



THE 19TH EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
**EUROPEAN INTEGRATION  
REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES**

## **EU Power in the Democratization Process of Albania?**

**Dorina Bërdufi<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** This paper examines Albania as a Western Balkan country, by investigating the European Union (EU) integration process framework of factors linked with its democracy. In the last decade WBs countries have shown tendencies of stagnation of democratization and over-reliance on strong leaders. The paper deals with some of EU toolbox limits and deadlocks to achieve democratic governance focusing on Albania. On the one hand, strategically EU and its member states are seen to become more self-centered, making thus the EU actorness in the latest as in the Western Balkans less concerned with enlargement. On the other hand, the weakening of the EU integration process, not a clear membership perspective for these countries and lack of benefits from the EU accession process, allowed sometimes the instrumentalization of Europeanization from the internal political actors, leading to the revival of the authoritarian mechanisms. These dynamics enabled the internal actors to use weak democratic institutions, political polarization, weak state, political crisis, weak opposition as legitimacies means of raising their authoritarian power. This internally shifted leading role EU remains one of the hampering factors of an effective democratic governance in Albania.

**Keywords:** EU power; democratization; Albania; authoritarianism

### **1. Introduction**

The paper focuses on Albania as one of the countries of the Western Balkans with the aim of analyzing the factors related to the situation of the hybrid democracy and the possible impact of the European Union's expansion policies in this country. Albania process in EU “started in April 2009 when applied for EU membership, was granted EU candidate status in June 2014 and then the EU held its first intergovernmental conference with Albania in July 2022” (European Council, 2024). Specifically, the objective is to deal with the EU toolbox limits and deadlocks to achieve democratic governance in Albania. Moreover, it attempts to investigate the implications these latest passes to the Albanian internal politics reforms and actions, as well as the mutual influence of internal actors in the stabilization of functional democracy.

The trend of democracy level is a global interest for the researchers. The WBs countries, as part of the ex-communist regime are no exception. Based on the measurements carried out by international institutions as well as internal in the WBs, where Albania is also a part, democracy is now on from a considerable timeframe in the stage of stagnation and also in certain countries its decreasing, a trend

---

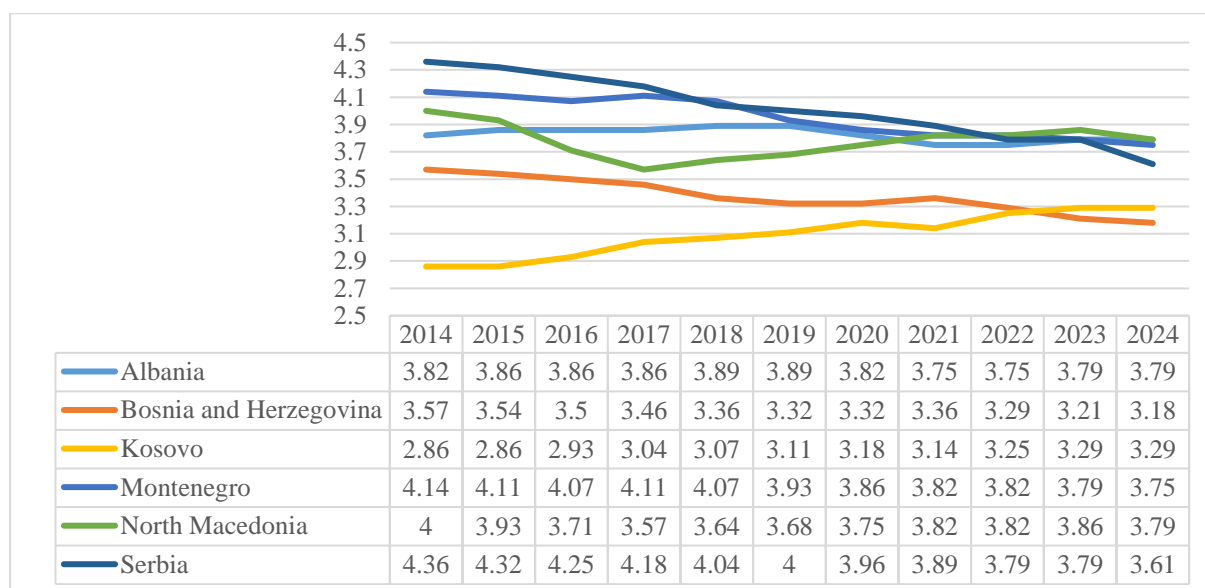
<sup>1</sup> “Aleksandër Moisiu” University, Durres, Albania, Address: Lagjja 1, Rruga e Currilove, Durres, 2001, Albania, Corresponding author: berdufidorina@gmail.com



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors.  
Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the  
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial (CC BY NC) license  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

which has been reinforced in the last couple of years. As a consequence, it attracted scientific interest to analyze the connections within this trend. Besides, since Integration in the European Union is in principle one of the factors of democratic stability of countries in the integration process like Albania, it is of interest to understand the patterns implicated to the actual democratic stage of Albania. The expectation was that the EU integration process to increase the level of democracy, while in fact the trends do not go in this direction.

The period after the 1990 by several experts is considered the third wave of autocratization, but differently from the previous this one is happening in a gradual form (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1102). The WBs countries where Albania is part, have been defined for a long time in the group of hybrid democracies, an intermediate state between liberal democracy and autocracy. As can be seen in the data of Freedom House (Figure 1), all WB countries, with the exception of Kosovo, in the last decade have experienced a decline in the level of democracy or stagnation, such as Albania. Currently, despite the reforms undertaken especially in recent years in Albania, still in 2024, according to Freedom House data (table 1), the most worrying categories are corruption, legal framework and independence and democratic central government.



**Figure 1. Western Balkans Freedom House democracy index 2014-2024**

Source: Freedom House. 2024. Nations in Transit 2024, A Region Reordered by Autocracy and Democracy

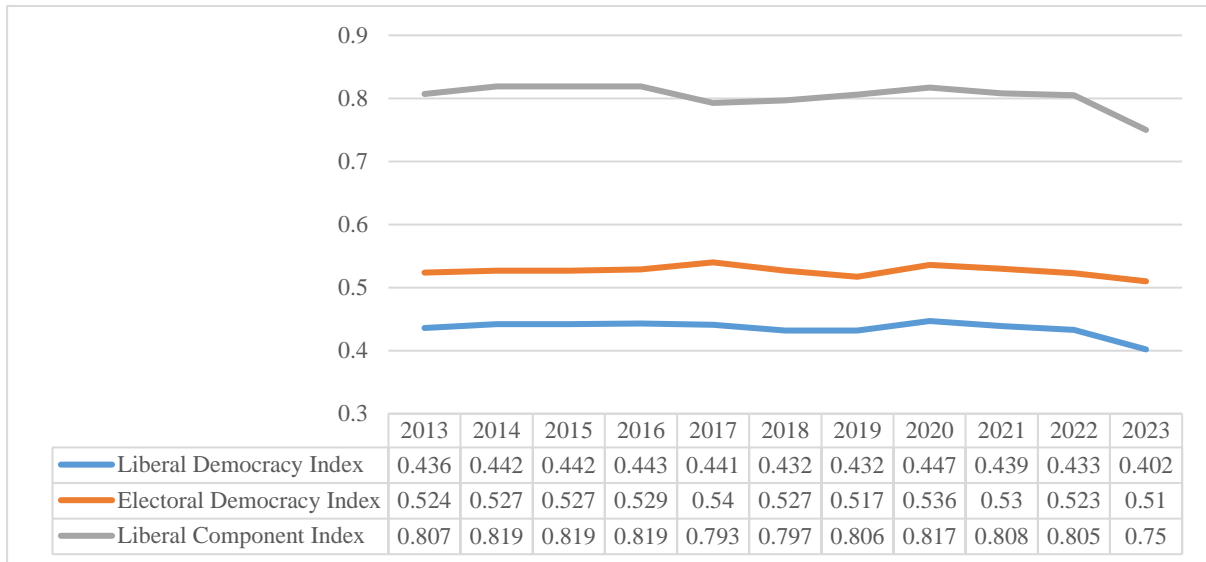
**Table 1. Category Score of Democracy - Year 2024**

National Democratic Governance	Electoral Process	Civil Society	Independent Media	Local Democratic Governance	Judicial Framework and Independence	Corruption
3.25	4.25	4.75	3.5	4.5	3.25	3

Source: Freedom House. 2024. Nations in Transit 2024, A Region Reordered by Autocracy and Democracy

The same concerning situation is confirmed from the V-Dem data (Figure 2), once more democracy level of Albania results in stagnation tendencies and moreover the two last years it has deteriorated in both of the measuring components of democracy: electoral and liberal. Consequently, we are at the point where it is still necessary to fulfill the basic criteria of democracy (in the concept of Dahl (1971)), which has been translated by the researchers in measurement categories of electoral democracy. In the literature this level of the concept of democracy is set as a fundament since it is generally accepted that the ideal

type of democracy is almost impossible to achieve from a certain country, and therefore practically its mapping starts from the basic term conditions (minimum) of democracy. In the range of electoral democracy Albania “lives in the ambiguous “lower bound” electoral democracies – Albania” (Nord et al, 2024: 14). Due to the data, even though 24 years after the communism period Albania still needs to develop a functional democracy.



**Figure 2. Liberal Democracy Index**

Source: V-Dem Institute, 2024. *Graphing Tools for Albania*, [https://v-dem.net/data\\_analysis/CountryGraph/](https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/)

## 2. Implications for Democracy

### 2.1. The Implication of the EU

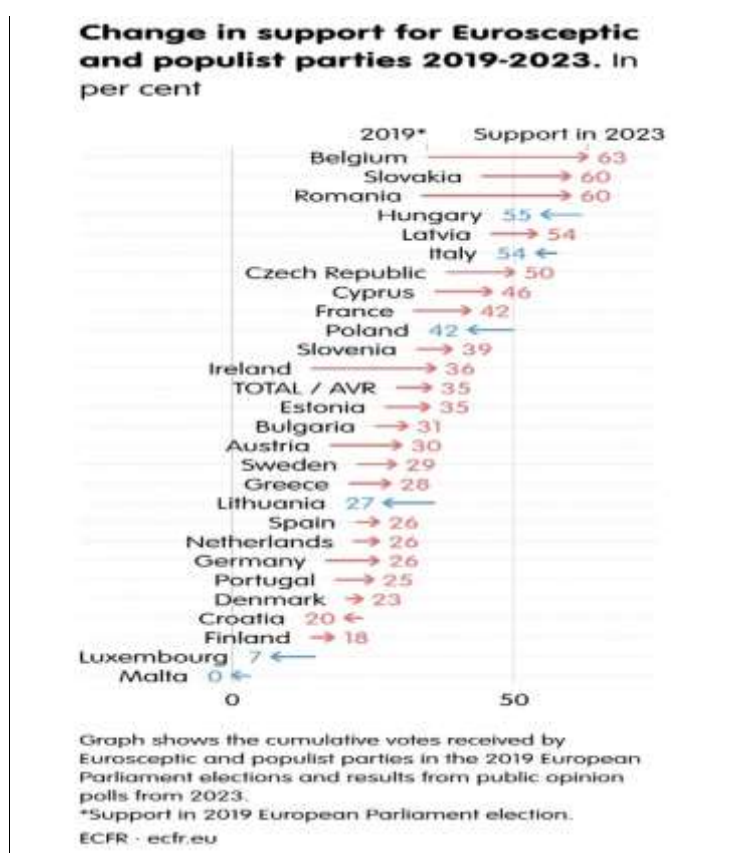
In order to explain the current democratic situation of Albania related to the EU integration process, it is necessary to outline the broad panorama, which includes firstly the consequences at the macro level of the EU itself and at the micro level of the Albanian state of the implications that come from the EU.

A concern related to the EU itself is its difficulties on the internal democratic accountability. The cause to that according to the literature is the perception of preferences disconnection of European citizens and the decision-making institutions, since the latter remains in the state between EU members and itself. Referring to the analysis of Follesdal and Hix “The endogeneity of voters’ preferences, while recognized and indeed a premise across many normative democratic theories concerned with the legitimacy of democratic arrangements, seems to be handled less acceptably at the European level than at the domestic level” (Follesdal & Hix, 2006, p. 556). Related to the countries in the process of integration, a possible solution would be the increase of democratic accountability as a factor of improving the level of democracy in these countries. An example of the two polarities and the difficulty of maintaining EU sovereignty is Brexit, where Britain’s exit from the EU emphasized the power of sovereignty and identity, especially economic at the domestic level.

Another influencing factor in the democratic development of the countries of the WBs as well as Albania is likely to be the fact that “for many years, the EU enlargement process has slowed down for reasons both internal and external to the Western Balkan countries and to the EU itself. The EU has itself been weakened by multiple crises (economic, political, migratory). Among others, in view of this slowdown,

new players qualified as emerging or re-emerging powers, such as Russia, China and Turkey, but also some other countries like Saudi Arabia, have projected themselves into the region” (Lika, 2021). The focus on solving internal situations and at the geopolitical level maintaining peace and stability sit on table as factors that indirectly affects the stagnation stage of Albanian democracy, and probably stimulation to a possible alternative cooperation partner that would per se contribute to the authoritarian features elevation.

An additional issue related to the enlargement policy is the growing trend of Euroscepticism within the European member states themselves “which has both undermined the efforts of the region’s progressive camp and strengthened the hands of its populists” (IDEA, 2022) and also the growing trend of populist parties. According to the analyses of Buras and Morina (Figure 3) “of the political trends in EU member states, based on the changes in the party system already taking place, similarly found that in 12 member states – including France, Germany, Italy, and Austria – the domestic political context is likely to become less accepting of enlargement in the coming months and years.” (Buras and Morina, 2023)



**Figure 3. Eurosceptic and Populist Parties 2019-2023**

COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine are considered also as related factors. COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the destabilization of the normal implementation process of the EU in terms of enlargement according to its planning, since the focus of attention would normally be to overcome the health crisis, which consequently comes with financial costs. Meanwhile, if we consider the Albanian government behavior during COVID-19 it “actively instrumentalised the pandemic to advance its political agenda, whilst undermining scrutiny, freedom of expression and free press. In a situation marked by the absence of the key institutions of the justice system, including the lack of the Constitutional Court as a result of a highly problematic justice system reform, the Government of Albania remained the only player in the field, at the expense of the other democratic institutions, and to the detriment of the constitutional balance of powers” (Krasniqi, 2021: 38). Meanwhile the war in

Ukraine brings a major political and security challenge to the EU's enlargement project. Despite the fact that this is one of the influences for undertaking a new integration project, this process faces obstacles that require to be surpassed.

Apparently, some of the factors analyzed above are carried over from the past and some appear as new ones from recent geopolitical developments. These factors serve as a cause related to the EU internal situations, as a consequence to its delayed enlargement policy, and further as a possible cause (direct or indirect) to the formation of the still vulnerable hybrid democracy regime like Albania.

### **3. Albanian and EU Implication**

Related to the internal panorama of Albanian institutions and European integration process, one of the reasons pointed out by the experts for the actual level of democracy in Albania is authoritarianism. As Bieber states “most governments in the countries of the Western Balkans have moved towards more authoritarianism over the past decade, despite the formal progress towards European Union (EU) accession” (Bieber, 2020, p. 139). Albania makes no exception to this trend of authoritarian features of the government. This position “increased exponentially after the opposition relinquished its constructive role in political life, thus failing to control the majority by devaluing the mechanisms of democratic control” (Bërdufi & Krasniqi, 2022, p. 42). In this context, “the EU has been criticized for unintentionally promoting “stabilitocracies“ and for not taking a stronger position against autocratic tendencies” (IDEA, 2022), as well as criticized for the tendency of policies and cooperation focused on the elite and not the citizens. These factors imply in countries like Albania difficulties in the functional implementation of democratic standards with the EU, and also infer increased chances of stagnation/deterioration of the democratic level.

Structural polarization is another argument that can be related to the current democratic level of Albania. “Structural polarization in Albania has meant that it retained a stable two-party system with each party, once in power, finding itself unwilling and unable to develop a working relationship with the opposition. This has been partly reinforced by the strongman politics of Sali Berisha and, to a lesser degree, Edi Rama. Thus, while Albania has seen less continuity and stable authoritarian rule” (Bieber, 2020: 34). The combination of the support for a strong leader, authoritarian regime and the decline for democracy support, creates the conditions for electoral democracy, causing thus decrease in the intensity in efforts towards EU Integration success.

This polarization is linked to another derivate of the basic condition for democracy, which is the lack of political consensus between the two major Albanian parties in the definition and functioning of the current electoral system. The latter was determined by consensus between the two main parties SP and DP in 2008, with the approval of constitutional changes and also in 2020 other determinations followed only with the approval of SP, without political consensus. The four consecutive legislatures after 2008 until the current parliament have often been criticized for the decline in the representative level, the weakening of the role of the MP within the parliamentary bodies and the Assembly. Yet “Albania’s democratic institutions are challenged by clientelistic party politics, a lagging judicial vetting process, and rampant corruption. The country’s special anticorruption courts made small strides in addressing graft during 2022, resulting in a modest score improvement in the Corruption indicator, but there was little opportunity for further reforms before local elections set for May 2023” (Freedom House, 2023, p. 8).

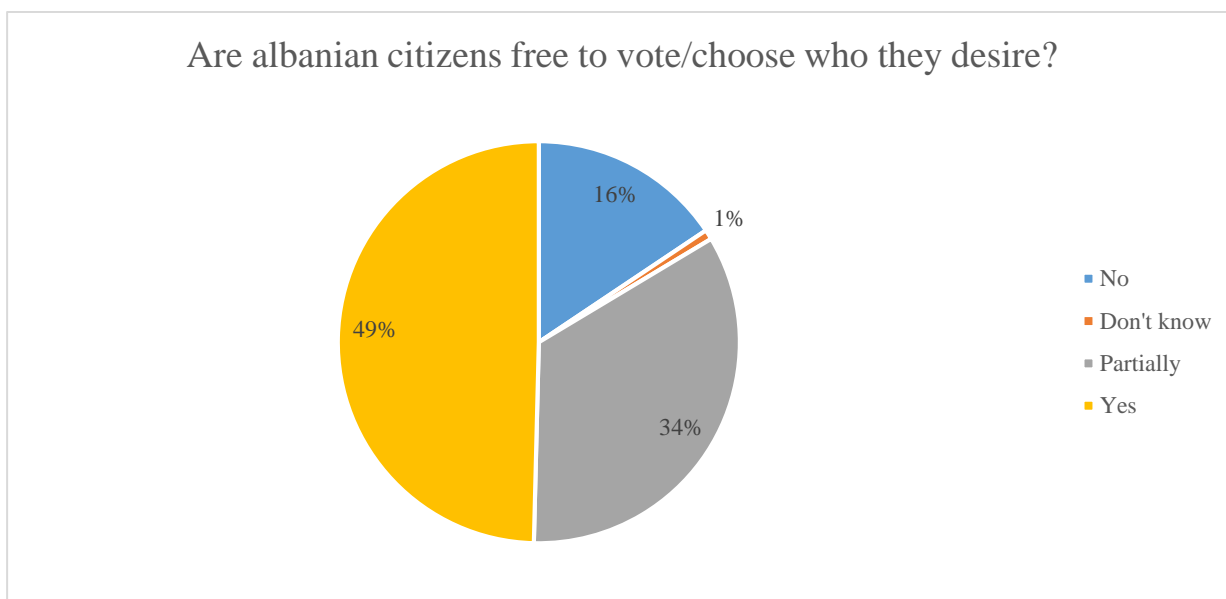
Another related factor is the activity of the government according to the preconditions and time limitations creating instability in the proper implementation of the reforms. This factor affects the more the timely implementation of the reforms rather than their substantial process. Among the reforms experimented in Albania with the promotion of the EU as well as the US are those in the judicial system (a process which started in 2017 and has not yet ended), vetting in the police system (interrupted due to ambiguities) and decriminalization (still in process). These examples can be attributed more to the technical approximations of the laws than to integral transformations of society, which directly affects the problematic implementation of functional democracy, since the parties involved have the tendency to take short-term measures to meet the criteria of integration into the European Union.

An important aspect is also the citizens themselves. The public according to studies, has begun to reduce the demands for democratic development. The long years of waiting for EU integration and the other factors analyzed above directed the citizens focus more on their individual interest and personal/family economic developments, than on the general democratic development of the country. Support of this point of view is also found in the survey data conducted in a national scale in Albania on April 2024 (Bërdufi & Krasniqi, 2024). The results reflect democracy stagnation also from the citizen's point of perception. Freedom of vote is one of the minimal conditions of democracy. In this context the survey data show that only half of the respondents affirms the freedom to choose the candidate/party they want, a third think that this freedom is partial and almost 1/5 of them affirm a lack of freedom in voting. Since the free vote is the basis of a functional democracy, the limitation of this freedom becomes a serious problem for a society that aims for EU integration.

The final argument is the lack of the citizens' support for EU integration. From the survey data turns out that in 2024 for the Albanians EU membership is not a primary priority for the next five years (until 2029). Instead their priorities are the modernization of the education system, the decriminalization of politics, the fight against corruption, the strengthening of the state of law and reduction of criminality/weakening of oligarchs. Hence even after 10 years from receiving the status of the candidate country, the fulfillment of the priorities set by the European Council for Albania before the start of the membership negotiations remain to be resolved, confirmed also from the perspective of the citizens. This tendency is observed even as well widely in the Western Balkans, in which the data show a decrease of the citizens' confidence regarding the time of their country's entry into the EU compared to the previous period. Eurobarometer data shows that "third of Western Balkan citizens, or 34% (3% less than last year), are still optimistic believing that the EU accession will happen by 2030, and another 32% aim for 2035. However, almost a quarter (23%) think it will never happen, which is 3% more than in 2020" (Balkan Barometer, 2023).

As a result, even after three decades of transition, ten years from EU candidate country and four years from the negotiations opening for EU integration, the indicators remain critical and reflect mistrust at the basic levels of functional democracy, and as a consequence a probability of reflecting this mistrust in international entities such as the EU institution.

Considering all the above arguments it is necessary for the Albanian leaders to show and implement more credibility in the implementation of reforms related to the criteria and conditions of the European Union's extension through a wide public approach (inclusion of citizens in decision-making), hence in the interest of creating democratic stability for the country.



**Figure 4. Albanian's Perception for the Vote Freedom in 2024**

Source: Bërdufi, Dorina and Krasniqi, Afrim, (2024). *National Representative Survey "Priorities of the Electoral Reform and Challenges of Political Participation in Albania"*.

#### 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, factors related to democracy level of Albania and EU democratization power are:

- ✓ EU internal democratic accountability and enlargement fatigue
- ✓ The new players qualified as emerging or re-emerging powers
- ✓ The growing trend of Euroscepticism and also the growing trend of populist parties
- ✓ The contribution of the COVID-19 pandemic and the active instrumentalization from the Albanian government
- ✓ The raised level of authoritarianism of Albanian government and strong leader
- ✓ Structural political polarization
- ✓ The lack of political consensus between the two major Albanian parties
- ✓ The implementation of the current electoral system
- ✓ The decline in the representative level, the weakening of the role of the MP within the parliamentary bodies and the Assembly
- ✓ Limitation in time frame and preconditions for EU integration reforms
- ✓ Reduced demand of the citizens for democratic development
- ✓ Citizens do not consider the EU membership as a priority in the near future

As a result, even after years of efforts in the EU integration process, these indicators still enable a weak and critical level of creating a functional democracy.

#### References

- Bërdufi, Dorina & Afrim, Krasniqi (2022). Democracy state and autocratization features in the republic of Albania. *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 8 (3), pp. 34-46. <https://e-jlia.com/index.php/jlia/article/view/741>.
- Bërdufi, Dorina & Krasniqi, Afrim (2024). *National representative survey. Priorities of the electoral reform and challenges of political participation in Albania*. Tiranë: ISP
- Bieber, Florian (2020). *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. Palgrave Macmillan



Buras, Piotr & Morina, Engjellushe, (2023). Catch-27: The contradictory thinking about enlargement in the EU. *ECFR*. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/catch-27-the-contradictory-thinking-about-enlargement-in-the-eu/#the-return-of-enlargement> (accessed on 13 March 2024)

Dahl, Robert (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

European Council (2024). *Albania*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/albania/> (accessed on 28 March 2024)

Follesdal, A. & Hix, S. (2006). Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU: A response to Majone and Moravcsik. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 44(3), pp. 533-562. Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2023, War Deepens a Regional Divide, 2023

Freedom, House (2024). Nations in Transit 2024. A Region Reordered by Autocracy and Democracy.

Gola, Gentiana & Bloom, Emily, (2022). Democracy in the Western Balkans: A Long and Winding European Path. *IDEA*. <https://www.idea.int/blog/democracy-western-balkans-long-and-winding-european-path> (accessed on 25 February 2024).

Krasniqi, Afrim (2021). Impact on Democracy of Emergency Measures Against Covid-19. *IALS Student Law Review*, 8. Pp. 28-38.

Lika, Liridon (2021). The Western Balkans at the crossroads of European integration and the emerging powers' projection of influence. *The Journal of Cross-Regional Dialogues/La Revue de dialogues inter-régionaux Special issue Western Balkans, European Union and Emerging Powers*. <https://popups.uliege.be/2593-9483/index.php?id=151>.

Lührmann Anna & Lindberg, Staffan, I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it? *Democratization*, 26:7, pp. 1095-1113.

Nord, Marina; Lundstedt, Martin; Altman, David; Angiolillo, Fabio; Borella, Cecilia; Fernandes, Tiago; Gastaldi, Lisa; God, Ana, Good; Natsika, Natalia & Lindberg, Staffan, I. (2024). *Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot*. University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.

Regional Cooperation Council (2023). *Balkan Barometer 2023 Public Opinion*. [https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key\\_findings/2/public](https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/public) (accessed on 11 March 2024).

V-Dem Institute (2024). *Graphing Tools for Albania*. [https://v-dem.net/data\\_analysis/CountryGraph/](https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/) (accessed on 30 February 2024).