



Transition to Democracy and the New Authoritarian Phenomena: The Case of Albania

Dr. Alketa Marku

Prof. Asoc. Eva Teqja

University "Aleksandër Moisiu",
Durrës, Albania

Received: 05 April 2023 / Accepted: 10 May 2023 / Published: 20 May 2023
© 2023 Alketa Marku and Eva Teqja.

Doi: 10.56345/ijrdv10n1s137

Abstract

The democratic system is characterized by its most evident features, such as the presence of participation in political choices, discussions in social life, the constant presence of political opposition, etc., for this, the term polyarchy was coined to indicate democracy. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the countries of Eastern Europe moved towards the democratic system, and the Balkan countries also, considered them countries in transition to democracy. According to Carothers, it is incorrect to speak of Countries in transition to democracy referring to any state that abandons the dictatorial form of government moving into who knows which direction. Also, as long as you are aware of the fact that a democratic country does not exist in a day, it is, however, to remember that consolidation of a democratic regime is not automatic and that we must accept the fact that a State can place itself in a grey position that can last for years and that in any case before speaking of consolidated democracy, it can alternate democratic moments, followed by new authoritarian phenomena. In essence, holding elections is not enough to be a democracy. Albania was a dictatorial country, and after the 90s it started the road to democratization. Although more than three decades have passed, it continues to be a hybrid regime. Can we consider that the new authoritarian phenomena have followed in Albania as well?

Keywords: authoritarianism, unstable democracy, hybrid, Albania, Transition

1. Introduction

At the end of the 80s, in the wake of the "third wave" of democratization, a new type of regime appeared a regime that was nevertheless based on regular multiparty elections but remained fundamentally authoritarian. Over the past decade, political scientists have explored this paradoxical combination and attempted to classify such regimes, which exist around the world¹.

Part of the Waves of democratization, from the end of the 1980s, became also the countries of Eastern and Southeastern Europe that for decades during the XX century were ruled by communist regimes. The transition of communist countries towards democracy, researchers define it as the Fourth Wave of Democratization. This is how the change is shown with the transition of countries that were ruled by authoritarian regimes (the third wave of democratization), a change that was based on the differences between authoritarian and communist regimes: communist regimes differed from authoritarian regimes not only in terms of party and ideological features but also because they

¹ Steven Levitsky, *Lucan Way*, Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War, *New York, Cambridge University Press*, 2010, fq. 536.

eradicated private property and absorbed civil society². Nowadays, an accelerating wave of autocratization is spreading around the world, which is characterized by slow "strangulations by elected autocrats" replacing unexpected events that endanger democracy³.

Referring to the study by O'Donnell and Schmitter, the "transition" is the interval between one political regime and another". They underline that: "transitions are delimited, on the one side, by the launching of the process of dissolution of an authoritarian regime and, on the other, by the installation of some form of democracy, the return to some form of authoritarian rule, or the emergence of a revolutionary alternative"⁴. While, Van Dyke in his study "Introduction to Politics" points out that "as long as democracy is threatened by authoritarian regimes, it is important to know the nature of the threat, knowing the content historical authoritarianism. And further, when each of them is known at the same time as the nature of democracy as well as that of authoritarianism, anyone is in the best position to judge and evaluate other matters"⁵.

The system of democracy is at a crossroads, especially after the 90s. Regardless of which index we refer to, over the past twenty years, the number of countries considered fully democratic has declined dramatically, and this trend continues to increase. Even according to some data, during the year 2022, a high number of countries were considered more authoritarian than in any year since 1990. If these numbers continue to rise, less than 5% of the world's population will live in a full democracy by 2026.⁶

2. Democracy and Authoritarianism

In a democracy, citizens are informed about issues that are public and can express their opinions, being encouraged to participate and interact with their elected representatives for every decision they make. While authoritarian states do not allow these forms of participation; on the contrary, they fundamentally reject the right to participate. Public opposition or dissent is seen as a threat to the dictator's unchallenged hold on power, and dictators use state violence to suppress such dissent⁷.

The characteristic of an authoritarian system is that the dictator is the only one who runs the state and has full power. Elections are allowed and authoritarian regimes can interact with their people, but the people cannot complain about the way they are governed. Leaders refuse to allow followers to have demands or desires and are the only ones who make decisions about what the population can and cannot have. Citizens are subjects who only have to submit and cannot participate in the government's decision-making⁸. The individual who leads in an authoritarian manner, often referred to as autocratic leadership, has full authority over every decision-making.

Researchers argue that authoritarian regimes build and use formally democratic institutions, such as multi-party elections and legislatures, as they serve to identify and also control social discontent. Through legislatures, regimes identify discontent, as elected politicians are allowed to address government demands on behalf of their constituents⁹.

The method used by non-democratic leaders and their supporters in democratic settings is that they work to reshape or manipulate political systems, on the one hand by playing on voters' fears of changes in their way of life, and on the other, by listing all the failures of their predecessors. They promote the idea that, once in power, they are only accountable to their demographic or party base, ignoring the interests and other segments of society and distorting institutions to prolong their rule. As soon as they come to power, the democratic principles of pluralism, equality and accountability, basic care and public service disappear, thus disregarding the rights and well-being of all citizens¹⁰. Scholars argue that authoritarian regimes create and use nominally democratic institutions, including parties

²Llambro Filo, *Alketa Marku, Instucionet politike në sistemet e qeverisjes*, UFO Press, Tiranë 2014, fq.

³Julia Leininger, *International Democracy Promotion in Times of Autocratization*, https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP__2_1.2022_01.pdf

⁴Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule. Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, q. 6.

⁵Van Dyke Varmon, *Introduction to Politics*, Nelson-Hall Publishers, Chicago, 1998, fq. 35

⁶The rise of authoritarianism is misunderstood – and it matters, The Centre for Elections, Democracy, Accountability and Representation (CEDAR) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228284176_Democratic_Theory_after_Transitions_from_Authoritarian_Rule,

⁷ <https://martialawmuseum.ph/magaral/democracy-vs-authoritarianism/>

⁸ <https://bestdiplomats.org/democracy-vs-authoritarianism/>

⁹ Dawn Brancati, *Democratic Authoritarianism: Origins and Effects*, *Annual Review of Political Science* 2014 17:1, 313-326,

¹⁰Freedom in the World 2022, *The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>

and elections, to buy support from political elites and citizens through patronage. They argue that members of political parties are offered benefits, such as jobs, connections or other economic opportunities. Thus, the party members benefiting from this system make them more inclined to oppose coups d'état¹¹. Referring to Simpser, excessive electoral manipulation inevitably leads to a longer stay in power of parties and leaders, and at the same time, this is accompanied by lower voter participation¹². When authoritarian leaders have succeeded in suppressing the media, civil society and legitimate opposition, they usually begin to attack elections and formal institutions, which are the core of democracy. When governments in power weaken or even openly dismantle democratic institutions and change the rules, such as appointments and electoral systems, in their favour, these are for international promoters of democracy, the signs of a phase of transition to autocracy. If this is not stopped and measures are not taken, it will lead to the clear installation of an autocratic regime.¹³

Today's authoritarian leaders are not isolated cases in a democratic world. They are actively cooperating to spread new forms of oppression and oppose democratic pressure. The measures and economic sanctions that democratic countries have followed, as a response to fake elections and coups d'état, have had no effect and have even been fading as a result of alliances between autocracies¹⁴.

3. The Case of Albania

Albania has been taken as a case study in the context of democratic consolidation, since the history of the country, during the last decades, consists of various governmental transitions from autocratic to democratic but which has not yet managed to have a sustainable liberal democracy. It seems that the political class itself has chosen the means to prolong the difficult transition period. Of course, the goal of the political elites is to maintain power as long as possible, this is shown by the fact that the same elites have dominated the political sphere and the path of transition for more than 30 years and that many of them have connection with the past totalitarian regime¹⁵. The brutal repression of the communist regime, the total isolation of the country, the prohibition of individual freedoms and the absence of a social or intellectual dissident movement made a non-peaceful transition in Albania. Therefore, the democratization of the country came more as a reaction to the political past than as an attempt to build a liberal democratic regime¹⁶. One of the elements that current Albanian society has inherited from its communist past is the strong identification of the party with the state. The party that wins the elections is perceived as the complete ruler of the state.¹⁷

Referring to the study published in 2020 by Tena Prelec, most of the countries in South-Eastern Europe were characterized by democratic backsliding, which led to the growth of competitive authoritarianism and the involvement of oligarchic groups. So, it is accepted that the processes of 'Europeanization' and democratization in the Western Balkans have been purely superficial, while they have shown, in the second half of the 2010s, an orientation towards the practices of competitive authoritarianism. For this reason, the leaders of the Western Balkans have been accused of involvement in 'stabilitocracy', i.e. showing stability in the international arena, eliminating political competition and consolidating patronage in the country, aware that maintaining the appearance of stability will offer them help and favours from western countries. Therefore, there is a risk that such non-transparent agreements will provide the means to some actors of the Balkan elite to stay in power, further removing civil society actors and citizens in general from the game¹⁸. Prelec concludes that the processes of democratic change and Europeanization in the countries of the Western Balkans encounter obstacles from the system of patronage and clientelism, which is related to the flow of money coming from

¹¹Dawn Brancati, *Democratic Authoritarianism: Origins and Effects*, *Annual Review of Political Science* 2014 17:1, 313-326

¹²Alberto Simpser, *Why Governments and Parties Manipulate Elections: Theory, Practice, and Implications*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013.

¹³Julia Leininger, *International Democracy Promotion in Times of Autocratization*, https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP__21_2022_01.pdf

¹⁴Freedom in the World 2022, *The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>

¹⁵Genti Margariti, *End of Transition, but Failure to Democratize: Democratic Consolidation in Albania Analyzed in the Frame of Political Elite Normative Preference for Democracy*, *European Journal of Social Science Education and Research*, July - December 2022, fq. 35.

¹⁶ALBANIA DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE ASSESSMENT, *The U.S. Agency for International Development DCHA/DG*, February 2006, <https://democracyinternational.com/media/Albania%20Democracy%20and%20Governance%20Assessment.pdf>,

¹⁷Arolda Elbasani, "Democratization Process in Albania: Manipulation or Appropriation of International Norms?" (January 2004).

¹⁸Tena Prelec, *The Vicious Circle of Corrosive Capital, Authoritarian Tendencies and State Capture in the Western Balkans*, *Journal of Regional Security* (2020), [DOI: 10.5937/jrs15-25716].

abroad, exploiting and worsening the weaknesses of the rule of law that are present in these countries¹⁹. Even Bieber in his study published in 2020²⁰, highlights the elements of authoritarian regimes in the Western Balkans which are: 1) the constant state of crisis; 2) the dynamics of stabilitocracy; 3) the rise of new external actors; 4) state capture and weak institutions; 5) weak opposition and civil society; 6) strongmen being in charge; 7) nationalism; 8) and a loyal media.

In the report of the Economist Intelligence Unit on the index of democracy in EU countries and those aspiring to join, in 2012, Albania was described as a hybrid country between "defective democracy and authoritarianism". The scanner of the Economist Intelligence Unit has ranked Albania in the same group as Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina as "countries with hybrid regimes, where there is a defective democracy grafted with authoritarianism". Such classifications have been achieved based on indicators such as electoral processes and political pluralism, respect and guarantee of civil liberties, functioning of a democratic government and political culture²¹. Based on the report of the Economist Intelligence Unit, in 2018, the political system in Albania was considered a system between autocracy and democracy and for years it has not made any improvement towards democracy. In the 2018 Democracy Index, Albania was ranked among the last countries in Europe. In 2020, the level of democracy in Albania declined and the country remained part of the states that have a hybrid regime. In 2021, Albania entered for the first time the second group of so-called democracies with problems (where elections are free and there are civil rights, but there are problems such as freedom of the media or suppression of the opposition and crisis)²².

The 2019 report of the European Economic and Social Committee (KESE), recommends that the Albanian government should take measures on the serious problems faced by young people in Albania, such as poverty, unemployment, and emigration. According to the report, about 70% of young people want to leave the country because of corruption, marginalization and poverty. The report also highlights youth criminality and low youth participation in politics²³.

Problems related to the level of democracy are also seen in the Albania 2021 Report of the European Commission. According to OSCE/ODIHR conclusions:

*"...there remained concerns related to the misuse of State resources and functions by the ruling party and other public figures, including pervasive allegations of vote buying and the leaking of sensitive personal data covering the political preferences of citizens. The CEC Sanctions and Complaints Committee reviewed several cases of alleged electoral irregularities. Limited progress has been made on the implementation of the roadmap for an enabling environment for civil society"*²⁴.

As found in Albania, as well as in other countries of the Balkans, the level of democracy is still low, considering it, as a country with hybrid and unstable democracy. Albanian politics should reflect on this, and make possible a positioning towards democratic countries for the good of the country and its citizens.

4. Conclusions

Just as Huntington confirms, poverty is one of the main obstacles to democratic development. According to him, the future of democracy also depends on the future of economic development, and any obstacle to economic development will be an obstacle to the expansion of democracy²⁵. Based on experience, economic development and political leadership are the two most important factors that can influence the consolidation and future expansion of democracy²⁶. Huntington also confirm that: *"economic development makes democracy possible; political leadership makes it real"*. If the future political elites do not believe that democracy is the least bad form of government for the citizens as well as for themselves, we cannot hope that democratic systems will be created. These leaders must also be able to bring about the transition to democracy and have the courage to face both the radical opposition and the hard-liners authoritarians, who

¹⁹Tena Prelec, *The Vicious Circle of Corrosive Capital, Authoritarian Tendencies and State Capture in the Western Balkans*, *Journal of Regional Security* (2020),

²⁰Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 2020, Fq. 33-35

²¹<https://www.dw.com/sq/shqip%C3%ABria-mes-demokracis%C3%AB-defektoze-dhe-autoritarizmit/a-15799420>

²²<https://gazetashqiptare.al/2022/02/11/nga-2015-deri-sot-si-ka-ndryshuar-renditja-e-shqiperise-ne-indeksin-e-demokracise/>

²³Marrëdhëniet mes BE-së dhe Ballkanit Perëndimor – rekomandime të KESE-së, Komiteti Ekonomik dhe Social Evropian, PDF 2019

²⁴Report of European Commission, 2021.

²⁵Samuel Huntington, "Democracy's third wave." *J. Democracy* 2 (1991).

²⁶Idem

will naturally become obstacles in this mission²⁷.

It turns out that for the effective protection of democracy there are at least two key points: one is focusing on events that can have an international impact, such as elections, and the other is human rights actors. It has been proven that support for human rights defenders it is a possible option to prevent autocratic deepening in electoral autocracies, but not in closed autocracies²⁸.

According to Leininger, since democracies in transition show common weaknesses, what should be done by intervening are concrete reforms that strengthen the main institutions, establishing the rules of the game and regulating competition and political participation²⁹.

Freedom House suggest that if there was a development of coordinated international policies based on democratic principles, and strengthening their internal governance systems, this would make the participating countries have better security, justice and economy. Democratic countries cooperate in the field of economy and security, and since they are more likely to adhere to agreements and norms, they will make more reliable partners in both areas³⁰.

References

- Albania Democracy and Governance Assessment, The U.S. Agency for International Development DCHA/DG, February 2006.
- Bieber F., *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 2020.
- Brancati D., *Democratic Authoritarianism: Origins and Effects*, Annual Review of Political Science 2014.
- Elbasani A., "Democratization Process in Albania: Manipulation or Appropriation of International Norms?" (January 2004).
- Filo Li., Marku A., *Instucionet politike në sistemet e qeverisjes*, UFO Press, Tiranë 2014.
- Freedom in the World 2022, *The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>
- <https://bestdiplomats.org/democracy-vs-authoritarianism/>
- <https://gazetashqiptare.al/2022/02/11/nga-2015-deri-sot-si-ka-ndryshuar-renditja-e-shqiperise-ne-indeksin-e-demokracise/>
- <https://martialawmuseum.ph/magaral/democracy-vs-authoritarianism/>
- <https://www.dw.com/sq/shqip%C3%ABria-mes-demokracis%C3%AB-defektoze-dhe-autoritarizmit/a-15799420>
- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228284176_Democratic_Theory_after_Transitions_from_Authoritarian_Rule,
- Huntington SP. *Democracy's third wave*. J. Democracy. 1991.
- Julia Leininger, *International Democracy Promotion in Times of autocratization*, https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP__21.2022_01.pdf
- Levitsky S., Way A. L., *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Margariti G., *End of Transition, but Failure to Democratize: Democratic Consolidation in Albania Analyzed in the Frame of Political Elite Normative Preference for Democracy*, European Journal of Social Science Education and Research, July - December 2022.
- O'Donnell, G., & Schmitter, P., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule. Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Vol. 4). Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.
- Prelec T., *The Vicious Circle of Corrosive Capital, Authoritarian Tendencies and State Capture in the Western Balkans*, Journal of Regional Security (2020)
- Simpser A. *Why Governments and Parties Manipulate Elections: Theory, Practice, and Implications*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013.
- Varnon V. D., *Introduction to Politics*, Nelson-Hall Publishers, Chicago, 1998.

²⁷Idem, fq. 33-34

²⁸ Julia Leininger, *International Democracy Promotion in Times of Autocratization*, https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP__21.2022_01.pdf

²⁹ Julia Leininger, *International Democracy Promotion in Times of Autocratization*, https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP__21.2022_01.pdf

³⁰ *Freedom in the World 2022, The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>