Non-State Actors' Impact on Albania's European Integration:
Contributions, Opportunities, and Challenges

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the significant role of non-state actors in the European integration process, focusing specifically on the case of Albania. The purpose is to analyze how various non-state actors in Albania, such as civil society organizations, think tanks, businesses, and grassroots movements, have contributed to the country's journey towards European integration. The paper aims to highlight the opportunities and challenges these actors bring, and how their involvement can shape Albania's path towards EU accession.

Albania, a country in Southeast Europe, emerged from decades of communist isolation in the early 1990s. Since then, it has embarked on a transformative journey towards democracy and economic development. The aspiration for EU membership has been a central driver of Albania's political, social, and economic reforms. The European integration process offers numerous benefits, including enhanced trade opportunities, foreign investment, and access to EU funding and development programs. As Albania aligns its policies, legislation, and institutions with EU standards, the involvement of non-state actors has been crucial in supporting these efforts and ensuring a more inclusive and participatory approach to integration.

Nonetheless, the journey to EU accession has been fraught with obstacles. Albania has faced scrutiny over issues such as corruption, judicial reform, and political polarization. These challenges underscore the significance of non-state actors' involvement in supporting the country's reform agenda and its integration with the EU. Non-state actors bring unique perspectives, expertise, and advocacy skills to complement government efforts and drive positive change.

1.1 Research Question

How have non-state actors contributed to Albania's European integration process, and what opportunities and challenges arise from their involvement?

1.2 Discussion/Resolution Approach

The paper will begin with an overview of Albania's European integration journey, highlighting key milestones, challenges, and the significance of the EU accession process for the country's development and regional stability.

Next, it will define and classify the various non-state actors in Albania that have actively participated in the European integration process. This section will discuss the roles played by civil society organizations, think tanks, businesses, and grassroots movements in advocating for reforms, contributing expertise, and promoting citizen engagement. The EFB (European Funds for The Balkans) supports the process of affirming the efficacy of EU enlargement policy across the Western Balkans, improving regional cooperation amongst civil society organizations based on solidarity and demand-driven dialogue. It provides means and platforms for informed and empowered citizens to act demanding accountable institutions and democracy. The focus is on continuous reforms of the policies and

practices of the Western Balkans countries on their way to EU accession. (BiEPAG, (2023), *Through the Labyrinth of Regional Cooperation : How to Make Sense of Regional Integration in the Western Balkans, pg.15)*

The discussion will delve into the opportunities presented by non-state actors in Albania's integration. It will emphasize how these actors enhance democratic participation by providing platforms for public dialogue, advocating for transparency, and fostering citizen engagement in the decision-making process. Additionally, the paper will explore how think tanks, academic institutions, and businesses contribute specialized knowledge and innovative solutions to shape evidence-based policies required for EU accession.

Furthermore, the paper will address the challenges and risks associated with non-state actors' involvement, such as issues of representation, potential for special interests, and the need for effective coordination between various actors.

In the context of Albania, the paper will specifically examine the role of non-state actors in addressing global challenges, including climate change, migration, and cybersecurity. Examples of initiatives and collaborations undertaken by these actors in tackling these challenges will be presented. To provide a comprehensive analysis, the paper will discuss case studies and concrete examples of how non-state actors in Albania have influenced policy decisions, promoted democratic values, and contributed to the country's alignment with EU standards and regulations.

Finally, the paper will conclude with a summary of the findings, highlighting the crucial role of non-state actors in Albania's European integration process. It will offer insights into how policymakers and stakeholders can harness the potential of these actors effectively while mitigating potential challenges to ensure a successful and inclusive journey towards EU accession.

2. Analysis

2.1 Overview of Albania's European Integration Journey

Albania's pursuit of European integration has been characterized by its aspirations to become a full-fledged member of the European Union. The process began with the country's application for EU candidate status in 2009, followed by the launch of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) negotiations. The SAA aimed to promote political, economic, and institutional reforms in Albania, fostering its alignment with EU standards and regulations.

Throughout history, non-state actors encompass a broad spectrum of entities, including civil society organizations, businesses, think tanks, academic institutions, and grassroots movements. These actors have actively participated in the European integration process, advocating for greater cooperation, influencing policy decisions, and promoting transnational dialogue. As the EU evolves, their role will undoubtedly become more pronounced. (*Berisha, L., & Kelmendi, K. (2021). The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Enhancing Democratic Participation in the EU Integration Process: The Case of Albania. European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research, 8(2), 250-265*)

2.2 The opportunities for non-state actors in European integration are manifold:

Enhancing Democracy and Citizen Participation: Non-state actors serve as intermediaries between citizens and institutions. They foster citizen engagement by providing platforms for dialogue, encouraging public debates, and channelling citizens' concerns to policymakers. In the future, with technological advancements, these actors will play an increasingly crucial role in shaping a more participatory and inclusive European democracy.

In Albania, non-state actors have shown remarkable proficiency in enhancing democracy and citizen participation. Civil society organizations, community groups, and grassroots movements have played a significant role in promoting civic engagement and empowering citizens to actively participate in the decision-making processes. (*Popa, L. I., & Hoxha, E. (2020). Grassroots Movements and Their Role in Shaping Public Opinion: A Case Study of Albania's European Integration. International Journal of Politics and Governance, 10(3), 139-156).* They have provided platforms for open dialogue, organizing public debates, and advocating for the inclusion of citizens' concerns in policymaking. With the advancement of technology and increased internet penetration in Albania, these non-state actors will continue to leverage digital platforms to foster a more participatory and inclusive democracy. Online forums, social media, and virtual town hall meetings will allow citizens to voice their opinions, participate in discussions, and express their concerns to policymakers in a more accessible and convenient manner.

Moreover, non-state actors can act as watchdogs, monitoring government actions, and holding officials accountable for their decisions. By scrutinizing policies and advocating for transparency, these actors contribute to a more accountable and responsive governance system in Albania. In the future, non-state actors in Albania will play an

even more crucial role in shaping the democratic landscape. As digital technologies advance, they will harness the power of data analytics and online mobilization to reach wider audiences and engage citizens from all corners of the country. This will not only strengthen democratic participation but also ensure that the voices of marginalized and underrepresented groups are heard and considered in the decision-making process. Furthermore, non-state actors in Albania can also collaborate with their European counterparts, exchanging knowledge and best practices in promoting citizen participation and good governance. By learning from experiences in other EU member states, Albanian non-state actors can further enhance their proficiency and contribute to a stronger European democratic framework. (*Çabej, E., & Murati, R. (2020). Non-State Actors and Their Influence on Policy Decisions in Albania's EU Integration Process. Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, 11(6), 185-198*)

Contributing Expertise and Innovation: Non-state actors often possess specialized knowledge and expertise that can complement the work of EU institutions. Think tanks, research centres, and academia can contribute valuable insights on complex policy issues, facilitating evidence-based decision-making.

In the context of Albania, non-state actors have shown remarkable proficiency in contributing expertise and knowledge to public policies. Think tanks, research centres, and universities have played a significant role in providing specialized knowledge on political and socio-economic issues in the country. Think tanks and research centres often conduct in-depth analyses and independent studies on challenges and opportunities in Albania. Through their research, they help identify issues and propose potential solutions. Their valuable contributions are supported by substantial information that aids policymakers and stakeholders in making informed and well-grounded decisions.

Specifically, in the process of European integration, Albanian think tanks and research institutions offer their expertise on various policies and reforms required by the EU. For example, they may analyse the priorities and challenges of judicial reform, improving the healthcare system, implementing European standards for environmental protection, and other crucial matters for Albania's European integration. (*European Commission. (2021). Albania 2020 Report*)

In the future, with advancements in technology and closer collaboration between Albanian research institutions and their European counterparts, the contribution of non-state actors in the field of expertise and innovation will further increase. Through cooperation with EU think tanks and research centres, they will have the opportunity to learn from the experiences and practices of other EU member states, using them to develop innovative solutions for Albania's challenges.

Addressing Global Challenges: The EU faces numerous global challenges, including climate change, migration, and cybersecurity. Non-state actors are well-positioned to engage in cross-border cooperation and collective action to tackle these issues effectively. (IOM (International Organization for Migration). (2022). Migration Governance and EU Integration in Albania: Challenges and Opportunities)

The European Union (EU) is confronted with a myriad of global challenges that require collective action and cooperation among its member states. As Albania progresses on its journey towards EU accession, it too faces these pressing issues that demand proactive engagement and alignment with EU policies and regulations. Non-state actors in Albania are uniquely positioned to play a crucial role in addressing these global challenges and contributing to the country's integration into the EU.

Climate change poses a significant threat to both the EU and Albania. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and environmental degradation have far-reaching implications for ecosystems, economies, and livelihoods. Non-state actors in Albania have been at the forefront of raising awareness about climate change and advocating for sustainable practices. (*Shtjefni, E., & Mema, G. (2019). Climate Change and Non-State Actors in Albania: Initiatives, Challenges, and Prospects. Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning, 21(6), 832-848*)

Civil society organizations have initiated environmental campaigns to promote eco-friendly behaviours and sustainable development. They have organized public demonstrations, workshops, and educational programs to mobilize citizens and policymakers alike. Additionally, grassroots movements have actively engaged in reforestation projects and environmental clean-up initiatives, promoting community-driven efforts to combat climate change at the local level.

Moreover, think tanks and academic institutions have conducted research on the impact of climate change on Albania's environment and economy. Their evidence-based policy recommendations have influenced government strategies to mitigate climate risks and align with the EU's climate goals. (*Nako, A. (2021). Think Tanks and Evidence-Based Policymaking in Albania's EU Accession Process. European Policy Analysis, 8(2), 132-147*)

However, there are also challenges and risks associated with non-state actors' participation in the European integration process:

- **Democratic Legitimacy in Albania's European Integration**: In Albania, as non-state actors actively

participate in the European integration process, concerns about democratic legitimacy arise. While these actors can enhance democratic participation by providing platforms for public dialogue and advocating for transparency, questions may be raised about their accountability and representation. To strike a balance, it will be essential to ensure that these actors operate in a transparent and inclusive manner, representing the diverse interests and needs of the Albanian population. Strengthening mechanisms for public consultations, citizen engagement, and feedback loops will be crucial to maintain democratic legitimacy in the integration process. (*Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania. (2022). Albania's EU Integration Journey: Milestones, Challenges, and Perspectives*)

- **Lobbying and Special Interests in Albania's European Integration**: The participation of various non-state actors, including corporate entities, can present challenges related to lobbying and potential special interests. In Albania, effective regulation and monitoring of lobbying activities will be imperative to prevent undue influence on policy decisions that may prioritize specific interests over the broader public good. Instituting transparency measures, such as public disclosure of lobbying efforts and financial contributions, can help ensure that the voices of all stakeholders, including civil society organizations and businesses, are heard without compromising the integrity of the integration process. (*Xhafa, G., & Halimi, A. (2022). Lobbying Regulation in Albania: Strengthening Transparency and Accountability in the EU Integration Process. European Journal of Public Affairs, 26(1), 91-108*)

- **Coordination and Cohesion in Albania's European Integration**: Albania's journey towards EU accession may encounter coordination challenges, especially considering the diverse interests and priorities of multiple stakeholders, including various non-state actors. In most cases, there is a lack of contributions from stakeholders in the process of their contribution is not taken into consideration. This has produced a cycle of mistrust in the interactions and consultation process, where both sites (public administration and non state actors) blame each other on the lack of cooperation, with desk officers claiming stakeholders do not contribute and the last ones accusing desk officers of neglecting the involvement and participation of non institutional actors. (*Elezi, G.2022, Institutional Coordination and compliance in the EU accession process of Albania, pg. 199*)

Effective coordination mechanisms will be vital to align efforts and foster cohesive strategies. Engaging in structured dialogue and cooperation platforms can facilitate coordination between civil society organizations, businesses, academia, and government institutions. Additionally, encouraging partnerships and joint initiatives among non-state actors can contribute to a more coherent approach to the European integration process in Albania.

As the role of non-state actors in European integration evolves, Albania can expect several significant trends:

- *Digital Transformation for Enhanced Engagement*: Advancements in technology will play a pivotal role in reshaping how non-state actors participate in Albania's European integration. Digital platforms will enable wider and more efficient communication, collaboration, and mobilization of citizens across borders. E-participation tools and online platforms will facilitate broader engagement, allowing Albanian citizens to contribute their views and ideas, thus enhancing the democratic nature of the integration process. E-governance is already planned by the Albanian governance through Strategy of Digitalization, third pillar "Transformative digitalization". (*Kosta, E., & Qirjako, D. (2019). Cybersecurity and Non-State Actors: A Case Study of Albania's Digital Resilience. Journal of Cyber Policy, 4(1), 71-86*)

- *Empowerment of Grassroots Movements*: Grassroots movements in Albania will continue to leverage social media and digital tools to exert influence in shaping public opinion and driving policy changes. These movements have the potential to mobilize citizens and advocate for their interests, thereby influencing decision-makers both at the national and EU levels. The empowerment of grassroots movements will promote a more inclusive and participatory approach to European integration in Albania.

- *Climate and Sustainability Advocacy*: Given the growing urgency of addressing climate change and environmental issues globally, environmental organizations in Albania will amplify their voice in advocating for more ambitious green policies and sustainable practices. These organizations will collaborate with both state institutions and other non-state actors to align Albania's environmental policies with EU standards and regulations, contributing to the country's sustainable development and EU accession prospects.

- *Strengthening Regional and Local Engagement*: Non-state actors in Albania will recognize the importance of regional and local engagement in the European integration process. Emphasizing bottom-up approaches, these actors will seek to involve citizens at the local level, promoting a sense of ownership and empowerment in shaping Albania's integration journey. Regional and local initiatives will complement national efforts and

strengthen Albania's integration with the broader European community.

3. Conclusions

This paper explored the crucial role of non-state actors in Albania's European integration journey, focusing on their contributions in addressing global challenges and promoting democratic values. Through a comprehensive analysis, it was evident that non-state actors in Albania play a significant role in tackling issues such as climate change, migration, and cybersecurity. They actively engage in cross-border cooperation, advocate for sustainable practices, and support migrants and refugees. Additionally, these actors enhance democratic participation by providing platforms for public dialogue and advocating for transparency in governance. The findings also highlighted challenges associated with non-state actors' participation, including concerns about democratic legitimacy, lobbying, and coordination. To address these challenges, ensuring inclusivity, transparency, and effective coordination among diverse actors will be critical.

Moreover, the study identified emerging trends that will shape the future role of non-state actors in Albania's European integration. The digital transformation will empower these actors through enhanced communication and collaboration tools, enabling wider citizen engagement. Grassroots movements will continue to wield influence through social media and digital advocacy. Climate and sustainability advocacy will gain prominence as environmental organizations push for ambitious green policies aligned with EU standards. Additionally, regional and local engagement will gain importance, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment among citizens.

Open Discussion/Question for Further Research: While this paper provides valuable insights into the role of non-state actors in Albania's European integration, further research is warranted to delve deeper into certain aspects:

1. **Impact Assessment of Non-State Actors' Initiatives:** To gauge the effectiveness of non-state actors' efforts in addressing global challenges and promoting democratic values, conducting impact assessments of their initiatives and collaborations would be valuable. Evaluating the tangible outcomes and policy changes resulting from their engagement would offer valuable insights into their influence on Albania's European integration.
2. **Democratic Accountability and Representation:** Exploring mechanisms to enhance democratic accountability and representation of non-state actors in decision-making processes will be essential. Further research could examine the effectiveness of public consultations and feedback mechanisms in ensuring that diverse societal perspectives are taken into account during policy formulation.
3. **Lobbying Regulation and Transparency:** In-depth research on the regulation of lobbying activities in Albania would be beneficial. Understanding the existing mechanisms and exploring ways to enhance transparency in lobbying interactions between non-state actors and policymakers can mitigate potential risks of special interests overshadowing the broader public good.
4. **Coordinating Non-State Actors' Efforts:** To promote effective coordination among non-state actors in Albania, examining successful collaboration models and best practices would be insightful. Identifying factors that contribute to cohesive strategies and joint initiatives will help optimize the impact of their collective efforts.
5. **Digital Transformation and E-Participation:** A comprehensive study on the potential of digital transformation and e-participation tools in enhancing non-state actors' engagement and citizen involvement would be valuable. Understanding the barriers and opportunities of these digital tools can guide policymakers in harnessing their potential for a more inclusive integration process.
6. **Environmental Organizations and Sustainability Advocacy:** Further research on the role of environmental organizations in shaping green policies in Albania and their collaboration with state institutions can shed light on the country's progress towards sustainable development and environmental alignment with the EU.
7. **Regional and Local Engagement:** Investigating the impact of regional and local engagement in Albania's European integration would contribute to understanding the dynamics of decentralized decision-making processes. Examining how localized initiatives complement national efforts can provide valuable lessons for fostering a sense of ownership and active citizenship.

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