



YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPEANIZATION IN ALBANIA: A SURVEY BASED STUDY

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Abstract

The Europeanization process has been long discussed by politicians, academics, and civic society in Albania. Over the years, membership in the European Union has been seen as a major aim in Albanian politics, and European integration has been regarded as one of the most effective ways to bring Europeanization to Albanians. This research aims to measure the perception and attitude of young people in Albania regarding the process of European integration and the ongoing process of Europeanization. The methodology used in this research paper consists of the analysis of data collected from a questionnaire completed by 576 young people over the age of 18. The results highlight the young people's perspectives on the process of Europeanization, including the impact of this process on social and political changing aspects, economic prospects, and cultural exchange. The research also highlights the elements that influence the young people's point of view, emphasizing the function of the media and the influence of social networks in the development of their knowledge about this process.

Keywords: Europeanization, Youth Perspectives, European Union, Integration Process

INTRODUCTION

The process of Europeanization is a comprehensive phenomenon that has influenced the formation of the political, economic, and social framework of Europe in recent decades. This process reflects the gradual integration of all European countries into a cohesive framework that promotes cooperation and harmonization of common policies and standards, including such as the enlargement of the European Union, the adoption of EU laws and regulations and the convergence of policies and practices between the countries. This process has not only redefined the way that countries interact with each other but has also played a crucial role in fostering regional integration and addressing global challenges (Subotic, 2011). In this context, it is very important to understand the process of Europeanization, especially for youth group to be clearer about the ongoing transformations in Europe and its implications.

There are several definitions for Europeanization. The most used explanation of this concept is given by the authors Schimmelfenning and Sedelmeiner (2005), who describe Europeanization as a process where states adopt the rules of the European Union, institutionalizing EU rules at the national level, which means the transposition of EU laws, restructuring of national institutions or even changing internal political practices according to EU rules and standards. Also, a more general definition is given by Radaelli (2006, p.60), who describe Europeanization as a:

“Process of a) construction, b) diffusion and c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’, and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public choices”.

Likewise, according to Katzenstein (2006), Europeanization is defined as the construction, awareness and institutionalization of formal and informal rules according to European practices.

The literature offers different explanations why countries adopt the rules of the European Union. One of the reasons why the candidate countries fulfill the EU conditions for membership is because the benefits of EU membership are greater than the costs. Another explanation is that states agree to adopt EU rules because they perceive them as appropriate and legal in the country. (Schimmelfenning and Sedelmeiner, 2005; Subotic, 2011)

But there is a difference between ‘europeanization’ and the usual questions that come up in traditional European integration theories. Radaelli (2006), emphasizes that Europeanization is a process that comes after the European integration process has begun. According to him, traditional theories of European integration do not focus on why and how

countries of the Union work together, or whether the EU is controlled more by the individual state or by its own institutions. Instead, Europeanization is how the internal politics of each country plays a role in being processed in the European integration before the state how the integration in the political systems of each country. This helps us to understand how the internal policies of the country, the integration process and the specific systems that promote integration are related with each other. Another issue that is important in this process is also the perceptions. According to Krastec (2022, p.40), “...in democratic politics, perceptions are in a sense all that matters...”. That’s why it is very important to know the people perceptions on the European integration. The perception of the European integration and the Europeanization process itself, remains very important subject but it is still not generalized in all population category.

The main goal of this paper is to analyze and to present the perception of young people regarding the Europeanization process of Albania. More specifically, it is conducted an analysis of the knowledge and perception of students in Albania regarding the process of Europeanization and European Union using a questionnaire. In this context the main question is whether young people in Albania have a positive image of the future of Albania in the European Union and what they think about the europeanization process of Albania.

The paper is structured as follows. First its present Albania's progress in the Europeanization presenting some data related to the basic issues that affect this process. Then the paper continues with the methodology and results of the conducted survey, concluding with summary of findings and references.

EUROPEANIZATION PROCESS OF ALBANIA

Since 1990, after the fall of communism in Albania, the terms Europeanization and democracy became the most used terms by all people in Albania. Euro-Atlantic integration was the initial and most important step in Albania's path towards integration, becoming the catalyst for other integration initiatives. Albania was one of the first countries in the region to request NATO membership. (AIIS,2003).

Since the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2006, the country has experienced a deepening of the process of integration into the European Union, intensifying institutional cooperation in the framework of the harmonization of domestic legislation with the European one. In 2014, Albania gained the status of EU candidate country, while in March 2020, due to the achievement of some results in several chapters (evidenced at that time in the Progress Report of Albania 2020), the European Commission recommended the opening of negotiations. On 19 July, the Intergovernmental Conference on accession negotiations took

place with Albania and the commission launched the screening process on the same day. (European Commission, 2022).

According to the European Commission (2022), Albania has maintained overall focus on reforms on the country's EU path, despite the challenge of addressing the economic and social consequences such as the 2019 earthquake, the Covid-19 pandemic, and Russia' aggression against Ukraine. However, the government must continue to work with all parts of society to advance the EU reform agenda.

The europeanization process is closely linked to various processes such European Integration, related to the terms like democratic governance, fight against crime and corruption, fundamental rights. Albania has made progress during the years on these fields. According to the Freedom House reports, Albania has made progress during the years. For 2022 democracy percentage increased in 46.43 (comparing with 2020 when this index was 45.83 out of 100) classified as a country in Transitional or Hybrid Regime.

The data presented in the Table 1 shows the progress and performance of Albania in these areas. Compared to 2020, there is no sign of improvement for any of the performance area, except an improvement in the fight against corruption, where the index marks a value of 3 from 2.75 that was in 2020. This progress is due to several high-profile indictments and convictions of former officials by the Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure (SPAK) as well as its proactive role in promoting the fight against corruption and organized crime. (Freedom House Report, 2023). Also, the data on democracy score only for Albania from 2010 to 2022 shows that Albania's democracy score has slightly decreased, instead of increasing during the years. However, there is a slight increase of the index for 2022 comparing to 2020.

Table 1¹: Democratic Performance by category

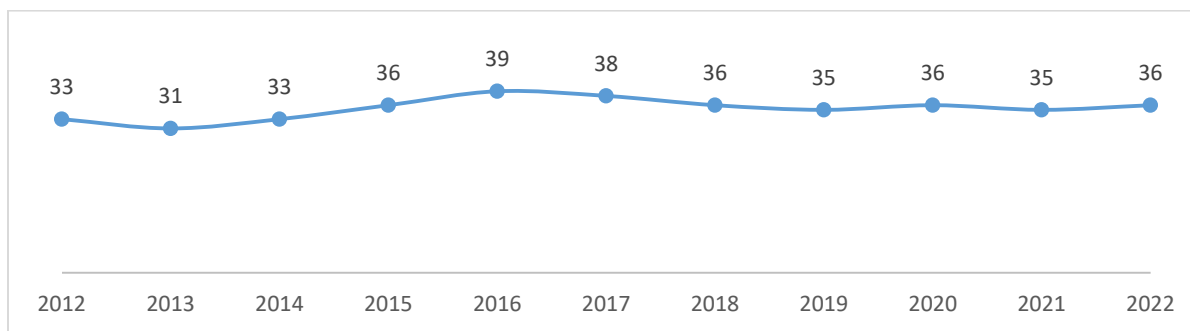
	2010	2015	2020	2022
National Democratic Governance	4.5	3.50	3.25	3.25
Electoral Process	3.75	4.25	4.25	4.25
Civil society	3	5	4.75	4.75
Independent Media	4	3.75	3.50	3.5
Local Democratic Governance	3	4.5	4.50	4.5
Judicial Framework and Independence	4.25	3.25	3.25	3.25
Corruption	5	2.75	2.75	3
Democracy Score	3.93	3.86	3.75	3.79

Source: Freedom House, 2010-2022

¹ According to Freedom House reports, the ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic.

Also, corruption remains a problematic area in Albania. According to the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions index, the scores has not changed a lot during the years. For 2022 it looks an improvement in the score compared to 2021, but it remains very low, and it is a problematic area where the country must work.

Figure 1: Corruption Perceptions Index (score²)



Source: Transparency International, 2012-2022

According to Spahiu (2014) it is an interesting situation in terms of Albania's relationship with the European Union, and this process is considered more like an EU obsession than a process when the country should learn and improve. On one hand, Albanian people want to be part of the European Union more than people in other Balkan nations, but on the other hand, Albanian politicians are often criticized for not being very effective and they do not perform as well as leaders in neighbouring countries in the Balkans.

Because politicians have noticed the strong desire among their people to join the EU, they use this fact to make EU membership a central part of their political platforms and are using the idea of joining the EU to gain popularity and support from the public. This pattern in Albanian-European relations can be called 'Europeanization by convenience'. (Spahiu, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents an analysis of a survey conducted in Albanian universities to gauge the views of young people on European integration and the Europeanization process of Albania. The survey questionnaire consists of two main sections. The first section consists of general information related to social data such as gender, age, and education field, while the second section contains specific questions on young people's perception of various issues related to European integration and the Europeanization process of Albania.

² A country score is the perceived level of public sector corruption on a scale of 0-100, where 0 means highly corrupt and 100 means very clean.

The survey was completed by 576 students from various faculties of the University of Tirana, which is the main university in Albania, during October to early November 2023. This time frame was chosen because it is when we have more students in the auditorium. However, there were some limitations. These limitations were not related to the number of students who completed the questionnaire, as the number was relatively high, and the students' willingness to complete the questionnaire was also high. The limitation was that the majority of respondents were women, with 81.2% of respondents being women and 18.8% being men.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The questionnaire was completed by 576 students in total, of which 81.2% of respondents are women and 18.8% are men. Most of the respondents (42%) are 18 years old (about 32% are 19 years old, 16% are 20 years old, 3% are 21 years old and about 7% are over 21 years old. About 61.6% of the respondents are students at the University of Tirana (76.1% of them study at the Faculty of Law, 12.1% study at the Faculty of Economy and 11.8% study at other Faculties of the University of Tirana), while 38.3% are students of other public and private Universities in Albania. Also, 58% (331 of 576 respondents) of students results in their first year of studies, 33% are in their second year of study, 5% in the third year and 4% are in Master level.

The questions were designed to explore the level of knowledge and familiarity with European Union and Europeanization process by the respondents. First the respondents were asked general questions *about the image of European Union*.

To measure this, it is used the Likert scale (1-very negative and 5-very positive). According to the response, in average the image is ranked in 4.13 point, meaning that EU image has good image for the youth people. About 27.8% of respondents have a positive approach and 45% of them have an approach towards European Union image very positive. In general, women are those who have more positive approach to the image of the European Union.

When asked what the European Union means to them, approximately 74.6% of the students chose *'Freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in Europe'*, and about 65.8% of them perceive the European Union as *'Economic Well-being'*. Also, the most frequently chosen statements about EU are *'Democracy'* (36% of the interviewees), *'Strongest voice in the world'* (34.2% of the interviewees) and *'Social Protection'* (31.4% of the interviewees).

One of the issues that young people value positively about the European Union is *"Free movement of people, goods and services within the EU"* (80% of young people), which is one of the EU's leadership values. Also, about 65% of the young people interviewed evaluate positively *the level of social well-being* in the EU (including health care, education, and the pension

system). Other positively evaluated issues are the *economic power of the EU* (about 61% of the young people interviewed), *Erasmus exchange programs* (50% of the young people) and 'The political and diplomatic influence of the EU in the rest of the world (32% of young people).

When asked "*In general, how familiar are you with the concept of Europeanization*", ranked from 1-very unfamiliar to 5-very familiar, it turns out that they have an average level of familiarity with the concept in the value of 3.91. About 76.24% of respondents stated that they are very familiar or familiar with the concept of Europeanization, while 20.52% are moderately familiar and only 3.24% stated that they are not familiar at all or a little familiar with the concept.

In the Figure 2 it is shown the perception of young people in the European Union. At first it was performed the Cronbach Alpha statistics for this set of questions, which result 0.9, meaning that response values for each participant across this set of questions are consistent. As the figure indicates, EU scored quite well on the statement "*The voice of EU has influence in the world*" meaning that the respondent has higher perception for the role and influence of EU in the most important issues around the world. Around 84.9% of the student interviewed are responded as 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree' about the importance of the role and influence of EU in the world. Also, they have a positive approach about the statement that EU has sufficient power to protect Europe's economic interests in the global economy, where 79.7% of them in total has 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree' about the statement. The findings are in accordance with previous studies of Teqja (2014) and AISS (2011) about the perceptions and knowledge of different groups as students, public administration, media, non-governmental organization

Figure 2: Perceptions on European Union

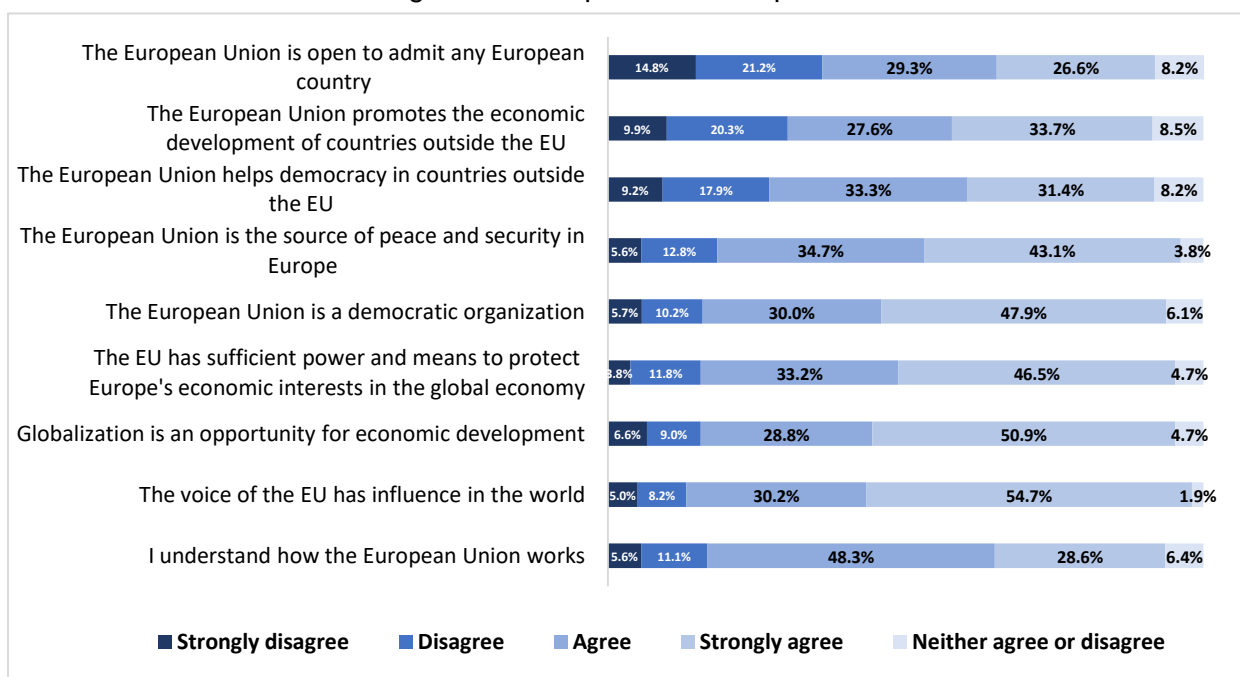


Table 2: Perceptions on European Union

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
I understand how the European Union works	3.84	1.128	576
The voice of the EU has influence in the world	4.21	1.141	576
Globalization is an opportunity for economic development	4.08	1.227	576
The EU has sufficient power and means to protect Europe's economic interests in the global economy	4.07	1.151	576
The EU is an democratic organization	4.04	1.211	576
The EU is the source of peace and security in Europe	3.97	1.218	576
The EU helps democracy in countries outside the EU	3.60	1.335	576
The EU promotes the economic development of countries outside the EU	3.55	1.387	576
The EU is open to admit any European country	3.32	1.435	576

The students were also asked about their perception of Europeanization (Figure 3). In general, they agree with the fact that Europeanization is a very important process and brings economic, social benefits and political stability for the country. But, despite the positive perception on the impact of Europeanization, young people do not have much faith in Albania's ability to be Europeanized successfully. About 34% of those interviewed are undecided on this statement.

Figure 3: Perceptions on Europeanization process

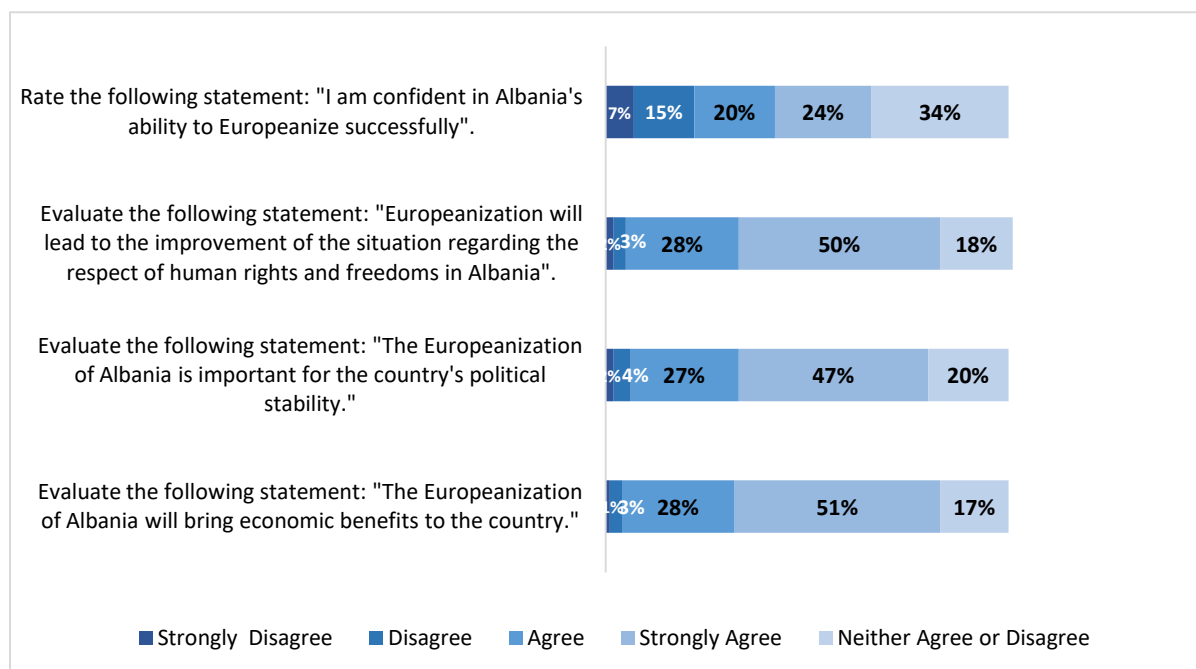


Table 3: Perceptions on Europeanization process

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Rate the following statement: "I am confident in Albania's ability to europeanize successfully"	3.39	0.914	576
Evaluate the following statement "Europeanization will lead to the improvement of the situations regarding the respect of human rights and freedoms in Albania"	4.21	0.994	576
Evaluate the following statement: "The Europeanization of Albania is important for the country political stability"	4.13	0.956	576
Evaluate the following statement: "The Europeanization of Albania will bring economic benefits to the country"	4.24	0.914	576

But what are the most used sources for informing about the Europeanization process or integration process? According to their response, the '*Internet*' and '*Television*' are the most frequent sources of information for young people regarding developments in the integration process, the European Union and Europeanization. It should be highlighted that only a small percentage (9.7%) stated that they receive information about these topics from the trainings, highlighting the relevance of these activities in information dissemination in this case.

CONCLUSIONS

This research paper focuses on the perception of young people about the Europeanization process of Albania. The country's politics have always considered joining the European Union a top priority. The implementation of European reforms was seen as the best way to bring Europeanization and to establish a democratic and free state. The survey results showed that the majority of the respondents were women, with 81.2% of respondents being women and 18.8% being men which is a limitation of the survey.

Albania has made some progress in terms of the Europeanization process, but the country still needs to do more in areas such as fighting corruption, media freedom, and democratic rights. The survey revealed that young people have a positive approach to the image of the EU and the role of its institutions, but they have different levels of understanding about the process of Europeanization.

Only 76.24% of the respondents stated that they are very familiar or familiar with the concept of Europeanization. Despite expressing optimism about the impact of the process of Europeanization, young people remain skeptical about the successful integration of Albania into the EU. They mainly rely on media, training, and social networks to obtain information on

the process of European integration and Europeanization. This research paper provides a comprehensive approach to understanding the perception of young people towards the process of Europeanization and European integration of Albania.

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