Engaging the new generation

Youth perspectives on Democracy and Citizenship in Post-Communist Albania

Tirana, Albania

Own image

Msc Thesis
Faculty of Geosciences
International Development Studies

Student: Tatjana Hora
Student number: 1193287
Supervisor: dr. Bianca Szytniewski
Wordcount: 23.785
Date: 11.08.2023

Utrecht University

Abstract

This research delves into the multifaceted interplay between the perception of democratization and active citizenship among the youth in Tirana, Albania. In light of the nation's post-communist era, this study explores the crucial importance of young individuals' outlook on the political structures and their role as active citizens. In the context of Albania's complex historical trajectory, the significance of understanding the youth's perceptions and its implications for active citizenship becomes evident. A qualitative approach is employed, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the participants' thoughts, experiences, and beliefs while unravelling the complexities of their political and civic behaviours. The findings provide critical insights into the prevalent scepticism and dissatisfaction among the youth, who perceive the current system as an extension of the past authoritarian regime rather than a modern democracy. Media prejudice, limited political accountability and transparency and the constraints of the two-party system contribute to their negative impression, impacting their willingness to actively participate in civic and political life. While active citizenship is essential for a thriving democracy, this study reveals that young people's choices vary significantly. Some strive to participate through volunteering or election assistance, while others adopt a rather detached approach, distancing themselves from political and civic activities. The key message of this research emphasizes the urgent need for civic education across generations, fostering a collective sense of civic responsibility and active citizenship among the youth. Bridging the generational gap and ensuring meaningful youth representation are essential strategies for developing a democratic society. Overall, this research sheds light on the complex dynamics between historical processes, perceptions of democratization and active citizenship among young people in post-communist Albania. By recognizing these intricacies, policymakers can design targeted interventions that empower the youth as proactive agents of change, ultimately contributing to Albania's democratic trajectory and societal progress.

Key words: *Albania, youth, active citizenship, post-socialism, democratization, civic education, political engagement*

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis supervisor Bianca Szyniewski, for her invaluable guidance throughout the entire process. Her insightful feedback, support and genuine interest in my research have been very crucial in shaping this thesis. Bianca's expertise, patience and willingness to listen have allowed me to explore my ideas freely and encouraged me to push the boundaries of my research. I am truly fortunate to have had such a lovely team consisting of Bianca, as well as my roommate in Tirana, Roshn. I am immensely grateful to him as he has been by my side through this challenging, but profound journey. Together, we embarked on this adventure to Tirana, sharing countless late-night discussions, moments of frustrations and bursts of inspirations. His belief in my abilities and unwavering presence have given me strength during the most demanding phases. Further, I am deeply grateful to my parents, firstly for encouraging me to pursue this Master's degree, which I am forever thankful for, and also for listening and always supporting me. I am thankful to my friends for their enthusiasm, support and source of inspiration, always telling me "You can do it!". Lastly, but certainly not least, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the participants who generously gave their time and trust, allowing me to delve into their world. Without their willingness to share their experiences and insights, this research would not have been possible. Their openness and cooperation have enriched my understanding and perspectives beyond this thesis, contributing to my comprehension and appreciation of the world. The completion of this research would not have been possible without the support, contribution and encouragement of these lovely individuals.

Faleminderit!

Table of contents

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Democracy is often considered the foundation of modern society. In many countries, democracy is seen as a cornerstone of political stability and social justice. In this system, power is held by the people or their elected representatives. Decision-making occurs through fair voting, ensuring equal opportunities for all members of society to participate (Spaiser et al.,2014). With its core principles, democracy allows for political participation, freedom of expression, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights. It helps create an inclusive, accountable, and just society where individuals can live without fear and have the chance to reach their full potential (Ganesan, 2020). The process of democratization in a country entails numerous aspects. Democratization involves making something more democratic and increasing people's participation in decision-making processes. This includes political democratization, which aims to make a government more representative and accountable to the people it serves. According to Ringen (2007), it can also refer to making an organization or society more inclusive and participatory, such as by giving more people a say in how things are run or increasing access to education and other resources. Democratization often aims to give more people a more significant stake in their communities and create a more equitable and just society (Ganesan, 2020).

The democratization process can majorly impact its citizens and how they engage in society (Letki, 2004). Giving more people a say in how their communities are run can create a greater sense of ownership and responsibility among citizens (Menser, 2018). Spaiser et al. (2014) argue that when people feel they have a stake in their decisions, they are more likely to support and participate in their communities, leading to increased civic participation and shared values. Social and cultural transformations occur, addressing issues such as gender equality and minority rights (Gould, 2004). Additionally, it can increase transparency and accountability in government and organizations, creating a stronger sense of trust and cooperation within society. When people feel their leaders are accountable and decisions are made openly, they are more likely to support those decisions and work towards common goals (Menser, 2018). However, it is essential to consider that the transformation to a democracy is a complex process with varying outcomes depending on the country's context, such as cultural, socio-economic and political factors (Haynes, 2011). The entire democratization process, thus, can significantly influence a nation's citizens as it may shape the social, political and economic environment in which they live. While democracy is often considered the most effective and fair form of government, there are several potential downsides or "dark sides" to democracy. With open space for diverse opinions, democracy relies on the integrity of its leaders and institutions, but unfortunately, corruption can be a significant problem in democracies. Elected officials may use their power for personal gain, and wealthy individuals and corporations may try to influence politics with their financial

resources (*The Dark Side of Democracy IFES – The Internaional Foundation of Electoral System, 2022*). Further, providing space for open debate and freedom of speech may present opportunities to spread intolerant and not inclusive values, using democratic mechanisms to weaken democratization, such as promoting xenophobia or voicing opinions against migration (Crush, 2001). The "dark sides" of democracy differ from context to context and may be influenced by the age of a democratic system. While young democracies may face more significant challenges in terms of establishing solid democratic institutions, accountability and norms, old democracies may be more prone to complacency and institutional decay (Ferrara, 2022). This is a very timely issue with the rise of right-wing populism around the world, including in European countries such as France, Germany and Poland, as well as countries which are currently in the process of establishing strong democratic institutions and fair elections such as several states in Eastern Europe (Rodrik, 2021) (Medushevskiy, 2021).

Growing up in a country undergoing a transition, such as establishing a democratic system, has different implications for young people. It may empower them by encouraging active participation and civic engagement. Optimally they gain expanded rights, freedoms, and opportunities for education and skill development. However, democratization poses challenges, including political instability, limited representation, social divisions, and economic uncertainty (Ganesa, 2020). In the past, we have seen young people acting as agents of change and aspiring to contribute to the resilience of their communities, proposing innovative solutions to contemporary issues and driving social progress (*Youth and Technology*, n.d.). Young people make up the future leaders of our society. They are the ones who will be responsible for making the decisions that will shape the direction of our communities, our countries, and our world. That is the reason why it is so important to invest in their education and development (Colombo & Rebughini, 2019). Furthermore, the youth is capable of generating new ideas and perspectives and is often at the forefront of social and cultural change, such as the movements for civil rights and LGBTQ+ rights, as well as being the ones who will be accountable for carrying on the traditions and values of our society and for building a more equitable and just future for all (Johnson, 2007). With 1,8 billion people currently between the ages of 10-24, it is the largest generation of youth in history (*The Power of 1.8 Billion Young People*, n.d.).

Some scholars have expressed worries that youth political engagement and participation are at an unhealthy low, while others have stated that it is not declining but solely changing in form (Delli, Caprini, 2000). A substantial part of young people does not disengage but participate in non-conventional activities and forms of political and social engagement, such as volunteering, protesting or embedding politics in their daily lives, which is their way of active citizenship (Earl et al., 2017) (Scholzmann et al., 2010). Concern that young people may lack the knowledge and abilities to act effectively as citizens and that they are frequently not deeply ingrained in their communities has spurred the policy conversation on active citizenship (Kersh et al., 2021). How young people perceive the

democratization process, and the current political climate of their country can influence how they engage as citizens (Letki, 2004). Looking at it as a spectrum, from negative to positive, a somewhat positive perception may inspire or instil hope, motivating young people to actively participate in shaping the democratic process. With increased access to education, which can help the youth to develop their skills and knowledge, they can become more informed and engaged citizens (Iversen & Soskice, 2019). Examples of engagements include joining youth organizations, participating in protests and working towards societal change. Additionally, the process can create more transparency and accountability in institutions, fostering greater trust and cooperation among young people (Parker, 2016). Trust in institutions reinforces the belief in the system and encourages active participation. However, a negative perception may lead to disillusionment and cynicism. The youth may lose faith in the democratic process if corruption, instability and broken promises are witnessed (Bhattacharyya & Hodler, 2015). This disillusionment can reduce their interest in participating and encourage apathy or disengagement. Negative attitudes, such as young people thinking the democratic system is ineffective or abused, can also lead to scepticism and resistance. Their unwillingness to actively participate in or work with established institutions may be hindered by this distrust (Gould, 2004). Despite the importance of democratization and its potential impact on young people's citizenship, there is a knowledge gap regarding how the development of citizenship among young people is influenced by the democratization process, particularly in countries undergoing transitions like post-socialist Eastern Europe. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring young people's perceptions and how it shapes their sense of citizenship.

1.2.   *Aim of research and research question*

Democratization is an ongoing process in many parts of the world, and there are still many challenges to consolidating democratic systems in many countries (Boix, n.d.). In Europe, particularly Eastern and Central Europe, several countries have undergone significant democratic reforms in the past few decades as they have sought to transition from authoritarian regimes to more democratic systems (Peacebuilding in the Balkans – SpringerLink, n.d.). One of those countries is Albania. Being located in the Western Balkans, Albania and its neighbouring countries have seen increasing changes since its recent end of violent conflicts in the 1990s. Since then, the European Union has had a significant influence and has been one of the main drivers of change, focussing on political, social and economic transformation (Keil, 2013). The transformation is fueled by the idea that the countries in the Balkans are being prepared for potential membership of the EU. However, according to Freedom House (2022), Albania has been considered a "hybrid democracy", which is, in this case, characterized by

"being democratic in the minimal sense that they feature regular, competitive elections, but their dysfunctional institutions are unable to deliver the definitive components of a liberal democracy".

Therefore, the specific context of this study will be the democratization process in Albania, which has been transitioning from a socialist republic to a unitary parliamentary country (Margariti, 2021). The formidable incentives for joining Europe give the country a clear direction towards further improvement of their democracy, as there are also numerous elements of unfinished revolution in each of the Balkan countries years after independence (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006). The fall of communism, which started with student demonstrations in Tirana in 1990, triggered Albania's transition. Now, accession to the EU has been a crucial factor in Albania's democratic consolidation. Enticements provided by international organizations have acted as the primary mechanisms for positive change and for promoting reforms in Eastern Europe thus far (Ilirjani et al., 2006). The Albanian democratization process may have a variety of effects on young people. More significant opportunities for their political participation, education, work, and personal growth might be provided by it (Ganesan, 2020). However, this shift can also present difficulties owing to the disruption of established institutions, resulting in ambiguity and conflict among the youth exposed to new ideas and values that may differ from those of their parents or community (Children's Social Worlds in Cultural Context | SpringerLink, n.d.).

The main aim of this research is to understand how Albania's transition to democracy has affected the development of citizenship among young people, including their democratic values, sense of belonging, participation, and engagement in civic and political life. The research may also explore the extent to which democratization has provided opportunities for young people to become active and engaged citizens and identify any challenges or barriers preventing young people from fully participating in the democratic process. The research could provide insights into the potential benefits of democratization for the development of youth citizenship, as well as the factors that may hinder their realization. According to Michels & De Graaf (2010), citizenship participation is seen as a vital aspect of democracy and positively influences its quality. Ultimately, this research aims to inform policies and interventions that support the positive development of citizenship among young people in Albania and contribute to the consolidation of democracy.

Acknowledging the importance of democratization and its impact on people's citizenship, specifically young people, the following research question is central to this research:

How does the perception of the democratization process influence young people's citizenship in Albania?

1.3. Relevance

This thesis's relevance lies in examining how democratization affects young people's feeling of citizenship in Albania, employing a qualitative method to comprehend their viewpoints and experiences. Unlike other quantitative studies on youth citizenship and democracy in Albania, this study explores the attitudes and motives of young people, offering a thorough understanding of the intricate relationships between democracy, citizenship, and youth engagement.

Comprehending the function of youth as catalysts for transformation and development is crucial for both scholarly and societal objectives. Young people's active involvement in civic and political issues is essential for Albania's progress and development as they will be the country's future leaders and decision-makers (Hwang & Kim, n.d.). Policymakers can create targeted interventions and policies that empower youth as active agents of change by understanding how democratization affects young people's citizenship (Barrett & Gavente, 2010). This can lead to the strengthening of democratic institutions, promotion of transparency, and combating corruption – all essential elements for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and fostering a just and peaceful society. Focusing on Albania's transition from communism to democracy adds another layer of relevance to this thesis. The research illuminates more significant social and political shifts in the country by examining how this historical process has influenced the perspectives of the current youth (Sofo, 2016). These observations can offer helpful direction to policymakers in Albania as well as other areas that are presently going through comparable democratic transitions. In order to ensure a more inclusive and participatory democracy, efforts to encourage young people's active engagement in governance and social concerns might be informed by an understanding of how democratization has affected youth citizenship.

Furthermore, the study's attention to potential challenges and tension within Albanian society, such as declining trust in institutions and significant migration outflows among young people, underscores the need to address these issues (Taylor, 2023). The flows of migration specifically influence international dynamics and create brain drain in Albania (Gëdeshi & King, 2021). Collective efforts towards encouraging social cohesion, reinforcing democratic ideals, and fostering sustainable development can effectively address these difficulties by empowering young individuals as engaged citizens.

Active citizens inside and outside the political system are necessary for vibrant democracies (Kersh et al., 2021). A lack of knowledge of and involvement in democracy makes democracy extremely vulnerable. The democratic system and its norms will eventually be unsustainable if too many citizens lack any interest in it (Winter, 2012). Youth who are not active in civic life and politics run the risk of being socially disengaged and indifferent to democratic processes. This may erode democratic

principles and practices, opening the door for the rise of populism, extremism, and authoritarianism, the mentioned "dark sides of democracy". Youth who do not participate may continue to feel helpless, which lowers their self-esteem and sense of agency in impacting their future and society (Bastien & Holmarsdottir, 2017). Inadequate youth participation in sustainable development programs can also make it more difficult to accomplish long-term goals and deal with current and upcoming challenges. Intergenerational cooperation is essential for effectively addressing global issues and excluding young voices carries the risk of undermining that capacity (Jamatia, 2022).

Predominantly centred on quantitative data, the current literature on youth citizenship and democracy in Albania ignores young people's distinct viewpoints and voices. A more comprehensive knowledge of the variables impacting young people's involvement in civic and political life is provided by this thesis, which closes that gap by integrating qualitative methods. Including young people's perspectives enriches the overall understanding of how democratization influences their sense of citizenship and political behaviour. The study emphasizes youth as change agents and shows how democracy affects young people's citizenship. Policymakers can use these insights to advance the SDGs, support democratic institutions, and empower the youth. The emphasis on Albania's situation guides other democratizing regions, such as the Middle East and North Africa. By addressing the limits of quantitative research, academics can enhance their understanding of youth citizenship and advance a more comprehensive perspective on societal development. Analyzing obstacles highlights the importance of encouraging youth participation to create a more inclusive democracy.

Structure of research

The structure of this research consists of several key sections. The thesis begins with a comprehensive literature review, delving into the concepts of democratization and active citizenship, along with their specific indicators, which culminate in the development of a conceptual framework. Following the literature review, the study focuses on the regional framework and context, as this aspect holds significant relevance for the research. The subsequent section outlines the methodological tools employed in data collection and analysis. Further, the findings of the research are presented, followed by a discussion of these results in the context of the literature and conceptual framework. Moreover, the thesis concludes with final remarks aimed at improving the well-being of youth, based on their specific needs, while also addressing the research question. Finally, the conclusion section provides suggestions for future research endeavours in the realm of youth growing up in post-socialist countries and their engagement in active citizenship.

2. Literature and Theoretical Framework

2.1 *Democratization*

Democratization is the act of increasing democracy or the involvement of individuals in the decision-making process with the goal of creating a more fair and just community and society (Sorensen, 2007). Key indicators of the democratization process are free and fair elections, political rights and civil liberties, the rule of law as well as transparency and accountability (Menser, 2018). These aspects entail that citizens can vote freely and are able to exercise their political and civil rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly. Further, it gives importance to the law. It reflects to which extent the laws of a country are applied evenly and fairly and the extent to which citizens have access to justice and resources if their rights are violated (Ganesan, 2010). If democracy in its fundamental form is regarded as 'government by the people', then democratization is, in its essence, a transformation of the role and status of the people who become citizens with rights and agency (Voltmer et al., 2019). There are several ways to measure the democratization of a country such as an analysis of election results, assessment by organizations that monitor democracy and human rights and lastly also through public opinion surveys (Coppedge, 2012). Citizens have their own perception of democracy in their own country and can evaluate the extent to which they believe their country is democratic (Murati, 2015). As this research aims to delve more into young people's thoughts, ideas and feelings, the focus will lie on their perception and experience of the democratization process.

One's perception of democratization can be influenced by several factors (presented in italic) which together form the individual impression and judgement. Firstly, *political convictions* have an impact on how people perceive the political and societal climate in their country. A democratic process may be viewed more favourably by individuals who have a stronger ideological commitment to democratic institutions and principles than by those who have a stronger intellectual commitment to authoritarianism or other political systems (Webster, 2008). If one's ideology leans towards authoritarianism or scepticism of democracy, this may lead to a more critical perception of the democratization process, questioning its legitimacy, effectiveness or potential risks (Morgan & Wisneski, 2017). Further, it influences how people perceive the state's role in society. Some may advocate for a limited role, while others may support a more active role for the (Voltmer et al., 2019). Individuals' political ideology can influence how they perceive the success or failure of democracy in their own country (Zajda, 2015). The understanding of one's convictions has an impact on how one evaluates specific situations and paradigms, comparing whether they are in line with their personal beliefs and values (Malone & Fiske, 2013). Furthermore, *education* can play a role in forming one's perception of democratization. A study by Fesnic (2016) investigating whether civic education makes

a difference for democracy, comparing Hungary and Poland, has shown that the countries made distinct decisions about civic education soon after becoming democracies. Based on studies on civic education policies and their effects, Poland's decisions seem more well-informed than Hungary's; the analysis of CIVED 1999 data clearly suggests that these decisions were effective. Polish students outperformed Hungarian students in terms of civic competence and liberal-democratic principles. Furthermore, public opinion polls over the past decade demonstrate persistent differences between the two countries, with younger Poles being less authoritarian than older ones, while the pattern is the opposite in Hungary (Fesnic, 2016). Additionally, a study in Albania suggests that teachers play a pivotal role as agents of change and continuity during periods of educational reform and democratization. There has to be support for implementing more interactive methodologies and assessment tools for democratic citizenship education for young people and acknowledging the importance of cultural factors and the construction of identity in the classroom (Gardinier, 2012). Informal education, such as family values and social interactions, can furthermore shape an individual's understanding of democracy and democratization (Sobirovich, 2022). Discussions, debates and exposure to diverse perspectives within informal settings can have an impact on one's belief of the importance of democracy, democratic values and the potential benefits or drawbacks of it (Schugurensky, 2006). In addition, people with access to high-quality civic education are more informed about democratic values, institutions, and procedures. They better understand the value of democratic decision-making processes, the rule of law, human rights, and citizen participation. By stressing its advantages and allowing people to participate in civic and political life, this information can help people develop a positive image of democracy (*Civic Education*, 2022). According to Winter (2012), 'Democrats are made, not born', and stresses the fact that civic education is extremely important for upholding a healthy democracy and creating an understanding of democracy for young adults. A lack of knowledge of and involvement in democracy makes democracy extremely vulnerable (Winter, 2012).

Besides *political ideology* and *education*, *media coverage* can have an impact on one's perception of democratization. This is done by selecting which events to report and how they are framed (Voltmer et al., 2019). Negative events, such as political corruption and electoral fraud, can create a perception of failure, while positive developments, like increased civic engagement, can create a perception of progress. Media bias can possibly also influence perceptions, as can stereotypes and misrepresentations (Giansiracusa, 2021). Media outlets' ownership, political affiliations, or journalists' personal agendas can contribute to biased narratives, leading to skewed perspectives (Ruschmann et al., 2012). Additionally, the media can impact public conversation by influencing the issues and themes that dominate the public agenda. Media outlets have the power to affect the tone of public discourse on issues connected to democracy by consistently covering certain events or themes. This may result in a lack of focus on some democratization-related concerns or an exaggeration of others, potentially overlooking critical issues or exaggerating minor ones (Doyle, 2019). Further, one's *personal experiences* can shape attitudes and opinions about democracy depending on prior experiences, which

in turn can affect how democratization is perceived. A more favourable perspective of democratization may result from positive experiences, such as taking part in successful elections or observing improvements in their neighbourhood after democratization (Tov & Diener, 2009). An unpleasant experience, like seeing political violence or corruption, can make people see democratization more negatively (Li et al., 2016). One's level of faith in political institutions and leaders can also be influenced by individual experiences, which can have an impact on how effectively the person sees democratization initiatives. In addition, prejudice, political representation, and one's gender all have an impact on one's personal experiences (Guinote & Vescio, 2010; Masiello, 2018).

The four indicators can also influence each other and are interconnected in their nature. For instance, formal or informal education, including one's upbringing, can play a role in shaping one's political ideology (Morton et al., 2011). Further, education can have an impact on how media is consumed as well as evaluated, discerning reliable sources and identifying potential biases (Hobbs & McGee, 2014). On the other hand, media coverage can significantly affect how people view their own experiences in a democratic society and influence how their political ideology is shaped and vice versa (Feldman et al., 2017; Lee & Hu, 2018). It is essential to account that these indicators shape the perception of democratization while also impacting one another.

Increasing democratization and external influences have an impact on the younger generations' perception of what kind of place they want to live in (Denemark et al., 2016). According to Halman & Voicu (2010), former authoritarian regimes discouraged individualization, and the state was dominant in all domains of life. Further, people lacked individual freedom, personal autonomy, and self-determination and could not attain personal goals and values. Also, Halman & Voicu (2010) elaborate that the state determined 'the whole life, both private and public spheres, and required submission of the individual to the demands of the state'. Hence, the total transformation of the system means changes occur in all social spheres, including substantial changes in cultural values and behaviour. The transitions from the totalitarian system have oftentimes been bitterly fought for with incredible human costs, and frequently democracy does not live up to its expectations and disillusionment with the new political order is increasing among citizens in new democracies (Voltmer et al., 2019). Further, Voltmer et al. (2019) explain that there is widespread disappointment with the quality of the new democratic order, which often seems to remain rather superficial without translating into effective representation and meaningful citizenship. Access to education, information and material resources has a significant impact on the ability of citizens to express their ideas, views and demands. The participation of these new networked movements often attaches less value to traditional and formal participation processes, such as government elections. A study on youth and democratic values in Albania and Belarus has confirmed a heterogeneity of democratic orientations and that transitioning societies do not follow a uniform pathway or democratic mindset but rather display diverse democratic preferences (Sianko et

al., 2022). However, it showed that the majority of adolescents in this study identify with key values of liberal democracy, such as the rule of law, pluralism and tolerance. Yet, there is a lack of open classroom climates in Eastern Europe compared to Western Europe, where discussions, attitudes, civic knowledge and skills can be shared (Sianko et al., 2022). Voltmer et al. (2019) distinguish the political dimensions of citizenship into the vertical relationship between citizens and power as well as the horizontal, which is the political community and cultural belonging. Group identity gives citizens a sense of belonging and support in hardship situations. Therefore, it is valuable to investigate how people experience democratization and how this impacts their relation to power, political community and cultural belonging in the form of the concept of *citizenship*.
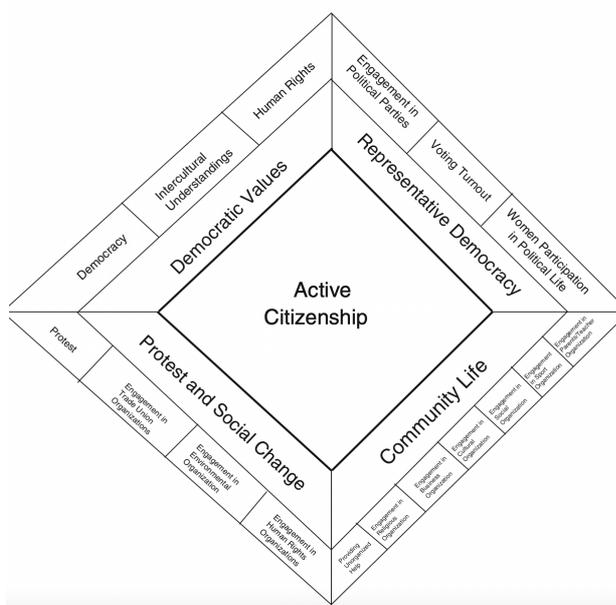
2.2 *Citizenship*

The concept of citizenship can be either defined with its legalistic meaning: a status that individuals in a country may enjoy and is associated with certain rights and privileges, or as the "qualities that a person is expected to have as a responsible member of a community" (*The Psychology of Citizenship and Civic Engagement*, n.d). According to Pancer (2015), the behaviour of someone, which is shaped by values, determines what kind of citizen that individual is. A good and active citizen is considered someone who votes responsibly and with knowledge, takes part in the decision-making process that influences their community, participates in volunteer work to aid others, stays up to date on local people and news, takes part in neighbourhood organizations, and engages in activities that promote and improve the lives of all community (*The Psychology of Citizenship and Civic Engagement*, n.d). Further, Pattie et al. (2004) state that it is evident that there are 'good' citizens who participate and have attitudes which support civic society and enhance governance. This also explains why some communities are 'better' than others. It is particularly true when we include elements like academic achievement, health, and overall happiness with life and democracy. What is noteworthy here is that these are all issues where individuals can make a difference in outcomes. Locals tend to feel more trusted and have better lives when they are more financially successful and politically and socially active. Thus, being a good citizen might not impact how much communal life there is, yet, it does generally improve the quality of life (*Citizenship in Britain: Values, Participation and Democracy*, n.d.).

The focus of this study will lie on the choice-based theory approach to citizenship introduced by Pattie et al. (2004), which states that citizenship emerges from the choices that individuals make. These reflect the costs and benefits of the choice situation, broadly defined. Individuals decide their

levels of participation and attitudes toward the rights and responsibilities set forth by society. Research in Eastern Europe has demonstrated the power of civil society as a force of agency to achieve government and market accountability (Howard, 2003). In a European setting, Edith Cresson, the European Commissioner for Education, Research, and Sciences in 1998, is credited for establishing the concept of Active Citizenship in terms of education and training. She explained that Active Citizenship refers to a situation in which the citizens of Europe could be both 'the architects and actors of their own lives' (Davies, 1998). A way to empower citizens to have their voices heard within their communities, a sense of belonging and a stake in the society in which they live, the importance of democracy, equality, and respecting diverse cultures and varied viewpoints were all mentioned as aspects of active citizenship. As Howard (2003) determined, active citizenship refers to actual participation and the benefits to society, such as accountable governance, rather than the networks formed via participation.

According to Hoskins & Mascherini (2009), active citizenship entails the "participation in civil society, community and/or political life, characterized by mutual respect and non-violence in accordance with human rights and democracy". Furthermore, the authors introduce four spheres of active citizenship (in italics) which will be used as indicators for the measurement of citizenship (See *Figure 1*). The first two pillars are *representative democracy* (participating proactively in democracy through voting, being a political party member, and working with government officials) and *community life* (contributing to and enriching the community by donating money and participating in local organizations). Although there have been significant changes to enfranchisement and suffrage in regards to youth in the past years, lowering the legal ages to vote to as low as 15 or 16 years old in some regions worldwide, voter turnout 18 to 24 year-olds is, on average, 16 percentage points lower than for adults aged 25 to 50 (*Infographic*, 2022). Few politicians and decision-makers in Europe are under the age of 30, despite the fact that young people make up about 25% of the continent's population (*Representative Democracy – European Youth Forum*, n.d.). Kay et al., (2021) note that organizations such as youth parliaments or forums are often opportunities for young people to practice citizenship rather than to enact it; thus, young people have little opportunity to influence actual decision-making. This demonstrates the trend among young people and their relation to representative politics, which has been expressed as a worry among scholars. However, it is argued

Figure 1

The active citizenship composite indicators
(Hoskins & Mascherini, 2008)

that young people engage differently to achieve social cohesion and change (Delli, Caprini, 2000). Hoskins.& Mascherini (2009) refer to this sphere as 'conventional participation'. Further, community life is a significant aspect of citizenship. An ideal citizen is a person who has a sense of belonging to a community and feels a sense of obligation and commitment to other members of that community (Howard, 2003). The term "community" has historically had a geographic connotation, implying proximity to the individual. However, in the internet and globalization era, it has come to mean a variety of communities of choice, the smallest unit being the family and the largest units being cities, nations, or groups of nations (Maier & Schäfer, 2004). Therefore, a sense of belonging is also examined by investigating youth engagement in the sphere of community life. According to Brooks & Holford (2009), the policy discussion on active citizenship has been motivated by a worry that young people, in particular, may lack the knowledge and abilities to function effectively as citizens and are frequently not deeply ingrained into their communities. Further, as specified by de Weerd et al. (2005), education is viewed as a crucial tool for "supporting active citizenship, equal opportunities, and social cohesion." Learning for active citizenship is viewed as a lifelong practice that helps one create the vital connections between knowledge and action.

Furthermore, *protest and social change* (working towards community betterment and social justice through activities such as protests, boycotts, demonstrations, and strikes) and *democratic values* (all actions of the active citizen should be underpinned by values that promote the well-being of the community, such as democratic participation, human rights, and nondiscrimination) are the other two determinants of active citizenship (Pancer, 2015). Protest and social change, which have grown to be immensely popular among young people, are considered the 'unconventional' forms of participation (Abs, 2006). Protests and strikes are a common form of youth activism, often used to draw attention to a particular issue or cause. Young people are regularly at the forefront of protests, using their voices and bodies to demand change, as countless recent examples have shown, such as the Fridays for future, as well as Black Lives Matter movements (Bennardo, 2019). Lastly, democratic values emphasize the significance of civic virtues such as "solidarity" and "being socially active for the good of society," as well as participatory democracy (Torcal & Montero, 2006). According to Hoskins & Mascherini (2009), values of active citizenship are closely in line with European political origins and follow the guidelines that founded the current European political structures. The engagement of youth in protest and social change is often based on responding to adverse life experiences such as discrimination and social exclusion (Kay et al., 2021). Democratic values being one pillar of active citizenship, demonstrates the direct link between the two concepts of values and citizenship. Moreover, civic responsibility and higher education are likewise related to citizenship in the way of working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing them ("Civic Responsibility and Higher Education", 2000).

Similarly to the indicators of the perception of democratization, the four spheres of active citizenship are interconnected and mutually influential, as Hoskins and Mascherini (2009) show. For instance, strong community ties encourage cooperation and inspire group effort, which influences protest and social change (Aronson et al., 2013). Participating in community activities can encourage democratic values, since it teaches people tolerance and collaboration (Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009). During demonstrations, activists frequently promote democratic values in an effort to create a just and equitable society. It is also noteworthy, that the different components of the main variables democratization and citizenship can possibly influence each other, such as education can have an impact on democratic values, political ideology on protest and social change or personal experiences on representative democracy.

Young people's civic engagement and orientation toward active citizenship are influenced by the interactions of demographic, experiential, and contextual factors (Kersh et al., 2021). Their ability to stay educated and participate in civic and political life is influenced by a variety of factors, including political events, historical processes, governance, community views, peers, families, schools, media, and personal experiences (Banaji & Mejias, 2020). These elements frequently interact, resulting in many active citizenship typologies that might alter over the course of a young person's life. These situations are typically intersectional, with multiple elements working together to place young people in distinct political and civic power positions. Further, Banaji & Mejias (2020) provide six categories of active citizenship, which represent varying levels of involvement and orientations towards civic and political participation. The categories are (for a more detailed description see Appendix C, Table 1) :

1. disenfranchised/excluded youth
2. inactive/passive disengaged youth
3. active in dutiful and conformist way
4. active in anti-democratic and authoritarian way
5. active in pro-democratic, anit-authortitarian way
6. hyper-active individuals seeking progressive change

According to Banaji & Mejias (2020) understanding these diverse active citizenship typologies among young people help us better understand how various internal and external factors influence their participation in civic and political life. It draws attention to the intricate interplay between individual experiences, social environments, and political ideologies that shapes young people's attitude to civic engagement and activism.

High active citizenship shows significant levels of citizen involvement and engagement, meaning participation in the four spheres identified by Hoskins and Mascherini (2009). This can be facilitated by strong civic education. Being well-informed about one's rights, responsibility and functioning of the political system, contributes to active citizenship (Banaji & Mejias, 2020). Civic education is not bound to primary or secondary education and does not have to be formal in its nature (Keating et al., 2009). Further, open and inclusive political environments provide a transparent and democratic system which encourages the involvement of citizens and fosters a culture of being active (Barrett & Gaventa, 2011). Effective civil society organizations, such as NGOs or grassroot movements, play a crucial role in mobilizing citizens and promoting active participation (Spar & Dail, 2002). High levels of civic engagement have major effects on a nation's growth. By promoting greater governance and representation through citizen engagement, it promotes political stability (Torcal & Montero, 2006). As engaged citizens develop a feeling of community and work together to solve shared problems, social cohesiveness is reinforced. According to Barrett & Gaventa (2011), when citizens actively participate in policy making, they ensure that it addresses the wants and concerns of the population, making it more effective and inclusive. Economically engaged residents who take part in neighbourhood projects and local efforts can support sustainable growth (Print & Lange, 2013). Additionally, highly engaged citizens demand accountability from authorities and institutions, which reduces corruption and improves political system openness. Active citizens also help society advance in issues like social justice, environmental preservation, gender equality, and human rights (Banaji & Mejias, 2020). Encouraging and promoting active citizenship is an essential aspect of fostering a thriving and democratic society.

This shows the interplay of active citizenship and democracy. Democracy and active citizenship are mutually reinforcing to one another (Bekemans & Chair, 2008). The basis for engaged citizenship is a functional democracy where citizens' rights are upheld, the government is open, and the rule of law is maintained (Kersh et al., 2021). By expanding political engagement, demanding accountability, advancing civic education, building social cohesiveness, and influencing policy, active citizenship, in turn, improves democracy. For democratic ideas to advance and become more firmly rooted in society, this symbiotic interaction is essential.

Low active citizenship, characterized by limited civic engagement and participation, can be explained through exploring all the different spheres of the concept. People avoid participating in civic activities when they find it difficult to discover a shared interest with others and when they are unsure of the potential effects of their actions (Badescu et al., 2004). Based on a cross-country study examining students in 24 countries, many secondary school students do not achieve the standards of "good enough democratic citizenship," which include: support for democracy, knowledge of politics, having a political preference, and being prepared to participate in elections (Brooks & Holford, 2009). Thus, a lack of education and awareness contribute to low citizenship as individuals may not be adequately informed

about their rights, responsibilities and importance of being active as citizens (Print & Lange, 2013). According to Banaji & Mejias (2020), some citizens may lack motivation to participate if they feel disengaged from politics or if they think their efforts won't make a difference. The authors go on explaining that in some cases, governments impose restrictions on people's rights to assembly, association, and expression, which discourages people from taking part in civic affairs. Overall, encouraging and promoting active citizenship is an essential aspect of fostering a thriving and democratic society (Winter, 2012).

2.3 *Conceptual framework*

The conceptual framework is a tool used in this research to organize and synthesize the different main concepts and ideas that are relevant to the topic. In the case of investigating the influence of *the perception of democratization* on *active citizenship*, the conceptual framework provides a structure for understanding the various factors that shape individuals' perceptions of democratization, as well as the different dimensions of active citizenship.

The conceptual framework contains various elements, including *education*, *political ideology*, *media coverage*, *economic situations*, and *personal experiences*, that might affect how people perceive democracy. By looking at these aspects, it is possible to understand better how people construct their perceptions of democratization and how these ideas affect their engagement in active citizenship. Furthermore, the conceptual framework incorporates the four spheres of active citizenship identified by Hoskins & Mascherini (2009): *representative democracy*, which denotes actively participating in democracy through voting, membership in a political party, and interacting with public officials, as well as *community life*, which refers to improving and enhancing the community through monetary donations and involvement in neighbourhood organizations. Additionally, the framework takes into account *protest and social change*, which refers to advancing social justice and community improvement through protests, boycotts, demonstrations, and strikes, as well as *democratic values*, which state that all actions taken by engaged citizens should be guided by principles that advance the community's well-being, including democracy, human rights, and nondiscrimination. The visualization of the theoretical framework also illustrates the interconnectedness and influence between the indicators.
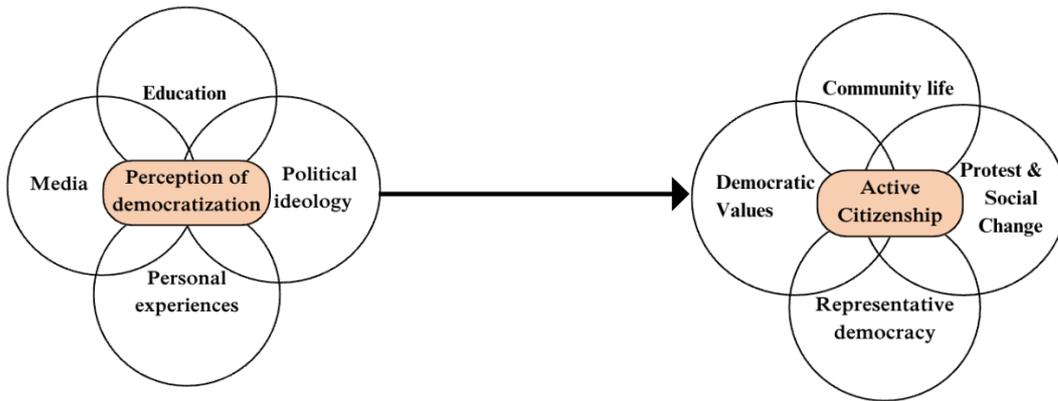
Figure 2. Theoretical model

3. Regional framework and context

3.1 *Background*

The study is taking place in Albania, specifically as it has experienced substantial changes in the past years, considering its current constitution was established only 24 years ago. Albania is a small country located in the Western Balkans (See *Figure 3*), and its GDP is exponentially increasing, while tourism, excluding Covid-19 travel restrictions, has likewise boosted. Furthermore, poverty and unemployment rates have been decreasing over the years, and overall, the country has received attention from the EU to eventually become a member state and integrate into the "European community" (Keil, 2013). Albania's population is around 2,8 million people, while 63,5% live in urban areas (Albania – Languages | Britannica, n.d).

Figure 3
Location of Albania (*Albania - Languages | Britannica*, n.d.)

The median age is 36,4, which is comparatively high in contrast to the worldwide median age of 30 but relatively lower than Europe's median age of 44.1 (*Albania – Average Age of Population 1950-2015*, n.d.). However, the country's fertility rate of 1.51 children born per woman is one of the lowest in the world. Albania had a nominal GDP per capita of $5,453 in 2020, making it a lower-middle-income nation. Tourism, foreign investment, and remittances are three primary drivers of the economy ("Albania", 2023). Following the fall of communism in the 1990s, the democratization process in Albania entailed several significant changes in the country's political, social and economic systems, such as shifting to a market-oriented economy, introducing political pluralism and attracting foreign direct investment (Biberaj, 2019). This was aimed at a number of factors, such as external pressure and support from the international community, as well as a growing desire for change within the country (Freedom House, 2014). A key step in the democratization process included the establishment of a new constitution in 1998, which guaranteed fundamental human rights and freedoms, holding free and fair elections, and developing a more pluralistic media (Spaiser et al., 2014). However, there have been challenges and setbacks in the form of concerns about corruption and the influence of organized crime in the political process. The country, furthermore, has faced economic and social difficulties as it has sought to transition to a market-based economy. Weak institutions, informal economy, poverty, inequality, and foreign debt were prevalent challenges. Due to these economic difficulties and the desire for better possibilities overseas, Albania is currently suffering a significant migration outflow and brain drain (Seiger et al., 2020). A study by Gallup conducted in 2021 has demonstrated that 50% of the Albanian population would like to move away (See *Figure 4* in Appendix B) (Inc, 2023). Elements including high unemployment, a lack of work opportunities, low earnings, corruption, and worries about public services have influenced this trend. The country's economy and society face difficulties due to

the exodus, underscoring the necessity of actions to encourage economic growth and enhance domestic living conditions (King & Oruc, 2019).

3.2 *Democratization*

Albania concentrated on an active process of Westernization after the collapse of the communist system with the aim of joining the European Union (EU) whilst already being part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since 2019 (Pinnavaia & Berisha, 2021). Edi Rama of the Socialist Party won the 2013 and 2017 parliamentary elections. He implemented several changes as prime minister to modernize the economy and democratically transform state institutions, including the judicial system and the police force ("Albania", 2023). Under his direction, Albania has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the Balkans. Rama also placed a significant priority on gender equality. As a result, since 2017, there have been more female ministers than ever before (*PM Rama at "Global Leader Women" Summit*, n.d.). However, a substantial amount of corruption allegations, including nepotism and embezzlement, highlight ongoing challenges in tackling these issues (Tema, 2023). Limited media freedom has been observed, with concerns about press independence and freedom of expression (*Albania*, 2022). Further, concerns regarding the lack of transparency in decision-making processes and public procurement practices have been raised, as well as allegations of electoral irregularities, raising questions about the integrity of the electoral process (Kera & Hysa, 2020).

Further, the European Union (EU) has played a significant role in the democratization process in Albania. As a candidate for membership in the EU, Albania has had to meet a number of criteria related to the rule of law, human rights, and the protection of minorities, among other things. In order to meet these criteria, Albania has had to undertake several reforms to strengthen its democratic institutions and promote the rule of law (Margariti, 2021). The EU has provided support to Albania through financial assistance and technical expertise, as well as through the deployment of election observers and other assistance to support the democratization process. The EU has also encouraged Albania to engage in dialogue and cooperation with other countries in the region as part of a broader effort to promote stability and integration in Southeast Europe (Morlino & Sadurski, 2010). Overall, the EU has been a critical partner for Albania as it has sought to transition to a more democratic and inclusive society. EU membership remains a long-term goal for the country. The plans unveiled by the country and its significant partners paint a positive picture of the future, but the execution and adoption of new systems and practices may only sometimes be successful in practice.

From June to September 2020, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the Institute for Democracy and Mediation, both based in Tirana, conducted polling and focus group research in Albania to ascertain the public's perception of the nation's political health using democracy benchmarks such as participation in politics, social inclusion, and public engagement. According to the study, two-thirds

of Albanians are unhappy with both the government and the opposition, and voting intentions have decreased by 21% since 2016. Comparing the differences in voter turnout between the first election after the end of the Cold War and the most recent election among post-socialist countries, Albania scores lowest with a decline of 46% (See *Figure 5* in Appendix B) (*Infographic*, 2022). Albanians are sceptical of the parties' capacity to keep their promises and do not feel they are being represented by the current parties (Jalvarado, 2020). Further, according to Freedom House's 2021 assessment, Albania's development toward a full-fledged liberal democracy has halted in the "grey zone" of hybrid democracy. "The 18th straight year of democratic loss for the region as a whole," according to the research, which evaluates 27 nations in Central Europe and Central Asia. Albania's democracy scored 3.75 out of 7, with 7 being the best possible score for democratic advancement. It belongs firmly in the "hybrid democracy" category (Halla, 2022). A hybrid democracy regime "may be democratic in the bare minimum sense that it features regular, competitive elections, but its dysfunctional institutions are unable to supply the definitive components of a liberal democracy," the research claims.

3.3 *Citizenship*

3.3.1 General

Despite the fact that two-thirds of Albanians dislike both the government and the opposition, Albanian citizens see more opportunities for engagement through civil society organizations working on public policy reform and good governance issues. The NDI study's respondents also mentioned being more involved in civil society through online petitions and social media. 40% of respondents felt at ease addressing their local officials if they had a concern. In comparison, 25% of respondents said they had spoken with their mayor or councillor the previous year (Jalvarado, 2020). However, the overall voter turnout in parliamentary elections has declined over the past decades (See *Figure 6*).

Figure 6. Parliamentary Election Voter Turnout in Albania (*Elections in Albania*, 2021)
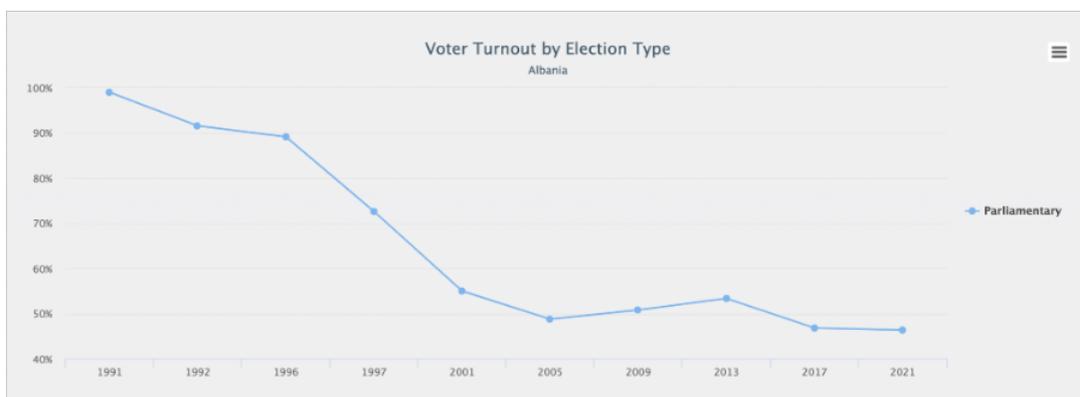
Two-thirds of citizens that participated in the NDI survey have voiced that it is critical to understand where political parties' funding comes from and how it is used. According to focus group participants, corruption is fueled by a lack of political financing transparency (*National Survey*, n.d). Furthermore, most people would never consider giving money to a political party because they firmly believe that political parties and the political system are dishonest and unrepresentative. The percentage of citizens being part of political parties dropped from 22% to 14% from 2016 to 2020, while the percentage of respondents being part of an NGO remained the same at 10% (Jalvarado, 2020). Albanian citizens believe they have a marginally more significant say in decisions made locally than nationally. Overall, 55% of Albanians believe they do not influence decision-making at all, according to the country's Democratic Institute. According to Hoskins & Mascherini (2009), there needs to be more resources and assistance available in post-communist countries for the development of a civil society. The lack of civil society is entirely explicable by weak institutions, unstable economies, and a lack of official support. The results of their study have shown that Eastern European countries ranked lowest in all spheres of active citizenship, and the youth in those countries is rather disengaged. This can also be seen in a comparison of voter turnout in established European democracies compared to young democracies in post-socialist countries (See Figure 7 in Appendix B) (*Infographic*, 2022). Hoskins & Mascherini (2009) explain these outcomes because the countries have also experienced many years of forced participation during communist times, which understandably has led to people being less interested in participating today. It is essential to point out that this study's data collection took place shortly before the local elections in Albania in May 2023.

3.3.2. Youth

The youth in Albania (aged 18-30) has reportedly reached the lowest level of knowledge and interest in politics regarding familiarity with political party programs, parliament, and MPs (*National Survey*, n.d). Albania's population shrank by 1.3% in 2022, with a decline of 7.1%, or 15,000 individuals, among those aged 20 to 24 and a decline of 6.300 among those aged 25 to 29 (Taylor, 2023). This demonstrates the impact of what is happening in Albania on an international level in the form of migration. According to Taylor (2023), Albanian prime minister Rama stated that "it is not a good idea to believe and let alone communicate that the young people should stay here because I think they have the right to try, and they should make use of their freedom". Further, young people frequently have the opportunity to practice citizenship through organizations like youth parliaments or forums rather than exercise it, which limits their ability to participate in decision-making processes (Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009). The National Survey on Young People and politics in Albania concluded that Albania's youth are disengaged from political parties; the great majority (80%) neither participate in politics nor work as activists. Just 9.2% of people are political party activists, whereas only 10.8% of people are party members (*National Survey*, n.d). Further, respondents have little faith in other young

people who are active in politics. The majority (60%) do not see any successful role models for young people in politics. Thus, the low levels of young people's involvement in Albania's political system are very visible. More than half of the respondents voiced that they do not trust the political parties, and a third of them believe that corruption is the main issue facing the nation. The other third of young people identified education and employment as the main challenges in the country, while around 20% saw the economy as the primary concern.

4. Methodology

This research paper investigates the influence of the perception of democratization on the sense of citizenship among young people in Tirana, Albania. A qualitative research study will be conducted in order to explore this issue. The following section explains the methodology used in this research paper.

4.1 *Research Design*

The overarching methodological approach is a case study examining young people in Tirana, the capital of Albania, while the democratization process provides the specific context. Case studies aim to provide an in-depth analysis of a specific case, focusing on young people aged 17 to 27 in this study (*Five Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry*, 2017). It is a holistic approach that considers a range of factors and variables to fully understand the entity or phenomenon explored in its natural context while researching recurring themes and patterns (Rebolj, 2013). It allows for the examination of multiple dimensions, such as political, social and cultural aspects, that might influence young people's active citizenship. Implementing a case study as an overarching approach to answering the research question contributes to fully understanding the context and its effects on the young population. Focusing on Tirana, Albania, as a case, allows for an exploration of the country's intricacies, complexities, and unique aspects, as well as the perceptions and engagements of its youth. It furthermore facilitates a deep comprehension of how different aspects interact and offers insightful details on the subject. The case study also enables a detailed examination of Albania's unique sociopolitical, historical, and cultural environment. As the choice-based theory approach to citizenship is implemented, the participants are seen as 'the architects and actors of their own lives', exploring how decisions are made and with what background. By considering an individual's motivations, one can comprehend and explain their behaviour, and identify collective patterns within and between societies. An individual's current behaviour is influenced by past experiences and how they have interpreted those experiences (Howard, 2003). According to Hoskins & Mascherini (2009), the essence of citizenship in contemporary society is how people see their rights and obligations. In order to get a thorough understanding of perceptions, in-depth interviews are suitable. By conducting in-depth interviews with young people, it is possible to capture their experiences, perspectives and interpretations within the local context.

4.2 *Data collection*

4.2.1 Method

The primary data collection method used in this thesis are semi-structured interviews and consists of 15 participants. This method was chosen because it allows for exploration of the participants' perceptions of democratization and citizenship in a more in-depth and meaningful way than other methods. With open-ended questions and the use of probes, this approach offers flexibility and a more personal interactive way of collecting data compared to quantitative methods (Rebolj, 2013). Conducting one on one conversations gives more freedom to talk about things that cannot be explored through surveys, while trust can be developed before the interview, which may provide an increased comfortability for sharing personal information. The conversation with participants can present insight into their thoughts and feelings about the topic, and it may feel more pleasant explaining their views without limiting it to a set of questions as in a survey. As this research aims to explore the experience of democratization, which is something very subjective and personal, a rather inductive approach is used, which is supported by having open-ended questions and room for diverse answers.

The interviews were structured based on the variables and indicators presented in the operationalization section. Furthermore, with the qualitative approach it is not only possible to find out how people feel about things, but also delve deeper into their possibly subconscious decision-making (Hindley & Font, 2018). As presented in the theoretical framework, active citizenship can be separated into four main spheres, including democratic values. Although these categories are used as underlying concepts, they may not be applicable to every community and active citizenship may mean something else to every individual. Therefore, with having interviews, it provides the opportunity to explore a variety of citizenship and how participants reflect on the democratization process in their country and its influences on their citizenship. Besides formal semi-structured interviews, dozens of informal conversations have been conducted which aided to form a general perception of young people's opinions and thoughts in regard to the current situation in Albania and how they act as citizens.

4.2.2 Field work

The data collection has taken place in the capital of Albania, Tirana over a time span of two months (March-April 2023). Tirana is a key city in the political, social, and cultural dynamics of the nation, making it an essential location to investigate how young people view the democratic process. The city's diversity offers a variety of viewpoints on the subject, and its urban setting makes it possible

to examine young people's activity and engagement. Access to resources, organizations, and stakeholders involved in encouraging youth participation are also available in Tirana. Tirana has been named the European Youth capital in 2022 and throughout the year the city worked under the slogan "Activate Youth" for active participation of youth people focussing on their needs, while helping them shape their future. A comprehensive schedule of more than 100 activities has been planned by Tirana with the goal of fostering volunteerism, strengthening youth organizations, and building networks and synergies among young people (*Tirana*, n.d.). Overall, carrying out the research in Tirana allowed for a thorough investigation of how democratization has impacted Albania's young people's active citizenship.

Participants for the study were selected using a non-probability sampling technique known as snowball sampling. Contact to random individuals in Tirana has been established and from there on snowballing took place. As the research is conducted in a country and city that was not visited prior to the research, this type of sampling is convenient while providing diversity. The participants' age range is between 17 and 27 and in order to ensure sample diversity, the objective was to achieve a balanced representation of genders and ages. However, according to existing literature and theoretical frameworks, although gender and ethnicity are influential social factors, their direct relevance to the specific research objectives of understanding young people's perceptions of democratization and active citizenship in Albania may be limited. In the research done by Hoskins & Mascherini (2006) investigating active citizenship among several European countries, it was concluded that gender and ethnic background are statistically non-significant for political action and participation.

The research offers important insights into young people's individualized perceptions of Albania's democracy process by concentrating on individual experiences, viewpoints, and interpretations of it. This strategy is consistent with theoretical frameworks and existing research that emphasize the need of taking into account human motivations, decision-making processes, and contextual aspects in comprehending active citizenship (Howard, 2003; Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009).

4.3 *Data analysis*

Once data saturation was achieved, the data analysis followed. In this study, with consent given by the participants, a qualitative content analysis approach was employed to analyze the data collected from recorded and transcribed interviews, with detailed notes taken during the conversations. Thematic analysis, a systematic method, was utilized to identify recurring themes and patterns within the data, while also allowing for the exploration of unique and individual cases. The analysis process

encompassed both deductive and inductive approaches. Through inductive analysis, the data itself guided the identification and derivation of categories and themes, enabling a rich understanding of participants' perceptions and behaviours. Additionally, deductive analysis involved testing preconceived notions and hypotheses derived from the research indicators, background information and assumptions. By employing a combination of deductive and inductive approaches, a comprehensive analysis of the data was achieved. To support the analysis process, a coding system was implemented, aiding in the organization and categorization of the data. The software NVivo was utilized to facilitate the coding process, enhancing efficiency and ensuring a rigorous examination of the collected information. Firstly, nodes, representing main themes and concepts, were created. This was followed by open coding which contributed to identifying additional patterns and themes by creating new nodes. Further, the coding process began, by linking segments of the interviews to specific nodes. Groups of related nodes were created as well as hierarchical structures to visualize broader to more specific themes. Lastly, the analysis involved identifying key patterns that represent the participants' experiences, perspectives and thoughts. Throughout the entire process the codes and groups have been continuously reviewed and revised as new insights emerged.

The thematic analysis approach proved valuable in capturing the complexity and nuances of participants' experiences, shedding light on their perceptions and behaviours within the context of the research (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

4.4 *Considerations and limitations*

Using a case study and a specific sampling technique benefits the research but simultaneously can create limitations. Snowball sampling is reliant on the participants providing referrals, which can cause specific biases. As this is a non-probability sampling method, self-selection bias could occur. This means that the participants who agreed to be part of the study may have distinct views of experiences compared to those who declined to participate and, therefore could influence the results (Heckman, 2010). The findings may not apply to the entire youth population in Tirana, which emphasizes the need to take into account the unique context of youth in the capital and its potential to differ from experiences and perceptions of youth in other regions or countries. Further, it is crucial to be aware of your own positionality when conducting research, in order to avoid bias and ensure the validity of the findings. For instance, making sure that there is no confirmation bias, which is the tendency to search for, interpret, and remember information in a way that confirms one's pre-existing beliefs, expectations, or hypotheses, while ignoring or downplaying information that contradicts them (Pohl, 2012). As this is a qualitative study, it is also necessary to keep in mind that there is a level of subjectivity involved in the interpretation of data and the identification of themes. Thus, reflexivity and self-awareness of personal

beliefs and values was of high importance throughout the research, especially during data collection, analysis and interpretation phases.

Additionally, all privacy and anonymity aspects have been discussed transparently and it was made sure that the interviewees are fully aware of the fact that the interview will be recorded and in which way the obtained information will be used. It was communicated to every participant that if there is interest in reading the final research paper, it will be shared with them. Further, the purpose of the study was thoroughly explained. This aided to avoid social desirability bias, which relates to participants responding in ways they believe is more socially desirable, rather than expressing their true opinions or experiences (Larson, 2019). By being transparent and creating a safe environment, participants are able to share their honest and genuine thoughts and opinions.

As the language used for this research is English, language barriers may arise. Therefore, beforehand it was made sure that the participant is feeling comfortable and is able to express themself properly to assure validity of the answers. Lastly, due to limited time in Albania, the planning of the interviews was done very precisely in order to avoid any last-minute difficulties or missing data. A neutral place was selected for conducting the interviews and flexibility in the sense of different time slots was offered for the participants. The overall aim was not solely to gain data and conduct this research for oneself, but hopefully also provide a safe space for participants where they can share their own experiences, perceptions and have an interesting and valuable cultural exchange.

4.5 *Description of participants*

The following table illustrates an overview of the interviewees which have participated in this study. In order to assure anonymity, pseudonyms have been employed, while the remaining information such as place of birth, gender, date of the interview and study has not been changed. All participants live in Tirana, however some of them are from different towns around the country. A geographic visualization is provided in the appendices (See *Figure 8* in Appendix B). Although three of the participants are not currently engaged in formal education, their previous study is indicated below as each of them have been studying for at least one year. All interviews have taken place in public settings, such as in cafes and parks depending on the preferences of the interviewees.

Pseudonym name	Age	Gender	Study	Place of birth	Date of interview
Anton	20	Male	Medicine	Tirana	13.04.2023
Sasha	20	Male	Medicine	Fieri	21.04.2023

Maria	19	Female	Graphic Design	Tirana	31.03.2023
Eriko	17	Male	High School	Tirana	31.03.2023
Christina	21	Female	Architecture	Berat	04.04.2023
Ardian	22	Male	Finance	Tirana	02.04.2023
Igor	19	Male	Marketing	Shkodër	10.04.2023
Aron	24	Male	Directing	Puke	19.04.2023
Abi	26	Female	Civil Engineering	Shkodër	22.03.2023
Luan	23	Male	Art	Fieri	11.04.2023
Gjon	20	Male	Civil Engineering	Elbasan	26.03.2023
Mara	20	Female	Law	Tirana	20.04.2023
Roan	20	Male	Medicine	Tirana	20.04.2023
Dion	27	Male	Psychology	Tirana	21.04.2023
Melissa	19	Female	Psychology	Tirana	28.03.2023

Figure 5. Participant overview

4.6 *Operationalization*

The key ideas of the study are operationalized in accordance with the setting in order to implicate the theoretical framework and address the research question. The operationalization of the variables is based on the main theories used in the theoretical framework, namely active citizenship by Hoskins and Macherini (2009), and the perception of democratization, which consists of different theories and extracted significant aspects:

1. *Perceptions of democratization* - refers to the way individuals interpret and comprehend the process of moving toward a more democratic political system. It includes people's expectations, goals, and worries about the democratic process as well as their views and attitudes about it. In this case it refers to the perception young people have of political and societal transformation happening in Albania. This perception is influenced by several factors:
    a. *Education* - refers to the way people are or are not formally educated about democratization, democratic values and politics, what their highest level of education

is and what role teachers play in this context, as well as informal education in the form of conversations with family members, talks with friends

  b. *Political ideology* - A person's set of beliefs and principles that influence their political views and opinions. It includes, among other things, their viewpoints on the function of the government in society, economic principles, social problems, and international relations

  c. *Media coverage* - in this context means what sources of media the participants consume, perceptions of the media's political bias, and whether they feel that the media accurately represents political events

  d. *Personal experiences* - refer to encounters with related to the democratization process varying from successful elections or observing improvements in their neighborhood after democratization to seeing political violence or corruption as well as family relations and upbringing

2. *Active citizenship* - Actively participating in the civil society, community and/or political life, it is further characterized by mutual respect and non-violence, in line human rights and democracy, actively contributing to development

  a. *Representative democracy* - refers to being engaged in official Albanian political parties, voting in elections (municipal, regional or national), working with government officials

  b. *Community life* - means helping and enriching one's community in Tirana by engaging in organizations (religious, cultural, social or sports) in forms of voluntary work, being a member or donating money

  c. *Protests and social change* - is defined as working towards social justice and community improvement in form of signing petitions, taking part in lawful demonstrations, boycotting products, being part of human rights or environmental organizations and practicing ethical consumption

  d. *Democratic values* - in this context refer to actions of the active citizen being underpinned by values that promote the well-being of the community, such as democratic participation, human rights, and nondiscrimination against races and ethnicities. This can be in form of acknowledging the importance of citizens to vote, developing an independent opinion, being active in politics and voluntary organizations

It is of high importance to keep in mind that the specific indicators are interconnected and may influence each other.

5. Results

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the study's findings pertaining to the research question. The results are derived from data collected through fieldwork, specifically in-depth interviews conducted with a sample of fifteen participants. The following analysis takes into account the research context and relevant discourses within the fields of politics, sociology, and development studies. To accomplish this, a theoretical framework is employed, encompassing various categories of factors that influence the perception of democratization and active citizenship.

The analysis is organized into three main sub-sections, offering a coherent understanding of the data within the specific context of Albania's transition from a post-socialist system and how young individuals perceive and engage with it. The first subsection examines the aspects that contribute to the perception of democratization, shedding light on the factors shaping young people's understanding of this process. The second subsection explores the different spheres of active citizenship, highlighting the various ways in which young individuals actively participate and engage in their communities. These subsections are based on the indicators included in the conceptual framework, which derived from theory. The third subsection presents the other themes emerging from the data which were not covered in the theoretical framework.

While acknowledging the interconnectedness across these sub-sections, their separation allows for a structured analysis that begins with the exploration of distinct categories, followed by an examination of the influence of the perception of democratization on active citizenship. Ultimately, this analysis aims to address the research question and provide valuable insights into the relationship between democratization, active citizenship, and the experiences of young individuals in Albania's evolving socio-political landscape.

5.1 *Perception of democratization*

5.1.1 General

The perception of the democratization process is very much similar among all the participants. No one has said that they believe Albania's political system can be defined as a modern democracy. Several people have stated that it is something they are aware of; they have learned the theoretical concept of democracy but have not experienced it in Albania.

"I think there is no democracy" - (Ardian, 22)

"So generally, democracy for teens in Albania is very much like an idea and a concept that we would love to see in practice, but not so much something that we believe in given the current political climate" - (Eriko, 17)

"In fact, among my friends and other people I know, it is commonly known and discussed that here in Albania, democracy is kind of something only theoretically" - (Anton, 20)

Aspects which categorize a modern democracy, as defined by Spaiser et al. (2014) and Ganesan (2020), such as the freedom of expression, the protection of human rights, transparent and accountable leaders and institutions are all elements the participants have described as lacking in Albania. In their opinion, these are aspects which are crucial for a well-functioning democratic society and being able to reach individual and collective potentials.

Furthermore, three participants have expressed that the entire concept of democracy is something they struggle with understanding and defining as, in their perception, they have not experienced in their lives growing up in Albania.

"I have no clue. I just don't want to say something about democracy without knowing the real meaning of it" - (Igor, 19)

"I would also like to point out that us teenagers were never actually given a right example of democracy. So even the concept of democracy is highly confusing to some sort of point because it will associate democracy to Albanians current status, which is formally democracy. But practically speaking, it's lacking a lot of democratic aspects or prospects" - (Eriko, 17)

In light of Albania being a post-socialist country and the context of the country's transition being very central to the research, more than half of the respondents have been expressing that they believe that the current political and societal system can be categorized as prolonged communism or dictatorship. Dion (27) and Aron (24) have explained that the father of the current prime minister, Edi Rama, has been a person of power during communist times. This gives them the impression that the same system continues, only hidden behind the formal definition and label of democracy. Luan (23), who has studied at the Art Academy in Tirana, has said that he and his fellow students going through the study at the Academy felt that it was like in the Soviet Union, being restricted and censored in what they do.

"We still have that small dictatorship active here." - (Anton, 20)

"I think democracy is like when you try to make communism feel hidden" - (Christina, 21)

All participants were very much aware and knowledgeable about the political system in Albania, especially considering the local elections, which were taking place shortly after the interview process. It was explained that although there are numerous parties, the system can be categorized as a two-party system with the socialist party (*Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë)* in power and the opposition being the democratic party (*Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë)*. This was something that stood out as "not democratic" in the participants' eyes — not having a variety of viewpoints and choices that represent their thoughts, values and ideas. Anton (20) has said that politics are always attached to one of these two parties. The participants have described the relation between the two parties as hatred, and being associated with one of either makes you the enemy of the other one, which can have negative repercussions such as not being able to get a particular job. In addition, more than half of the interviewees have explained that despite the two main parties' differences, the outcomes and general goals are alike. Several participants have referred to either of the parties as "the lesser evil" or a "double-edged dagger".

> "..but something that I would say is that both of the parties are bad. We have to choose which one of them is less worse than the other" - (Igor, 19)

> "Everyone knows they've just been saying the same words throughout the years, and I would bet that it's the same words with the other party. They just use a different jargon" - (Sasha, 20)

> "This guy is better, no, the other guy is better. No, it's the same, but like, with different colours" - (Roan, 20)

5.1.2 Political ideology

The majority of the interviewees have said that they have difficulties understanding their own political ideology and which parties or political figures align with their values and thoughts. This was explained partially through the fact that the older generation has had a different relationship with public political figures and their own political stance, which the youth observes but does not agree with, as Abi (26) thinks. In four interviews, the participants shared that, in their opinion, older people tend to idolize politicians and go with the political direction despite knowing what the person really stands for. This perceived lack of own thought process and evaluation, which again can be traced back to the

communist times, is confusing for the younger generation in terms of trying to understand what they stand for.

> "They love the politicians, but they don't even know what they stand for, but they just love the persona and follow the persona" - (Sasha, 20)

> "They are trying to tell you that this one is the right person, but not giving actual arguments"
>   -   (Gjon, 20)

Although some participants had a relatively clear idea of how they would describe their political stance, more than half struggled to understand their personal political beliefs. They presume that the lack of education on what political stances can even mean and what spectrums of politics there are may contribute to the confusion around political ideologies. In their opinion, the practical portrayal they receive is limited to two parties, who many again believe do not have an actual agenda. This leads to the individual young people not knowing in what way their own needs and wants can be represented in the form of politics and how positive change can be achieved. Despite their trouble understanding their own ideology, they are able to evaluate that the democratic system in their country is seen as a failure. According to Zajda (2015), one can assess the success or failure of democracy in one's country based on their personal convictions.

> "Political ideology? I don't have one. I'm not going to lie. That's a topic I've always felt incompetent to talk about" - (Maria, 19)

> "I believe in freedom. Yeah. I would like to believe in freedom, but, like, it's impossible with everything I've seen and gone through" - (Roan, 20)

5.1.3 Education

As Tirana is Albania's capital and the country's university hub, the impression arises that education numbers are fairly high. Sasha (20), who is not from Tirana, has said that around 90% of his peers from high school continued going to university. However, Roan (20) has shared an official statistic regarding the distribution of education and work among young people in Albania and between 15 and 19-year-olds, 74% get any form of formal education, and 6% do both work and get a formal education, while 25 to 29-year-olds only 3% get education and 1% does both work and any form of schooling (See *Figure 9* in Appendix B). Several participants went on explaining that they perceive many issues with the educational system, such as the lack of proper political education and ability to critically think and

question. Maria (20) says that in her opinion, although it is an essential component of a healthy society, in Albania, civic education is missing but could be achieved in different ways, not only in the formal settings of schools and universities. Anton (20) and Dion (27) both said that they get the impression that teachers want to convey certain ideas as critical thinking and thoughts on current politics but cannot implement that in the classroom due to the possible negative consequences. Furthermore, the topic of corruption came up again in relation to education and how the government has an influence on educational institutions, individuals pursuing their self-interest instead of the student's needs. Several subjects have said that it is widespread that their teachers do not show up to class. It is more the norm rather than an exception. With all of these facts, the majority of the participants have expressed a lack of trust and also hope that teachers really critically examine their behaviours and motivations. Additionally, most of the conversations revealed that political education likewise did not take place in an informal setting, such as at home. Some have communicated that their parents told them to be sceptical, but overall they perceived that it was a discussion children were not included in growing up. It remains that politics is not something their elders educate them on.

> "When we are at home, we do not really talk about politics and I don't think we will" - (Melisa, 19)

The generational conflict arises as the youth understands that their parents and grandparents grew up in a different generation. They respect it and learn from it, but growing up in the current system, they perceive that there is a lack of education, formally and informally, which could potentially contribute to young people's understanding of their rights, beliefs and what power they have as members of modern society. However, this lack of guidance makes it difficult for the participants to move forward and actively engage with societal issues.

> "I think the biggest problem with teens is their lack of stability in their beliefs and their guidance. I think an overall sense of guidance is lacking, you know, not just in education" - (Maria, 19)

There is an overall perceived lack of formal and informal education but a wish for an improved civic education, addressing topics such as critical thinking and open dialogue at home. This goes in line with the study by Fesnic (2016), which investigated whether civic education makes a difference in democracy comparing Hungary and Poland. Poland's actions appear to be more well-informed than Hungary's in light of studies on civic education programs and their impacts; the examination of CIVED 1999 data strongly suggests that these decisions were, in fact, effective. Students from Poland did better than students from Hungary regarding civic engagement and liberal democratic values. Furthermore, the participants suggest that although some teachers do wish to educate students on democracy, they

are still limited in their actions and formal political education is restricted. However, Gardinier (2012) indicates that teachers play a pivotal role as agents of change and continuity during periods of educational reform and democratization. There has to be support for implementing more interactive methodologies and assessment tools for democratic citizenship education for young people. The participants do identify with key values of democracy but expressed that there is a lack of open classroom climates where discussion, civic knowledge and skills can be shared. This is in line with (Sianko et al., 2022) findings in Belarus and Albania. Further, Winter (2012) stated that education is extremely important for upholding a healthy democracy and creating an understanding of democracy among young adults, which is demonstrated in the case of youth in Tirana, where the absence of education hinders the development of a healthy democracy and creates confusion around the term for young people.

5.1.4 Media

According to Christina (21), there is a lot of media coverage in regard to the country's democratic transition and political climate. However, she continued explaining that the difficulty lies in determining which media source is biased, which media sources are purchased, and which ones are truthful and genuine. The majority of the participants have explained that the media, in their eyes, is overall propaganda. Due to the previously described hatred between the parties, this is also present in the media. It was described as the media being split into the two parties, reporting either extremely well of one party and ridiculously bad of the either or the other way around.

> "Oh my God, it is fake, it is so fake. I don't like it at all. The shows, the media, they want us to see what the government wants us to see. They don't really go out of their way to show us reality" - (Mara, 19)

> "I don't see any democracy if you're just putting propaganda in the media. The thing is, we're not allowed to think free in the media. All the media is just bought by the political parties" (Aron, 24)

In a couple of the interviews, it came up that there is an online non-biased media outlet which many young people follow and engage with. It aims to factually prove that a lot of the stories that are published through big media corporations are not true. However, the reach of this site is limited, and Anton (20) has said that from time to time also sends information to this organization, but recently the people running the site have been exposed and got into a lot of trouble for speaking the truth.

All in all, the participants have expressed that there is a lack of another component and cornerstone of a modern democracy, which is freedom of speech and access to unbiased information. This furthermore weakens the impression of Albania having transparent and accountable institutions among young people. Media, which is crucial for a healthy society as it provides information, promotes accountability and contributes to education and critical thinking, is misused in the participants' opinion. As proven by Giansiracua (2021), media bias can possibly influence perceptions, as can stereotypes and misrepresentations, which is the case with young people in Tirana. Further, it confirms that in Albania, limited media freedom has been observed with concerns about press independence and freedom of expression (Albania, 2022). It shows the power media outlets have in terms of affecting public discourses on issues connected to democracy, choosing which events to cover, resulting in an unfair representation, overlooking critical issues and contributing to the personal interest of specific individuals, such as politicians (Doyle, 2019).

5.1.5   Personal experiences

A lot of personal stories have been shared during the conversations, with one aspect occurring in almost every interview. It was communicated that a substantial number of people had lost their jobs when the Socialist Party came to power in 2013. This is related to workers, being teachers or janitors, voicing support for the other party and therefore not being able to continue with their occupation. Maria (19) has said that one of her parents got demoted from their job in the healthcare system due to these political changes. Christina (21) furthermore explained that if your job is related to the party in power and you still want to voice your concerns or, for instance, join a protest, it is inevitable that you will lose your job. Anton (20) shared a recent story about the Activist App, which is a new social media application launched by the government. Everyone who works in the public administration is forced to download it and give it likes and comments to create the idea of unwavering support towards the current political climate. Further, he went on to say that there have been several reports made by people involved trying to act against this by going to the police, but the police have their hands tied as they are also forced to download the app and engage with it themselves. Additionally, he pointed out how he himself is possibly limited in his freedom through the government. There have been talks about introducing a new law in regard to medical students that after finishing their education, they are obliged to stay and work three years in Albania, and only after the completion of these three years the graduates are able to receive their diploma and have the freedom to use it abroad. Anton (20), a medical student, said that it is a desperate move of the government to try to keep skilled workers in the country while publicly saying that everyone should have the freedom to move. Edi Rama officially stated that "it is not a good idea to believe and let alone communicate that the young people should absolutely stay here because I think they have the right to try, and they should make use of their freedom" (Taylor, 2023). This demonstrates the lack of accountability, which contributes to the perception of a failed democracy,

as well as how the media uses information to the advantage of people in power, as well as the false promises young people receive. However, Anton (20) stated that if it actually comes to the point where the implementation of this law will take place, he will protest against that. Many interviewees explained that the usual way to express your thoughts openly, especially if you support the opposition, is to leave the country, as many of their peers have done.

> "All the people who want to make a change are already out there. In Canada, America, Germany, you name it" - (Roan, 20)

A lot of the participants have expressed their personal disappointment with the government due to false promises. Ardian (22) explained that things do get done, it is not like nothing happens, but usually, it is exaggerated by the parties what they will do and what they have done, and the youth has the impression that things are getting build not to serve the general population but rather again due to self-interest or aiming and benefiting private corporations. Gjon (20) shared the story of when he first started studying, and the government was launching student cards with benefits for students, including museum entries, shops and libraries. Yet, only a small part of these promises has been realized. The interviewees concluded this with having the feeling that there is no actual progress which affects them. They see new buildings being built in Tirana, but not benefiting them. This causes a loss of hope that something will get done by people in power that will improve the wants and needs of young people.

> "People have lost their beliefs that something's going to change" - (Gjon, 20)

> "We definitely not have seen much progress in political discussions, political education and anything that really concerns us" - (Melisa, 19)

In conclusion, the results indicate that the perception of the democratization process among young people in Tirana, Albania, is characterized by a lack of belief in the country's political system as a modern democracy. Participants expressed that while they are aware of the theoretical concept of democracy, they have not experienced it in practice in Albania. Many participants described the current political and societal system as prolonged communism or dictatorship, suggesting that the same system continues to exist behind the formal label of democracy. The two main political parties, the socialist party and the democratic party, were seen as the only viable options, leading to a perception of a two-party system that does not represent the diversity of viewpoints and choices among the participants. The participants expressed frustration and despair over the lack of transparency among political figures and limited freedoms. Additionally, the participants mentioned the use of propaganda by political parties to manipulate the population and highlighted the generational differences in accepting political messages. Many participants struggled to understand their own political ideologies and the representation of their

values and ideas in the political landscape. The educational system is seen as lacking in civic education and critical thinking skills, with corruption also affecting educational institutions. Media coverage was perceived as biased and propaganda-driven, with participants expressing scepticism towards the authenticity and truthfulness of media sources. Overall, the findings suggest a lack of trust, hope, and guidance among young people in Tirana regarding their engagement with the political system and their ability to bring about positive change. This confirms the claim by Volmer et al. (2019), stating that there is widespread disappointment with the quality of the new democratic order, which often seems to remain rather superficial without transforming into effective representation and substantive citizenship.

5.2   *Active citizenship*

5.2.1   General

When talking about engaging as citizens in Albania, the majority of the participants have explained that they face obstacles and oftentimes feel unheard by politicians. Although in around half of the conversations it was discussed that the youth wants change, they struggle to understand how it can be achieved. Christina (21) and Igor (19) both said that the youth is very open to change and wants something new and they believe if everyone would get together and actively work on an issue it could be improved. However, currently, in the eyes of the youth, it is a lot of passion and talk about change but no actual practical examples.

> "Albanians still don't have the courage to move. We have to move out of our small society comfort zone" - (Gjon, 20)

> "We have people who have a passion for talking about change. And they have these great ideas about what they can do better but they just don't know how to" - (Maria, 19)

Anton (20) expressed that he has this impression that in Albania citizens, especially the older generation, act less in a community but rather as individuals with the philosophy that if it does not affect me, I will not act. In relation to that, the generational conflict, Dion (27) pointed out that he believes that there is also some fault with the youth as in his view the people do not even try. They accept the way things are, as the older generation accepts these things. However, delving more into the conversations a lot of reasons arise why this is the case. In almost all the interviews it came up that people who express their opinion openly may face consequences. Aron (24), who was studying movie

directing, made a final project depicting the destruction of an old theatre in Tirana using it as a metaphor of destroying Albanian history and was not able to complete this, as he was restricted by his educational institution, which led to him leaving his study. Sasha (20) shared that he feels that students' needs and values are disregarded at his university and when asked whether it would be possible to speak up against that, he explained that he would likely face a delay in his study. In a lot of conversations, it was revealed that there is fear in connection with speaking up and engaging as it automatically puts you in a certain category, associated with a party, or as an enemy of the state, which may also affect one's family and their jobs. Around half of the participants have stated that they conclude that taking action in the majority of the cases also does not lead to anything. Through their personal experiences, which will be highlighted in the following sections, it gives them the impression that no matter what is done, the goal will not be achieved. Ardian (22) and Gjon (20) both said that their takeaway is that everyone just tries to focus on themselves, becoming independent from political parties and the government.

> "We don't believe anymore that if I have an idea, I am going to get supported by some people and make it actually happen. So, everyone is trying to live all by themselves, not being together. And everyone who has the possibility to move outside just moves" - Gjon (20)

Overall, according to the participants, this led to the detachment and indifference of many citizens in relation to what is going on in their country. Many expressed that they, their parents, their friends or other acquaintances simply do not care anymore about what is happening politically, socially or economically as long as it does not affect them.

> "I am not very interested in what happens and what is going to happen" - Abi (26)

> "I am totally detached from politics and what is going on. Whatever happens, it happens. I have my own plan for the future. It's their problem, not mine" - Sasha (20)

5.2.2 Representative democracy

When talking about representative democracy none of the participants have voiced that they are officially engaged in, or members of a political party. This was explained by the low trust and not aligning beliefs among the individuals and the parties. This confirms that few politicians and official decision-makers in Europe are under the age of 30, despite the fact that young people make up about 25% of the continent's population (*Representative Democracy | European Youth Forum*, n.d.). In this

case, the participants do not have any politicians or people in power who they resonate with or share similar ideologies and expectations. However, two out of the fifteen interviewees volunteered in the official local elections. Igor (19) did so, as his mother has been helping in the municipal elections and he wanted to support her, while Anton (20) will work in one of the voting centres because of his curiosity to see how the elections practically take place. He furthermore said that not voting, in his opinion, is like staying silent. When asking all the interviewees whether they will vote or not, the answers differed considerably. While a third was certain they were going to vote, some were not sure for which party. Maria (19) has said that she is leaning towards one of the parties, but to vote for it will break her heart as she feels that it is always one step forward and three steps back, with either of the options. Abi (26) communicated that although she does not feel like her vote would change anything and she does not believe in any of the parties, she feels obliged and has the responsibility as a citizen to engage in election and decide for the "lesser evil". The ones who were uncertain whether they will vote or not explained this on the one hand by practical matters, such as having to go back to their home city in order to vote there and not knowing if that will work out and on the other hand not knowing who to vote for. Lastly, the ones who were absolutely sure they were not going to vote justified that by the fact that they believe the outcomes are already defined and their choice does not matter as change will not occur in any scenario.

> "I don't want to vote. It's not going to do any change. Everybody here. I am talking about all the politicians being the same" - (Mara, 20)

In regard to elections, according to Sasha (20), there is a new tendency for young people to actually engage in the elections. He thinks, although there is a lot of frustration and mistrust among the youth, he has the impression more people are trying to change something. Yet, Melisa (19) pointed out that when she speaks to her acquaintances, the majority does not want to engage in elections due to the reason of not knowing who to vote for and not seeing any value in that. This confirms that according to the National Democratic Institute (2020), two-thirds of Albanias are unhappy with both the government and the opposition. The youth in Tirana demonstrated that in their opinion there is no difference between the parties and therefore, engaging in elections, in several cases, seems unnecessary.

5.2.3   Protest and social change

On the topic of protests, most of the respondents communicated that they have never engaged in any form of protests, demonstrations or signed petitions, although many explained that they would, if the protests were to be independent and for an actual cause they believe in. Aron (24) continued saying that in his opinion the youth generally does not protest as he has seen it to only a very limited extent. According to Dion (27), if you look at the people engaged in these actions, over the past 10

years, you will see the same ones, there are not any new people joining in actively trying to voice their opinions. Three participants have pointed out that they believe that there are not enough protests, and they would personally wish for more. This is again related to the fact that they think the youth in Tirana want to see things they stand for change for the better, but do not know how to. Another reason, several interviewees said, is that in their point of view the protests often do not lead to anything. Maria (19), shared a story of a protest for a young girl who was sexually assaulted and many people joined to request a general sex offender registry, as this does not exist in Albania. Since that protest, according to her, nothing has changed. Some have mentioned positive examples of protests they see abroad, as for instance in France, but this comparison does not necessarily make the youth feel more motivated, but rather frustrated that it does not work out like that in their own country. Yet, it was mentioned by some participants that there have been successful protests in the past. One related to nuclear waste, which Albania was supposed to import but due to the protest this did not happen, as well as students demonstrating for lower tuition fees. The participants have shared this with a feeling of pride and accomplishment.

> "Some protests have been quite good. As a matter of fact, in 2018 students had a protest which went really well" - Anton (20)

In order to understand why young people do not engage in protests, besides the impression that they will not lead to anything, it is important to look at the association to parties. In regard to protests, in almost every interview it was mentioned that it is very common that one of the parties attaches itself to the protest which then becomes a very strong political statement many do not want to be associated with.

> "If you have a protest over here, it's going to turn into a party protest" - Luan (23)

> "Again, political parties took advantage of the protest and tried to get their own interest. Usually though the protests have been called by the political party: 'We have to bring down this other party. Let's bring them down'" - Anton (20)

As mentioned in the previous sections, the association with parties can lead to negative consequences, especially regarding one's job. Therefore, Dion (27) explained with a lot of compassion that he cannot blame young people for not engaging in a protest, because if their parents are working with the administration in some sort of way, demonstrating possibly can cause the parents to get fired. Furthermore, Roan (20) shared that his parents were associated with the government at the time and in order to join the demonstration for the sexually assaulted girl Maria (19) spoke about, he had to disguise himself.

"I've actually gone to a women's protest because a little girl got molested and I could not go to the protest by showing my face. I had to wear a cap, a bandana and glasses" - Roan (20)

Additionally, a lot of participants have pointed out systemic issues they find very important and believe should be addressed by the general society such as mental health problems and violence against women. However, they point out that the protests organized by the parties are usually for causes they find not very crucial and important for the well-being of the overall society.

As Badescu et al. (2004) have mentioned, people avoid participating in civic activities when they find it difficult to discover a shared interest with others and when they are unsure of the potential effects of their actions. This is the case with the Albanian youth. In some instances, they believe that there are many useless protests for causes they do not believe in, or they fear repercussions of participating. In contrast to Bennardo (2019), who states that young people are regularly at the forefront of protests in order to demand changes, this does not apply to the youth in Albania.

5.2.4 Community life

Regarding community life, the majority of the participants said that on a low scope they feel very communal, such as with their neighbours and their group of friends and family. It was communicated that there is a lot of support and people try to help their closest circle, especially the ones who have left the country and support their local community with remittances. This partly contradicts Brooks & Holford (2009) who have stated that policy discussions have been motivated by a worry that young people are frequently not deeply ingrained into their communities. However, the findings are in line with the fact that the youth may lack the knowledge and abilities to function effectively as citizens. Looking at formal organizations, the engagement among the interviewees is rather limited but around half have engaged in one way or another and acknowledge that there are separate entities providing access for youth to learn and engage.

Christina (21) shared that she volunteers several times a year in the school her mother works in as a teacher and Luan (23) organizes art events himself and he explained that it fulfils him a lot. Yet, he is disappointed with the fact that if there are organized events for the youth around the city, it is usually done by international organizations or embassies and not provided and supported by the local government. As Tirana was named "Youth Capital 2022", there have been, according to official sources, many activities planned for the young people residing in the city. However, Eriko (17) said that although he found the idea very endearing, to him it felt more like an official label making the city look good but

not actually providing substantial value for the young population. Maria (19) has participated in the European Youth Parliament and she said that it has brought her a lot of joy. Anton has likewise shared that he frequently participates in events organized by the American or Dutch embassies and recently went to a conference on corruption in Albania where workshops on critical thinking and identifying corruptive activities were provided.

> "I've taken part in different activities that promoted politics, leadership, communication skills, etcetera, things that really develop soft skills in the youth that actually are needed to kind of have another perspective regarding everything, even politics or democracy here in Albania" - Anton (20)

The remaining participants have stated that they do not engage in organizations, due to lack of interest or time. However, Ardian (22), explained that he feels sceptical about organizations. He believes that a lot of them are not entirely separated from political parties and are used for "brainwashing" young adults into specific beliefs. He shared the story that one time he was invited by a friend to join an event organized by a non-governmental association but when he joined there were a lot of staged pictures taken indicating a link to a specific political party which he did not feel comfortable with.

5.2.5 Democratic values

When examining democratic values, which include the support of democracy, human rights and intercultural understanding, all participants have made the impression that it is something they strongly believe in. Especially with the rise of social media and the possibility to see and compare how certain things are abroad in an instant, the participants have explained that they do support concepts associated with democracy such as pluralism, equality and freedom of speech. These are exactly things the young people in Tirana miss and view as limited. The absence of more than two parties makes them believe that it is not really democratic, but they wish it would be. Not being able to publicly say what you think is considered not correct by the participants.

> "If I am at school, I shouldn't be talking about these kind of things because I have to be neutral. That is wrong" - (Mara, 20)

Furthermore, they desire a higher focus on reducing violence, especially against women and children, not only through words but actual practical consequences and actions. The majority voiced that they would like to go abroad and learn more about other cultures through traveling and not only

reading. With a big Roma population in Tirana, some participants have explained that they feel a lot of compassion and sorrow for these people as the government does not treat them with respect.

When talking about the future and the participants' plans, opinions are very mixed. Around half of the people conveyed that they are hopeful. They believe in the coming generation and think change will occur. No one thinks the change will appear radical, but rather incrementally, step by step. Ardian (22) said that he sees a lot of potential and it makes him feel sad that so many resilient young people choose to leave Albania knowing that it can get better if they try.

"We could do better. We will achieve that. In an amount of 20 years or something like that" - Mara (20)

The majority of the participants, despite the criticism and missing alignment between the personal democratic values and the things going on in the country, have demonstrated a lot of love and pride for their country which portrayed a certain connection and communal feeling among the youth.

"And we actually are proud of our country even about the issues that are now happening, we are proud of what we have achieved so far" - Melisa (19)

"I'm a nationalist. I'm very nationalistic. I want the best for my country. I want the best for the people in this country" - Dion (27)

Nevertheless, the other half of the interviewees has said that they want to leave the country once possible. Although there is a lot of pride and love, around 50% of the participants are quite pessimistic and have given up in some way and the solution is to migrate to a different country where they can find better political, economic and societal circumstances.

"I would say I've already made the decision, but I'm just waiting to see how I go with these remaining years (of university). But in my mind, if you would give me the choice right now, I would leave" - Sasha (20)

"I am trying to, I'm trying to go to the US or somewhere. I don't want to live here" - Aron (24)

In conclusion, the examination of active citizenship among young people in Tirana, Albania reveals a complex landscape characterized by challenges, disappointment, and a feeling of disconnection from the political system. While many participants stated a desire for change and

acknowledged the necessity for group effort, they had trouble comprehending how to successfully accomplish such change. Fear of repercussions, such as those from educational institutions or being linked to a particular political party, has emerged as a major impediment to active engagement. The hesitation to take part was also influenced by a lack of confidence in the effectiveness of protests and the notion that they frequently have no discernible impact. Looking at the choice-based approach to citizenship introduced by Pattie (2004), which states that citizenship emerges from the choices that individuals make, and these reflect the costs and benefits of the choice situation, it is possible to see here that usually, according to the participants, the costs outweigh the benefits from engaging as citizens. The effort is not worth the possible consequences, or not seeing any results or changes. Further, it is questionable if in some specific situations taking action or not, can even be considered 'having a choice' for some. A situation like that could be participating in a protest which could possibly cause a parent to lose their occupation. The participants also emphasized a widespread disregard among individuals, including themselves, for political, social, and economic matters that do not significantly affect their own life. Young people were discouraged from participation by the identification of protests with political parties and the potential implications of such associations. While formal organizational participation was limited, some participants nevertheless acknowledged the value of community engagement and indicated support for programs that help young people develop their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Overall, the results point to a desire for democratic principles like equality, diversity, and freedom of speech, but also to a perception of a gap between these principles and their actualization in Albania.

5.3 *Emerged themes*

5.3.1 Corruption and Nepotism

Half of the respondents have communicated that they perceive the corruption in Albania as really high, which is also present in the political sphere. The interviewees have the impression that in order to gain power politically one must have to pay in Albania. With money, Aron (24) explained, it is possible to buy freedom, to buy a prison, or a certain position in the government in Albania. Further, Mara (20) expressed that corruption is not only found in politics but also in education, in schools and universities, with the police, as well as in workplaces. Roan (20) emphasized this by explaining that if you want to become a judge there is no way around corruption, considering that the average wages even for "prestige positions" are relatively low. All participants have been explaining this with a lot of frustration and despair as corruption is so prominent in many areas of their lives. One specific story has been repeatedly shared by the participants which was related to the upcoming elections. News has been circulating that in rural areas one vote in their favour costs the party around 50€, as well as party

members collecting IDs from people they assume would vote against them in order to prevent them from doing so. The participants have expressed this without doubts, but rather convinced that this is possibly the case in many areas around Albania.

"They say: 'We know that you're going to vote for the Democratic Party. So can we have your ID and give you $50 so you won't be able to vote?' So they are doing that. And they had a van full of ID votes" - (Aron, 24)

Besides corruption being a central theme, nepotism and the pursuit of personal interests has been mentioned in the majority of the interviews as well. The participants have explained that next to having the financial means to gain power, connections are a crucial asset in order to become a political figure. This is conceived as unfair and wrongful among the participants while explaining that it is something they are used to. Dion (27) shared the belief that among the people working for the administration, 90% are employed through nepotism. Further, the majority of the participants is convinced that there are no exclusions among political figures being corrupt, having the impression that everyone steals and portrays themselves as "good" while not being transparent and acting in the favor of the general population. Mara (19) has explained that in her view her peers and her have been convinced to believe that democracy in Albania functions as a form of facade to make leaders and political parties gain as much money and power as possible. In her opinion, the way Albanian politicians operate is a contradiction to what democracy means in theory. Additionally, several interviewees have singled out the pursuit of personal interest of powerful people as the main cause and problem in Albania as the general population and people who are less fortunate suffer from these actions. Roan (20) said that the people in power are ready to sacrifice the core of Albania and its cities without a care for personal profits.

"Poverty in Albania is heavily derived from political theft" - (Mara, 19)

"Personal interest is the biggest problem here in Albania, in the administration, because people think only about themselves and not the bigger picture" - (Anton, 20)

The nepotism and personal interest have also been observed by the participants in the form of the connection between powerful corporations and the government. Anton (20) has shared the specific example of the waste management system in Tirana which is operated by a newly found local company. He is sceptical of that choice and believes that foreign companies could handle the situation more efficiently and better but the government chooses the local company due to personal reasons such as corruption and money laundering.

Corruption and nepotism were identified as pervasive issues in various aspects of Albanian society, including politics, education and workplaces. The interviewees communicated a feeling of frustration and despair over the prominence of corruption and lack of transparency among political figures. This is coherent since unpleasant experiences, such as seeing political violence or corruption, can make people see democratization more negatively (Li et al., 2016).

5.3.2 Generations

Around half of the respondents have mentioned propaganda being a tool parties frequently use to pursue the population of their actions. Mara (20) has described it as "brainwashing" the population with misinformation to deceive and win over their votes. Christina (20) said that if she were to pursue a position in politics, she would have to accept to become a figure of propaganda. On the topic of propaganda, three participants have mentioned the generational differences indicating that the older citizens, such as their parents and grandparents, often blindly believe what the parties are expressing. They continue explaining this by looking at the history, meaning that the older generation has lived through communism and dictatorship, and in their opinion is more prone to accept things the way they are and not critically questioning what is being said. Dion (27) suggested that it might be related to an incident which appeared in the late 90s, in which a major part of the population has been involved in pyramid schemes and many Albanians have lost a lot of money. He goes on explaining that this big downfall as a result of people making individual decisions has lowered their self-confidence and feeling that they should be responsible for themselves. He says that it leads to people relying more blindly on politicians and now questioning the decisions made by people in power.

> "Because of 1997 they think 'I failed as an individual. Let's rely once, once again, let's rely on the party.' And now we have history repeating itself. Having the people supporting parties blindly without a care because they consider themselves incompetent, inadequate, like not smart enough to do something for themselves. So, it's trauma after trauma" - Dion (27)

Some interviewees have explained that they believe that the older generation never experienced what it means to be able to be an active citizen and gain an understanding of what democracy entails. Therefore, struggling with their citizenship identity, this is taken over by the youth in similar ways.

"I don't think they have properly dealt with democracy or like they know what they actually mean. So it's very hard for them to transmit the right knowledge to their children" - Maria (19)

As Albania has been a socialist and authoritarian country, the youth in Tirana feels these implications and conceives the current system as a prolonged communism and dictatorship, identifying the older generation not acting upon their rights as citizens and worshiping politicians like idols. Not seeing examples of people speaking up and being active citizens growing up as well as at present, the participants have a difficulty understanding how they can align their wants and ideologies with actual actions and practical applications. In their opinion their parents do not know how to act, which the youth understand considering the political climate the older generation grew up in but leaves the younger people without guidance and a feeling of being lost. They want to engage but oftentimes do not know how to as they have never been shown a successful example. This can be explained through the country's recent history. As former authoritarian regimes discouraged individualization, the state was dominating and determining 'the whole life, both private and public spheres, requiring submission of individuals to the demands of the state' (Halman & Voicu, 2010). Thus, the older generation, for instance, the participants' parents, are used to being limited in their active citizenship and might need time to understand, adapt and embrace new opportunities and practices.

5.3.3 Economic conditions

Economic struggle and lack of job opportunities have been central themes in the interviews. Many have disclosed the belief that due to the mismanagement of resources, corruption, nepotism and inefficiency the country faces in the form of its government, essential institutions and big corporations, there is difficulty finding a well-paid job according to one's skill set. It was communicated that the usual pathway for young adults following the completion of their education is to either start to engage with one of the political parties, find a job in a call centre or work in a cafe. They explained that it is also a reason why so many people leave the country as it is difficult to develop yourself and pursue your own interests.

"Either you work in the administration, which close to 90% of the people are employed through nepotism and like knowing some other people and expressing your support for the current party. And the other part of the people in Albania work in call centers" - (Dion, 27)

"There are 100 accountants that get a degree each year and they're forced to work different jobs other than their profession. No matter how skilled they may be" - (Anton, 20)

The lack of job opportunities as well as nepotism and corruption present in the workplace furthermore decreased the belief in Albania being a modern democracy. This is in accordance with the National Survey (2023), stating that a third of the Albanian youth believes that corruption is the main issue facing the nation, while the other third of young people identified education and employment as main challenges in the country, while around 20% of them saw the economy as the main concern. The analysis supports the theory of the "dark side" of democracy, many young democracies face (Ferrara, 2022). The participants have the impression that there are great challenges in terms of establishing strong democratic institutions, accountability and norms.

While the first two subsections of the results go in line with the theoretical framework and the indicators, the additional emerged themes: *corruption and nepotism*, *generations* and *economic conditions* demonstrate the specific context and regional, historical implications. This all results in the country facing issues such as mass migration outflows and brain drain with 50% of the population wanting to leave (Inc, 2023). It is due to the economic conditions, a lack of work opportunities, low earnings, corruption, and worries about public services (King & Oruc, 2019).

6. Discussion and conclusion

The perception of democratization plays a crucial role in shaping the behaviour of young individuals as active citizens. This research explored the indicators influencing the perception among the youth in Tirana, Albania, and its impact on their engagement as citizens, taking into account the specific context of the country. The findings reveal a complex landscape characterized by challenges, disappointment, and a feeling of disconnection from the political system. The main indicators used for the perception of democratization were *education, media, political ideology* and *personal experiences*. For active citizenship, the focus was on *representative democracy, protest and social change, community life* and *democratic values*. Additional themes emerged from the results are also presented and evaluated. The following section demonstrates interpretations of the results answering the research question, followed by the societal and academic implications.

6.1 *Youths' perception of democracy and active citizenship*

The results show that young people in Tirana, Albania, are sceptical and disenchanted with the democratic process. They consider the nation's political structure a holdover from the former communist dictatorship rather than a contemporary democracy. Their unfavourable image is exacerbated by media prejudice, a lack of openness among political officials, and minor participation in the two-party system. The flaws and corruption of the educational system also influence their dissatisfaction. As a result, the participants feel alienated and disinterested in the political process, which could prevent them from actively participating in it as citizens. While active citizenship refers to citizens being both 'the architects and actors of their own lives' (Davies, 1998), in the case of the youth in Tirana, this statement cannot be applied due to their own perception of limited agency. According to Voltmer et al. (2019), democratization is, in its essence, a transformation of the role and status of the people who become citizens with rights and agency. However, considering Albania is a 'hybrid democracy', the citizens are restricted in their own rights. Although it officially might seem like equal rights are enforced, the youth feel limited in their freedoms. This is related to Hoskins & Mascherini (2009), who state that the essence of citizenship in contemporary society is how people see their rights and obligations, which in this case, is restrained. Hence, the youth might be unable to pursue being an active citizen, regardless of their motivations. The structures affect their behaviour and leave them very cautious, apathetic or semi-engaged. When looking at the six categories of active citizenship introduced by Banaji & Mejias (2020), it clearly shows how the various internal and external factors influence the youth's participation in civic and political life, in this case specifically their perception of democratization and its components. While the majority can be categorized as generally

inactive/passive/disengaged, some are generally active in dutiful and conformist ways, demonstrating their view on citizen responsibilities. This 'type' also forms the broadest category of young people across most European states (Banaji & Mejias, 2020). However, none of the participants has shown being very active (hyper-active) in progressive, pro-democratic and anti-authoritarian ways, nor active in anti-democratic and authoritarian ways. Their stance became apparent, with everyone wishing for a more enhanced democratic system but not knowing how to achieve that without jeopardizing their own and their family's livelihoods or actually achieving substantial results. Although the participants have similar behavioural patterns, thoughts and attitudes, it is still important to acknowledge that they individually make different choices. Some do try to engage in political life by helping with elections or volunteering. In contrast, others are entirely indifferent and decide to live their lives independently from civic and political happenings. It confirms that young people's civic engagement and orientation toward active citizenship are influenced by the interactions of demographic, experiential, and contextual factors, including political events, historical processes, governance, community views, peers, families, schools and media (Kersh et al., 2021). The participant's awareness of their choices and conscious decision-making further underlines the significance of these factors shaping their citizenship. Overall, considering that some are active in some areas, the citizenship among the youth in Tirana can be categorized as relatively 'passive'.

6.2 *Revisiting the conceptual framework*

The conceptual model *Figure 2* depicts the four indicators contributing to the perception of democratization and the four spheres of active citizenship. The results have shown that these were all essential components to measure one's perception, as well as active citizenship behaviour. Additionally, three themes emerged: *economic conditions, generations, corruption & nepotism*. The youth's perspective of democratization is strongly influenced by how they view the state of the economy, corruption, and nepotism. Economic hardships and corruption cause doubt and disappointment with the efficiency and justice of the democratic process. Democracy may suffer from a lack of trust stemming from the belief that the interests of the individual govern more than the common good (Ganesan, 2020). Moreover, equal possibilities for citizens might be hampered by economic disparity and corruption, creating the impression that the democratic system is not entirely effective and that not everyone benefits equally. Besides the ones presented in the theoretical framework, these elements have the power to shape the youth's perception of democratization and influence their willingness to engage as citizens in the political process actively. Lastly, the generational dynamics influenced the perception and level of engagement, which was not accounted for prior to the data collection. The older generation's acceptance and detachment impacted the participant's outlook, and the absence of active citizenship education in families exacerbated their sense of disorientation and uncertainty about their

position. This demonstrates the need for civic education among all citizens, regardless of age and shows that learning for active citizenship is viewed as a lifelong practice (de Weerd et al., 2005). Especially in post-socialist countries, this is important, as people of all ages receive a new set of rights and opportunities while frequently not knowing how to engage with that, and the coming generations are taking over this uncertainty. Although all these factors influence active citizenship, it is very contextual in this case, looking at democracy and what conditions are provided given the history and current political climate.

6.3 *History matters*

The results of this study underline that history does matter. Regardless of living in a globalized world and young people being able to consume a variety of media, having a rather European orientation and values, local recent history significantly impacts the social, economic and political climate. In this case, there is an evident lack of guidance, and as several participants have stated, the entire system feels like a prolonged socialism. This impression prevails; active citizenship becomes similar to the citizenship of youth living in an authoritarian system, namely, relatively passive and restricted. The historical background of the nation's transition and its difficulties in establishing democracy can be linked to the lack of confidence in political institutions and the underrepresentation in the democratic system. The shortcomings and corruption of the educational system, which also have historical roots, have an impact on the civic education and critical thinking abilities of young people. The lingering effects of communism's legacy and educational system have affected young people's perceptions of democracy and their sense of agency in engaging in civic and political life. There is an overall lack of self-confidence, and participants express this feeling of being powerless. Examples, such as the 1997 incident of pyramid schemes, show that it might be generational trauma, with the older generation having little hope in their own abilities and giving that same perception of oneself over to the youth. According to Howard (2003), there are not enough resources and assistance available in post-communist countries to develop a civil society, resulting in decreased social cohesion, limited citizen participation, reduced democratic accountability and hindered overall development. It becomes clear from these results that young people's perspectives and behaviour as citizens of Albania are greatly influenced by their past. Policymakers and other stakeholders must comprehend the historical background to create targeted interventions that address the difficulties young people encounter in actively participating in the political system and doing so as educated and empowered citizens.

6.4 *Youth as agents of change?*

The research furthermore reveals that the youth in Tirana possesses the desire and motivation to be agents of change in their society, expressing strong beliefs in democratic values, including pluralism, freedom of speech and equality. They aspire to see effective positive transformations in Albania, indicating their agency in shaping the future. Further, instances of successful protests and civic actions, such as the nuclear waste protest and student demonstrations for lowering tuition fees, were shaped with pride, demonstrating that youth-led efforts can lead to tangible outcomes. Attempts to create more transparent media outlets and sources were made but shut down by people in power. The research identifies several barriers to actively participating in civil activities. The association of protests with political parties is a significant barrier since it breeds mistrust and apprehension about being linked to political agendas. The link is exacerbated by the belief that protests are, besides some exceptions, ineffective in bringing about significant change, resulting in a lack of trust in these kinds of group initiatives. Furthermore, nepotism and corruption in various fields, including politics and education, develop mistrust and disenchantment with formal institutions, which deters young people from participating in civic life. This poses a definitive danger to democracy, as Winter (2012) has suggested. As democracy and active citizenship are mutually reinforcing to one another, Barrett & Gavente (2010) explain that there is a misconception that states, and strong institutions have to be built first and citizen engagement follows later. They stress that engagement can make positive differences, even in the least democratic settings. Democracy is healthiest if there is participation, and if young people do not engage, this might result in a backward spiral, enabling the concentration of power being centralized and people pursuing their personal interests in anti-democratic ways. However, active and effective citizens who can help to deliver development and democratic gains do not emerge automatically. Intermediary measures of change are essential. Awareness of rights, legal and institutional procedures, knowledge, disposition towards action, organizing skills and the thickness of civic networks contribute to emerging democratic citizenship (Barrett & Gavente, 2010). As mentioned, it is an interplay between a well-functioning democracy and active citizenship. Hence, contributing as active citizens to a healthy democracy facilitates all aspects supporting favourable circumstances for participation. Furthermore, brain drain becomes relevant since young people's lack of optimism for the future of their country and their propensity to leave in search of better chances abroad worsen the loss of talent and potential resources for the country's growth. This phenomenon presents severe obstacles to Albania's development and advancement but is enhanced by the current circumstances young people face in Tirana.

Considering sense of belonging being a crucial aspect and contributor to active citizenship, in the case of the participants, the majority, opposed to many other factors, demonstrated a high sense of belonging. Regardless of the frustration and dissatisfaction, there is a lot of pride and communal love.

There is a high awareness of the country's past and feeling of accomplishment towards Albania overall. Despite some wanting to leave, it is as if they are at the right place at the right time, just do not know how to act upon that. The foundation, in terms of communal understanding and feeling of belonging, is there and shows potential to be built upon. However, there is a lack of belief that other people have the same opinion and ideologies. Based on the results, the assumption arises that there is an insufficient exchange between young people discovering common goals and collectively being active to achieve them. Although the participants display a sense of belonging, perhaps the missing collective action and dialogue is what Kersh et al., (2012) have identified the youth not being deeply ingrained in their communities.

6.5 *Implications*

The research reveals that many believe Albania is not ready to become an EU member state. The findings suggest that the country faces numerous challenges in its political institutions and governance, as indicated by the categorization of Albania as a hybrid democracy regime. In such a system, while regular elections are held, the institutions struggle to fulfil the core components of a liberal democracy. This deficiency furthermore raises concerns about the potential risk to democracy in the country, making it even more crucial to address the issues of citizenship participation. Based on the results, there should be a central focus on enhancing civic education. Several studies have proven that civic education is the key to the development of a strong civic society, resulting in significant citizenship and the promotion of democratic values (Fesnic, 2016). In order to be better prepared to engage in the democratic process and contribute positively to societal change, not only the youth, but every citizen, should be equipped with knowledge and critical thinking skills. An understanding of their rights, legal procedures and the importance of being active, are all essential pieces to achieve that. Furthermore, civic education does not have to be done in a formal way and can be achieved through different channels. Bridging the gap between generations is crucial for fostering a culture of active citizenship (Denemark et al., 2016). Encouraging dialogue and understanding between older and younger generations can promote a collective commitment to democratic ideals and values. Moreover, addressing the historical legacies of the communist era can contribute to shaping a more conducive environment for participation. Through conversations, recognizing the impact of the past on the youth's perceptions can aid the development of interventions that resonate with their aspirations and experiences. Based on the results, meaningful representation is essential. Platforms for youth voices to be heard in decision-making processes should be established, as these will instil an enriched sense of belonging and ownership (Menser, 2018). The youth have to be encouraged and empowered to take

ownership of their future. Providing opportunities for them to initiate and lead civic action will enhance their sense of agency and demonstrate that their contributions can lead to tangible results. The youth in Tirana wishes to be acknowledged and heard by local politicians. It is clear that there has to be increased local investment into youth initiatives, instead of every programme being financed by foreign embassies and organizations. Being valued, heard and included is the key.

In order to realise and enhance active citizenship by youth in Albania, a multi-faceted approach is required. Policymakers, educators, civil society organisations, and communities must collaborate to create an environment that contributes to and supports youth engagement. This could be done by investing in youth programs. Allocating resources to youth-focused programs that encourage civic engagement and participation will empower young individuals to shape their communities actively. While there are already projects as such, for instance Tirana being the European Youth Capital, this should emphasise substantial practical opportunities to engage. Moreover, implementing policy reforms that promote accountability and transparency in the political system can build trust and confidence in formal institutions and is very necessary in this case. Launching public awareness campaigns highlight the importance of active citizenship and the potential impact of collective action can inspire young individuals to get involved. If access to information about government policies, programs and opportunities is improved, civic engagement can be increased (*The Psychology of Citizenship and Civic Engagement*, 2016). As the results have shown, the participants feel like there are limited economic opportunities. The youth's economic struggles should be addressed, providing avenues for entrepreneurship and meaningful employment. Drawing on international best practices, such as investigating trajectories of other post-communist countries, and collaborations can offer valuable insights and support in fostering youth engagement and democratic values. Central issues, such as media freedom, should be publicly addressed. Protecting these freedoms and promoting unbiased reporting can create a more informed and engaged civil society.

6.6 *Answering the research question*

Looking back at the initial research question: "*How does the perception of the democratization process influence young people's citizenship in Albania?*", the research has shed light on the significant impact of the democratization process on young people's engagement. Through an in-depth qualitative study, the findings underscore the relevance of historical processes and contextual factors in shaping young people's outlook on democracy and their active citizenship. A complex interplay between political structures and individual agency has been uncovered. Young people in Tirana exhibit

scepticism and disappointment with the current political system. The system is characterized by institutions and political figures not being accountable and transparents, the media being corrupt and biased and only having limited successful civic engagement and involvement in decision-making processes. All these aspects contribute to the hindrance of the development of active and informed citizens. The youth is overall relatively apathetic and usually only engages in conformist and dutiful ways. Despite these barriers, the research also reveals that young people in Tirana are driven by the desire to be agents of change in their society. They express strong beliefs in freedom and democratic values such as freedom of speech and expression, pluralism and equality. However, their engagement is constrained by several factors, including the association with political parties, corruption, nepotism, and overall being unheard. All these factors together pose a big risk for the development of Albania to a modern democracy. Without active and engaged citizens, the dark sides of democracy can arise. While being mutually reinforcing, active citizenship and democracy both have significant potential to improve. However, more accountability and transparency among politics and other spheres of society must be created, as well as increased opportunities for youth to reach their potential. This can be done by emphasizing the development of favourable policies, civic education and channels for youth to participate meaningfully.

This study contributes to the literature on youth engagement and democratization by providing insights into the specific challenges faced by young people in post-communist countries. By examining the perceptions and behaviours of young citizens, a nuanced understanding of their agency and constraints within the political system is offered. Importantly, this study amplifies the voices of young people in Tirana, providing them with a platform to express their perspectives, challenges and aspirations. By taking their experiences and opinions into account, policymakers can design policies and initiatives that are more inclusive, representative and responsive to the needs of the youth population. In conclusion, the impact of the perception of democratization on active citizenship among Tirana's youth is profound and multi-faceted. Addressing the barriers to their engagement and fostering a culture of democratic values and participation is essential for building a vibrant and inclusive democracy in post-socialist Albania. By empowering young people to be active citizens, policymakers can pave the way for a brighter and more prosperous future for the country as a whole.

7. Limitations

The study's exclusive emphasis on university-educated youth in Tirana results in its limited generalizability. As residents of Albania's centre of culture, politics, and economy, they constitute a specific segment of the country's youth population. Due to differing socioeconomic and cultural conditions, youngsters in other regions — especially those in rural areas — may have very different experiences and perceptions. Consequently, it is important to use caution when drawing broader conclusions from the findings as they might not be immediately applicable to the youth in other circumstances.

Both the data analysis and the evaluation of participant replies are intrinsically subjective procedures. The interpretation of the data may be influenced by the researchers' personal prejudices and preconceptions, which could result in confirmation bias. Even though bias was reduced as much as possible through rigorous methodology and reflexivity, it is crucial to acknowledge its presence. Additionally, the study was done in a specified period of time. Hence, it captured the youth's perceptions and involvement at that exact time. However, over time, a variety of events, laws, and cultural shifts may have an impact on the attitudes and actions associated with active citizenship. Therefore, it's possible that the study's conclusions don't accurately reflect the dynamics of young engagement over time. The main emphasis of the study was how youth active citizenship is influenced by democratization. Although this is an important component, their engagement may also be shaped by other variables, including family dynamics, peer influence, and individual financial circumstances. Future studies could examine how these extra components interact to develop a more thorough picture. The sample consisted of young people with a university education, which may not be a representative group of all young people in Tirana. Different viewpoints and degrees of engagement may exist among those who have not pursued higher education or come from marginalized backgrounds; which were not fully captured in the study. Moreover, participants might have felt pressured to answer in a way that would be socially acceptable, giving the impression that they are more politically conscious or involved than they actually are. The authenticity of self-reported data and the accurate portrayal of youth participation levels may be impacted by this bias.

Despite these limitations, the study offers crucial insights into how young people in Tirana view democracy in Albania and their capacity to effect change. It creates opportunities for further research and advocates for all-encompassing strategies to promote young involvement and create an atmosphere that is more inclusive and democratic. Refining future research and policy initiatives to better address the obstacles young people encounter in actively participating in shaping their society can be aided by acknowledging these limitations.

8. Suggestions for further research

While this research offers valuable insights, there are numerous directions for future studies to broaden our comprehension of this complex and evolving topic:

Comparing studies that include youth from different Albanian regions and other post-communist countries would offer a wider perspective on the impact of historical and contextual factors. Comparisons with countries that have different political systems and democratization trajectories can clarify the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Albanian youth. Furthermore, considering the time limitation of this study, a longitudinal research would allow for an exhaustive exploration of how perceptions and citizenship among young people evolve over time. By tracking significant changes in attitude and behaviours, it would be possible to identify key turning points and potential triggers for increased engagement. Furthermore, it would be possible to explore whether some indicators have a bigger weight than others. Additionally, studying successful youth-led organizations and grassroot movements could provide valuable lessons for creating an enabling environment for youth-led change. Identifying the specific factors, in the Albanian context, that contribute to the effectiveness and sustainability of such initiatives would inform strategies for supporting youth activism.

9. References

Abs, H. J. (2006). *Indicators on Active Citizenship for Democracy—The Social, Cultural and Economic Domain. Paper by Order of the Council of Europe for the CRELL-Network on Active Citizenship for Democracy at the European Commission's Joint Research Center in Ispra, Italy*. CRELL-Network on Active Citizenship for Democracy.

Albania. (2023). In *The World Factbook*. Central Intelligence Agency. https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/albania/

Albania: Media freedom in decline due to lack of pluralism and transparency.(2022,November18) ARTICLE 19. https://www.article19.org/resources/albania-mediafreedom-in-decline/

Albania—Average age of the population 1950-2015. (n.d.). Statista. Retrieved December 2, 2022, from https://www.statista.com/statistics/444044/average-age-of-the-population-in-albania/

Albania—Languages | Britannica. (n.d.). Retrieved December 2, 2022, from https://www.britannica.com/place/Albania

Anketa-tremujore-e-forcave-të-punës-t1-2022.pdf. (n.d.). Retrieved July 5, 2023, from https://www.instat.gov.al/media/10081/anketa-tremujore-e-forcave-t%C3%AB-pun%C3%ABs-t1-2022.pdf

Aronson, R. E., Lovelace, K., Hatch, J. W., & Whitehead, T. L. (2013). StrengtheningCommunities and the Roles of Individuals in Building Community Life. In B. S. Levy & V. W. Sidel(Eds.), *Social Injustice and Public Health* (p. 0). Oxford University Press.https://doi.org/10.1093/med/9780199939220.003.0024

Badescu, G., Uslaner, E., & Sum, P. (2004). Civil Society Development and Democratic Values in Romania and Moldova. *East European Politics and Societies*, *18*, 316–342. https://doi.org/10.2307/1520426

Banaji, S., & Mejias, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Youth Active Citizenship in Europe: Ethnographies of Participation*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-35794-8

Bastien, S., & Holmarsdottir, H. B. (2017). *Youth as Architects of Social Change: Global Efforts to Advance Youth-Driven Innovation* (1–1 online resource (XXIV, 353 pages 14 illustrations, 10

illustrations in color.) : online resource). Springer International Publishing.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66275-6

Bekemans, D. L., & Chair, J. M. (n.d.). *INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE, DEMOCRACY & ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP in EUROPE*.

Bennardo, G. (2019). *Attitude Towards Fridays for Future*.

Bhattacharyya, S., & Hodler, R. (2015). Media freedom and democracy in the fight against corruption. *European Journal of Political Economy*, *39*, 13–24) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2015.03.004

Boix, C. (n.d.). *DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRATIZATION*.

Brooks, R. M., & Holford, J. A. K. (2009). Citizenship, learning and education: Themes and issues. *Citizenship Studies*, *13*(2), 85–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621020902749027

Christie, S. (2020).Youth as Subjects and Agents of Artistic Research: A Comparison of Youth Engagement Models. *Theatre Research in Canada*, *41*(2), 308–312. https://doi.org/10.3138/tric.41.2.f08

Citizenship in Britain: Values, Participation and Democracy. (n.d.). Retrieved March 9, 2023, fromhttps://webebscohoscom.proxy.library.uu.nl/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzE4M TgyOV9fQU41?sid=ec43fbda-c5b9-416be389979b39988ef@redis&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_1&rid=0

Civic Education. (2022). https://doi.org/10.4324/9781138609877-REE170-1

Civic Responsibility and Higher Education:, edited by Thomas Ehrlich. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 2000. 403p. $34.50. ISBN 1-57356-289-0. LC99-057257. (2000). *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *26*(5), 367–367. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0099-1333(00)00148-8

Colombo, E., & Rebughini, P. (Eds.). (2019). *: Coping with Complexity and Ambivalence*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429198267

Coppedge, M. (2012). *Democratization and Research Methods*. Cambridge University Press.

Crush, J. (2001). The Dark Side of Democracy: Migration, Xenophobia and Human Rights in South Africa. *International Migration*, *38*(6), 103–133. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2435.00145

Davies, I. (1998). Citizenship Education in Europe. *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education*, *3*(3), 127–140. https://doi.org/10.2304/csee.1998.3.3.127

Delli Carpini, M. X. (2000). Gen.com: Youth, Civic Engagement, and the New Information Environment. *Political Communication*, *17*(4), 341–349 https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600050178942

Denemark, D., Mattes, R., & Niemi, R. G. (2016). *Growing up Democratic: Does It Make a Difference?* Lynne Rienner Publishers. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=4675540

Doyle, E. (2019). *Media bias and the role of the press* (First edition, 1–1 online resource (125 pages)).GreenhavenPublishing.https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=s te&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN= 1868991

Earl, J., Maher, T. V., & Elliott, T. (2017). Youth, activism, and social movements. *Sociology Compass*, *11*(4), e12465. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12465

Elections in Albania: 2021 Parliamentary Elections | IFES - The International Foundation for

Electoral Systems. (2021, April 20). https://www.ifes.org/tools-resources/faqs/elections-albania-2021 parliamentary-elections

Feldman, L., Hart, P. S., Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., & Roser-Renouf, C. (2017). Do Hostile Media Perceptions Lead to Action? The Role of Hostile Media Perceptions, Political Efficacy, and Ideology in Predicting Climate Change Activism. *Communication Research*, *44*(8), 1099 1124. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650214565914

Ferrara, F. (2022). Institutional Decay: The Logic of Self-Undermining Processes. In *The Development of Political Institutions* (pp. 61–108). University of Michigan Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12013333.6

Fesnic, F. N. (2016). Can Civic Education Make a Difference for Democracy? Hungary and Poland Compared. *Political Studies*, *64*(4), 966–978. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12215

Five Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry. (2017, August 9). SAGE Publications Inc. https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/creswell

Freedom House. (2014). *Nations in Transit 2014: Democratization from Central Europe to Eurasia.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=1826788

Ganesan, N. (2020). *International Perspectives on Democratization and Peace*. Emerald Publishing Limited. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=6373751

Gardinier, M. P. (2012). Agents of Change and Continuity: The Pivotal Role of Teachers in Albanian Educational Reform and Democratization. *Comparative Education Review*, *56*(4), 659–683. https://doi.org/10.1086/667396

Gëdeshi & King. (2021). The Albanian scientific diaspora: Can the brain drain be reversed? *Migration and Development*, *10*(1), 19–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/21632324.2019.1677072

Giansiracusa, N. (2021). *How Algorithms Create and Prevent Fake News: Exploring the Impacts of Social Media, Deepfakes, GPT-3, and More*. Apress. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4842 7155-1

Gould, C. C. (2004). *Globalizing Democracy and Human Rights*. Cambridge University Press. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=266601

Guinote, A., & Vescio, T. K. (2010). *The Social Psychology of Power*. Guilford Publications. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=515883

Halla, B. (2022, April 21). *Albania remains 'hybrid democracy' without credible political opposition*. www.Euractiv.Com. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/albania-remains hybrid-democracy-wit hout-credible-political-opposition/

Halman, L., & Voicu, M. (2010). *Mapping Value Orientations in Central and Eastern Europe*. BRILL. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=737711

Haynes, J. (2011). *Routledge Handbook of Democratization*. Taylor & Francis Group. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=958169

Heckman, J. J. (2010). Selection Bias and Self-Selection. In S. N. Durlauf & L. E. Blume (Eds.), *Microeconometrics* (pp. 242–266). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230280816_29

Hindley, A., & Font, X. (2018). The use of projective techniques to circumvent socially desirable 70
responses or reveal the subconscious. In *Handbook of Research Methods for Tourism and Hospitality Management* (pp. 202–211). Edward Elgar Publishing.
https://www.elgaronline.com/display/edcoll/9781785366277/9781785366277.00023.xml

Hobbs, R., & McGee, S. (2014). Teaching about Propaganda: An Examination of the Historical Roots of Media Literacy. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, *6*(2), 56–66.

Hoskins B.L. & Mascherini M. (2009). Measuring active citizenship through the development of a composite indicator. *Social Indicators Research*, *90*(3), 459–488.
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-008-9271-2

Howard, M. M. (2003). *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

Hu, F., & Lee, I.-C. (2018). Democratic Systems Increase Outgroup Tolerance Through Opinion Sharing and Voting: An International Perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *9*, 2151.
https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02151

Hwang, S., & Kim, J. (n.d.). *UN and SDGs: A Handbook for Youth*.

Ilirjani, A., Elbasani, A., & Peshkopia, R. (2006). *Albanian Journal of Politics: 2005*. Globic Press.

Inc, G. (2023, January 24). *Nearly 900 Million Worldwide Wanted to Migrate in 2021*. Gallup.Com.
https://news.gallup.com/poll/468218/nearly-900-million-worldwide-wanted-migrate-2021.asp

Infographic: How Voter Turnout Varies Around the World. (2022, April 11). Statista Infographics.
https://www.statista.com/chart/15996/share-of-the-voting-age-population-that-voted-in-the-most-recent-national-election

Iversen, T., & Soskice, D. (2019). Democracy and Prosperity: Reinventing Capitalism through a Turbulent Century. In *Democracy and Prosperity*. Princeton University Press.
https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691188874

Jalvarado. (2020, December 18). *Albania: NDI public opinion research reveals how to strengthen public engagement in politics.* [Text]. NDI. https://www.ndi.org/publications/albania-ndi public-opinion-research-reveals-how-strengthen -public-engagement-politics

Jamatia, P. L. (2022). The Role of Youth in Combating Social Inequality: Empowering the Next Generation. *Journal of Language and Linguistics in Society(JLLS) ISSN 2815-0961*, *2*(06), Article 06. https://doi.org/10.55529/jlls.26.11.20

Johnson, D. (2007). "This Is Political!" Negotiating the Legacies of the First School-Based Gay Youth Group. *Children, Youth and Environments*, *17*(2), 380–387.

Kay, E., Tisdall, M., Pitti, I., & Bruselius-Jensen, M. (2021). Revisiting young people's participation and looking ahead: Concluding remarks. In M. Bruselius-Jensen, I. Pitti, & K. Tisdall (Eds.), *Young People's Participation: Revisiting Youth and Inequalities in Europe* (p. 0). Policy Press. https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447345411.003.0017

Keating, A., Ortloff, D. H., & Philippou, S. (2009). Citizenship education curricula: The changes and challenges presented by global and European integration. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *41*(2), 145–158. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270802485063

Keil, S. (2013). Europeanization, State-building and democratization in the Western Balkans. *Nationalities Papers*, *41*(3), 343–353. https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2013.768977

Kera, G., & Hysa, A. (2020). Influencing votes, winning elections: Clientelist practices and private funding of electoral campaigns in Albania. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, *20*(1), 123–139. https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2019.1709698

Kersh, N., Toiviainen, H., Pitkänen, P., & Zarifis, G. K. (2021). *Young adults and active citizenship: Towards social inclusion through adult education* (1–1 online resource (xv, 182 pages) : illustrations). Springer. https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=6567013

King, R., & Oruc, N. (2019). Editorial Introduction: Migration in the Western Balkans – Trends and Challenges. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, *21*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2018.1532682

Larson, R. B. (2019). Controlling social desirability bias. *International Journal of Market Research*, *61*(5), 534–547. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470785318805305

Letki, N. (2004). Socialization for Participation? Trust, Membership, and Democratization in East Central Europe. *Political Research Quarterly*, *57*(4), 665–679. https://doi.org/10.1177/106591290405700414

Li, H., Tang, M., & Huhe, N. (2016). How does democracy influence citizens' perceptions of government corruption? A cross-national study. *Democratization*, *23*(5), 892–918. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1039995

Maier, H., & Schäfer, M. (2004). *Totalitarianism and Political Religions*. Psychology Press.

Malone,C., & Fiske, S. T. (2013). *The Human Brand: How We Relate to People, Products, and Companies.* (1–1 online resource (211 pages)). Wiley. https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1388816

Margariti, G. (2021). TOWARD AN ECLECTIC APPROACH FOR DEVELOPING A POSSIBLE THEORY OF DEMOCRACY IN ALBANIA. *Anglisticum*, *10*(6), 11–17.

Masiello, F. R. (2018). *The Senses of Democracy: Perception, Politics, and Culture in Latin America*. University of Texas Press. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=5264867

Medushevskiy, A. (2021). Global Constitutionalism and Legal Fragmentation: The Populist Backslide in Central and Eastern Europe. *Studia Iuridica Lublinensia*, *30*(4), 393–440. https://doi.org/10.17951/sil.2021.30.4.393-440

Menser, M. (2018). *We Decide!: Theories and Cases in Participatory Democracy*. Temple University Press. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=5211337

Michels, A., & De Graaf, L. (2010). Examining Citizen Participation: Local Participatory Policy Making and Democracy. *Local Government Studies*, *36*(4), 477–491. https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2010.494101

Morgan, G. S., & Wisneski, D. C. (2017). The Structure of Political Ideology Varies Between and Within People: Implications for Theories About Ideology's Causes. *Social Cognition*, *35*(4), 395–414. https://doi.org/10.1521/soco.2017.35.4.395

Morlino, L., & Sadurski, W. (2010). *Democratization and the European Union: Comparing Central and Eastern European Post-Communist Countries*. Taylor & Francis Group. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=530332

Morton, R., Tyran, J.-R., & Wengström, E. (2011). *Income and Ideology: How Personality Traits,*

Cognitive Abilities, and Education Shape Political Attitudes (SSRN Scholarly Paper 1768822). https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1768822

Mungiu-Pippidi, A. (2006). Democratization Without Decommunization in the Balkans. *Orbis*, *50*(4), 641–655. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2006.07.005

Murati, R. (2015). Conception and Definition of the Democratization of Education. *Journal of Education and Practice*, *6*(30), 173–183.

National Survey: Young People and Politics in Albania. (n.d.). Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Retrieved March 12, 2023, from https://www.wfd.org/what-we do/resources/national-survey-young-people-and-politics-albani a

Parker, C. (2016). *Peacebuilding, Citizenship, and Identity*. SensePublishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-247-9

Peacebuilding in the Balkans | SpringerLink. (n.d.). Retrieved January 8, 2023, from https://link springer-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-14424-1_1

Pinnavaia, L., & Berisha, E. (2021). The Role of Cross-Border Territorial Development. Evidences from Albania. In E. Berisha, G. Cotella, & A. Solly (Eds.), *Governing Territorial Development in the Western Balkans: Challenges and Prospects of Regional Cooperation* (pp. 309–332). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-72124 4_15

PM Rama at "Global Leader Woman" Summit | Albanian Embassy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (n.d.). Retrieved March 16, 2023, from https://ambasadat.gov.al/saudi-arabia/en/pm-rama global-leader-woman-summit

Pohl, R. F. (2012). *Cognitive Illusions: A Handbook on Fallacies and Biases in Thinking, Judgement and Memory*. Psychology Press.

Print, M., & Lange, D. (Eds.). (2013). *Civic Education and Competences for Engaging Citizens in Democracies*. SensePublishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-172-6

Rebolj, A. B. (2013). The case study as a type of qualitative research. *Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies*, 28–43.

Representative democracy | European Youth Forum. (n.d.). Retrieved March 12, 2023, from
https://www.youthforum.org/topics/representative-democracy

Ringen, S. (2009). *What democracy is for: On freedom and moral government* (1–1 online resource
(xiii, 319 pages)). Princeton University Press. http://site.ebrary.com/id/10364761

Rodrik, D. (2021). Why Does Globalization Fuel Populism? Economics, Culture, and the Rise of
Right-Wing Populism. *Annual Review of Economics*, *13*(1), 133–170.
https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-070220-032416

Ruschmann, P., Hudson, D. L., & Marzilli, A. (2012). *Media bias* (Second edition, 1–1 online
resource (128 pages) : illustrations). Chelsea House. http://site.ebrary.com/id/10559422

Schlozman, K. L., Verba, S., & Brady, H. E. (2010). Weapon of the Strong? Participatory Inequality
and the Internet. *Perspectives on Politics*, *8*(2), 487–509.
https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710001210

Schugurensky, D. (2006). "This Is Our School of Citizenship": Informal Learning in Local
Democracy. *Counterpoints*, *249*, 163–182.

Seiger, F.-K., Timmerman, C., Salazar, N. B., & Wets, J. (Eds.). (2020). *Migration at Work*. Leuven
University Press. https://doi.org/10.11116/9789461663443

Sianko, N., Small, M. A., Kapllanaj, M., Fino, E., & Mece, M. (2022). Who Will Sustain a Culture of
Democracy in Post-Communist States? Examining Patterns of Democratic Competence
among Youth in Albania and Belarus. *Social Indicators Research*, *162*(1), 351–375.
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-021-02840-2

So What Difference Does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement - GSDRC. (2011,
January 5)https://gsdrc.org/document-library/so-what-difference-does-it-make-mapping-the
outcomes-ofcitizen-engagement/, https://gsdrc.org/document-library/so-what-difference-does
it-make-mapping-the-outcomes-o f-citizen-engagement/

Sobirovich, T. B. (2022). National and universal principles of democracy. *Asian Journal of Research
in Social Sciences and Humanities*, *12*(1), 334–338. https://doi.org/10.5958/2249
7315.2022.00064.8

Sofo, S. (2016). Democratization of Education in Emerging Countries. *Journal of Interdisciplinary
Education*, *15*.

Sorensen, G. (2007). *Democracy and Democratization: Processes and Prospects in a Changing* 75
     World, Third Edition. Taylor & Francis Group.
     http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=634503

Spaiser, V., Ranganathan, S., Mann, R. P., & Sumpter, D. J. T. (2014). The Dynamics of Democracy,
     Development and Cultural Values. *PLOS ONE*, *9*(6), e97856.
     https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0097856

Spar, D., & Dail, J. (2002). Of Measurement and Mission: Accounting for Performance in
     Non-Governmental Organizations. *Chicago Journal of International Law*, *3*, 171.

Taylor, A. (2023, March 13). *Albanian population fell by 1.3%, mainly youth, in 2022*.
     Www.Euractiv.Com. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/albanian-population
     fell-by-1-3-mainly-youth -in-2022/

Tema, A. (2023). The War Against Corruption in Albania. *ESI Preprints*, *18*, 455–455.   *The Dark
     Side of Democracy | IFES - The International Foundation for Electoral Systems*. (2022,
     December 9). https://www.ifes.org/publications/dark-side-democracy

*The Power of 1.8 Billion Young People: 'State of the World Population 2014' Launch | Wilson
     Center*. (n.d.). Retrieved August 10, 2023, from https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/the
     power-18-billion-young-people-state-theworld-population-2014-launch

The Psychology of Citizenship and Civic Engagement. (n.d.). Retrieved January 18, 2023, from
     https://web-s-ebscohost.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzg4Mz
     I3Ml9fQU41?sid=7eae945d-cd8e-45d4-b0e0-cd448e2cd8fc@redis&vid=0&format=EB&lpid
     =lp_1&rid=0

Tirana: European Youth Capital 2022! | European Youth Portal. (n.d.). Retrieved February 6, 2023,
     from https://youth.europa.eu/news/tirana-european-youth-capital-2022_en

Torcal, M., & Montero, J. R. (2006). *Political Disaffection in Contemporary Democracies: Social
     Capital, Institutions and Politics*. Routledge.

Tov, W., & Diener, E. (2009). The Well-Being of Nations: Linking Together Trust, Cooperation, and
     Democracy. In E. Diener (Ed.), *The Science of Well-Being: The Collected Works of Ed Diener*
     (pp. 155–173). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-2350-6_7

Vaismoradi, M., Jones, J., Turunen, H., & Snelgrove, S. (2016). Theme development in qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, *6*(5), p100. https://doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v6n5p100

Voltmer, K., Christensen, C., Neverla, I., Stremlau, N., Thomass, B., Vladisavljević, N., & Wasserman, H. (Eds.). (2019). *Media, Communication and the Struggle for Democratic Change: Case Studies on Contested Transitions*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16748-6

Webster, C. (2008). Democratization and human rights in Cyprus: Objective measures and the populations' perceptions. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, *8*(1), 33–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/14683850802012164

Winter, M. de. (2012). *Socialization and civil society: How parents, teachers and others could foster a democratic way of life* (1–1 online resource). SensePublishers. http://site.ebrary.com/id/10640304

Youth and technology: 5 ways we're changing the world | United Nations Development Programme. (n.d.). UNDP. Retrieved March 16, 2023, from https://www.undp.org/blog/youth-and-technology-5-ways-were-changing-world

Youth Participation to Sustain Peace during Electoral Processes | United Nations Development Programme. (n.d.). UNDP. Retrieved July 30, 2023, from https://www.undp.org/publications/youth-participation-sustain-peace-during-electoral-processes

Zajda, J. I. (2015). *Globalisation, ideology and politics of education reforms* (1–1 online resource). Springer.http://www.dawsonera.com/depp/reader/protected/external/AbstractView/S978331195063

10. Appendices

Appendix A - Interview guide

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Your perspectives and insights are greatly valued and appreciated. The purpose of this interview is to gather information about your experiences as a young person in Albania in regards to the democratization process and your sense of citizenship. With the democratization process I mean the transformation from a non-democratic political system to a democratic one, which is characterized by elements such as free elections, freedom of speech, government accountability and transparency. This research is being conducted for my Master's thesis at the University of Utrecht and in the field of International Development studies.

I want to reassure you that your participation in the interview is entirely voluntary and that you are free to leave at any point. Please be aware that anything you say during the interview will be kept private and that you will stay anonymous. The final report will not contain any personal information.

In order to accurately collect and analyze all of your comments, the interview will also be recorded with your consent. The recording will only be used for this reason, and after the transcription is finished, it will be deleted.

The length of the interview will be between 30 and 60 minutes.

Once again, I appreciate your willingness to participate in this interview. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to let me know. Also, if you are interested in reading the end result I can share it with you once it is done.

Opening questions

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself, including your age and educational background?
2. What would you consider your most important personal values? To what extent do you believe that these are in line with the most prominent values of Albania?

Main questions

Democratization

Education

1. In your opinion, how important is education for the democratization process?

2. Has your educational background influenced your understanding of democracy and the democratization process in Albania?

3. Have you received any formal education on democracy and democratization? If yes, can you tell me more about it?

Political ideology

4. What does democracy mean to you?

5. What is your political ideology? How does your political ideology influence your understanding of democracy and democratization?

6. Are there any specific political ideologies or parties that you believe are more supportive of democratization in Albania?

Media coverage

7. How do you consume news and media in Tirana? Do you read newspapers, watch TV news, or follow social media?

8. Do you believe that the media coverage of political events in Albania is fair and impartial?

9. Have you ever encountered any biased or misleading news related to democratization in Albania? Can you give an example?

Economic situation

10. How do you think democratization and the economic status of a country are related?

11. Do you believe that a better economic situation can lead to more democratization? Vise Versa?

12. Have you or anyone you know experienced any economic hardship that you believe could be addressed by a more democratic government?

Personal experience

13. Have you ever had any personal experiences that have influenced your perception of democratization in Albania?

14. Can you think of a positive example you or someone you know experienced as an outcome of the democratization process in Albania?

15. Can you think of a negative example you or someone you know experienced as an outcome of the democratization process in Albania?

Active citizenship

1. What does it mean being an Albanian citizen to you?

Representative democracy

1. Have you ever voted in an election in Albania? If so, what motivated you to vote?
2. Are you a member of a political party or organization in Albania? If yes, can you tell me more about your involvement?
3. How do you believe the political system in Albania can be improved to better represent the needs and interests of its citizens?

Community life

4. Have you ever volunteered or donated money to a community organization in Albania? If yes, can you tell me more about your experience and your motivation?
5. How important do you believe it is for young people to give back to their communities?

Democratic values

6. What are the most important democratic values for you?
7. Have you ever participated in a protest or demonstration in Albania that were related to these values?
8. How do you believe Albania can better protect and promote these values for all of its citizens?

Social change and protest

9. Have you ever participated in boycotts, demonstrations, petitions? If yes, can you tell me more about this experience? What was your motivation?
10. How effective do you believe boycotts and protests are in promoting social change and political reform in Albania?
11. What are some of the major issues or challenges that you believe young people in Albania are facing today?

Closing questions

1. In what ways do you think society can encourage young people to be more engaged in political and civic participation?
2. Do you believe that young people in Tirana are actively engaged in promoting democratization? If yes, how?

3. Reflecting on the interview and what we have spoken about, how do you think the democratization process promotes or hinders your personal values you have mentioned in the beginning?
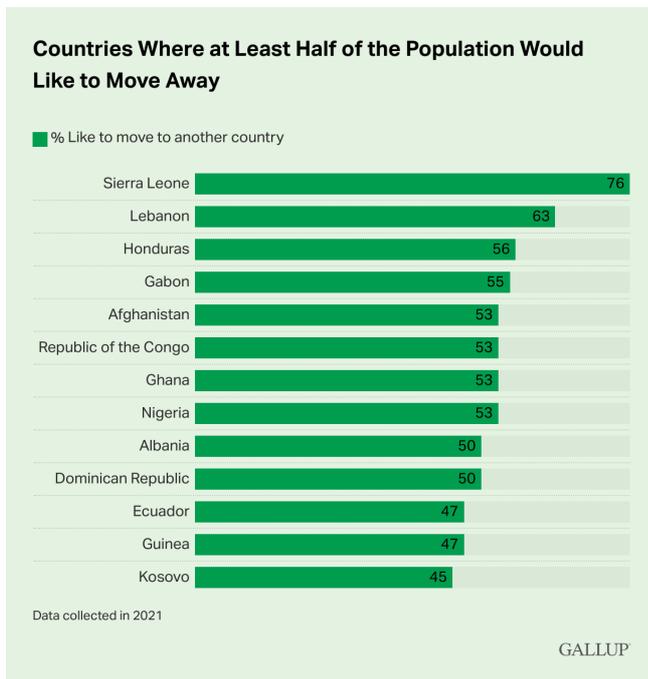
Appendix B - Figures

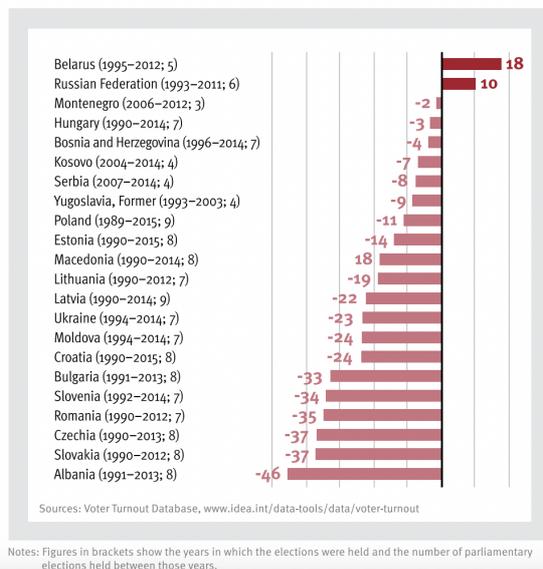*Figure 4.* Countries where at least half of the population would like to move away (Inc, 2023)

Figure 5. Differences in turnout between first election after the end of cold war and the most recent election (*Infographic*, 2022)
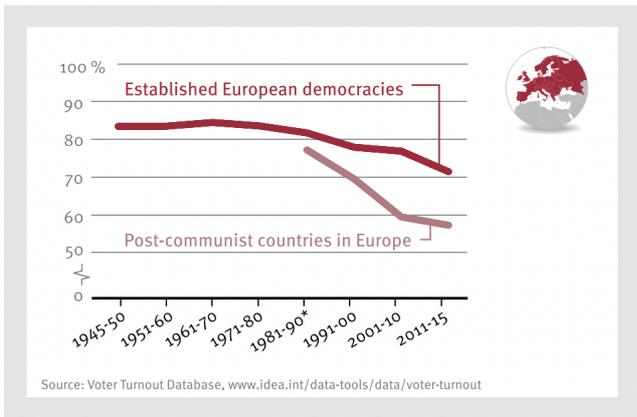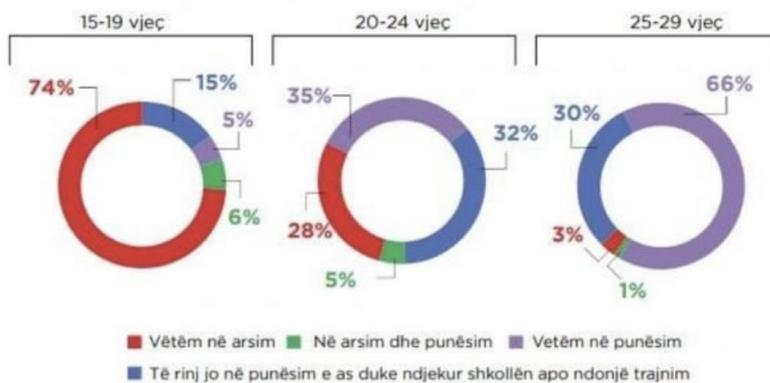
Figure 5. Voter turnout in Europe, 1945–2015

Figure 7. Voter turnout established democracies vs post-communist countries in Europe (*Infographic*, 2022)

Figure 8. Map of participants' hometowns (*Onestopmap, 2021*)

Figure 9. Proportions of young people studying, working, doing both or neither

Red - Education
Blue - Neither education, nor work
Purple - Work
Green - Work and education

(*Anketa-Tremujore-e-Forcave-Të-Punës-T1-2022.Pdf*, n.d.)

Appendix C - Table: typology of citizenship

Typology of active citizenship (Banaji & Mejias, 2020)

Active citizenship typology	Explanation
Generally disenfranchised/excluded	Results from an intersection of internal or external factors (trauma, illness, abuse, addiction, extreme poverty, geographic displacement, other social constraints such as gender-based violence). No matter how developed they may appear to be, all of Europe's member states have groups of young people like these. Many of them are aware of their exclusion but lack the resources or motivation to fight it.
Generally inactive/passive/disengaged	Results from a combination of internal and external factors (which does not exclude sporadic civic participation like voting or joining organizations or gangs), and it may also equate to local norms and subcultures conformity as these are rarely challenged. Some people just "can't be bothered," while others can be thought of as being on "stand-by" until a problem that affects them directly emerges. Between this type and the first type, there is a lot of overlap.
Generally active in dutiful and conformist ways	Adhering to the civic and political roles and rules established by authorities in school, family, community, religious leaders, government, and mainstream media—as well as, on occasion, to the rules and roles imposed by peers: gangs/sport groups) can also occasionally involve being passive/standby/silent and occasionally posing doubts about or making criticisms of a certain issue. This 'type' forms the broadest category of young people across most EU member states
Generally active in anti-democratic and authoritarian ways	Challenging the logic of democratic rights as well as the concept of tolerance and equality, one questions the traditional roles and regulations supported by pro-democratic non-conformists, mainstream schools, government agencies, and mainstream media. Online trolling, hate speech directed at women or members of racial, sexual, or religious minorities, as well as the propagation of hate speech through alternative media—actions that may or may not be violent or threatening—are frequent examples. There are both religious and secular motivations. People in this category typically take action against specific 'others' or 'out-groups' in order to strengthen the political power and rights of the in-group's members.
Generally active in pro-democratic, anti authoritarian and non-conformist way	Challenging the traditional roles and laws supported by family, school, government, and mainstream

	media. Young people who frequently remain silent, stand by, or conformist on one level (such as gender relations in families or hierarchies in educational institutions) while being critical and active on another (such as copyright, trade union movements, the environment, or police violence) fall into this category. This category also includes long-term, studied civil disobedience, satire, creative and fun participation, unlawful acts and spectacular stunts that challenge inequality. This generation of young people frequently has subculture-related group identities.
Generally very active (hyper-active) in progressive, pro-democratic and anti-authoritarian ways	Those who aim to fundamentally alter society, institutions, and interpersonal interactions in order to make them more equitable and balanced. Youth who are concerned about issues of justice, fairness, and equity on various levels (personal, familial, community, workplace, locality, national, and global) and with intersecting factors like gender, race, ethnicity, language, age, faith, religion, disability, and social class fall into this category. These young people are well-informed about a wide range of subjects and advocate for change by relying more on international norms and human decency than on national laws and rights, which may nonetheless be cited for pragmatic purposes. Hyperactive young individuals frequently support or serve as leaders in civic organizations.