization. As we have argued this is partly due to its approach that sees democratization as a linear, administrative and structural process, ignoring the internal political dynamic. An approach that makes that doubtful assumption that “the accession and transition are parts of the same process and that preparations to join EU are coterminous with the overall development goals”.<sup>9</sup> When in fact, as we have tried to show so far, EU integration is misused to avoid rather than stimulate local debates that would enhance democratization. A process which is not unique to Albania, since research in other countries further ahead in the EU integration process has shown that “...the administrative bias of the accession process impedes the development of a wide debate on governance in applicant countries.”<sup>10</sup> In the case of Albania, the impact of the EU integration conditionality is further limited by the fact, that despite the local rhetoric it is a long term benefit that does not affect immediately the political expediencies of the party in power, which is why very often EU integration ends up as mere rhetoric rather than concrete policies. In fact “the developments in Albania show that the opinion shared by many scholars, and also the officials of the European Union, that the Union can induce reforms and change by offering the perspective of integration might be too optimistic.”<sup>11</sup> In Albania, like elsewhere in the region, the incentives offered by the EU are not sufficient to offset the costs faced by the domestic elite in order to engage in a real process of reforms.<sup>12</sup>

The impact of the international community has been further limited and often counterproductive due to its attempt to distance itself from the Albanian political scene, while approaching it as a homogenous entity. One of the primary concerns of the international community has been to appear neutral and unbiased in relation to local political actors. At times this concern has been in proportion to its degree of involvement in Albanian political affairs. As a consequence international community actors have made use of existing homogenizing concepts in the Albanian political scene such as ‘political class’, ‘all the parties’, ‘Albanian politics’ and so on. The language thus used has been at the same time highly diplomatic and ambiguous, always blaming everyone equally and holding none accountable in particular. The approach has often been generalizing to a degree that has been hard to scrutinize. A couple of examples would suffice to demonstrate this phenomenon. Thus, with regard to Albania’s EU integration declarations on part of the latter go along the lines “Albania should do more to progress in its path towards EU membership”. Judging from Albania’s slow down in the EU integration process one could conclude from the preceding declaration that everybody in the country should be held equally responsible for this slow down. In the same fashion before electoral processes it is quite common from prestigious international community institutions to hear declarations of the kind: “The Albania political class should hold free and fair elections”. Such declarations overlook dynamics and interests on the ground, assuming that the problem with the lack of free and fair elections in Albania lies with everyone to the same extent, political parties, institutions, citizens, and the society in general.

While one can sympathize with the effort to appear neutral and unbiased one cannot avoid observing that such ‘neutrality’ has often proved counterproductive. Applied to the Albanian political scene such neutrality has meant equal distance from all parties, which in practice has proved a strong support for the status quo. At a time when the status quo of Albanian politics was the very source of crises, such stand has in fact produced the very opposite outcome of what it

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<sup>9</sup> Grabbe, Heather (2002) “European Union Conditionality and the Acquis Communautaire”, *International Political Science Review*, 23 (3): 249–268.

<sup>10</sup> Grabbe, Heather (2001), “How Does Europeanization Affect CEE Governance? Conditionality, Diffusion and Diversity”, in: *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1013-1031.

<sup>11</sup> Hoffman, Judith (2005), “Integrating Albania: the Role of the European Union in the Democratization Process”, in *Albanian Journal of Politics*, 1 (1): 55-74.

<sup>12</sup> See Kubicek, Paul J. (2003), *The European Union and Democratization*, London/New York: Routledge.

aimed to achieve. The consecutive deepening of the crises has resulted in an even greater need for the intervention of the international actors, as indicated by their increasing importance in deciding on the acceptability of elections and the legitimacy of Albanian governments. Therefore, another vicious circle has been produced where the increased involvement of the international community, given its approach, has not mitigated the crises, such as problematic electoral processes, but rather furthered it, producing thus an even greater need for its presence and involvement. This is not to say that the role played by the international community in Albania has been a negative one. Black and white judgments and analyses should be avoided especially in a phenomenon as complex as that of the Albanian democratization. One can find numerous examples of the positive involvement of international actors in Albanian politics and in guaranteeing some basic democratic standards. Therefore, the question at present is not whether there should be an involvement by international actors in Albanian democratization, an unavoidable reality of the Albanian political scene, but how such involvement can be improved.

The first prerequisite for an improved role of the international community should be the support of processes rather than individuals. Although this formula is repeated quite often by high diplomats, in practice it is not applied as often as it is articulated. Supporting democratic processes should be an unconditional approach, even if these processes bring to the fore individuals that international organizations or embassies apprehend. Even if this means letting the Albanian voter 'err'. After all democracy consolidates through trial and error, it is a learning process. The word 'process' is crucial here, because it is through the process, be it elections, referenda, public opinion public debates, that mistakes or distortions are corrected. Otherwise, if the process is sacrificed for the sake of outcome an irreparable damage is done to democracy, short term benefits are weighed more than long term outcomes, projecting current distortion into the future. Unfortunately this has often been the approach of the international community *vis a vis* Albania, which is why it should come as no surprise that 15 years after the fall of communism Albanian democracy has not yet guaranteed a process such as free and fair elections.

Supporting the process rather than the individuals can only be achieved if stability does not take precedence over democracy. This is another point where the intervention of the international community can be improved. In the past Albanian democratization has been often assessed in terms of regional stability. No matter how poorly Albanian governments have performed at home, in terms of democracy; they have been praised for their stabilizing role in the region. There seems to be an increased awareness on part of the international community in this regard. Fortunately, as a number declarations and reports indicate, Albanian democratization is being judged on its own merits, rather than on Albania's role in the region. This has come due to the fact that it has become increasingly clear that Albania poses a security threat to the region not through its foreign policy, at times quite absent, but rather as a weak or collapsing state, with porous borders, state capture, a potential source of emigrants and due to the lack of rule of law, a safe haven for all kinds of trafficking and other dangerous and destabilizing activities. In the stand of the international community democracy should take precedence over stability even with regard to domestic Albanian politics. Only a consolidated democracy can produce long term and sustainable stability. Any other approach can achieve short term stability at the expense of democratic consolidation, in the long run endangering both of them. This is not to say that stability is not a necessary component for democratization, but that the only kind of stability desirable and sustainable is in the framework of a working democracy. It is quite likely that democratization might prove destabilizing at times; however this is a risk worth taking. It is first of all a risk that has to be taken and managed and handled by the Albanian actors themselves, through a trial and error learning process.

The international community has an important part to play in the process; however the ownership of the process has to be firmly in the hands of the local actors. The more the responsibility regarding Albanian political developments shifts towards international institutions the more the lack of accountability in Albanian politics increases. Despite their good intentions it must be emphasized that after all the international institutions are not accountable to the electorate at large. Thus the

more local actors lack the ownership of the process the more the voters will feel that they are free to change governments but not policies. This is even more so given that the local political actors quite often are willing to delegate decision-making to international actors so as to avoid responsibility.

Therefore the more we move into the future of the Albanian democratization the smaller the role of international institutions should be in guaranteeing the integrity of Albanian democracy. Unfortunately, these last 15 years indicate that far from being self sustainable Albanian democratization has become with time increasingly dependent on international factors. Domestic failures of democratization have created an institutional vacuum that has been filled by international actors. The increasing importance of the OSCE presence in Albania is an indication to this effect. Once in place, and due to the continuing failure of Albanian institutions, the necessity of international presence has not waned but increased. Under these conditions a number of international institutions have become indispensable in the local political scene, self perpetuating their necessity. This does not bode well for the future of Albanian democratization because it might hinder the transfer of the ownership of the process to local actors. Therefore, the international community in general and specific institutions that represent it in particular should start working on an exit strategy. This should be a long term strategy which while taking into account the necessity of the international factor at present, should also outline specific steps on how international institutions should gradually whither away from the local scene. This would after all be a clear sign of the consolidation of Albanian institutions.

### **3.1. Civil Society and International Community**

Besides its direct intervention into the Albanian political scene, be it through the EU integration process, or through other means, the international community plays an important role through supporting democratization efforts in the civil society sector. A number of donors sustain financially, collaborate or partner with local NGOs in projects that aim to enhance democratization. Albania has a very weak civil society sector. The term is mostly applied to a number of NGOs which are donor dependent and donor driven. Therefore, the impact of international community on the civil society sector is quite determinant, which is why they are treated together in this section. This impact has meant that many of the approaches of the international community have been transplanted into the civil society sector. Thus, most of the points made above about the stand of international community on Albanian politics are valid also for the civil society sector. This sector too is marked by a strained effort to appear neutral and unbiased, which has reinforced the existing generalizing articulation, thus eschewing rather than emphasizing accountability, avoiding rather than influencing the political process.

Most of the democratization efforts in the civil society sector focus on the 'technology' of democracy, the know-how of participation, rather than its political dimension, the representation of conflicting interests. Two areas that receive most of the support are trainings and awareness raising. Trainings vary from capacity building to producing informed citizens that will know how to participate and do advocacy and lobbying. Awareness campaigns on the other hand focus almost exclusively on information. The underlying assumption in both cases is that the more citizens know the more they will participate. The approach also assumes that any failures in the democratic process are due to lack of consolidation of democratic institutions, which is why a number of round tables, trainings or awareness raising campaigns are organized to this effect. Once the institutions will become consolidated they will function better and involve more citizen input. Therefore the apathy of the citizens, their dissatisfaction with the political process, their lack of desire and willingness to participate is explained in terms of weak democratic institutions, and it is remedied through trainings and awareness campaigns that simply tell the citizens that they must participate. Therefore, a number of shortcomings essentially of a political nature, such as dissatisfaction with the political elite, the representation crises and lack of trust in political institutions, are addressed through a very technical approach of trainings and awareness raising, which almost entirely ignores

the political dimension of the failures in the democratic system. This approach is partly informed by the need to remain apolitical, which why there is such a focus on the technology of democratization. In fact the main prerequisite for any local Albanian NGO to receive funding is that it should not be politically affiliated or biased. Yet many NGOs that apply for funding do deal with political matters that pertain to democratization. In order to avoid any semblance of political affiliation or bias they rely on and reinforce the existing political discourse which functions through generalizing categories that find problems with everyone, from individual politicians to the society at large, but hold accountable none.<sup>13</sup> Such approach in practice has produced a number of curious outcomes. Thus, international donor funded civil society organization that have been involved in political activism have organized protests against bad governance in Albania, by protesting in front of the government offices, in front of the opposition party offices and in front of the ruling party offices. In short they have protested against everyone avoiding thus any allegations that they favor a given political party or actor.

It goes without saying that such moves have been rich in neutrality and poor in efficacy. In the longer term they have not produced more accountability, but have proved quite counter productive. By emphasizing the need to change the political class as a whole these movements have increased rather than lowered the levels of dissatisfaction with politics in general and politicians in particular, de-legitimizing thus the whole system, while not offering an alternative solution. The emphasize on the need to get rid of the political class, not only has downplayed any positive examples from the Albanian political scene, but has also produced rather than reduced apathy amongst the populace. If everyone is equally bad, than what is the point of even voting or participating in political activities. Furthermore, the replacement of the political class calls for revolutionary rather than evolutionary solutions, which in absence of a consolidated democracy and in presence of weak institutions might be quite counter productive.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that the problem rests with the concept of neutrality or political bias per se. The problem lies with the way in which civil society actors apply these concepts into practice. Lack of bias and neutrality in relation to political developments is understood as equal distance from all parties. This approach results from the logic according to which if the ruling political party claims A and the opposition claims B, than the truth of the matter is to be found half way between A and B, i.e. equally distanced from both parties. This middle of the AB segment is a safe place because it avoids accusations of leaning closer to A or B. At the same time it is a position that only contributes in preserving the status quo, without tipping the balance one way or another. What is lacking in this approach is the relation of the civil society actors to the concept of a mission, value or interest that they are supposed to represent and advocate. With regard to democratization these means that every civil society actor should have a principle or principles, a 'truth' or 'truths', which it promotes or supports and against which it judges political developments in the country. Usually these are expressed in its mission statement. The performance of political actors should be judged only in relation to these principles rather than against each others. This means that independence, lack of bias or neutrality is a concept that should be upheld in relation to the mission statement and principles of the civil society organization. This does not preclude one from taking a stand even on delicate political issues, as long as such a stand is consistent with those principles of democratization that the given organization upholds. Although such stands will bring upon the civil society organization criticism from one or another political party, in the long run such stand if consistent with a given set of principles will increase its credibility and it will enhance the role of civil society organizations in the Albanian political scene.

It is from this angle that some of the donor policies with regard to the political neutrality of Albanian civil society sector should be revisited. NGOs or other civil society groups should not be judged simply on the merit of their political neutrality, but rather in relation to the values and

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<sup>13</sup> See Blendi Kajsia (2004), "Ligjerimi Steril", *Politika dhe Shoqeria*, Tirana.

principles they uphold or promote. It should be of little consequence if in the process of doing so they are perceived as or accused of being politically biased. Political bias is not an evil in itself. After all in a democracy every individual or organization sustains a given political opinion. The question is whether political bias results from the principles a given organization holds, or it is a political flirt with a given political party in exchange of immediate benefits. Of course it is the latter that should be avoided, while the former is a phenomenon that should be encouraged because it can promote a more vigorous involvement of civil society sector in the Albanian political scene. A good example here would be the anticorruption initiatives, which ones freed from the political neutrality conditioning could prove much more effective. In Albania corruption is first and foremost a political rather than simply an administrative phenomenon.<sup>14</sup>

Yet donor policies are only one of the factors that can improve Albania's civil society sector performance in relation to democratization. The crucial challenge remains the development of domestic, grass root organizations that represent and promote the interests of specific groups. Democracy is after all an endless process of negotiations amongst different interest groups. As it was already mentioned Albanian NGOs are not only entirely dependent on donor funding but also driven primarily by donor priorities. This means that if donor funding ended tomorrow, the entire sector that is called civil society would very soon collapse. Such severe dependency on donor funding produces donor driven NGOs, which means that many local NGOs articulate the priorities the donor wants to hear, this is how one applies for funding after all. Given that these priorities are articulated by the local NGOs, the donors endorse them as local priorities. An exchange is thus set off in which the donors outline their priorities, which are picked up and articulated by the local NGOs, which then the donors endorse as local priorities, because they are articulated by local organizations. The end result is a closed circle that produces numerous projects and activities that seem to satisfy only the needs of the donor and of the local NGO. Therefore, more than a sector which represents and promotes the interests of different interest groups, the civil society sector provides a good employment opportunity, both in terms of financial remuneration and social status.

This is in fact one of the major handicaps of the Albanian civil society sector, aside from the fact that it opens up employment opportunities especially for well educated youth from western countries. Civil society organizations are not representative of societal interests. This is another area where donor policies can be improved so as to enhance Albanian democratization. In practical terms this means that there should be a more concerted effort to fund those organizations that are created by domestic actors, have a certain membership and are organized around specific issues. These could be farmers groups, village women organizations, student groups, or any other group that wants to protect and promote a given value or interest. Such organizations are not only more sustainable in the long run, but also more representatives than the current NGO sector. Their biggest asset is also their biggest liability; in most cases they do not speak the language of the donor, which is why some extra effort is needed in order to listen to them.

Supporting interest groups implies encouraging efforts that aim to influence government policies in a transparent fashion. In another words it means that lobbying should be encouraged as an activity in which civil society organizations can be engaged more frequently. Lobbying serves a double purpose in democratization. First it affects government policies to the benefit of a specific group. Second it serves to improve policies and educate interested groups on the functioning of the system as a whole. There have been a number of successful lobbying efforts by civil society organizations in Albania. However, these efforts have often been taken ad hoc and by organizations that do not represent or rally around them specific interests.

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<sup>14</sup> See Ivan Krastev (2004), "From the Ground Up – An Assessment of Anticorruption Initiatives", in *Shifting Obsessions : Three Essays on the Politics of Anticorruption*, Center for Policy Studies (CPS). Central European University (CEU). Budapest 2004.

In order to effectively support interest groups, donor policies should also make a better distinction between think tanks and NGOs. The funding provided for the civil society sector sometimes does not distinguish between the two. Think tanks tend to and should be more research oriented as compared to NGOs that are more activity oriented. Think tanks are a crucial part of civil society since they contribute with ideas and expertise to the democratization process. However, their product should be better combined with that of academia and universities in general, as well as with that of NGOs that deal with lobbying and other specific activities. At the moment most think tanks operate in complete isolation in relation to academic institutions. A better cooperation needs to be established between think tanks on the one hand and academic institutions on the other. Donor funding policies could play an important role in encouraging this cooperation.

This would also require an understanding of civil society that goes beyond its narrow definition as a collection of NGOs. Universities and academia in general should also constitute a crucial part of the Albanian civil society sector. Unfortunately at the moment they play a very secondary role in the Albanian democratization. Due to a variety of reasons, which cannot be explored at length here, very little of the funding by international donors has gone to universities or educational institutions. The beneficiaries of such funding have usually been individual NGOs or think tanks. No matter how difficult it is necessary for international donors to try and channel more of their funding through educational institutions. In this way they can strengthen research institutions and think tanks within the universities. They can play a major role in providing opinions, expertise and research on Albanian developments in the future. This would also extend the number of beneficiaries from donor funding.

#### **4. POLITICIZING DEMOCRATIZATION**

The main goal of this paper has been to see democratization as a primarily political process, rather than as a phenomenon that moves from transition to consolidation through a transition paradigm. As we have tried to show above the main threat that Albanian democracy faces today is not weak institutions or a weak state, but rather a process that is transforming politics into an apolitical process. This is not a process specific to Albania, neither is it triggered simply by local factors. The end of communism marked a period of de-ideologization throughout the world. The traditional left and right camps began to dissolve. As parties started moving towards the center their ideological differences started to disappear and their programs and policies increasingly looked alike. This brought about an increased focus on corruption as the sole distinguishing factor between a corrupt government and a less corrupt opposition. As Ivan Krastev argues “the ultimate manifestation of the new threat to democracy is the corruption-centered discourse on politics. This discourse moralizes policy debate to the point where politics is reduced to a choice between the corrupt government and not yet corrupt opposition. The core of political discourse becomes claims not about the future but about fraud.”<sup>15</sup>

This phenomenon is common to new, consolidated and not yet consolidated democracies. In Albania, as in many other countries the anti-corruption rhetoric was a key factor for the Democratic Party to come to power after the 2005 parliamentary elections, against a government that it heavily accused of corruption. At the moment the anticorruption rhetoric has become the main organizing principle of governance, almost entirely hegemonizing the political debate, which has now been reduced to two sides, each claiming that the other is corrupt. Yet none offering or debating on specific policy recommendations or reforms. It is this phenomenon that makes it difficult to

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<sup>15</sup> Krastev, Ivan (2006), “Democracy “Doubles”. *Journal of Democracy*. Vol. 17, N 2. National Endowment for Democracy and the John Hopkins University Press. Available on line at [www.journalofdemocracy.com](http://www.journalofdemocracy.com)

accomplish reforms, to debate on reforms, which in turn would strengthen institutions and the state in general. In addition to local factors this process is also supported by the international community which time and again simply reiterates that Albania should fight corruption, rather than pushing for specific reforms. At the same time by supporting an apolitical civil society, when the major challenge of Albanian democracy is the absence of a genuine political debate beyond anticorruption policies, the international community has further contributed in stifling the political debate that is the source of a dysfunctional democracy.

This is why it becomes important to move beyond the transition paradigm with its non-political approach to democracy, which explains every failure in the democratic system due to lack of democratic consolidation, ignoring thus the crisis of democracy Albania is going through. Therefore, the problems that Albanian democracy faces should not be viewed as a failure of democratization, but as a crises of democracy.<sup>16</sup> This would constitute an important change of perspective that goes beyond the transition paradigm. So far through this paradigm every failure has been explained due to the fact that democracy has not been consolidated yet. While in fact, as this paper tries to show, some of the fundamental problems that Albanian democracy faces are neither specific nor unique to it, they can be found also in the so called consolidated democracies, as it is the case with anti-corruption rhetoric and failing political reforms and debates. Another fundamental challenge Albanian democracy faces today, common to many present day democracies, pertains to the distrust of political institutions, politicians and the political process in general, which in turn produces a crises of representation. The largest group of voters does not sympathize with either of the major political parties, Socialist Party (SP) and Democratic Party (DP).<sup>17</sup> Political parties are viewed as highly corrupt and inefficient. The Human Security Survey shows that the majority of respondents (65.7%) think that politicians are above the law, while an even larger percentage (69.9%) think that political parties either serve public interest to a limited extent or not at all.<sup>18</sup> Approval rates are even lower with urban youth amongst whom only 12% placed some trust in political parties.<sup>19</sup> These are in fact the real failures of Albanian democracy. The consequences that such failures produce might be different and probably more serious than in other countries which have a longer and richer experience with democracy. Yet this should not make us blind to some of the shared challenges that democracies face, such as crises of representation that results from the blurred distinction between left and right.

The concept of consolidation is not very helpful in this respect, since a well functioning democracy never quite consolidates. A healthy democratic process calls for the continuous antagonism and clash between strong political identities and open conflict of interests. "If such is missing, it can too easily be replaced by a confrontation between non-negotiable moral values and essentialist identities."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the very idea that a final resolution of conflict is possible, implicit in the concept of democratic consolidation, is something that puts the democratic project at risk. Conflict and antagonism constitute the condition of possibility of a democratic system. From this perspective democracy should be conceived as a good that only exists as good so long as it cannot be reached. "Such democracy will therefore always be a democracy 'to come', as conflict and antagonism are at the same time its condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of its full realization."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Krastev, Ivan (2002), "The Inflexibility Trap – Frustrated Societies and Weak States", Center for Liberal Strategies (CLS0), Sofia, p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> According to a survey conducted by the Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS) in urban areas, 38% of the electorate does not sympathize with any political parties. The data should be treated with caution though since the survey did not cover rural areas which account for at least 50% of the population. For more information see: AIIS (2003), "Democracy at the Local Government Level – The Case of Albania", Tirana, p. 91.

<sup>18</sup> Institute for Contemporary Studies (ISB) & Center for Rural Studies (QSR) (2003), *Human Security Survey 2003. Human Security In Albania*, prepared for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), p 67.

<sup>19</sup> International Republican Institute (IRI) in Albania (2004), *National Youth Survey*, The survey was conducted during the January 29 – February 5.

<sup>20</sup> Mouffe, Chantal (1993), *The Return of the Political*, London/New York, Verso, p 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p 8.

Calling always for consensual policies and trying to avoid conflict for the sake of political stability or in order to fight corruption, a very common approach by the international community, will produce less rather than more democracy, and in absence of a democratic process, more rather than less conflict. Therefore, dispensing with a transitional perspective of democracy and its apolitical understanding concept of consolidation, would help us better understand how to improve the political dynamic of democracy, which constitutes the bases of a well functioning democratic system.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper is an effort at rethinking the democratization process beyond the transition paradigm. Its main conceptual recommendation, which can have specific policy implications on the ground for democracy aid efforts, is that democratization should be viewed as a political process and that politics should be awarded priority in democratization efforts. The paper draws on the lessons learned from the mistakes by other actors in the democratization field. As such it compiles more of a ‘not to do’ rather than ‘to do’ list of approaches and activities in the area of democratization. Of course democracy is a contextual system that changes and evolves from one context to the other, therefore there can be no specific formulas or hand outs to follow on how to make a country democratic, beyond some very general principles. In fact democratization efforts by donors and agencies other than Italian Cooperation are the best example in this respect. One of the major shortcomings of these efforts is their lack of flexibility, their rigidity in approaching democracy primarily through a ‘technological’ rather than political approach. Therefore, flexibility and a keen perception of the political context and dynamics in Albania should be the best tools through which Italian Cooperation can enhance its democratization efforts in the country. This is not to say that there cannot be some more specific recommendations that should be kept in mind in democracy building efforts. Below there are some of the main policy recommendations that follow from a re-conceptualization of democratization. A heavier emphasizes on the political process is the thread that ties them together.

### **Local politics considerations**

One of the areas in which projects of Italian Cooperation should better focus is local politics. Local politics is crucial to the success of any projects that are implemented locally, no matter how apolitical they might be. Thus, even projects that have simply to do with local infrastructure, urban planning or other non-political processes can fail if they do not involve all the local political actors, especially since power changes hands and local actors compete to assume and propagate local successes, regardless whether they are financed by government or foreign funds. There are cases in Albania when very good projects that target local urban issues have been placed on hold, or have been completely halted due to the local political rivalry, because they were initiated involving primarily only one political party, the one in power at the time of project implementation. This has made it difficult for the project to continue when power has changed hands.

### **Enhance project visibility and improve public relations**

Italian cooperation is one of the major donors in Albania. In absolute terms even bigger and more present than USA. Nevertheless, its activity receives little publicity, and it thus sustains a low profile. This in turn reduces the political leverage of Italian Cooperation, a leverage which can be of great help in order to get things done, or to overcome project impasses that might happen due to local political dynamics. Therefore, a higher profile of Italian Cooperation projects is crucial. One way in which this can be done better is by improving coordination of disseminated projects spread

throughout the country. Another way is to better connect projects at the local level with the political influence of Italy at the central level, which is explored in greater detail below.

### **Coordinate national political influence and local projects.**

A higher profile of Italian Cooperation can be achieved by capitalizing on Italy's political influence at the central level. Of course this also very much depends on Italian foreign policy priorities and involvement in Albania. However, at present Italy is one the most important partners of Albania in a variety of fields, including aid. Yet this fact does not seem to be widely recognized in Albania, partly due to the low profile of Italian Cooperation projects and the fact that they seem to operate in isolation of political and diplomatic considerations at the central level, focusing mostly at the local level. In the future it is possible to raise the profile of Italian Cooperation not only through more visibility in the media, but also by utilizing high level official visits from Italy. This implies not simply intensification of high level delegations from Italy, but also the inclusion of on-site visits in Italian Cooperation projects when such exchanges take place.

### **Improve coordination and apply a holistic approach to democratization**

A better coordination of different projects at the central level, Tirana, would serve not only to make them more visible, but would also increase their impact nationally. Due to the fact that Italian Cooperation functions in a decentralized fashion, focusing mostly at the local level, its presence in the capital is very weak. In addition the lack of coordination between different efforts reduces their impact at the national level. While each project seems to be focused in a very specific area and field, an overall focus of Italian Cooperation which would enhance its impact at the national level, seems absent. This is not to say that the same projects should be taking places everywhere, but rather a more holistic approach in which different projects can become more complementary through better coordination and exchange of information. This calls for some kind of 'philosophy' of Italian Cooperation in Albania.

### **Local Ownership Replication**

Local ownership means that although the projects might be initiated and financed by Italian Cooperation, they should also involve at every stage local actors and eventually should be transferred to them in order to be sustainable. There were a number of such projects especially those dealing with social services at the municipal level. Such projects could be replicated elsewhere in the country as successful examples. Italian Cooperation could play a greater part in achieving this due to its expertise and experience in such projects.

### **Corruption**

This is an area where Italian Cooperation can play a greater role, for a number of reasons. First Italy has a long experience in anti-corruption initiatives, and it is from a political, cultural and legislative perspective much closer to Albania than other actors that have been heavily involved in this area. This is not to say that Italian Cooperation should replicate the unsuccessful efforts of other donors, such as anti-corruption awareness raising campaigns. The focus should be more on specific policies in the area of the executive, legislative and judiciary where there is an already existing tradition of cooperation that can be built upon. This calls primarily for efforts at the central level, although specific policies that reduce corruption at the local level can also be integrated in existing Italian Cooperation projects whose byproduct is more efficient and transparent governance, therefore less corruption.

### **Rule of law**

This is another area where Italian Cooperation can contribute even further given the history and affinity between Albania and Italy. Besides already existing projects in the area of the judiciary perhaps more focus can be devoted in other areas such as public administration, both at the central and the local level. Italian Cooperation can contribute in capacity building efforts of public administration. Here again political consideration should be taken into account, because in Albania public administration is still a political issue. Lessons can be drawn by previous efforts by other international actors which indicate that when ignoring political dynamics capacity building efforts have proved futile due to sweeping changes in public administration due to political dynamics. Therefore such efforts should be carefully planned and politically backed to make sure that no investment goes wasted.

### **Support and work with interest groups**

Most efforts in the area of democratization target NGOs and neglect genuine local interest groups which can range from farmers' association to local citizen associations. This has proved quite counterproductive since NGOs, as argued earlier on in this paper tend to reflect donor priorities rather than represent local interests. Interest groups on the other hand are real channels of representation that if strengthened also improve the quality of democracy. In the framework of local ownership and participation interest groups, be at the local or national level, could be a useful target.

### **Support and cooperate with universities**

Universities are a crucial component of civil society that has been neglected, for a variety of reasons, by other actors in the area of democratization. Given the large number of Albanians who have studied in Italy, a number of which now teach at the Albanian public universities, this could be another area where Italian Cooperation could focus more. In fact a number of initiatives regarding rule of law can be channeled through universities. Improving the quality of the university education and helping them achieve a higher public profile could be a real contribution in developing Albanian civil society and democracy in general.