Listening to Albanian Youth Activists:

The Potential of Activism in Fostering Sociopolitical Efficacy and Generating Hope Among Youth

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MSc Thesis

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Abstract

This study explores the engagement of Albanian youth in sociopolitical activism within a post-communist context. Using narrative inquiry, youth activists were interviewed to understand the factors shaping their activism and its relationship with sociopolitical efficacy. The findings counter prevailing narratives of youth apathy, highlighting their capacity for change within constrained circumstances. Participants display proactive agency and sophisticated critical reflection, attributing disengagement to systemic and historical factors rather than indifference. Borrowing a framework inspired by critical consciousness, this paper explores the potential of youth-led bottom-up activism in cultivating the skills, civic knowledge, and agency necessary for meaningful sociopolitical engagement in an unresponsive and distrusted political landscape. Historical mistrust emerges as a significant barrier, rooted in Albania's past. Motivations for engagement in activism span from strong emotions to being inspiration by peers, underlining the multifaceted nature of commitment. The study underscores youth-led activism's potency in cultivating critical awareness, amplifying sociopolitical efficacy and collective agency, and infusing a much-needed sense of hope. Addressing gaps in the literature, this research provides unique and rich insights into youth motivations and the impacts of their activism on themselves. It emphasizes the importance of listening to youth voices and considering contextual nuances in the process of understanding and researching youth (dis)engagement. Furthermore, it suggests the potential of integrating non-institutionalized youth activism into development initiatives, emphasizing youth's role and capacity as agents of change. In essence, this paper highlights the significance of integrating youth activism and civic education into the field of international development studies. Engaging established networks and actors already cultivating youth-led activism enriches our comprehension and advancement of the transformative power wielded by young people, ultimately promoting inclusive and contextually sensitive sociopolitical change.

Key words: *youth activism, youth engagement, sociopolitical efficacy, critical consciousness, non-institutionalized activism, Albania, Tirana*

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I would love to express my deepest gratitude to all the participants of this research. Their openness and vulnerability in sharing their inspirational life stories were essential for shaping the depth of this study. Their helpfulness, hospitality, and kindness made the process of data collection much easier, as they were eager to help me out and refer me to other participants that might enrich the research with their insights. Furthermore, I am indebted to inspiring individuals like Kreshnik and Xheni, who facilitated connections with multiple participants and offered help throughout this journey. Their support has been instrumental in navigating the networks of activism in Tirana. My appreciation also extends to the organizations and collectives that graciously opened their doors, welcoming me in their community centres and allowing me to attend their events.

In closing, it is worth noting that many participants were pleasantly surprised by my decision to conduct research in Albania without any prior ties to the country. They appreciated the interest a researcher from abroad showed in their life stories and their honest reflections. Looking ahead, I hope for a future where this is not perceived as a surprise and becomes more normal, where their voices are acknowledged and valued, and a future where Albania and its youth gain increased recognition from researchers, shedding light on the country's diverse aspects beyond the prevalent negative headlines.

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Introduction

In the past few decades, there is a debate about political participation being in crisis (Putnam, 2000; Stoker, 2006; O'Toole, 2016) particularly among young people, which is a significant challenge facing modern democracies (Farthing, 2010; Furlong and Cartmel, 2012; Henn and Foard, 2012). This is mainly due to the decrease in democratic participation by citizens in terms of electoral votes and party engagement (Norris, 2011), which is particularly observed with younger generations (Mycock and Tonge, 2012). It is often emphasized by how youth has been labelled as politically apathetic and alienated from traditional political institutions (Hay, 2007), which is exacerbated with data showing that their lower levels of engagement are not just temporary, but rather a generational effect that could indicate a long-lasting decline in political and civic participation, adding to the 'crisis narrative' around young people's political participation (O'Toole, 2016).

However, various papers challenge the notion that the youth is politically apathetic, arguing that they are actually alienated from traditional political institutions and processes, which they view as unreliable and indifferent to their needs and concerns (O'Toole, 2016). There is an increase of alternative modes of participation, such as activism, which is specifically apparent in younger generations (Dalton, 2011). Thus, many scholars argue that young people are in fact politically engaged, but in activities beyond the traditional electoral politics. Soler-i-Martí (2015) argue that the reason that youth disengagement is perceived is better explained by "*institutional disaffection rather than political disaffection*". Their findings suggest that young people are interested and psychologically involved with political and social issues but have developed new relationships to politics that lead to alternative forms of expression, such as various forms of activism. Moreover, most of the same authors argue that youth and their opinions should be considered and recognized by older generations and politicians, as they are capable to act as agents of social change, especially in themes that directly impact them. This standpoint is portrayed by examples such as Tereschenko's (2013) research of Ukrainian youth and their political participation, where unconventional participation was studied. The findings indicated that young people are, contrary to popular opinion, critical and, in fact, engaged: they "*showed an ability to make sophisticated judgements about various aspects of social and political life*" and "*demonstrated responsibility for and engagement with more personal issues and immediate social problems*". Articles such as Han & Ahn's (2020), argue that youth may be perceived as "*stewards for the future*". Youth activism manifests in meaningful ways on micro- as well as macrolevels: both the individual development of a sense of agency, and the contribution to national and global narratives and conversations about the pathways to more sustainable futures (Trott, 2021). Skovdal and Benwell (2021) argue how young people can be a critical political force, as they "*are crucial stakeholders because of their capability to act as agents of social change and to function as sources of knowledge*".

Furthermore, a complementary field of research focuses on the potential impact of involvement in activism on the participants themselves. According to various studies, youth organizing through activism may support the development of young people and their communities (Trott, 2021). The findings of Terriquez (2015) suggest that "*activist organizations that critically engage youth in politics can foster young people's civic participation to a degree that exceeds that of non-activist public oriented organizations*". Other research highlights essential skills potentially learned from involvement in youth activism, such as the potential to enhance the development of agency (Larson & Hansen, 2005), and foster critical consciousness (Kirshner, 2007). A concept which encompasses these effects on agency and beliefs of individuals, is 'sociopolitical efficacy', which "*represents the perceived efficacy to effect social and political change*" (Diemer & Li, 2011). This sense of agency refers to the belief of being able to realize change and forms a fundamental part of the ability of youth to become agents of change in a sociopolitical context (Watts et al., 2011).

In essence, "*research has found that youth who participate in activism may develop the skills, interests, and dispositions for future political participation*" (Carey et al., 2021). Thus, a more in-depth comprehension of how these skills, interests, and sense of agency are developed may provide us with valuable insights that may potentially point to novel ways of enhancing youth engagement and paving the way to more inclusive democracies in which youth are recognized as agents of change.

As the debate around youth participation continues, many institutions and organizations invest in numerous efforts to promote more youth participation, such as the EU, UN, UNICEF, the World Bank, and many governmental bodies on a global scale (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). Ensuring inclusive democracies in which the needs and perspectives of young people are taken in account is essential for sustainable development according to the UNDP (2022) and youth participation can be crucial for development initiatives to be relevant and effective according to the World Bank (2022). However, many initiatives are criticized for valuing young people for what the future citizens that they become, rather than their present contributions (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). Some authors argue that state-sponsored settings and top-down approaches could learn from the experiences and insights of non-institutionalized youth activists (Taft & Gordon, 2013; Kowasch et al., 2021).

<p style="text-align:center; color:red;">Academic relevance</p>

Following these arguments, one may anticipate that there is comprehensive literature on youth activism. However, relevant research is scattered over several separate fields of study (Earl et al., 2017). With the "*meteoric rise of youth activism*" (Cattell, 2021) for reasons that range from the local to the global, the understanding of the reasons why youth engage in these matters as well as how it impacts them becomes essential (Beukes, 2021). Learning from the lived experiences of youth may support academics, policymakers, and those working with youth in "*working with youth realities rather than against them*" (Pruitt, 2017). Young people around the world are contesting the idea that they are neglected in decision-making processes, especially in themes that affect them most, as the popular idea of "*nothing*

about us without us" implies, policies should not be formed for people without the direct participation of the people that are affected by them most. As the future of societies are the realities that younger generations will inhabit, this sentiment could be relevant for the field of development studies as well. Earl et al. (2017) urge that it is crucial to understand youth activism because aging into adulthood their engagement could have important effects for the future of social movements and activism. Their findings also indicate that early engagement with activism highly correlates on political and social engagement across the lifespan, making this relevant if one wants to gain potential insight about the future of engagement and citizenship of particular geographical contexts.

Within the literature, several academic gaps can be identified with regards to youth activism. Akiva et al. (2017) stress that there is not yet much known about what motivates youth to engage in activism and related initiatives. This entails how the activist initiatives and programs relate to young people's identity and their development. What is also lesser covered are the "*distinctive qualities of activism experiences that influence youth's perception of agency*" (Kirshner, 2007), and in particular what youth may learn from activist engagement (Carey et al., 2021). Specifically, Rogers et al. (2012) recommend future research to explore how youth participation in activism contributes to civic development. Furthermore, in general, most of the recent research to youth activism has been concerned solely with climate activism, with less research to other forms of organized activism, aimed at social and political change. Another point raised by Taft & Gordon (2011) is that most of the literature surrounding political socialization of youth concerns itself purely with traditional political participation and usually is focused on adult-led initiatives that aim to encourage youth participation. Hereby, the experiences of the already politically active youth activists and youth-led initiatives from the bottom-up are often overlooked, even though their findings indicate that this group has the potential to complement current existing literature with new insights that are valuable for understanding and increasing youth engagement in general.

Moreover, Pruitt (2017) argues that most of the relevant literature is based on Western democracies and points out that there is an ongoing need to study youth activism and reflections on their roles as citizens within other cultural settings. Likewise, Kirshner (2007) urges for similar research outside of Western contexts, in order to "*gain a rich and nuanced understanding of the meaning and significance of youth activism by understanding its varied forms*". This point is complemented by the findings of Kitanova (2020), who found a correlation between the age of democracy and youth's political participation: the younger the democratic system, the less young people participated politically. As most studies relating to youth engagement and activism have been situated in countries such as the US and UK (Pruitt, 2017), it might be interesting to address the gap and study a case in a relatively newer democratic society. Understanding this topic through the investigation of other contexts outside the usual Western case studies may add value to the overall discourses and deeper comprehension of youth engagement in a contemporary democracy. Insights from such research could also be valuable

for similar contexts, with regards to inclusion and integration of youth in the process of democratization and societal development.

<p style="text-align:center;">The Case of Albania</p>

In some cases, the process of enhancing youth engagement is funded by major international organizations and institutions. This is also the case with countries that are on the outskirts of the European Union and are potential EU-membership candidates. From a geopolitical standpoint, such a context might provide many interesting findings, as there is external funding to promote the development of youth political participation. Additionally, by applying a geographical lens to this topic, the honouring of the complexities of particular settings may lead to new insights that could complement the current understandings and literature with regards to youth activism and their sense of agency. Therefore, for this paper, the choice has been made to focus in-depth on one particular case of a non-Western setting on the outskirts of the EU that currently gradually receives more funding and development of youth engagement.

One of these cases would be Albania, which has dealt with continuous challenges in its democratization process since the early 1990s, since student protests throughout the country became the catalyst for the fall of the communist regime three decades ago. Political participation has consistently lowered ever since (INSTAT, 2021), gradually reaching one of the lowest voter turnout percentages on the European continent (IDEA, 2021). The Albanian population is aging compared to a decade ago, but still resides within the top four of youngest populations in Europe (Eurostat, 2021). Nonetheless, a 2021 national survey by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy states that the vast majority (80%) of youth are not engaged in politics as party members nor as activists (WFD, 2021). These intertwined challenges highlight the importance of investigating the underlying complexities that drive these challenges. A country, a culture, and a generation that have been encircled by negative narratives, bringing the aforementioned 'crisis narrative' of youth being apathetic and disengaged to a particular extreme, allows for interesting exploratory research into the dynamics and realities that are beyond the surface. Additionally, besides survey based statistical information, there is little academic investigation aimed towards exploring Albania in general, and even less concerning youth activists.

In a nutshell, based on the aforementioned debates, lack of academic exploration, and complexity of the intertwined challenges youth engagement faces in the Albanian context, this study aims to shed light on the narratives that shape the subjective realities of youth and their own perspectives on what drives them to be actively engaged as well as what holds them back. In this sense, this study honours the voice of youth activists as a legitimate source of insight, that may lead to more in-depth understanding of how the new generations in Albania reflect upon and make sense of their past, their present surroundings, and their future. Thus, exploring the biographies and reflections of activist youth through narrative inquiry may potentially contribute to more inclusive policy making and pave the way for further political and social engagement by young people. By delving into the stories of individuals, researchers can gain insight into the processes of change, the continuities with the past, and the

possibilities for the future. Narrative identities may assist in shedding light on the lived experiences, emotions, and the personal meanings associated with specific events or phenomena (Squire, 2008), as the remnants of historical experiences continue to influence the present and shape the imaginative construction of selves and futures (Bradbury & Mashigo, 2018). Exploring the narratives holds promise for unravelling the relationship between their engagement in activism and their sense of sociopolitical efficacy and comprehending the dynamics of both concepts better for this particular context.

By exploring the narratives of young Albanian activists, this research aims to contribute to an understanding of why Albanian youth are engaged in activism, how their sociopolitical efficacy is shaped, and whether these processes are related to each other. In doing so, it recognizes the significance of individual stories within their specific social, cultural, and historical contexts (Squire, 2008). Hence, this in-depth qualitative case study may surface novel narratives or complement current ones, especially since such research has not yet been done in the context of Albania. All in all, this thesis aims to answer the following overarching question:

Why do Albanian youth engage in activism and how do they shape their sociopolitical efficacy to realize change in a post-communist context?

This overarching research question will be answered through inquiry about how Albanian youth (a) perceive obstacles for sociopolitical efficacy and engagement as youth in Albania, (b) narrate their motivations to engage in sociopolitical activism, and (c) reflect on how their engagement in activism and their sociopolitical efficacy might influence each other.

Despite findings that highlight the potential of youth activism for community development and promoting sustainable development in the Global South (Beukes, 2021), youth activism seems to be lesser focused on within the field of development studies. The literature on youth within development studies is often focused on migration (Deotti & Estruch, 2016), employment (Pieters, 2015), and inequalities (Azeng & Yogo, 2013). This is relevant since many organizations and institutions across various scales and contexts highlight the importance of youth participation and their potential for societal development. Hence, understanding what drives already politically active youth to express their agency, voice their opinions, and imagine a better future – might provide us with valuable insights about how these efforts can be better integrated in our current systems, development initiatives, and decision-making processes, as "*youth activism programs and initiatives can help shape the future of democratic institutions by fostering youths' civic mindsets early-on, with the hopes that they will change oppressive social orders in the present and into adulthood*" (Carey et al. (2021). Simultaneously, by fostering youth activist initiatives, learning and development of youth could be enhanced, sparking their capacity of leading change, both in the present as well as in the future, enabling the "*frequently silenced actors to speak and be heard*" (Tsekoura, 2016).

Thus, this paper aims to address the gaps in literature that were mentioned before, such as that there is not much known about what motivates youth to engage in activism (Akiva et al., 2017), how activism relates to young people's identity and agency (Kirshner, 2007), what youth learn from activism (Carey et al., 2021), what can be learned from already active youth (Taft & Gordon, 2011), and an investigation of youth activism in a non-Western context (Pruitt, 2017).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

"But in youth the tables of childhood dependence begin slowly to turn: no longer is it merely for the old to teach the young the meaning of life. It is the young who, by their responses and actions, tell the old whether life as represented to them has some vital promise, and it is the young who carry in them the power to confirm those who confirm them, to renew and regenerate, to disavow what is rotten, to reform and rebel."

—Erikson (1968)

This section will begin by providing a brief overview of the main academic debates surrounding the main theme addressed in this paper. Following the literature review, a comprehensive explanation of the most relevant concepts will be presented. Ultimately, this chapter will include a conceptual model that encapsulates the key concepts that are employed throughout this thesis.

The Crisis Narrative: Apathetic Youth

At the heart of the theoretical debates surrounding the topic of youth engagement are two opposing narratives. First, this concerns the more traditional 'crisis-narrative of youth apathy' that was especially prevalent since the beginning of this century. It is characterized by concerns for youth political engagement being at an "unhealthy low" (Putnam, 2000), which poses vital challenges for modern democracies (Farthing, 2010), as youth are participating less in politics (Norris, 2011) and are labelled as politically apathetic and alienated from traditional political institutions (Hay, 2007). Youth are depoliticized in public discourses across many countries, largely deprived of their agency and their potential for social and political change (Giugni & Grasso, 2020), and often not taken seriously in the context of social and political matters, being largely neglected in decision-making processes (Beukes, 2021). Even programs and organizations that aim to contribute and encourage youth engagement often lack the capacity to lead to meaningful youth participation and are criticized for being largely tokenistic: within such organizations young people do not necessarily develop the belief that they actually capable of being actors of change, and their contributions and efforts remain largely neglected in the realm of actual decision-making processes (Gordon & Taft, 2013).

It is important to note that assumptions within this narrative are often implicit, but may essentially create barriers for youth engagement, as it presupposes young people are disinterested, lack a sense of agency, and are incapable of critical thinking (Earl et al., 2017). These assumptions can also be inherent to research, as is the case with the concept of youth's political socialization, which is a process which enables people to attain lasting political attitudes and behaviours, which can also be an essential instrument to the maintenance of a social order or political status quo, such as the sustaining of a democracy but also that of a dictatorship: encompassing the process of becoming citizens that

support – or challenge – existing political systems (Amna, 2012). Traditional research of youth and their socialization tends to view it as a process that "*flows down from more experienced, knowing adults to less experienced, naïve youth*" (Gordon & Taft, 2011). These traditional views of youth socialization and engagement are referred to as the youth deficit model (Osler & Starkey, 2003), and predominantly characterize research and efforts that are based on the 'crisis narrative' of disengaged youth.

Through this lens, young members are seen as 'citizens to be' and have to be 'taught' how to properly engage with politics, usually denying young people their agency in their own political socialization (Earl et al., 2017). It is often adult-centred and has a top-down bias, with a focus on their future: the citizens that they will become later. As Gordon and Taft (2011) have found, youth involved in activism argue that top-down efforts for cultivating more political participation in young people do not always provide youth to participate fully "*because these well-meaning adults see what they are doing as "socializing youth for the future", rather than actually engaging youth in activism that matters in the present*". If youth engagement is encouraged in this way, there is a risk that young people will be "*tamed and disciplined rather than empowered and skilled*" (Amna, 2012).

<div align="center">The Counter Narrative: Engaged Youth</div>

In the past decades, the aforementioned narrative and its assumptions have been increasingly challenged. In this 'countering narrative', youth are seen as alienated from traditional politics because they perceive them as unreliable and indifferent to their needs (O'Toole, 2016). Numerous research argues that there is an increase in alternative modes of participation, such as activism, that is especially prevalent among younger generations (Dalton, 2011). This countering narrative is thus mainly concerned with the notion that the observed youth disengagement is mainly explained by "*institutional disaffection rather than political disaffection*" (Soler-i-Martí, 2015). Political and societal landscapes are changing, and traditional democratic institutions need to adapt and reshaped in a way that engages with young citizens (O'Toole, 2016).

This narrative embraces a broader understanding of youth engagement and participation, and its inherent assumptions move beyond the youth deficit model. Various papers (Andersson, 2015; Taft & Gordon, 2011; Kirshner, 2007) point to politically active youth that drive their own political socialization, mainly based on research on youth engagement in the context of non-institutionalized participation, such as everyday political activities and activist initiatives (Earl et al., 2017).

Thus, this narrative argues for young people to be regarded as being capable of being active participants and should be acknowledged as legitimate citizens of society, with their own sense of agency. It allows a view that moves beyond the formal, rational, adult-centred, top-down, and future-oriented ways of how youth engagement is studied and stimulated. Hence, it is grounded in the notion that political socialization can be driven by young people themselves, is non-directive, and is focused on their present contributions and knowledge (Andersson, 2015). Moreover, supportive to this narrative is the notion that youth-led organizations that foster activism are potentially potent fields of learning

and civic development (Kirshner, 2007). The involvement in activism "*can promote knowledge and skills necessary for effective civic participation*" (Rogers et al., 2012) and foster a sense of critical consciousness that is seen as essential for their sense of agency and effective participation in social and political settings (Carey et al., 2021).

This countering narrative, in which youth are regarded as agentic and lead their own political socialization, will be applied as theoretical basis for this thesis. From this starting point, the youth is seen as the legitimate voices that need to be heard and studied.

Biographies

Andersson (2015) emphasizes the integration of different life contexts, with its changes and developments over time, in order to define and understand the process of engagement more thoroughly. Therefore, the narrative inquiry that this study applies presents a way through which individuals construct meaning from their autobiographical past and their perception of the future. This is embodied by the concept of '*narrative identities'* (McAdams, 1985), which encompasses the weaving together of personal experiences, cultural influences, and sociopolitical contexts, forming a cohesive life story that becomes a central aspect of one's identity. Friskie (2020) highlights the transformative power of storytelling, emphasizing how personal narratives contribute to the formation of identity. By incorporating significant life events into their narratives, individuals assign meaning and purpose to these experiences. The sharing of personal stories can facilitate self-expression and promote the recognition of shared experiences.

Moreover, the relevance of exploring the biographies of youth activists is rooted in previous findings by various scholars such as Rogers et al. (2012) and Diemer and Li (2011), who point to contextual factors such as social background, parental support, and peer support as being intertwined with sociopolitical efficacy and engagement in activism. Nevertheless, Gordon and Taft (2011) criticize research (e.g., Youniss et al., 2002) of not including friends, peers, and other youth from socializing influences. In case these influences are taken into account, usually they are studied through quantitative methods, using various scales and numbers to determine significant correlations. Even when significant connections are found, what the interrelations exactly entail and how the influences are related often remain unclear (Gordon & Taft, 2011). Additionally, specific distinctions, such as between parents and peers, are often also missing from analysis (e.g., Diemer & Li, 2011), even though the influences may vary significantly. Considering these points raised, it is important to make sense of their choices and understand how their development links up to other factors and influences in their lives (Owen, 2008).

Youth Activism

One of the ways in which young people mobilize themselves is through engaging in social action, which signifies individual or collective action to create social transformation. The aim of this kind of action is

to instigate sociopolitical change of the unjust aspects of society that lead to unfavourable or inequitable conditions (Diemer & Li, 2014; Watts et al., 2011). As Akiva et al. (2017) define in their theoretical framework, the concepts of social action and activism can be used interchangeably, as will be the case in this thesis. Within this theoretical framework, activism encompasses being engaged in protest activity such as social movements, protests, demonstrations, striking, or organizations that foster social action (Teorell & Torcal 2007).

Organizations and initiatives in this category extend beyond the state-sponsored and adult-led settings, and Kowasch et al., (2021) state that current forms of efforts that aim to encourage youth participation should learn from the many insights that the youth activists themselves have. Taft and Gordon (2013) have found that in some cases, youth distrust the top-down organized youth councils, as they are seen to leave no space for dissent and challenging voices, and rather are concerned with preparing the youth to fit in and conform to the current traditional political systems. Youth-led organizations and activist initiatives, regardless of being sponsored by external institutions or not, may offer alternative pathways to bottom-up mobilization and youth-led political socialization, where political ideas and beliefs are formed differently and may encourage or challenge existing ideas and systems (Gordon & Taft, 2011). Thus, youth activism has the potential to challenge power dynamics, transform prejudices towards youth groups, and make marginalized people be heard and seen (Youniss & Hart, 2005). Therefore, engagement in youth-led activism provides a solid counterargument to deficit-based approaches to youth and challenges perspectives of young people as apathetic or socially and politically disengaged (Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012).

Furthermore, the specific focus on youth is essential, as it is recommended not to consider youth activism as the equivalent of adult activism (Earl et al., 2017), because despite their crucial role in the history of social movements, young people face many additional challenges such as not being taken seriously (Beukes, 2021) or being discriminated on basis of their age (Gordon & Taft, 2011).

Moreover, with regards to the motivation for youth's engagement in activism, Akiva et al. (2017) argue that it is based on the both the motives of the desire to participate in social justice as well as of attending for sanctuary. Here, sanctuary is briefly defined as "*a space that protected and affirmed their social identities*" and relates mainly to feelings of physical and psychological safety. In their findings, these two motivations were deeply intertwined, which is interesting as sanctuary as a motivation is often overlooked. Akiva et al., (2017) also found that collective agency was a driving force for engagement, aligning with Kirshner's work (2009). It seems that the reasons are usually rooted in internal emotional and psychological factors as well (Trott, 2021), and Kowasch et al., (2021) argue to go beyond the rational and to inquire about the emotional domain, since feelings and emotions are found to play a crucial role in their political participation, indicating that the emotional and subjective reality of youth can also be determinant for their engagement.

One emotional aspect seems to be a recurrent theme for activists and political participation despite feelings of despair or distrust in current politics: hope. It has been regarded as an essential factor

for individual agency, as "*within much of the critical literature, hope is assumed to be the engine of change and transformation*" (Niarn, 2019). This is mainly built upon Freire's concept of the pedagogy of hope (Freire, 2014). The hope for a better future can be what motivates young people that face uncertain futures to engage in activism that aims to shape a more promising future. This relates to the literature that refers to the role of imagined futures in activism: how actors perceive the future and how it influences their actions presently. Clarifying this further: "*The future is unknowable, but action generally entails consideration of both the outcomes of our actions and the state of the world in the future, making imaginations of the future central to issues of action, agency, and identity.*" (Catell, 2021).

All in all, there are many different factors that could potentially play a role in the motivation of youth to engage in activism, related to an individual's context, past, and perceived future. Thus, in-depth research could potentially contribute to finding ways to engage youth to be more active within sociopolitical contexts.

Critical Consciousness and Sociopolitical Efficacy

One conceptual lens that links sociopolitical efficacy with activism is based on the framework of "*critical consciousness*", which originated from the work of Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (2000) and has been extended by numerous scholars (e.g., Diemer & Li, 2011; Hope & Jagers, 2014; Watts et al., 2011; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021). Although the concept is primarily used in research with an educational focus, several scholars such as Watts et al. (2011) argue that the concept may also be valuable for research and the discourse around youth participation and civic engagement. The concept of critical consciousness refers to the process by which people critically analyse their sociopolitical realities and take action to improve them (Freire, 2000). Garcia et al. (2009) define it as "*the ability to recognize and challenge oppressive and dehumanizing political, economic, and social systems*", which therefore encompasses both thinking as well as acting.

Although the conceptualization has taken many different forms over time, its core consists of the dynamics between 'critical reflection' and 'sociopolitical action', in which the former is usually considered as a precursor to the latter (Freire, 2000). Critical reflection entails looking at the realities of daily life in order to analyse the connections between individual contexts and larger structural forces (such as the social, economic, and political environments) that limit access to opportunities and resources, which perpetuates inequity and restricts agency (Giroux, 1983; Hatcher et al. 2010). It includes the capacity to think critically about conventional beliefs and assumptions, as well as recognizing how historical influences affect current elements of daily life, and how certain patterns of thinking and feeling serve to uphold prevailing systems of inequality (Diemer & Blustein, 2006).

Beyond these two components, multiple authors (e.g., Morrell, 2003; Hatcher et al., 2010) argue for the inclusion of a third component that serves as a bridge between the two; 'sociopolitical efficacy' (Jemal, 2017). This component "*represents the perceived efficacy to effect social and political change*"

(Diemer & Li, 2011), mainly referring to the "*beliefs that actions in the sociopolitical system can lead to desired outcomes*" (Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991). This mainly stems from the idea that "*one cannot think oneself into liberation*" (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Additionally, Diemer and Li (2011) have found that sociopolitical efficacy is significantly correlated with activism, as well as with more formal ways of political participation (e.g., electoral voting), and thus crucial to understand youth engagement in sociopolitical matters. Moreover, Sohl (2014) dives deep into the sources and effects of youths' political efficacy, and she states that "*youths are more inclined to act politically upon a latent psychological engagement (political interest) if they are also motivated to do so in terms of believing that they are capable of making a difference.*". Hence, she has found that interest alone is not enough to encourage sociopolitical participation and action to take place – a sense of efficacy needs to be boosted among youth to encourage them to become active in striving for sociopolitical change. Aligned with this view, Watts et al. (2011) emphasize efficacy as being the essential component of critical consciousness: the fundamental factor that stimulates youth to become agents of change. They argue for sociopolitical efficacy to receive more attention, cautioning that problems may arise from solely boosting critical reflection and awareness in young people without cultivating their efficacy as well, since "*an expanded awareness of entrenched social problems without a sense of agency or the organizing skills to set and achieve attainable objectives can lead young people to feel overwhelmed and demoralized*". Moreover, Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) state that the literature often focusses solely on educating and raising awareness, mainly related to the first component of critical reflection, and that more research is needed that sheds light on the agency and action-related related components of critical consciousness. Additionally, some scholars have found that critical reflection is not a necessary antecedent to sociopolitical efficacy and that it may influence activism independently (Hope & Jagers, 2014). Thus, this research will focus on two components of the critical consciousness framework and the dynamic relationship between them: 1) sociopolitical efficacy and 2) activism.

Although significant correlation between these components is found in numerous studies (e.g., Diemer et al., 2014), the same authors state that more research is needed for a better understanding of the direction of the relationships. Many studies continue to imply that a linear trajectory exists, in which sociopolitical efficacy leads to activism (e.g., Godfrey et al., 2019; Harrell-Levy, 2018). However, a more recent study found that sociopolitical efficacy influenced action, which then in turn heightened sociopolitical efficacy among young activists (Poteat et al., 2020), suggesting a cyclical and reinforcing effect. Nevertheless, the authors concluded with stating that the relationship between sociopolitical efficacy and action continue to be unclear. Besides the direction of the relationships, Hipolito-Delgado et al. (2021) argue that there is a need for more in-depth comprehension of *how* one component may lead to another. Thus, this paper will shed light on these connections using an in-depth qualitative narrative inquiry that aims to uncover biographies and perceptions of the young activists in order to understand the development of their sociopolitical efficacy and how it has related to their activism.

Based on these theories and concepts, a visual model is provided to portray the potential links between the key variables for this research. Based on the previously mentioned literature (e.g., Poteat et al., 2020; Hipolito-Delgado, 2021), this research will address the dynamics of the connection between activism and sociopolitical efficacy as well as its direction of influence. Additionally, the underlying processes that lead up to the shaping of sociopolitical efficacy of youth as well as to engagement in activism will be examined more in-depth to further comprehend the concepts of sociopolitical efficacy and activism in the specific context of this study.
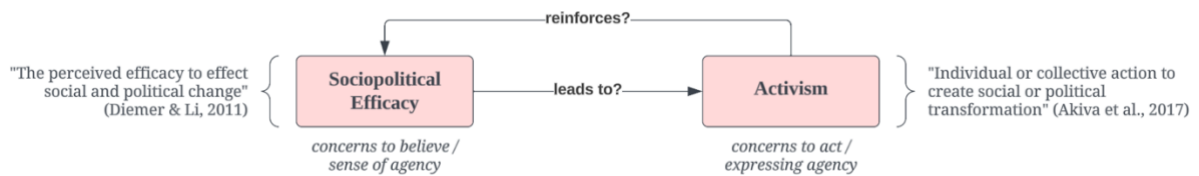

Figure 1: Conceptual model with most relevant variables of this thesis

Regional Framework

From 1945 to 1991, Albania was under the rule of what is classified as a communist-totalitarian regime (Merkel, 1999). It is considered as one of the harshest dictatorships in Eastern Europe, adopting repressive Stalinist measures and strict surveillance that affected everyday lives deeply (Biberaj, 2019). Besides a legacy of suffering and traumatic experiences, these measures had a major impact on the country's civil society as well, as the one-party regime adopted a law that prohibited all independent organizations and impeded activities of all kinds of associations, making it illegal for citizens to initiative independent action in the public sphere or informally organizing around any social cause (Chiodi, 2007). Thus, a few decades ago, it was illegal to be a non-state affiliated activist or to self-organize, blocking the fundamental notions of cultivating civil society, as people would be labelled enemies of the state, be imprisoned, or exiled (Krasniqi, 2012). Any kind of organizations that were in place were dependent and affiliated with the party in power (Gurashi, 2017).

Therefore, as communist regimes started to fall in Eastern European countries by the end of the 1980s, Albania stood out due to the absence of substantial dissident movements or groups that could advance an alternative to the dominant one-party system (Biberaj, 2019). Instead, discontented students played a pivotal role in 1990, initiating protests aimed at reforms. These evolved into massive protests involving the general population, thereby posing a challenge to the stability of the regime (Vickers & Pettifer, 2000). Consequently, by the end of 1990, the party leader reluctantly agreed to the establishment of political pluralism (Vickers & Pettifer, 2000). Moreover, Albania had a lag with regards to the pace of democratic transition compared to other Eastern European countries, and some scholars (e.g., Chiodi, 2012) point to the largely missing civil society for this delay.

These are important events in understanding current activism, since it has left a legacy of a various set of perspectives and expectations of demonstrations in the Albanian context (Shahini, 2021), and it is relevant for this study as it was mainly students protesting and thus young activists that initiated a movement big enough to instigate sociopolitical change on a national scale after decades of rigorous status quo being ruthlessly maintained. However, even though the movements were largely organized from the bottom-up, the transition to democracy was largely controlled and guided from above (Merkel, 1999). Thus, some scholars point to the 'capturing' of transition politics by people in a way associated to the former regime, leading to a new political elite that remained in power positions after (Elbasani, 2008). Therefore, "*post-communist Albania has gone through different waves of democratization and de-democratization, featuring institutional progress but also periods of stagnation coupled with recurrent crises of order and legitimacy*" (Elbasani & Lipinski, 2013). Ever since the transition, two main political parties, the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party, have dominated the political landscape.

The results of these events still are significant for current movements. For example, in 2018 – when a small student demonstration developed into one of the biggest demonstrations since the early 1990s – the protesting students consciously refrained from working together with any of the (opposition) parties, fearing co-optation by political other agendas, as the activists "*feared the appropriation of their cause by politicians, who they thought were seeking to exploit the momentum as they had previously done since 1992*" (Shahini, 2021). Moreover, it demonstrates the evident divide between civil society and politics in Albania, as is also suggested by Amy and Gjermeni (2013).

All in all, the country has seen several severe socio-economic, political crises and scandals over the past 30 years, echoing its impact through the current political landscape (Muço, 2001).

<p style="text-align:center">Statistics and Quantitative Surveys of Albanian Youth</p>

In 2022, Albania had around 2.79 inhabitants, down from 2.83 in 2021 (INSTAT, 2022). The population in Albania has been decreasing for decades now, with the trend continuing in recent years. One of the main reasons being consistent high rates of emigration, amounting for 42,000 people emigrating in 2021 only (INSTAT, 2022). The 'mass' out-migration has caused Albanians to appear in headlines in news articles in the United Kingdom in negative light, sparking a big debate in British media, as record numbers of young Albanians have sought asylum there in the previous years, amounting for 28% of the arrivals by small boats in 2022 (Gentleman, 2023). It is noteworthy that the population decrease mainly concerns young people, with almost 10% of the youth (aged under 29) emigrating in 2021 (INSTAT, 2022). Besides these statistics, in the yearly GALLUP poll that gathers data about population where people *would like* to move away, Albania consistently appears in the top ten for the last years, taking the 9th place in 2021 with around 50% of the population wishing to move away (Gallup, 2022). The other countries on the top ten list include the war-torn Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, with Albania and Kosovo being the only countries located in continental Europe. One of the main reasons for this would be that over half of Albanians were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2020, being the highest percentage (51%) in Europe according to EUROSTAT (2021). Within this group, the people aged under 18 and between 18-24 were most at risk, amounting for around 15% of young people being in risk of poverty (Fortuny & Taylor, 2021). This is mainly caused by the mixture of the rising global prices and inflation, unemployment rates, and the low wages (INSTAT, 2021). The age group of 15-29 years old has by far the highest unemployment rate in 2021, with 26% of them being neither in employment nor in education or training (INSTAT, 2022). Regardless, youth still represent 40% of the population (INSTAT, 2022), making them an essential group for the country's development.

Moreover, surveys by different organizations have made the effort to capture the youth's perception of the political situation in the country. A 2021 national survey by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy revealed that the vast majority (80%) are not engaged in politics as party members nor as activists (WFD, 2021). The main reason is mistrust, as 53% do not trust political parties at all and 27% only trust them a little (WFD, 2021). The same survey shed light on more aspects of

young people's perceptions of their political environment. Most of the youth (68.8%) believe that youth should be more involved with politics. 64% of them do not feel that their central and local politics represents their voices or is committed to them. 49% of Albanian youth do not trust the parliament, and only 2% have full trust in the role of the parliament in their country. Voter turnouts have been on the decrease for decades (WFD, 2021). Noteworthy, 60% of youth do not find successful role models of young people in politics, and 45% believe that other youth in political parties simply imitate their leaders. The surveys also revealed that the Albanian political environment is considered as non-transparent and corrupt (WFD, 2021). A recent survey (2021) by the Civil Rights Defenders has uncovered troubling findings, such as that the vast majority of youth do not believe in equality before the law (79%), the right to freedom of assembly (69%), or freedom of association (70%) (Civil Rights Defenders, 2021). From all age groups, youth report the lowest levels of interests in political parties and politicians (IDM, 2020).

All in all, Albania confronts intertwined challenges that directly affect its youth. Despite this, the statistics indicate that many young Albanians are becoming less engaged politically and are emigrating. This trend of reduced political involvement and increased emigration, especially among youth, highlights the significance of the regional context for this study's goal. However, despite these trends, some young Albanians remain committed to staying and instigating some kind of social or political change. These individuals can offer valuable insights into how to promote youth engagement and drive meaningful change equitably and inclusively.

<center>Tirana as European Youth Capital of 2022</center>

Both local and central governments appear to pay attention to youth engagement, as the Albanian government appointed a new position called the Deputy Minister of Youth in 2020 who is responsible for the policy frameworks on youth. One of the main objectives is the "*enhancement and participation of youth in democratic decision-making processes*", and one of the subdivisions of this objective is the "*increase of youth participation in decision-making processes and local governance structures*". This indicates an institutional interest in more youth participation in decision-making processes.

On the local level, the Albanian capital, Tirana, was awarded the title of the 'European Youth Capital of 2022' (Tirana EYC, 2022), which is awarded annually to boost youth participation and strengthen a European identity among young people. Tirana was the first capital to be awarded this title, and a grass-roots bottom-up initiative was the main cause for the nomination. Interviewing one of the leading people involved in this initiative, she explained that it was a pioneering and energy-intensive process. Especially since they had to convince the local government of the importance of such an award and of youth participation, to receive the necessary funding, which they eventually succeeded with. Because of the momentum generated by this, Tirana might be an interesting hub of youth political participation and activism. Additionally, what makes investigating Albania specifically noteworthy through a geographical lens, is that it is situated on the outskirts of the European Union and is a potential

EU-membership candidate, with ongoing diplomatic talks. Especially since it is a country that has been received funding by the EU for the establishment of different youth organizations and the promotion of democratic values for several years now. Moreover, another reason to focus specifically on the capital of Tirana, is what one of the participants of this study mentioned, namely that "*Tirana, it's the capital, yes, but also one of the cities where all the policies start with and then they start being implemented also at other small cities or at the national level when it comes to Albania*" (Edona, 2023).

Methodology

Research Design

The overarching framing underlying the methodology used for this thesis is the epistemological approach of social constructionism, which entails that knowledge and meaning are constructed collectively. "*Social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live*" (Gergen, 1985), while recognizing the cultural and historical context from which knowledge is derived. This perspective considers the connectedness between individuals and their cultural context, as well as the recognition that knowledge is a product of social interaction.

According to Pruitt (2017), the most effective approach to learn about youth participation would be to ask young people how to better engage them. Additionally, Skovdall & Benwell (2021) argue to go beyond the 'giving voice' agenda and explore the ways in which society can establish better 'infrastructures of listening': cultures that cultivate listening to young people and access their everyday lifeworlds. Therefore, doing in-depth qualitative research might shed light on their individual and collective experiences, generating insights and more in-depth understanding of their narratives and perspectives.

Thus, the primary methodology for this thesis will be the narrative inquiry. Grounded in social constructionism, this approach involves the generation and analysis of narratives of life experiences. These narratives give way to the understanding of "*one's own and other's actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time*" (Chase, 2005). Narratives are then used as data, including how they are connected with experiences, the language that is used, and how the story is shared with others, reflecting the "*current internal world of the narrator as well as aspects of the social world in which he or she lives*" (Josselson, 2001). The telling of narratives is regarded as a powerful way of sharing and creating meaning for experiences (Seidman, 2012). Additionally, the approach can be essential to voice the perspective of marginalized groups, which can be empowering and simultaneously lead to a sense of shared experience that can inspire others into social and political action (Riessman, 2008). By taking the narrative inquiry as methodology, the research aims to keep the voice of youth central.

For the data collection, the researcher was present in the place of study Tirana, Albania, for more than two months. The experience of being there contextualized many of the findings and complemented them with observations and numerous informal conversations with youth in the city. Visiting multiple community centres where the activists gather, cafes where the youth spend their free time, offices of the main initiators of the "*Albanian Youth Capital of 2022*", and simply living and walking around the city where most of the participants live added an ethnographic element to the research.

The main sample of this study is youth engaged in activism. All participants were under 32 years old – and the oldest participants were already active for at least multiple years. A total of 13 in-depth interviews were conducted, complemented by two interviews with participants specialized in youth work and activism. One of them was a leading figure in promoting and sustaining the bottom-up initiative to make Tirana the youth capital of 2022, a title awarded by the European Youth Forum. She provided many contextual and institutional factors to take into account. The other participant was a leading human rights activist, who was present during the student demonstrations as a young activist in the early 1990s. She enlightened many aspects about the cultural and historical context of Albania, as well as highlighting differences between youth activism back then and right now.

Besides these two interviews aimed at understanding the context, all other participants were inquired to share their personal stories. From an autobiographical past to their first encounters with social and political issues, and the process of their engagement in activism. They also shared their future aspirations and voiced their opinions about youth engagement generally in Albania. Except for one interview with three participants around a table, all of the other interviews were individually conducted. All these participants were engaged in activism in one way or another. Most of them identified as activist, while some were involved in activism but identified more as youth workers or volunteers. But nevertheless, all participants were aware of the study's purpose and were enlightened about the aims and research question.

For the participant sample, snowball sampling was used, which is a non-probability sampling method where new participants were recruited by the initial participants that were selected based on their involvement in various types of activist initiatives. Therefore, the sampling was not random. However, this method was combined with purposive sampling, which entails that some participants were chosen 'on purpose' and ensures the inclusion of participants with specific characteristics. Hereby, demographic details were considered, as well as the engagement in different kinds of activism, to broaden the sample and diversify the narratives. In the end, more diversity was attained using these approaches, as the age ranged from 18 to 32, and participants were engaged in different categories of activism.

Although the population was based in Tirana, participants originated from different locations spread across the country, ranging from very small remote villages to other cities in other regions of Albania. Due to this, even though the study was situated in Tirana, their origins and upbringing

encompassed almost all regions of the country, providing more diversity in the youth interviewed. Additionally, two participants were interviewed that were currently living abroad for their studies – one of them would come home after his studies and the other lived her entire life in Tirana before her studies. However, both were young activists in Albania, and still were active for their country in some way, regardless of living abroad. Their insights potentially contributed to the representation of different youth activists that are in some way tied to Albania and Tirana. The following table is an overview of the different participants for this study (with anonymized names to ensure confidentiality):

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Grew up in	Lives in	Type of activism
1	Arben	Male	18	Shkodra	Tirana	consumer activism, sustainable lifestyle, youth trainings
2	Arta	Female	19	northern village	Tirana	youth trainings, empowerment
3	Sofia	Female	19	Vlorë	Tirana	environmentalism, volunteerism, youth trainings
4	Blendi	Male	21	Durrës	Tirana	LGBTQ+, artistic activism
5	Ilir	Male	21	northern village	Tirana	student rights
6	Violeta	Female	23	Tirana	Berlin	civil society, feminism
7	Bujar	Male	23	small town in mid-Albania	Tirana	student rights, civil society
8	Luljeta	Female	24	small town in mid-Albania	Tirana	environmentalism, volunteerism
9	Besnik	Male	25	Vlorë	Cambridge	civil society, youth trainings, advocacy
10	Elona	Female	27	southern village, Tirana	Tirana	advocacy, civil society, youth training, youth worker
11	Erion	Male	29	Elbasan	Tirana	environmentalism, volunteerism
12	Ilira	Female	29	southern village, Durrës	Tirana	feminism, civil society
13	Ergys	Male	32	southern village, Greece	Tirana	student rights, worker rights, digital, LGBTQ+
14	*Vesa*	*Female*	*Late 30s*	*unknown*	*Tirana*	*advocacy, youth worker, civil society*
15	*Edona*	*Female*	*Late 50s*	*Korçë*	*Tirana*	*human rights, civil society*

Table 1: An overview of the participants of this study

Moreover, the types of activism were also diverse, ranging from individual activists to collectives and more professionalized networks, encompassing (but not limited to) organizations and groups such as EDEN (Environmental center for Development, Education and Networking), RYCO (Regional Youth Cooperation Office), Aleanca (Alliance Against Discrimination of LGBTQ+ people), Organizata Politike (or *'Lëvizja Bashkë'*), Shota.al (Intersectional Feminist Magazine/Movement), GLOW Tropojë (Girls Leading Our World), The Student Congress, and the EYP (European Youth Parliament).

Narrative interviews provide a valuable methodology for studying narrative identity, allowing participants to shape their stories and select experiences that are significant for the individual (Riessman, 2008; Squire, 2008). For this, adopting an experience-centred approach in narrative research enables researchers to focus on individual stories, subjective interpretations, and personal meaning-making which acknowledges the unique experiences and perspectives of individuals, emphasizing the significance of narratives in shaping their sense of self and identity. Hereby, individuals' narratives are situated within their specific social, cultural, and historical contexts to be able to comprehend their experiences more accurately (Squire, 2008). The transcripts and notes of the interviews were analysed using a narrative analysis, in which all narratives were read in-depth, and similarities and differences were investigated. For the coding, a hybrid form of inductive and deductive methods was used. Stories are inductively found throughout the transcripts, and subsequently compared as well as contrasted across participants. After inductively coding the narratives, the findings were related to the theoretical framework, literature review, and the main concepts, to ultimately provide an answer to the overarching research question.

Operationalization of variables

A core variable for this research is youth activism, relating to individual or collective action to create social transformation (Akiva et al., 2017). This can manifest in taking part in demonstrations, strikes, social movements, forums, activist initiatives, or other protest activities. It includes any kind of action that is geared towards changing sociopolitical conditions and seeking for social justice, such as involvement in social movements, sociopolitical oriented organizations, advocacy, demonstrations, protests, or other activist initiatives with a distinct sociopolitical agenda.

Another core variable is their sense of agency, and in particular the belief that they are able to effect social and political change: the concept of sociopolitical efficacy (Diemer & Li, 2011). This relates mainly to (1) the perception of young people that they can personally make a difference to solve problems in their social and political environments, (2) that working together may contribute to making a difference, and (3) the responsibility they feel they bear towards getting involved and contributing to change.

These variables will be investigated by means of the narrative identities (McAdams, 1985) of the participants: how they tell stories to make sense of their autobiographical past and their perceptions of their future. This may concern any background information one is willing to share and feels like is important to their story, and their engagement in activism

The operationalization and conceptual model will serve as a supporting framework to collect and analyse the data later on. Rather than imposing its definitions on the collected data, it will primarily serve as a way to distinguish the differentiations between the distinctive concepts.

Validity and Reliability of Methodology

Narrative inquiry strives for internal validity through its focus on participants' lived experiences and perspectives. By capturing rich, in-depth narratives, it enhances the authenticity and credibility of findings. Snowball sampling, which relies on participants' referrals, supports validity by identifying individuals who possess crucial insights and unique viewpoints within the studied context. Purposeful sampling contributes further to internal validity by intentionally selecting participants and asking for referrals who offer diverse and representative narratives. However, a potential risk lies in over-representation of certain perspectives due to social networks, potentially limiting the overall validity.

Furthermore, the iterative nature of narrative inquiry, involving data collection, analysis, and interpretation cycles, contributes to the study's reliability. However, snowball sampling, while valuable for uncovering hidden narratives, may introduce biases if specific social ties dominate the recruitment process. Conversely, purposeful sampling mitigates this risk by deliberate selection, increasing the likelihood of consistent and reliable data, as participants were chosen from different types of activism and age groups.

While narrative inquiry offers an in-depth understanding, it may lack external validity due to its focus on specific contexts and narratives. Snowball sampling's reliance on referrals might inadvertently exclude individuals with dissenting views or experiences, potentially limiting the study's comprehensiveness. Purposeful sampling, while deliberate, may still introduce selection biases if not executed meticulously. Furthermore, the qualitative approach's subjectivity necessitates researchers to navigate their own biases and preconceptions, potentially impacting the study's objectivity.

Ethical Considerations, Practical Limitations, Potential Biases, and Positionality

In conducting fieldwork abroad, it was important to anticipate and address ethical considerations and practical limitations. Prior to data collection, measures were taken to ensure ethical guidelines. Participant consent was obtained, with the recording of interviews reliant upon participants' explicit agreement. Transcripts were subsequently anonymized to protect participants' identities, and pseudonyms were used to further maintain confidentiality.

Interviews were conducted in English, potentially introducing biases as participants had to be fluent and comfortable in a language different from Albanian. Thus, this may lead the studies to not fully represent the diversity of youth experiences, potentially overlooking important themes from non-English speakers and affecting the depth of communication.

Throughout the data collection process, possibility of potential biases was kept in consideration. Both respondent biases, stemming from social desirability or other influences, and researcher biases, such as confirmation bias or question-order effects, were acknowledged and actively managed. This commitment to minimizing bias upheld the integrity of the research findings.

Positionality, as an integral element of the research process, is something that was continuously reflected upon and will be mentioned here. The researcher's personal attributes, including age-group

alignment with the study's focus and a pre-existing interest in activist initiatives, could be potential influences on data interpretation. Moreover, the researcher's affiliation with a Western European institution may influence a perception shaped by specific norms and values. Hence, reflexivity is pivotal in safeguarding against tendencies to "exotify" or "romanticize" participants and their context. To navigate these dynamics, a rigorous practice of reflection was maintained. Regular notetaking, memo writing, and introspective documentation facilitated an ongoing examination of the interplay between the researcher's perspective and the research context. This was complemented with extensive conversations with many inhabitants of Tirana during the fieldwork, discussing the themes of this paper.

The Echoes of Struggle:

The Hindrances to Sociopolitical Efficacy and Activism as Perceived by Albanian Youth

Introduction

This chapter of the results examines how youth critically reflect on their sociopolitical contexts and the hindrances they face with regards to sociopolitical action. These hindrances relate to their personal, collective, and historical narratives that encompass the past, the present, and the future. It therefore sheds light on the contextual conditions and collective stories that inhibit sociopolitical efficacy and sociopolitical action among Albanian youth, illuminating deeply ingrained beliefs and mindsets. The interviewed youth critically reflected upon possible conditions and root-causes that Albanian youth may be considered as disengaged from sociopolitical action. Through examination of the perceptions of youth on their sociopolitical contexts, the hindrances they face with regards to cultivating sociopolitical efficacy as well as to engaging in sociopolitical activism will be investigated. Understanding their contexts – as described by themselves – provides a valuable context to situate the further findings of this paper.

Mistrust: Social Landscape and Passed Down Narratives

> *"And I saw that people here are not stupid. People are not bad. People are just manipulated by so many things, that are so complex, that so many things have happened to them that they have the right to doubt in everyone, to not believe, to be sceptical, to be nihilist, to be whatever they might be." –* Ilir

One of the most apparent patterns that emerged from all the stories narrated by the participants was that of mistrust. It was mentioned over and over again as one of the main challenges for youth to belief that they are capable of making a change in their sociopolitical environments. Their views on mistrust and its origins were quite extensive and they were capable of reflecting critically with thought-through reasoning for the potential causes of mistrust, and it was always contextualized and related to past events and developments in the country. As most Albanian adolescences are raised by caregivers that lived through the communist regime, which lasted until three decades ago, many of the participants pointed to recent history as the root cause of the widespread mistrust. Therefore, most of the narratives of the participants were in some way related to making meaning of the historical context of their country.

The way in which participants reflected on the older generations, and their own caregivers specifically, was noteworthy. They often did not agree with their worldview, beliefs, and values – but most of them did show understanding and contextualized their behaviour in terms of their difficult and traumatic past. Some participants, while acknowledging this, still urged older generations not to raise

their children with their fears projected on them, as otherwise everything will be passed on from generation to generation, and the same problems will persist endlessly:

> *"Communists cared only about people not believing other people, people not interacting with each other. They were afraid to exchange two words because they wouldn't know whether the other person is a person that will spy on them or is a good friend that listens to them. This mentality exists even today. And I think the older generations are guilty about educating the children like that. Like, if the grandfather has educated his own nephew like that, the nephew will educate his own children like that."* – Erion

This perception of mistrust in the past resonates with the feelings of mistrust that are present in current Albanian society, as perceived by youth. It is something that manifests itself in many different shapes and forms, and it overshadows many aspects of the beliefs and hopes of young people, as it becomes apparent in their personal stories:

> *"One thing that really hurts me in Albania is the faith and how much people believe in each other, in politics, in God, in everything. I think we find ourselves a little bit hopeless in these times. And this is one thing that I really feel, and I don't know what I could do about this, but it's something that really, really makes me sad."* – Luljeta

Luljeta continues explaining that through her volunteering work she encounters this mistrust often, as people often become sceptic about any initiative, even the handouts of free gifts. Likewise, Erion explained that he found it awkward and difficult trying to convince people all the time.

Furthermore, another thing that seems to be passed down through upbringing is the instilled fear, according to some participants related to mistrust stemming from demonstrations in the past:

> *"My parents assume that I would even be detained. I feel like maybe that's also what goes on with a lot of people's parents and grandparents, that they always see demonstrations as a clash with the police and you going against something, and you doing something wrong. [...] My parents were in their mid 20s when the 1990s demonstrations happened. They don't talk about it, but I think they're probably traumatized by it."* – Violeta

Perhaps related to this, several participants mentioned another narrative that is present in their parent's mentality, which the mentality not to interfere in problems that do not directly affect you, as Bujar said, "*our parents always tell us to not mess with things that are not a problem to us. Albanian parents, that are my parents' age, will always try to enforce that mentality*".

Luljeta draws the connection of the mistrust with a general lack of hope, one that is so deeply ingrained, that it keeps being transmitted onto other generations. She admitted that even for her, it was

difficult to find hope of this changing, because "*to change the way that people think is something that maybe takes two or three generations.*". Additionally, Sofia phrases this sentiment as follows:

> "*I noticed what really demotivates Albanians and makes them feel hopeless, is related to politics and the economy. There are the same two political leaders that were here since the ending of the dictatorship. People have seen what they have done, and they have lost hope in them. I think that these people will be inspired when there will be a new political leader or a new political force, that will maybe give them new hope.*" – Sofia

This sentiment was shared by most participants, as they criticized the current government and the current political landscape. They often blamed politics in the past three decades as the root-cause of the diminishing hope for change.

Mistrust: Political Landscape and Spread of Conspiracy

> "*Politics are like this. If you are part of it, you will play the game, everywhere in the world. But I really, really think that playing the game is one thing, and playing a game created by yourself is another thing. I just wish that this Albanian version of the game would be just the game that is everywhere else. I think that that would open so many doors for young people already.*" – Bujar

Mistrust in the political landscape was shared amongst all participants to some extent. Their blame encompassed both major parties in the government and not solely the one in power. Many talked about how the political landscape discourages youth from participating politically, as the main parties feel unrepresentative towards youth, their concerns, and their values. Additionally, the lack of communication between young people and the government seemed to be a concern of most participants. Some participants believed that the government fails in motivating and engaging youth, they feel increasingly unheard by people in power, as Arta explains:

> "*The politics here in Albania don't motivate the youth. They don't listen to the youth, and they don't find a way to communicate with them. If there is no solution coming from the top, they push us to find a solution, to do a protest for example. But they don't find a way for youth to participate in the government more directly.*" – Arta

However, besides these concerns, there were other pressing issues identified by the participants as well. Entangled in the stories they were telling; corruption came up very often, as exemplified by the following quote:

The corruption that is mentioned here relates mainly to the political parties, but besides the effect on perpetuating already existing narratives of mistrust, it also affects the agency and beliefs of young people in different ways. Participants talked about corruption being spread beyond politics and has according to Ilir even seeped into everyday life, as "*It has become a culture of corrupting people. You have this corruption everywhere, not only the ministers of deputies.*" Because of prevalent corruption, mistrust – in politics but also in others – is amplified.

Besides corruption and the lack of opportunities for youth to communicate with people in power – and actually being listened to – participants told stories of getting false promises that led nowhere in the end. It got darker when inquired about how the political systems inhibit one's ability to bring about change, as they mentioned precedents of manipulation, bribery, threats, violence, and misinformation being spread. Most of these were specifically aimed at restraining people from attempts to make a change. On the one hand, there are more apparent ways this happens, such as police violence or protest initiators being jailed, but on the other hand, there are various mechanisms that are hidden from plain sight. One participant explicitly mentioned that numerous of these have been aimed towards him and his peers. He mentioned that the biggest way for people in power to interfere in social and political action is exploiting the already existing mistrust. Spreading misinformation about the leaders of a movement or protest, bribing social media accounts to spread conspiracy theories, and accusing people of having hidden agendas are things that multiple participants were aware of – and some had also encountered thus far. Most of these narratives are overshadowing any initiative by civil society or activists. A popular example of this is that activists are often accused of being agents of international elites with ulterior agendas. Besides these accusation, people are also often blamed of being part of the opposition, even if this is not the case.

Relatedly, mistrust arises when there is funding from the government or an international institution. Even when there is no funding, people tend to accuse others of getting paid to protest, which makes it difficult to become active. These ideas are often spreading like wildfire through social media, and evoke resentment and hatred amongst people, even if it is based on misinformation.

Besides misinformation and conspiracy theories, there is also a widespread fear that an initiative might be claimed or 'hijacked' by a political party, who would use it their own gains. People often get bribed as well to change their opinions or to restrain from action. Ilir mentioned that because of all these things, many of his peers remain sceptical and distrustful, which drives more disengagement. All of these narratives perpetuate youth and their realities – preventing them from taking action or working together.

Gender Roles

> *"Because in patriarchal settings as Albania, people are afraid of people being different and not knowing where to frame them, or where to position them, or let alone being a girl or young woman acting like this. This was a stereotype that only men could fit in. Not girls."* – Ilira

Gender plays a significant role in the ability of Albanian youth to participate in sociopolitical activities. Many participants discussed this issue, especially young women who highlighted the impact of traditional gender roles on their upbringing and future goals. Beyond addressing gender inequality between men and women, some participants also expressed concerns about exploring their gender identity in the broadest sense. These discussions were more prevalent among participants from smaller towns or villages, where traditional norms tend to be more dominant in an individual's life. Participants explained that the past decades have affected women differently, particularly in remote areas where women faced more isolation and constraints on mobility compared to men. Inhibited mobility – based on factors such as traditional gender roles and sustained financial dependences – may perpetuate already existing structures of inequity, as well as hinder pathways to sociopolitical activism to address these issues. These constraints not only reinforce existing inequities but also hinder opportunities for sociopolitical activism aimed at addressing these challenges, as such barriers and limitations consequently reduce the ability to engage in activism. They may prevent basic actions, such as moving to places to mobilize or gather or express ideas with peers. As a result, gender-related obstacles significantly impact the capacity of Albanian youth to participate actively in sociopolitical endeavours.

For some, the men in the family prevented them from going to places where there might be men present, which restraints one's ability to mobilize or partake in extracurricular activities, also events geared towards cultivating critical consciousness and empowerment. One participant, Elona, shared her story about her displaced childhood, and how heart-breaking events in her past eventually paved her way to Tirana from a young age onwards. In hindsight, she realizes that this move opened many doors for her and led her to develop into the person she is right now. She also realizes if her destiny did not lead her out of the village, she would probably lose out on educational opportunities and already be married. Another participant, Ilira, was prevented to go abroad for a scholarship because of patriarchal mentality. She went to Tirana instead and found an apartment and a job when she was only 16 years

old. Her frustration and anger translated into the drive to prove everyone wrong: her father, her teachers, and society in general. Furthermore, it was interesting that she mentioned that in high school, even though she struggled with the school system and teachers being unresponsive to critical questioning, she managed to endure it all as "*I had people supporting me, I had my peers, I had my male friends who were capable of doing anything*". This indicates that stereotypes related to one's gender may inhibit or enable a certain way of expressing one's agency. Moreover, only one participant in this study, Violeta, was born and raised in Tirana. She emphasized that this was a privilege for her in many ways. Even though it is a small city, she said, it still helps you to stay more anonymous. Additionally, she explained that – because of opportunities of employment and education – women were also more in a position to become financially independent, finding a way out of the gendered dependence based on financial factors in smaller towns and villages.

Blendi, another participant, shared his struggle in exploring his gender identity, exacerbated by his family's lack of support, leading to severed ties with family members. His account shed light on the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, as in some contexts, they confront both oppression and abuse based on their gender and/or sexual orientation. Being marginalized, LGBTQ+ members encounter additional barriers on a daily basis that impede their personal agency. Moreover, stories were told about individuals who were refused medical care or transportation due to their gender identity. Disturbingly, LGBTQ+ public figures and activists often receive (death) threats on social media, highlighting the ongoing challenges they face. This emphasizes the need to understand how these various obstacles intersect, greatly undermining their sociopolitical efficacy and adding elements of danger and heightened risk to being sociopolitically active.

Another aspect that came up were the professional roles assigned to genders, such as civil society being predominantly women driven and as opposed to the male dominated conventional politics. Although participants mentioned that this was changing in the past two decades, some still raised caution of this ingrained belief that may deter individuals that identify as males to engage in initiatives that are associated with civil society and volunteerism.

In summary, the deeply rooted notions of gender identity and the roles associated with it result in a struggle for equal opportunities due to existing imbalances. Sexism further exacerbates this by creating inequalities in opportunities for taking part in societal and political changes. This is because individuals may not be considered seriously or may be ignored based on their gender identity and the roles they're expected to fulfil. Moreover, many women and members of the marginalized LGBTQ+ community already face various challenges in their daily lives, which leaves them with limited capacity and energy for getting involved in sociopolitical actions. Additionally, when one's gender identity is linked to having less influence over one's own surroundings, it creates unequal barriers to actively participating in societal and political matters. Changing this status quo requires more effort, especially as these ideas are passed down through generations. The restrictions on personal agency within the

confines of one's family home hinder the development of stronger agency when it comes to broader sociopolitical contexts.

Lack of Civic Education

> *"I've never had any understanding or explanation about social movements or any affiliation to them at school. We never talked about it; it was never taught to me. The demonstrations were something bad and it was never taught to me that there was also something good. That they are a form of democracy or a form of expressing your voice."* - Violeta

A noteworthy result of this study has been the absence of educational settings and teachers as motivators for sociopolitical efficacy and action. In fact, if educational systems and teachers were mentioned, it was often in a negative light with regards to their sense of agency and motivation to engage in activism. As the quote of Violeta above illustrates, civic education and subjects related to sociopolitical action are absent from the curriculum most of the participants of this study have had. Viotela became aware of this when she started studying in Germany, where many of her friends already were introduced to social movements and political ideologies from a very young age. Multiple other participants shared this sentiment, with some of them pointing to the educational system as one of the biggest reasons for youth to be disengaged in sociopolitical contexts; because they lacked the awareness of basic democratic rights and what it entails to be active as a citizen. Furthermore, other participants, such as Ilira, mentioned that the classroom was not the place for her to discuss her concerns and worries in adolescence. She also stated that being vocal in class was certainly not encouraged and you usually had to conform and demonstrate some kind of obedience to be favoured by teachers:

> *"Meanwhile, I was not that type of student, I was trying to understand things by logic and even push forward and ask other questions. And somehow when they were in difficulty and they didn't know how to answer that question, they were like, please don't think out of the box, we're doing something else here today."* - Ilira

Other participants mentioned that education in Albania lacked any kind of meaningful civic education, and pointed to this as a main reason for Albanian youth to have a limited understanding of political processes as well as a lack of awareness of rights and responsibilities that go with being a citizen in a democratic state. Without this knowledge, youth might not recognize when their rights are being infringed upon or when they have the agency to influence policies and decisions through activism, as

In essence, civic education plays a crucial role in equipping youth with the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary for sociopolitical engagement and activism. A lack of such education can lead to a reduced sense of efficacy, and a decreased inclination to participate in activism to address societal issues, as Ilir states: "*because in school we don't learn anything about ideology, politics, differences of*

historical movements and the impact that they had in our politics". This sentiment is illustrated by the following quote:

> *"That's why, if you have to change this country, you have to work hard on the educational system to create a new generation with people who have knowledge about what democracy is, and what culture is. Teach why it is important for people react to the government and to the systems, why it's so important to fight corruption and where the possibilities are to make this country a better country."* - Ilir

Lack of Resources

In Tirana, youth encounter a significant impediment stemming from limited resources, both in terms of financial means and time availability. The city's escalating living costs, coupled with low wages and high demands of their studies, exert vast pressure on adolescences. An illustrative perspective comes from Ergys, who, in his early thirties, recognises a shift in the experiences of Tirana's students, transitioning from "*full-time students with part-time jobs, to full-time workers with part-time studies*". This transformation highlights a lack of both financial resources and time. This indicates that young people often lack both the financial resources as well as time, as they have to work many hours to sustain their daily life and to pay for their studies, depending on their families' support and availability of scholarships. These conditions frequently align with youth migrating from various parts of the country to Tirana, driven by educational and occupational prospects. Consequently, they often become autonomous and independent for the first time, a process intertwined with self-identity exploration. Simultaneously, this often goes hand in hand with attaining financial self-reliance. These multi-layered processes can be draining, leaving minimal flexibility in one's schedule. As a result, the scarcity of time and energy becomes a major obstacle, potentially constraining an individual's capacity for meaningful sociopolitical engagement.

The Catalysts for Engagement:

The Biggest Enablers and Motivators for Youth to Engage in Activism

Introduction

Despite the challenges that might hinder young people's belief in their ability to bring about social and political change, there are individuals who actively take part in activism from a young age. Some of these participants openly shared their reasons for getting involved, while others spontaneously reflected on their motives during the interviews. Exploring how these activists reflect on and narrate their personal journeys into activism can offer us a clearer understanding of this phenomenon. This becomes particularly important in the Albanian context, as discussed in the previous chapter, where the sociopolitical landscape does not naturally promote or support political and social engagement among young people. Therefore, this chapter focuses on the stories told by young individuals who choose to be active and engaged, even when faced with numerous obstacles.

From Pain to Purpose: Turning Suffering into Meaningful Action

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"Activism is probably one of the best ways to address these issues we face every day. It's like a step forward, doing something against that thing that is making your life hard every day, for no proper reason." – Blendi

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One of the patterns of engaging in activism was suffering – both that of oneself as well as the suffering in others. As the participants narrated their upbringing, some of them emphasized particular hardships and difficult feelings they encountered. They often perceived this as a catalyst for them to engage in action that serves this pain in some way: to alleviate the pain of oneself or to prevent that pain in others and transformed this pain into purpose. A few participants, when asked for their motivation to help others, would reflect back on their lives, and realize that it originated probably because of feelings of non-belonging, isolation, loneliness, apathy, or as a result of experiencing injustices, abuse, bullying, oppression, or poverty – either themselves or through people close to them.

This theme sheds light on the many emotional motives to be engaged, such as empathy, but also of anger, as it seems that anger can be a strong force for activism. Besnik tells a story of the aftermath of one of his projects, renovating a basketball field in his city, "*which was destroyed after a year, started to be ripped apart because no one from the municipality was taking care of it. And that gave me a lot of anger. And that's when, to channel my anger into something, I started working proactively in civil society in Tirana.*".

Furthermore, some participants turned their story of struggle to a story of success, and used this a fuel to make a change and engage in activism:

> *"I really know how it is to feel like you're hopeless. When you feel like there is no one that can understand you, there is no one in the world that really has good intentions. I have felt that a long time ago and I don't want other people to feel like that, and I want to like an inspiration for them, that's why I'm working on myself so much. I want to make a change."* – Sofia

Other participants reflected on moments of becoming aware that they were in privileged positions and realized that they could have suffered more if born in a different place. Hence, another drive for engagement stemmed from empathy and compassion. An example of this, is when Violeta volunteered at a women's shelter, and realized the extent of suffering other women in her country endured. She realized her own position, and it evoked a powerful mission within her to actively work towards a reality in which her privileges would not be called privileges anymore.

<p style="text-align:center; color:red;">From Isolation to Belonging</p>

> *"It was the first protest that I joined in Tirana where I started to understand that I'm not the only one who's thinking against the rules, who's not afraid to speak up about her rights, and that imagines another world."* – Ilira

Another theme that emerged was the purpose of finding a group with shared values to belong to, and being able to be around people where people could be and express themselves more. As the previous quote by Ilira illustrates, activist initiatives may become the setting in which young people realize that there are others that share the same values. Usually, the stories related to this theme stemmed from an isolated childhood where they could not express themselves fully as they wanted, or from a past in which they felt alone in their thoughts and opinions.

On the contrary, some participants shared a story of a happy and fulfilling childhood and had a wish later in life to again be surrounded with likeminded people and a community to be themselves around. As for some most of their friends and family had migrated away, their hometowns were becoming empty, and they were now seeking a new community. Activism fitted the start of a new chapter, where adolescences become more independent, and start exploring their identities and values. Most young Albanians expressed that activism provided a pathway for them to find a community, a network of support, a group of friends, or simply a space to express oneself:

> *"I realized that there are other people who are doing activism by fighting for causes that I see as important to me as well. I felt the energy and started to hang out with these people more and started to contribute with what I can do."* – Blendi

Additionally, a few participants expressed that they enjoyed discussing political, social, and philosophical ideas with others – to broaden their horizons and to learn new things. Some stated that forming communities through activism and having a shared purpose also proved to be a potent antidote

to loneliness, apathy, despair, and was capable of cultivating more trust and cohesion between people. Moreover, Arta gave the example of being involved in setting up a successful initiative that was established to educate, empower and bring together a group of young girls in the village she grew up in – to start a community by young women, for young women, in which they could feel a sense of belonging, share their challenges, and express themselves in a safe setting.

<div align="center">From Inspiration to Action</div>

> *"If you are there, you can manage to inspire people and to attract them. That's how I joined; that's how other people joined. There's another comrade of mine, I went to their class. It was the same field I was studying, and I was like, "last year I was a freshman like you, if you need any advice or anything, just find me.". One of them was this comrade, she was on the last row of the class, and she came running to me, being like: "I want to join you!". And she's still with us after six years."* – Ergys

Another major motive for getting engaged in activism was being inspired by others. As the quote by Ergys demonstrates, he himself joined after being approached and inspired by other activists, which is also how many of his current comrades joined.

Inspiration can also come from caregivers, as for both Arta and Arben, their inspirations were their mothers, who stimulated or supported them in ways that fostered interest in joining youth initiatives and workshops, that eventually led them to becoming increasingly involved in activism. For others, their curiosity and enthusiasm are sparked when they hear success stories or see other activists do something.

What is noteworthy, is that many participants emphasised the need for more authentic role-models. Some participants went further and criticized public figures and organizations that promoted youth engagement and activism as being inauthentic, and therefore discouraging people from joining. They stated the need for more authentic storytelling, which would also include their failures, setbacks, and genuine obstacles in their attempts to bring about change – so people can authentically relate and be inspired. Elona sketched a good example of this form of authentic storytelling to inspire others. She was always moved the most by trainers, facilitators, and others that dared to share their most authentic selves. Reflecting upon this, she now states it is something she actively tries to embody:

> *"I think nowadays this is what keeps me alive, being humble and actively listening to young people, no matter their backgrounds, no matter where they come from, I can always find something similar with them by being sincere."* – Elona

From Values to Action

> *"I cannot change it for the whole of Albania. But following my values, I can at least motivate and inspire some young people to follow this example of doing things step by step. I believe this is how it should be."* – Elona

Another source of motivation to be engaged in activism are strong values that drive people. Some participants clarified this by describing their values as a compass, a personal mission, a reason to live. They also described the values that should be developed and promoted in youth if their engagement was to be enhanced. To this regard, they mentioned values such as empathy, solidarity, courage, authenticity, and curiosity.

Empathy was something that surfaced when participants narrated about their childhoods, as many of them described themselves as empathetic, sensitive, and compassionate towards others. As Elona describes how her childhood led her develop strong values. Her empathetic nature, strengthened by the hardships that she and her siblings faced, helped her to become the person she is now. Which is why she refuses to, for example, be affiliated with political parties or initiatives that she believes do not align with her values: "*It doesn't work like that for me, because of my values. I don't want to lose my values because my values are, you know, the ones that keep me alive.*".

Sometimes values such as empathy translate to solidarity, as for example Bujar started in his early teenage years to volunteer and raise money with his friends to help families in poverty. Some participants sought to find ways to help people, and their motivation was their passion was to help others, even if their specific reasoning is different. As the example of Blendi:

> *"What drives me in general is to be able to influence other people who need help. If they see another person like themselves doing stuff that they might want to do as well. Maybe not in the same direction, but, just to have that courage to be themselves and do what they want to do."* – Blendi

Moreover, the value of curiosity is also mentioned to be very important in order to engage in activism. As Ergys describes "*A very important element of engagement is if the youngsters are curious, and they want to learn new things or to find out new things. Then, if you have activity happening around you, you cannot be blind, you cannot just close your eyes.*". Thus, according to him, curiosity opens the eyes and therefore may opens doors to engagement and activism.

From Patriotism to Action: Love for Albania

> *"Because we have an expression in Albanian, it's "better to be the first in the countryside, than the last in the city". So, it's better to be the first in your country if you have the chance to, then to be just somebody in England or America."* – Arta

Besides critique on politics, scepticism, and despair for a better future – the commonality between most activists was the love for their country, for their culture, and for their people. This is essential for two main reasons. Firstly, it shows that, despite the many hardships and constraints the activists have faced, their activism is mostly rooted in a compassionate value towards their country and people in general, as they mostly expressed to believe in the inherent good of people. Secondly, this pattern also opposes any assumptions that activists in Albania are only actively engaged because they ought to be or because they cannot leave the country and migrate to find better opportunities elsewhere. Remarkably, most of the participants of this study either have had the opportunity to leave the country or already lived abroad. Even though Besnik was doing a scholarship abroad, he expressed that he wanted to go back and contribute:

> *"The wages here are unimaginable for what I would be doing in Albania. But compared to the worth that I think I can have here – the worth that I think I can have at home is much more important. At the end of the day, pride and hope to come back home is selfish as much as it can be communal. I want to be proud that I'm Albanian. I don't want to just be proud because I'm a patriot, I want to be proud about something that we've built or I've built there, at home."* – Besnik

This resonates with other narratives that emphasized the value of the many aspects of Albania that still needed improvement as opposed to the countries they could migrate to, that usually had these basic needs already covered:

> *"It's horrible to live here, it's noisy, it's chaotic. But after leaving, you'll really miss this country. Because when you go to Europe, things are so good you may feel unnecessary because you can't change anything. You can't fix anything; you can't make anything any better than it is. In Albania, you can really contribute, because there are so many things to do here and so many ways to make the life of people better."* – Ilir

Moreover, multiple participants expressed that they had considered leaving the country, but currently choose to believe hope is still back home, and that there need to be people staying that want change – usually this went hand in hand with the mentality of "*if not us, then who?*". The people that were currently active were so few, that every single activist leaving would interrupt the momentum.

Additionally, some participants voiced that they viewed leaving the country as giving up. They recognized that life would get easier perhaps, but it was not worth it, because they would abandon their country and their cause. As Ergys phrased, he had many competencies, skills, and a wide network that would allow him to work and live anywhere. He could move into his parent's house in Greece, not pay rent, and live an easier life. But he does not want to: *"Why? What for? It doesn't accomplish me. It doesn't make me full. That's why I'm an activist. Because I want a change and I enjoy contributing to different causes.*"

The Empowering Nexus:

The Interplay Between Activism and Sociopolitical Efficacy

Introduction

This chapter takes us into the experiences of young activists, showing how getting involved in efforts to bring about sociopolitical change has an impact on how they feel about their ability to create change. By looking at their stories, we see some important patterns that help us understand this relationship better. Exploring these patterns, we learn more about how activism and sociopolitical efficacy are connected, and thus, illuminating the different ways activism may be of potential value for cultivating youth as agents of change.

Activism as Viable Alternative to Conventional Politics

"All the activity we did left something in their consciousness, some tools, some ways, so they can pick them up and just continue where we left off. I believe that if something will change in Albania, we the people are the ones who are going to bring this change. There is no other way." – Ergys

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One of the ways that engagement in activism proved to be affecting sociopolitical efficacy amongst Albanian youth, was that – through embarking on an activist journey – they realized that the way to bring about social and political change in their community and in their country, was through activism. Distrust in the political system and scepticism in conventional political ways to bring about change now did not withhold the youth from taking steps towards change anymore. Distinct from political parties, they saw this path as more authentic and empowering.

Activism is a way to demonstrate what else is possible, as Ergys expresses: "*people do not think that they can change their environment or the things they have problems with by organizing. So, we have to show them that this can be done".* Most of the activists believed they were paving the way for people to become more active, but also for future generations, to leave them something they can pick up and move on with.

A few activists, however, also argued that they were active for the previous generations as well. Ilira vows that she continues the movement that was started by women in the past, as she says that "*you have to do your best and probably in the future, people are going to continue your path. As I am doing or my comrades are doing in the path of other women in history, and other people who fought against injustices*". Ilir believes that there is a hidden mission for Albanians, "*that you have to work for your country as the people before us did*", since people in the past sacrificed their lives to create the Albanian state and solidifying Albanian culture. Activism in this way includes fighting for causes that extend beyond one's life here and now: it is for the future – but also less obviously – for honouring the past.

Furthermore, another reason why activism may be considered the only path to actual change, is the distrust in the youth wings and activists of the political parties. Participants criticized them for being too propaganda driven, and for the people that were involved to be there because of the personal gains and promised shortcuts to power:

> *"I've always avoided them – but they're very, very political. I understand that they have to share the political values of the party they represent, but they become propaganda sharing. And I feel like if you would join one of them with very different opinions or something that's not really mirroring what the political parties are doing right now, you'd probably be casted out, but I haven't seen any other platform for us to be giving to have some dialogue."* – Violeta

Moreover, multiple participants point out that Albanian politics go wrong as people get involved with the aim to gain something from it, whether money or power. Even activism can sometimes be tainted with this, as people seek to work for well-paying institutions, without transmitting authentic values or advocating for actual change that would benefit Albanian youth. Ilir elaborates this and calls out major donors for being more careful to where and whom they direct their funding to:

> *"I believe it would be great if the European Union takes their funding more seriously, so that all these funds go to the right persons, people who are really willing to work for the things they really believe in. Because helping people who make a living out of activism, and activism for them is a profession, it becomes some sort of prostitution. Like there's no joy in that. It's only business. And being only business, they try to justify their phones more than to do what they might believe it's better for the country."* – Ilir

Although the same participants acknowledged that people employed as activists can do very good, and is still very valuable work, they simply emphasize the pitfalls related to it, of simply doing your work and being disconnected to the actual challenges that people face or the values that someone wants to fight for.

All in all, activism provides an alternative pathway for youth that wish to be active in realizing sociopolitical change but are sceptic or distrustful in conventional political or professionalised ways to do so. Thus, through activism, young Albanians acknowledged that they felt that they were somehow contributing to sociopolitical change, whether it is the continuation of activism in the past or paving the way for activists in the future.

"It turned out to be the start of a student movement for the first time after the fall of communism and the democracy in Albania. Because our circle grew up and expanded into something that was a collective, we were dividing duties and objectives to fill in one week." – Ilira

Activism also proved to be a gateway to the realization of collective agency: the sense that people are more empowered together and chances of bringing about change increase when working as a collective. This goes further than simply belonging – as activists emphasized how they felt more empowered through being in a group of activists. Most activists pointed out that their belief in them bringing about change was increased through being part of a larger group, a collective, or organization:

"When you are alone, you don't think that you can actually bring a change or do something. You feel weak, you might become a target. But when you have a group, when you have a community, it empowers you. Because you might be alone while speaking out loud in your class in front of 100 students or in front of your professors, but you have another 50 people outside that will support your ideas in every class" – Ergys

A collective or community gave a sense of power that exceeded that of being an individual, hence, collective activism led to higher individual beliefs in bringing about change. Additionally, Blendi stated that this sense of empowerment can also occur through the complementary skills that people may bring into a group:

"Because it's always harder on your own. I understand that there are not so many possibilities right now, but they should keep doing what they do, because they will find a way, if they keep doing it. Because I do think that we all have unique abilities, like I can do something, but you can do something else, together we can complete the whole process." – Blendi

Combining unique abilities, a group can work together with more effectiveness, and therefore increase the belief in oneself of bringing about change, as they may amplify each other's strengths and complement each other's shortcomings. Reflecting upon the massive demonstration of 2018, Ergys described that this scale of protest allowed people to become empowered to say what they wanted to say. It illuminated what others felt while also opening the space to share one's own worries:

"When you are around 20,000 people, even by passing through, you listen. They express their worries, their demands, their problems. Girls coming out and publicly calling out the professors for sexual harassment, for asking money for exams.

It just comes out; you just know what to say. So, yeah, it formed us politically. It formed us. It taught us how to articulate our ideas better." – Ergys

Besides the space to articulate and express worries, and get listened to and related to by others, Ergys also expressed that this big protest empowered them as a group – and even made them feel protected in the face of threats:

"We became even stronger as a group and stuck together more. Because imagine every morning trying to protect yourself because the militants of the parties were also aggressive. They would come after girls, and they would beat them. And we would always hang out in groups of four of five people moving around in the protest. It was like we were one body." – Ergys

Furthermore, activism in organizations, groups, and communities also seemed to lead to feelings of solidarity, between people, but also between causes and goals. Activists that started supporting student rights, and joined a movement or collective, in some cases eventually also were involved in protests and initiatives for LGBTQ+ rights, women's rights, workers' rights, and Roma community rights. They realized the interconnection between these things, and how the empowerment of one community may benefit that of another.

Similarly, Elona points out how – especially in Albania – it is important for multiple civil society organizations to work together if you want to make a change. As, particularly in meetings with for example the municipality, it helps to mention a bigger institution or powerful organization in order for them to take you seriously and actually listen to you.

Moreover, collective agency can also be an antidote to the widespread mistrust between people that is present. Ilir explains that they organize gatherings with young students, where they brainstorm all kind of ideas:

"By doing so, we connect more with each other, and we are always growing. And I really hope at this point to grow more and more to create these connections between students and to create this trust between each other, this unity that people will finally know that we are not trying just to make ourselves at a position where we can sell ourselves more." – Ilir

All in all, collective activism may bring about higher levels of sociopolitical efficacy in individuals through a myriad of reasons, which include feeling empowered in bigger numbers and stronger in the face of threats, feeling increased solidarity and empathy towards others and their causes, complementing each other's abilities and skills which leads to higher confidence in their capacities, and recovering trust in the 'other' in a society where mistrust is prevalent.

"I do think that the key is to facilitate these types of communities and to have these types of gatherings, to exchange opinions, to even have any type of dialogue. I think that that is the starting point, and anyone can take that knowledge and make a change, in the world, in their communities. In Tirana, these demonstrations were the only place that fostered that community. Like I didn't have that at school. I think the demonstrations really did that." – Violeta

Another way activism had an empowering effect on the sociopolitical efficacy of youth, was through providing the space and means for civic education and self-development. On the one hand, activists learn about politics and get educated by their peers and mentors, on the other hand, activists learn about themselves and develop many skills as well as enhancing personality traits. Several participants, such as Bujar and Elona, marked their activism as a pathway for them to become more brave, more vocal, more courageous. Some learn to develop the skill of public speaking, others overcome their shyness and insecurities. Elona is an example:

"Because as a person, as a human being, I was very timid and distant, and I didn't talk much. I was very shy, and this actually helped me a lot, to be more outspoken, and to be more vocal, whenever I had the opportunity to talk about something that was affecting me, but even for things that were not affecting me, but were affecting our society." – Elona

Besides these kinds of characteristics, activists also seem to learn a wide variety of other skills, especially if the activist initiatives are part of an organization or collective:

"You learn a lot. I believe that you gain more than you give. If I contribute here, let's say two hours a day and I do data entry, I might have given two hours of my time, but I have gained a lot more than I have given. Because I will be hanging out with people, talking with them, I will learn new things. You always gain more than you give, even though it's not in economic terms." – Ergys

Multiple participants also expressed that activism was the way through which they received their political education: their peers would educate them about many things and show them new perspectives. Often ideas and knowledge that is not present in their educational curriculum. As Ergys described, he started reading more and educating himself about social and political issues, "*we had protests and stuff and basically I got educated in the streets. Comrades would give me small articles or books to read. I remember that, when I joined the movement, in my entire life I had read only two books*". He continues to explain how his personal growth and civic education has been consistent after:

> *"Every conversation I had with an activist, with an older activist, with someone more politically articulate than me, politically conscious than me, was like a moment of illumination, of inspiration. Like, okay, I have to read this up. Let's learn more. Let's discuss. Let's talk about it."* – Ergys

Similarly, other participants mentioned that activism provides a way for youth to discuss and talk about politics and social challenges, to become aware of political ideologies and values that speak to you. They also spoke of the openness that the activist organizations usually have towards new ideas and critical questions, creating a valuable alternative to gaining civic education outside of schools.

Narratives of Despair: Setbacks and Discouragement

> *"But one of the reasons I might consider to leave this country is the perspective that it's like a tunnel with no light at the end. And even if a light is at the end, it's another train coming toward us."* – Ilir

Although many patterns within the narratives indicate activism being positively correlated to sociopolitical efficacy, it does not mean being an activist goes without any experiences of despair, of frustration, of discouragement – as well as burnouts, violence, persecution, and threats. Being an activist also has its downsides and may also inhibit a sense of sociopolitical efficacy.

A few participants expressed how their activism went hand in hand with burnouts, stress, and sleepless nights. After much effort, the results of activist initiatives were sometimes highly disappointing, as often initiatives lead nowhere:

> *"One thing I was sad about this is that we made all that effort, you know, it takes a lot of effort to collect 6000 signatures, it's very difficult. And it was two weeks of very little sleep and all that. But when we sent that to the municipal council, we did not get any answer from them. So that put us down."* – Bujar

Multiple participants talked with despair about the frustration that sometimes emerges, especially after successful initiatives. Some of these initiatives are professionally and effectively put together, often through a bottom-up approach. Bujar portrays this with an example, as he was part of a large process of setting up a student congress – the first of its kind – that has 150 students in it who were nominated by 4000 other students. It is a phenomenon that other participants in this study also spoke highly of. Nevertheless, Bujar expresses:

> *"We never get any invitation from the government or from the municipality, or from anyone else for that matter. They're not cooperative with us, and that makes me feel bad about the situation. I wish that they would just invite us to talk, that's all. Just talk. Hear us voice our problems, write down notes, and discard the notes after we leave, but just make the effort, you know?"* – Bujar

The frustration in his voice matched those of other participants when they told their stories of setbacks they faced. This quote also signifies the direness of the situation, as the bar is as low as simply being listened to.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the first chapter, youth in the city often face financial struggles, and being an activist potentially adds some layers of risk and worry to this situation. Many activists are financially dependent on either their job or their parents. Activism, for most youth, is something to do besides their jobs, which already is difficult enough to maintain. Even if they manage to balance this, another factor may overshadow their efforts: people in power will (in)directly threaten people with cutting their financial sources. Different participants told stories of precedents when people got fired as a new party got in power. In addition to this, it also seemed to be a known phenomenon that you might risk being fired if you engage in social and political action that goes against the political party in power. For youth, this manifests in two ways: either their own or their parents' job is threatened.

> *"The good thing here is that there has been progress in democracy. But it's small progress. You cannot call my parents not being fired progress, because protesting is my constitutional right in Albania, and I can do it whenever and however I like. So that should not have any effect on my job or my parents' job. […] People that have a business and that support themselves, like my dad, they don't really care. People that are employed and are paid by the government, like my mom, are always a bit more frightened. And this is how it tends to be here."* – Bujar

Meanwhile, Ilira shared a story related to this threat. Some years ago, she did something during her activism, that put the spotlight on her. In the years after, she continued to engage in activism regardless, becoming a public figure. At the time, she had a job that helped her pay her university fees and make a living in Tirana, and she got fired, "*because even though this was not an Albanian company, this was a branch of an Italian company, but was still managed by an Albanian guy who was part the party in power in Albania*". After the incident, she expressed that when she sought a job in an institution, they always googled her and rejected her because of the incident. Regardless of being experienced and having two master's degrees, she is still struggling to find a compatible job:

> *"I'm still perceived as this person who can find trouble everywhere where she is. So, activism has affected my life a great deal, with good meaning, but also in ways that make it difficult to live under these conditions, because we cannot be self-sufficient."* – Ilira

Furthermore, regardless of threats, activists still try continuing to organize and protest. Sometimes leading to difficult situations, as Ilir explains that he was jailed for a few days after organizing a protest, because as he says, "*there are so many mechanisms they try, just to destroy the protest, to lower the enthusiasm of people who are protesting*.".

Additionally, another reason for discouragement was in 2019, when a large earthquake happened, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This also halted a lot of momentum gained by several movements. Many young people left the country after the pandemic, including leading figures of past protests. This has been discouraging for some participants as well, because they felt like they had to start over again.

All in all, an individual's belief in their capacity to realize sociopolitical change may also diminish after being involved in activism, as it can become a burden too heavy to carry, a threat to sustaining a basic livelihood, a way that may lead to harassment and jail, or simply the dread of continuous setbacks and discouragement.

Narratives of Hope: Stories and Experiences that Drive Perseverance

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"The hope remains because it stays with the people, I would just want to be there and see and taste and feel the things that are changing. My hope doesn't rely on the many manifestations of evil and corruption and forms of distrust that exist in Albania and on social media." – Besnik

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One of the apparent traits in the activists – especially the ones that were active the longest – was their own perceptions and stories of hope. Despite setbacks, obstacles, and limitations, most of the participants continued to endure and stay hopeful. Usually, this narrative was connected to perceiving their activism as something much bigger than themselves, something that had to be done, and that was part of a long-term process:

"Activism carved me with a lot of patience, because I learned the hard way that the fruits of my work that I'm doing now will be in the upcoming years. Nothing happens in an eyelid, nothing happens now. You have to do your best and probably in the future, people are going to continue your path. As I am doing or my comrades are doing in the path of other women in history, and other people who fought against injustices." – Ilira

"I started to understand and realize that only by organizing with my peers in different issues, we can actually try to bring a change, even if we don't bring it soon. I made peace with myself that the changes that we are trying to bring may not happen in this lifetime, but at least we can leave something from that for the other generations that will come. So, they do not start from zero. They have some solid grounds where they can step on and continue the work that we left." – Ergys

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Similarly, some participants also related hope with the process of change, and the acknowledgement that change itself is inevitable. They see that change has already happened in their lifetimes, and they see joy in being able to contribute to this unavoidable process:

> *"I do feel hopeful. Things have actually changed a lot since I was younger, and I do think that they will change more. I mean, they will change anyway even if somebody doesn't do anything. I'm trying to do something so that maybe I can impact that change. It's nice to know that you're doing something to influence this process. It will change for the better, I'm pretty sure."* – Blendi

> *"I do believe in change because I've already seen change in the last decade. I have almost 12 years of activism in Albania and in this span of work we've already solidified a feminist movement for the first time in Albania, something that didn't exist before."* – Ilira

Other participants found their hope in the possibility that the political system will change inevitable at some point. One participant saw the path to this through a law that enables Albanians abroad to vote by mail instead of being present, another participant laid her hope in the top-down changes and laws that were implemented to diminish corruption in order to move closer to becoming a part of the EU. This sentiment is illustrated by the following quote:

> *"With the right opportunities and the right resources, the Albanian youth shine. I think this can be a way, when political forces decentralize and there comes maybe a young, inspiring leader that has all these new plans, people will get their hope back."* – Sofia

When interviewing an Albanian activist in her late 50s, she mentioned hope as a crucial factor as well, regarding it as a vital difference between protesting youth in the early 1990s and youth now. She is worried about the capacity of youth nowadays to pose a challenge to the status quo:

> *"Because I don't see to them the same spirit that we had in the nineties. It was difficult in that time for us to do things, but we had a lot of hope. It's maybe not very difficult for young people now to do things, but they don't have hope. And this is something that makes them more weak."* - Edona

All in all, hope manifests in many different shapes and forms, and is perceived as the main component of activism by many Albanian youth activists. The lack of hope halts efforts aimed at sociopolitical change and may impede an individual's efficacy to bring about change as well. In the results of this study, it appears that activism may be a powerful way to boost hope in individuals, carving them with patience, and boosting their efficacy. Especially the capacity to zoom-out and see efforts in a much larger process of change – or the capacity to zoom-in and focus on the smaller changes that are happening within and around an individual.

Discussion

This study was exploratory, delving into the case of Albanian youth engagement and activism, aiming to illuminate the factors that shape their sociopolitical engagement. Through a comprehensive examination of narratives from Albanian youth activists, this paper opens the discussion to fresh perspectives and insights that enrich the discourse surrounding youth engagement. Reflecting back upon the conceptual framework, sociopolitical efficacy was assumed to be an essential precursor to activism (e.g., Hope & Jagers, 2014), which potentially could be a reinforcer of sociopolitical efficacy (Poteat et al., 2020). The relevant literature suggested that the relationship is still unclear and the way it affects each other also remains vague (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021). Hence, the following model visualizes the updated conceptual model based on the summarized findings of this paper, and the following discussion section will dive deeper into its explanation.
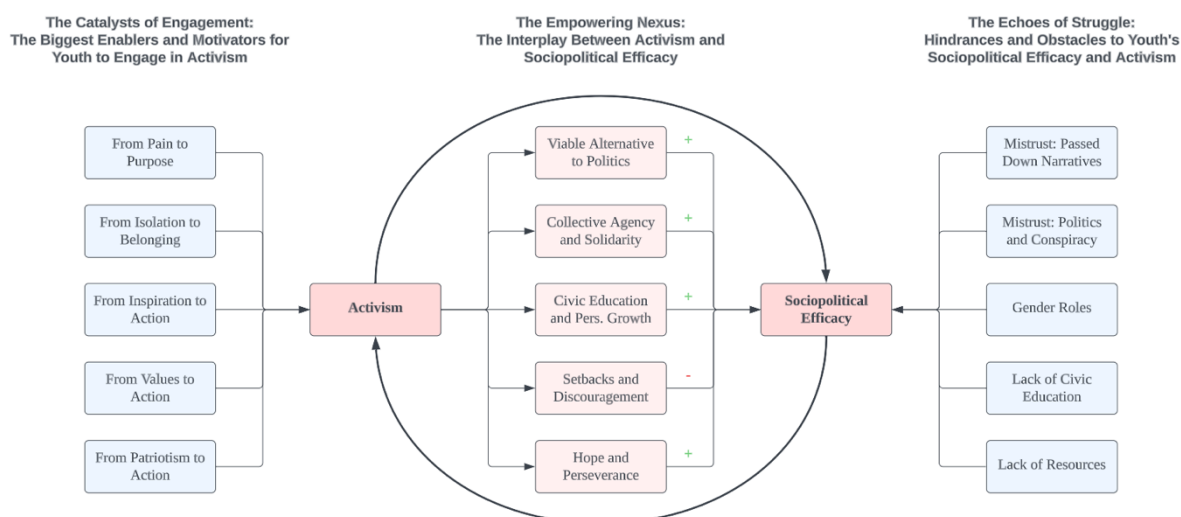

Figure 2: The updated conceptual model based on the summarized findings (*See Appendix B for bigger representation*)

The Crisis Narrative versus Counterpoint Findings

The so-called 'crisis narrative' of youth disengagement (Putnam, 2000), often perceived as a sign of apathy amongst the younger generations, finds a compelling counterpoint within the findings of this study. Although most participants did acknowledge the narrative of youth being disengaged, they emphasised the responsibility as well as the capacity of youth to be agents of change. Nonetheless, most participants highlighted that young people were not the ones to blame and explained this through contextualizing this phenomenon. However, as opposed to the debates outlined in the theoretical framework of this paper, the way they narrated about other youth deviated from the simple dichotomy of being engaged versus disengaged; they pointed their fingers to numerous political, economic, and societal factors as reasons they were not more active – and often used their own experiences and stories

to exemplify that. Many participants believed that young people are very much capable of being critical and bringing about change but were constrained by numerous factors, both externally, such as the lack of opportunities or freedoms, and internally, such as courage or hope. Hence, the findings of this research align with the countering narrative that attributes youth disengagement to institutional disaffection rather than inherent indifference (O'Toole, 2016). The narratives of Albanian youth activists align with this countering narrative, unveiling a generation that rejects traditional political structures as unresponsive to their needs and aspirations as well as unrepresentative of their values and identities. Corresponding with findings of studies such as that of Soler-i-Martí (2015), it seems that youth may have political interest and be psychologically involved with sociopolitical matters but cannot express this through traditional institutional political ways. The findings of this study point to a reality in which the sociopolitical landscape is not encouraging youth engagement in any meaningfully perceived form, consequently leading to youth being unmotivated to participate in unresponsive institutions. Nevertheless, the narratives of the activists interviewed in this study validate the notion that youth are indeed capable of driving their own political socialization (Andersson, 2015). Rather than becoming apathetic when dissatisfied with social and political institutions, these young activists channel their aspirations and ideas into alternative pathways to sociopolitical change by means of activism, which aligns with the findings of Earl et al. (2017). Hence, employing a positive outlook and a lens based on the theoretical counter-narrative made it possible for this paper to shed light on an alternative viewpoint and its potential to encourage youth engagement within Albania post-communist context.

A Sociopolitical Landscape that Hinders Youth: Considering History

Diving in the context of Albania's youth, an important element emerged that was not apparent in much of the literature as discussed in the theoretical framework. Although Taft and Gordon (2013) found that in some cases youth distrust top-down organized councils because of conformity pressures, the feeling of mistrust was not very evident amongst the literature. Mistrust emerged from this study as one of the core themes – it was found to be the biggest obstacle and hinderance to youth engagement, in both conventional political ways as well as in any kind of activism. It is ingrained so deeply into social and political structures, that even volunteering work is looked down upon, as there may be a hidden agenda behind someone or the organization doing it. It is rooted in a fear and distrust, that according to the participants stems from a difficult past full of suffering and deception, and it transmits from generation to generation as a mentality that is passed down. Widespread mistrust, according to the participants, find their seeds planted throughout the isolated communist era under a vastly controlling and ruthless regime. Throughout recent decades, the feelings of mistrust were fuelled numerous times by scandals and corruption (e.g., the major pyramid schemes of the mid-nineties). It has also been exploited through the spread of fear and misinformation, putting active people with dissident voices in a negative light. Additionally, it allows conspiracy theories – exacerbated by social media – to take hold and spread like wildfire, making it very difficult for any socially or politically active youth to make a stand without

suspicion. Simultaneously, civil society is politicized, and activist are suspected of earning money from political elites to voice their opinions, and as this happens frequently through the youth parties of the political parties, any activist – whether politically affiliated or not – is suspected of being sociopolitically active for their own or their party's gains.

Besides being a significant barrier and burden for meaningful sociopolitical engagement, this study also has consequences on the literature, as it shows that many activists persistently distance themselves from any political association, even if political parties attempt to offer them financial or educational gains. For youth to be more sociopolitically active in a meaningful way in the Albanian context, many of the participants agreed upon the notion that youth should refrain from following the usual path of politics and – especially at a young age – steer clear from political parties and affiliations. Some used examples of figures that used to be pioneering activists that now turned into conforming politicians, becoming part of a system that neglects the voice of youth activists and bottom-up initiatives. They voiced their concerns, and this indicates a finding that is contrary to other findings – mainly based in western democratic settings – that activism leads to more political participation in conventional ways (e.g., voting or being part of a political party or campaign) as was found for example in the study of Diemer and Li (2011). This study points to the opposite, the more youth realized the value of activism, the more they rejected the idea that sociopolitical change comes conventional politics. Many of them had lost hope in the dominant political parties and the corrupted systems – while laying their hope in activism and civil society. Thus, this reinforces the idea of the countering narrative, as scholars should take into account various forms of participation, especially with regards to the variety of sociopolitical landscapes in the world that deviate from the western democratic model.

<p style="text-align:center; color:red;">Motivations for Activism: Factors Strong Enough to Engage</p>

Furthermore, shedding light on the subjective realities of Albanian youth activists through narrative inquiry brought forth many aspects to their engagement that were rooted in the psychological and emotional domains as well as uncovered what youth perceive as their biggest obstacles and motivators in engagement through critical reflection. As many authors such as Friskie (2020) highlighted, narrative inquiry by means of examining one's narrative identity, proved its potential to unveil the process of sociopolitical engagement, rooted in an individual's present context, biographical past, and future aspirations. Participants reflected on their motivates and setbacks on their activist journeys, made meaning of their hardships and sufferings, and connected the dots while critically reflecting upon their own stories contextualized in the historical, political, and social factors in their country. Therefore, the potential of this approach would be recommended for future in-depth research to understand youth engagement, as it may unveil many factors and experiences that would otherwise be hidden. This recommendation builds forth on the suggestions of Trott (2021) that indicated that motivations are rooted in internal emotional and psychological factors, and that of Kowasch et al. (2021), who argued

to go beyond the rational and inquire about the emotional domain. Hence, most of the motivations for engagement in activism by the participants of this study were indeed rooted in emotions and feelings.

Besides emotions, another source of motivation aligned with the findings of Akiva et al. (2017), who argued that both the desire to participate in social justice as well as attending for sanctuary were as important – an element often overlooked. Sanctuary, or "a space that protects and affirms social identities", proved to be a major motivation for the participants of this study as well. Especially activism and associated communities or collectives were a 'safe space' for many, as members of marginalized communities were welcomed and celebrated. These safe spaces often led to the forming of communities as well, with close connections and friendships flowing out of them. This contributed to feelings of collective agency as well, which aligns with Kirshner's work (2009).

Furthermore, there was one other major source found in this study, which pointed to being inspired by others. This mostly entailed being inspired by peers and in a few cases by parental figures or mentors. Stories were told of seeing another activist do something inspiring that one aspired to do as well or of being embraced for one's full self by peers that were part of an activist collective. Most activists told narratives of themselves and other peers in their communities of becoming engaged solely because of other activists inspiring them – revealing peers and other activists as a potent catalyst for sociopolitical engagement, even for youth that were apathetic before being approached or inspired. This is noteworthy for the literature, as in the cases where scholars to take into account other youth or peers as socializing influences, they often combine for example peers and parents (Diemer & Li, 2011), even though the influences may vary. Besides quantitative correlations, the influences remain often unclear (Gordon & Taft, 2011), and this study illuminates potential pathways in which peers contribute to the sociopolitical engagement of youth.

Activism's Transformative Effects on Albanian Youth

Moreover, the literature suggested that after being involved in activism, it may become a potent field of civic education (Kirshner, 2007), promote many skills necessary for participation (Rogers et al., 2012) and foster a sense of critical consciousness and heightened agency (Carey et al., 2021). This emerged to be apparent in this study, as a myriad of consequences of activism on an individual came forth through the narratives told. Involvement in activism had a major effect on the young activists, encompassing many different themes as demonstrated in the results. For some participants, becoming involved in activism made them read political books for the first time, and others realized that they were not the only ones with vocal opinions on the status quo of their society after participating in a protest. Numerous examples in the narratives revealed the importance of collective agency and the potential of organizing to realize sociopolitical change. Activism led many youths to places and settings where discussions were prevalent and their voices were (finally) heard by others, and their identities were welcomed. Activists expressed that they became more brave, vocal, compassionate, and courageous thanks to their involvement in activism. A noteworthy finding, especially in the context of Albania, was

the potential of activist initiatives and spaces where activists could gather to foster trust and cohesion amongst young people. Thus, activism proves to be a potent antidote to the widespread mistrust.

Another way that activism effected individuals was its potential to cultivate hope. As Freire's (2014) concept of the pedagogy of hope indicates, hope may motivate young people to engage in activism that shapes a more promising future in the face of uncertainty. Hope is assumed to be an engine of change (Niarn, 2019). Here, the study in Albania may provide contribution to the literature, as hope was not necessarily found to be a key catalyst or motivator to engage in activism. Rather, hope was found to be something that was cultivated over time of engagement in activism. The starting point of some of the Albanian activists that were interviewed mainly consisted of having a low sense of efficacy, they did not necessarily belief they were capable of making a change to their sociopolitical realities. After being involved in activism, participants mentioned notions such as that it "*carved them with patience*" and seeing others engaged or the fruits of their efforts "*sparked their hope*". Additionally, their hope was often related to a far distance future, which relates to the literature of imagined futures (Catell, 2021), emphasizing the importance of the perception of futures. Activists talked about that whether they would see the change they were striving for or not, they were paving the path for future activists to walk upon. Moreover, they use this hope to navigate obstacles and persevere setbacks, as they have a bigger goal in mind, being part of a process of change in a country they aspired to spend their futures, with the prevalent sentiment of "*if not us, then who?*". Many of the activists, especially the ones that were active the longest, added a temporal factor to their motivation to sustain their activism, which encompassed a distant future – but noteworthy, also a distant past. They mentioned paving the way for future generations and accepting that they probably will not see the fruits of their efforts – but they also mentioned that activists in the past have done the same, enabling them to have this journey in the present. This complements the literature, as it may also be important – especially in the context of sociopolitical activism – to take into consideration how activist consider history as essential to their efforts as well.

Last but not least, it is also important to consider the negative links activism may have on sociopolitical efficacy, which has received little attention from academic works thus far. This awareness is essential since it points to areas which in many cases call for additional assistance and protection. Besides setbacks and unresponsiveness, activists may be in danger because of their actions as well, as the result of being threatened, fired, demonized, harassed, or persecuted. Hence, this study clearly demonstrates many potential positive effects activism may have on individual youths, but also acknowledges the dangers and hardships they may face as a result of their actions.

Challenging the Notions of Sociopolitical Efficacy

Examining the relationship between engagement in activism and their sense of sociopolitical efficacy, it seemed that the initial assumption rooted in the theoretical framework was different. The narratives indicated a myriad of effects mainly from activism on sociopolitical efficacy, rather than the opposite,

which is predominantly implied in the literature surrounding critical consciousness. The findings align more with those of Poteat et al. (2020), that suggested a cyclical effect. Notably, some participants narrated their journeys the opposite way of what is proposed in critical consciousness literature: they got involved in an activist initiative some way or another, where they engaged in dialogue and discussions that instigated their interest in sociopolitical issues and began to realize – through stories told by others and through first-hand experiences – that they were able to organize and make a difference together. Although some form of curiosity is noted here as a precursor to become involved in an initiative, it is different from what is implied in the literature (e.g., Freire, 2000), in which critical reflection or a sense of sociopolitical efficacy are seen as the precursors to activism. The examples of this study shed light on another narrative: the potential of activist initiatives to foster an individual's belief in their efficacy to bring about change as well as their civic education and thus their capacity of critical reflection. Shedding light on this different direction in relationship of the components of critical consciousness, as Hipolito-Delgado et al. (2021) suggested research to do, reveals another dynamic to the process.

As previously mentioned, one of the five major themes that were found in this relationship indicated a negative effect of activism on sociopolitical efficacy. This has consequences for the literature and potential initiatives, as it is important to take into account that the cyclical relationship does not solely rest on empowering each other. Nevertheless, the positive effects that were found do suggest potential in fostering activist initiatives and inquiring youth activists to learn about how to engage youth and cultivate their sense of sociopolitical efficacy.

<div align="center">Reflection on Limitations: Acknowledging Biases and Omissions</div>

Undertaking a qualitative narrative inquiry in Albania, with both the snowball and purposive sampling method as well as flexible open-ended interviews, presented a unique set of opportunities and challenges. While this approach enabled a rich exploration of the lived experiences of young Albanian activists, it is crucial to reflect on potential biases and omissions that might have influenced the research process and findings.

One of the central challenges of this study was conducting narrative interviews in a language that was not native to the participants. Although all participants spoke English fluently and with lots of proficiency, still, nuances and cultural subtleties might have been lost in their translation. The choice of words, tone, and phrasing used through using English could have inadvertently altered participants' narratives, potentially leading to an incomplete or skewed representation of their experiences. Besides this, another problem may have occurred: the exclusion of activists that were not comfortable or proficient enough to conduct interviews in English. Thus, future research is recommended be conducted by a native speaker or with a skilful translator to interview a wider range of Albanian youth activists.

The cultural context of Albania, with its unique historical, social, and political dynamics, adds complexity to the interpretation of narratives. As an outsider without a deep understanding of the local

culture, there is a risk of misinterpreting or oversimplifying participants' stories. Certain cultural references or implicit meanings might have been missed, impacting the accuracy of the analysis and potentially perpetuating cultural biases. However, to diminish these effects, the researcher stayed in the country for a few months himself and complemented the interviews in this research with thorough research of the context and numerous informal conversations to get to know the culture better.

The sample size, while providing valuable insights, is relatively small and might not capture the full diversity of experiences within the broader population of young Albanian activists. The participants who agreed to be interviewed could have distinctive motivations or perspectives that influenced their willingness to share their narratives, potentially leading to selection bias. This might have skewed the findings by over- or under-representing certain viewpoints. Hence, the findings of this study may be complemented by studies with a bigger sample, to contrast and compare the results.

Besides generalizability for Albanian youth activists, the transferability of the findings of this research may also be limited, as much of the rich descriptions and understandings may be specific to the Albanian context and not work the same in other geographical and cultural settings. It may, however, be interesting to compare the results to similar studies conducted in different contexts.

The researcher's own background, beliefs, and perspectives could have unintentionally shaped the study's design, data collection, and analysis. To establish more rapport and a sense of safety, informal conversations usually surrounded the interviews. Moreover, the researcher's preconceived notions or expectations about youth activism could have introduced confirmation bias, where certain themes were emphasized or disregarded based on prior assumptions. Subjectivity shapes an element of such qualitative research methods, and thus, future research is recommended to use mixed methods as triangulation, as to conduct both qualitative as well as quantitative measures in researching this subject.

The open-ended nature of the interviews allowed participants to shape the conversation, potentially leading to the omission of critical themes or perspectives that they did not prioritize. Certain aspects of the participants' experiences, which were not explicitly raised during the interviews, might have been left unexplored. Additionally, the study's focus on narratives of activism might have overshadowed other contextual factors that contribute to youth engagement. Future research may perhaps delve deeper into the various factors that attribute to sociopolitical engagement and efficacy.

In conclusion, while the qualitative narrative inquiry conducted in Albania provided valuable insights into the reality of young Albanian activists, it is crucial to acknowledge and critically reflect on the potential biases and omissions inherent in the research process. By acknowledging these limitations, future research can build upon this study's foundation to delve even deeper into the complexities of youth engagement, sociopolitical activism and efficacy within the Albanian context.

Conclusion

In exploring the dynamics of Albanian youth engagement in activism and how it relates to sociopolitical efficacy within a post-communist context, this study has shed light on the multifaceted interplay between young individuals, activism, and their beliefs in realizing sociopolitical transformation. The overarching research question, "*Why do Albanian youth engage in activism and how do they shape their sociopolitical efficacy to realize change in a post-communist context?"* has been addressed through a comprehensive inquiry into their perceptions, motivations, and reflections.

<div align="center">Answering the Research Question</div>

Through the lens of the research sub-questions, it became evident that Albanian youth navigate a complex landscape marked by both internal and external factors that influence their willingness to engage in activism and effect their sociopolitical efficacy. They grapple with obstacles deeply rooted in historical mistrust, contextualized by a legacy of repression and manipulation as well as structural restraints as a consequence of being marginalized on basis of factors such as gender and age. These findings demonstrate the importance of different political, social, and cultural settings with regards to youth engagement and sociopolitical efficacy, corresponding with the arguments of scholars (e.g., Kirshner, 2007) to research cases outside of Western democracies to gain a richer understanding of the processes. Although youth participation in the context of Albania may relate to Kitanova (2020), who found a correlation between age of democracy and youth's political participation, the narratives of activist youth provide a more nuanced perspective on this phenomenon. The reasoning for youth in Albania not to engage actively in conventional politics may not be rooted in indifference, but in a myriad of other reasons that discourage them from participating in what they perceive as unresponsive, non-representative, and deceiving institutions towards youth. However, aligning with the research by Soler-i-Martí (2015), most participants believed that Albanian youth were indeed generally interested in sociopolitical matters. They mentioned that, although some were capable to express this through various forms of activism, other young people lacked the resources and opportunities to express their interest and engagement in a meaningful manner. Despite the obstacles in the sociopolitical landscape, the narratives of these young activists unveil a resilience-driven motivation, intricately tied to the restoration of hope, the cultivation of agency, and the aspiration for an inclusive and socially just future. Based on their biographical narratives, it became apparent that many of the participants were able to foster this resilience and sustain their motivation by means of engaging in activism. Even when some of the participants were hesitant or apathetic at first, being gradually more involved in activist initiatives and part of collectives assisted them in fostering beliefs in their own abilities to bring about change as well as cultivating critical awareness of sociopolitical issues and their causes.

Thus, this research bridges critical gaps in the existing literature, offering insights into the motivations and potential effects of youth activism that have previously been less explored. By

unravelling the intricate relationships between activism and agency – through narrative inquiry and a framework inspired by critical consciousness – this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how youth-led initiatives can help shape the future of democratic institutions. This study sheds light on a remarkable relationship between activism and sociopolitical efficacy, as activism provided a pathway for many of the interviewed youth to learn numerous skills, feel empowered through collectives, restore trust in others, attain civic education, become aware and be encouraged to think critically of sociopolitical issues, and cultivate a sense of hope in others that is often lost in their surroundings. These findings underscore the potential of youth activism programs and initiatives as platforms for nurturing civic mindsets from an early age, thereby fostering a generation capable of challenging oppressive norms and driving societal transformation.

Similar studies in other contexts emphasize the need for education to focus more on civic education and fostering sociopolitical efficacy amongst youth, which also resonates with the wishes and solutions to youth disengagement suggested by the participants. The results of this study, however, also suggest that it might be equally important to foster existing activist initiatives and collectives as well as cultivate and provide funding for environments that allow for activists to thrive and express themselves. By inquiring and acknowledging what is already there and what already works for youth in their specific context – scholars, policymakers, development initiatives, and those working with youth may be effectively "*working with youth realities rather than against them*" (Pruitt, 2017).

<h2 style="text-align:center;color:red;">Contribution to the Field of International Development Studies</h2>

Furthermore, the added value of this study extends beyond the specific context of Albanian youth activism, resonating with broader discourses within international development studies. Youth activism, despite its potential as a catalyst for sociopolitical development and community advancement, remains comparatively underexplored within the field. The prevailing focus on narratives around other concerning issues based on a youth deficit model overshadows the significance of understanding what drives currently active youth to voice their perspectives, engage in advocacy, and envision transformative change – unveiling the motivations and insights behind a minority of youth that stay positive, empowered, and resilient despite facing numerous challenges.

In essence, this study is underpinned by the call for a more comprehensive exploration of youth activism and its potential within the field of international development studies. It contributes to our understanding of the mechanisms through which youth activism might empower individuals and shape agents of change. Listening to youth activist may assist the design of inclusive, responsive, and effective development initiatives, geared towards a specific cultural context.

Thus, by acknowledging the voices, experiences, and aspirations of young activists, this research is an attempt to take a step towards promoting inclusivity, amplifying agency, and fostering a generation of change-makers. It also points to an untapped potential of where youth studies – with

theoretical lenses such as critical consciousness – may intersect with international development studies. As such, the study offers a potent message: in the pursuit of sustainable development and inclusive democratic societies, youth activism as well as civic education must form an integral focus within the realm of international development studies.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research with regards to youth activism in Albania could gain valuable insights from conducting quantitative or mixed methods research to investigate the same subject, to seek more empirical data that may either complement or challenge the findings of this study. Simultaneously, with quantitative measures, a larger sample may be used, more generalizability may be sought after, and more variables could be accounted for. As such, an intersectional analysis could uncover how varying social identities intersect with youth activism, potentially revealing unique challenges and opportunities faced by youth. Thus, the inclusion of more aspects of identity and other factors such as socioeconomic conditions as well as influences from upbringing and education may prove interesting for future research analysis. Furthermore, comparative investigations, for example examining patterns of youth engagement across post-communist societies, could provide valuable insights of similarities and differences across multiple contexts.

Moreover, longitudinal studies, as advocated by Kirshner (2007), could shed light on the sustainability of youth activism's impact over time, adding a temporal aspect to the theories. In addition, exploring the role of formal and informal education more in-depth in nurturing youth agency could provide insights into how educational systems can foster civic participation in a context such as Albania. Investigating the causal link between youth activism and policy change could be relevant too, to examine the tangible influence of youth-led initiatives on shaping sociopolitical landscapes. By venturing into these uncharted research domains, informed by established scholars and frameworks, including Hipolito-Delgado's (2021) conceptualization of critical consciousness and the findings of this paper, future studies can expand the nuanced understanding of youth agency, activism's transformative potential, and its integration within the broader context of sociopolitical development.

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Appendix A – Interview Guide

After introducing myself and my study background, explain the thesis and its aims. Give a short explanation of the interview method. Assure the participant that he/she/they may stop the interview at any given moment and is free to skip any question that is uncomfortable answering. Explain to the participant that the interview will be anonymized. Ask for explicit consent for recording the interview and explain that the recordings will be deleted after transcription (which also will be instantly anonymized). Before conducting the interview, inquire whether they have any further questions or remarks.

Introduction

- Let's start by getting to know you better, I'd love to hear about you and your experiences. Can you tell me about your background, such as where you grew up and what your family was like? This may include anything that comes up and might be relevant for your story.
    - Are there any experiences from your childhood or adolescence that you think have had a lasting impact on your values or beliefs?
    - Probes:
        - *What are some of the things that have shaped your life so far?*
        - *How did you first become interested in social and political issues?*
- How do you think your background and identity influence the way you see the world and the issues you're passionate about?

Activism

- I'm really interested in understanding how your personal experiences have influenced your involvement in activism.
    - What motivates you to get involved in activism, and what issues are you most passionate about?
    - Can you tell me more about the types of activism your involved in?
    - How have the people closest to you (family, friends, peers, community) influenced your activism, and how has your involvement in activism affected these relationships?
    - How have the different organizations and institutions you're involved in affected your activism? Have you found support or resistance from these institutions?
    - How have broader societal factors, such as the political climate or policies in Albania, impacted your motivation to engage in activism?
- Activism can be rewarding, but it can also be challenging at times. Have you faced any particular challenges in your activism work, and if so, how have you dealt with those challenges? I'm also interested in hearing about the main ways you've tried to stay resilient and motivated in your work, especially when it feels like progress is slow or difficult to achieve.
    - Have you ever felt discouraged in your efforts to create change? If so, how did you overcome those feelings and stay resilient for your cause?
    - What do you think would be the main reasons that you've been able to stay motivated and continue your activism over time?
- And what would you say have you learned from it? Has activism changed you in any way, and if so, how would you describe this change?
    - Can you describe a time when you felt empowered through your activism, when you felt like you were truly making a difference?
    - When you participate in these types of activities, how do you feel about your ability to make a difference? Do you feel like your actions can have an impact on the issues you care about?

Sociopolitical efficacy

- How do you feel about your ability to make a difference through activism?
- Have there been any experiences or challenges you've faced that have made you feel more or less capable of creating change in the world?
- What do you think is the importance of working together with others to make a change?
- To what extent do you feel like young people bear responsibility to be involved in attempts to make a change?

Youth Political Landscape

- How do you view the current political landscape for youth and their ability to participate politically and socially? What do you think needs to change to make it easier for young people to be involved in creating change?
- As we wrap up, I'm curious to know about your hopes and aspirations for your activism work in the future.
  - What changes do you wish to see in Albania for the next generation?
  - Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences and perspectives as an Albanian youth activist?

Appendix B – List of Figures and Tables

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Grew up in	Lives in	Type of activism
1	Arben	Male	18	Shkodra	Tirana	consumer activism, sustainable lifestyle, youth trainings
2	Arta	Female	19	northern village	Tirana	youth trainings, empowerment
3	Sofia	Female	19	Vlorë	Tirana	environmentalism, volunteerism, youth trainings
4	Blendi	Male	21	Durrës	Tirana	LGBTQ+, artistic activism
5	Ilir	Male	21	northern village	Tirana	student rights
6	Violeta	Female	23	Tirana	Berlin	civil society, feminism
7	Bujar	Male	23	small town in mid-Albania	Tirana	student rights, civil society
8	Luljeta	Female	24	small town in mid-Albania	Tirana	environmentalism, volunteerism
9	Besnik	Male	25	Vlorë	Cambridge	civil society, youth trainings, advocacy
10	Elona	Female	27	southern village, Tirana	Tirana	advocacy, civil society, youth training, youth worker
11	Erion	Male	29	Elbasan	Tirana	environmentalism, volunteerism
12	Ilira	Female	29	southern village, Durrës	Tirana	feminism, civil society
13	Ergys	Male	32	southern village, Greece	Tirana	student rights, worker rights, digital, LGBTQ+
14	*Vesa*	*Female*	*Late 30s*	*unknown*	*Tirana*	*advocacy, youth worker, civil society*
15	*Edona*	*Female*	*Late 50s*	*Korçë*	*Tirana*	*human rights, civil society*

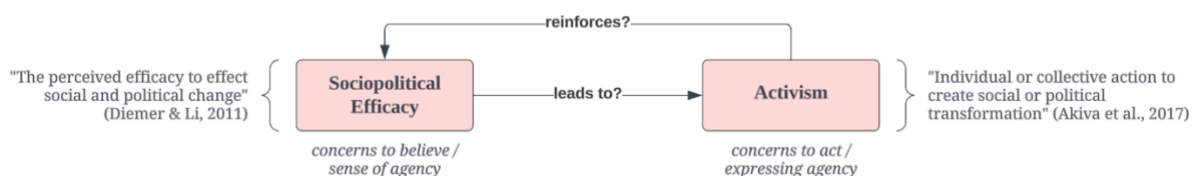**Table 1:** An overview of the participants of this study

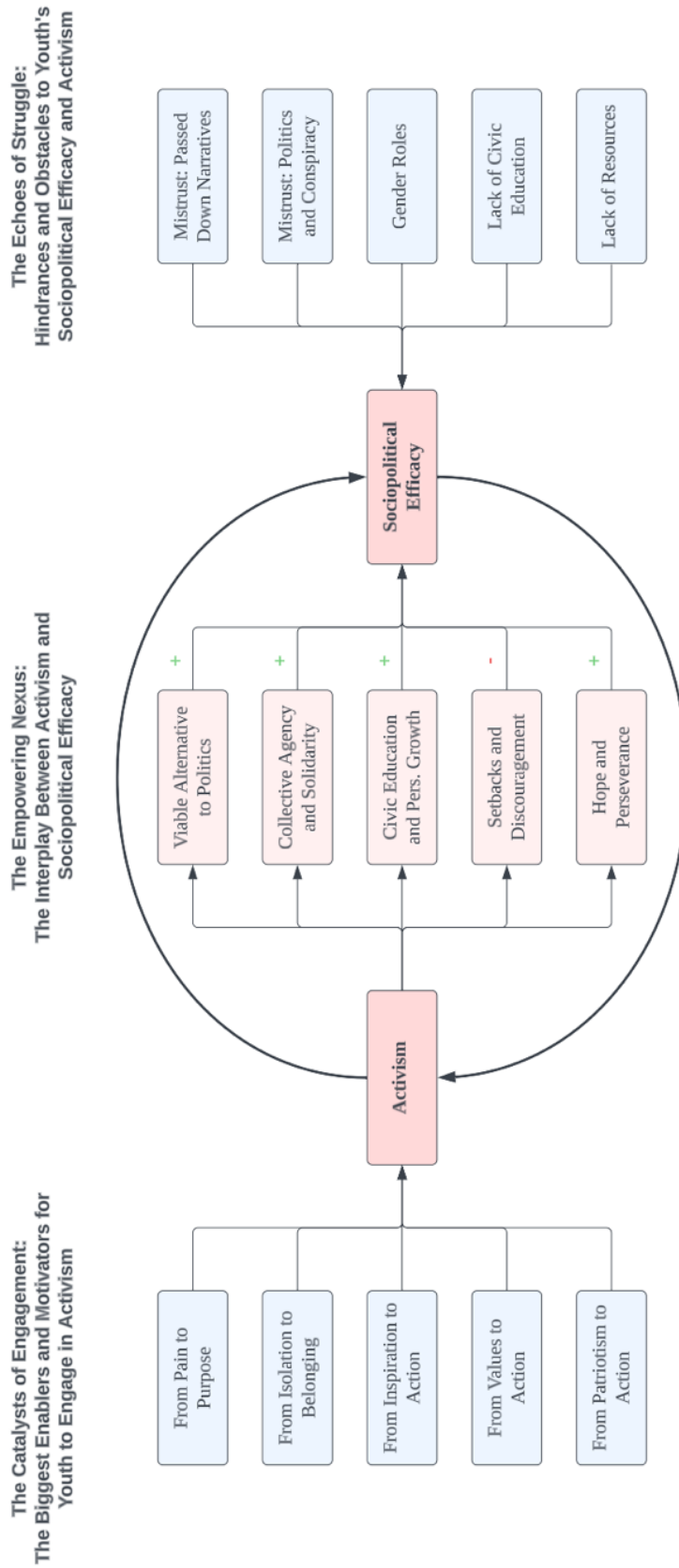**Figure 1:** Conceptual model with most relevant variables of this thesis

Figure 2: The updated conceptual model based on the summarized findings