

**“Inclusive” Civil Society**  
**Implications of Albania Civil Society activity since ‘90s**

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## **Introduction**

This paper addresses a case study and reflects on the development of civil society establishment in Albania since in the beginnings of the '90s. Thus, the specific dimension of time that this analyse concerns, will include the beginnings of these years till nowadays. Civil society is often identified in a considerable extent with civil society organizations (CSOs), which comprise the activity of the so-called non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and non-profit organizations (NPOs).

Hence, the purpose is to elaborate and analyse, as synthetically as possible, the evolution and development of the Albanian civil society organizations and surely unveil which are the influential factors of having this civil society profile in Albania. The emergence of CSOs, since the changes of the regime into a democratic one, has involved in relations a range of elements, actors and practices, which have been the core influence of giving to it its physiognomy of nowadays. However the research will be focused in explaining some of the core implications that affect or impede the CSOs in Albania to be inclusive ones regarding their role in representing the citizens and their problems or to be real actors in decision-making.

Furthermore, to achieve the purposes of this paper it is used a qualitative method to analyse the core implications of the activity and priorities of the Albanian CSOs. The research work is mainly focused on literature review, such as books, related with the key concepts and theories of the paper, scholarly articles, written about the arguments and disputes discussed even in this paper. Also, of great importance for the elaboration of the arguments in this paper will be the attempt to put into use the data that offer several reports of the research work done in this field of interest.

## **Historical background**

Albania owns a short history as a country with a democratic regime, from which can be verified a shorter period as a functional democracy and this has been largely reflected in the historical background and evolution of its civil society (Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2010). Therefore, it can be asserted that the civil society in Albania is a young phenomenon. The studies on its progress and its evolution focus mainly in post-communist period taking into account the developments that this sector have witnessed since that time. One reason to this short life of civil

society in Albania is that prior to the collapse of the communist regime in 1990 there were no CSOs operating in Albania and significant developments of this third sector of good governance occurred only during the post-communist period.

The communist regime, as well as in many other countries where it was settled, dispersed many human rights among those the freedom of speech which turned into the main obstacle of developing a genuine activism of this sector. As the index of civil society in Albania notes that *'a fall of communism in Albania was forewarned and even led by civic movements such as the demonstrations and the hunger strike of workers in the mining industry and the protests of Tirana University students in the early 1990s. Prior to these events, a number of demonstrations against the communist rule took place in 1990 culminating with the protest of July 2nd, 1990 when some 5000 demonstrators sought refuge in foreign embassies. The establishment of a multi-party democratic regime restored guarantees for basic human rights, opening the path for new developments including that of the civil society sector. Yet, a long road lay ahead to a consolidated democracy and a developed civil society sector'* (Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2010: 7).

Throughout all these years, since the 1991 and till nowadays, data and statistics shows that 30% of registered CSOs were during the transition period 1991-1996 and 49 % during 1997-2001 (Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2010). While, during 1997, considered as the "difficult year" for Albania, because of the internal political crisis caused by the collapse of the pyramid schemes, had a severe negative impact and during it there were not really functional CSOs. Again the index of civil society in Albania shows that *'civil society activity after 2005 was marked by new developments which have also reflected on the way civil society is perceived. This period was marked by a growing tendency of civil society actors to transition to politics, blurring the boundaries between the two sectors in the public's opinion. As a result many NGO financial supporters reduced their funding resulting in the diminished size and geographical coverage of the third sector'* (Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2010: 9).

It can be derived that the Albanian civil society profile is represented as relevant to its political development. In the 2011 report of CIVICUS Alliance it is stressed that since the end of communism surely it is noticed some political progress toward political rights, but still challenges remained. Some of them concerned the key areas of state effectiveness such as

corruption and rule of law, where reform is still needed. As a result of these internal political challenges, the influence of CSOs activity was difficult to be achieved. Otherwise this atmosphere of limited and inefficient interactions produced a distrustful attitude of citizens toward state institutions and civil society itself (CIVICUS, 2011).

As a conclusion the index of civil society in Albania stresses that *“in the past two decades since the demise of the dictatorship, Albanian civil society has made great strides, reaching today’s moderately developed level. Beginning with more idealistic initiatives and interactions with the citizens in the early 1990s, Albanian civil society has become more pragmatic in the course of years”* (Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2010:1). This kind of pragmatism is closely related with the selectivity of issues supported and the well done calculation of the task and activities that will be provided with funds by foreign donors. This shows that although CSOs are well established as institutions they still represent a pattern of donor-driven activism than demonstrating an active membership base of civic participation. All these features are barriers for CSOs success generating lack of coordination, both within civil society and other sectors (CIVICUS, 2011).

It is in the course of these years and these presented challenges that the relations of Albanian civil society and EU have been shaped, developing several approaches of EU presence toward these organizations. The support that the European institutions and policies gave to CSOs has been considerable in their establishment, organizational structures and the fulfilling of their projects. Anyway this supportive approach has had also other implications in the evolving of this sector in Albania, such as implying dependence factors and external influence and selectivity in their activities.

### **Implications shaping Albanian Civil Society**

As it was mentioned above in the historical background and evolution of civil society in Albania, this is a new sector for the governance of Albania and most of the Balkan countries that have passed the same historical steps of regime changes. Thus, the involvement of international actors in donating and supporting civil society in the region of Balkan has been present since the period of political transition in these countries, from the authoritarian one to the democratic political systems. This transitory period has been characterized from efforts of developing similar

democratic systems as those of western countries. During this period, there have been attempts in every country to co-ordinate the activities of international donor agencies and host country governments, including civil society support. However, as in other sectors, there is a gap in the substantive participation of local stakeholders, i.e. CSOs and other actors in shaping priorities for civil society development in their countries.

It was already stressed that, since the changing of the regime and going through the transition period, Albania has constantly aspired to be part of the EU. While managing to fulfil all the requirements of being accessed, Albania has also managed to go through the European integration process and trying to adapt its political, economic and social life with the EU model. From the other side, much of the literature on the European integration refers to the domestic impact of the European Union as “Europeanization”. This Europeanization process comprises different mechanisms and instruments that help and lead forward the process *per se*. These mechanisms could be observed in several points of views, beginning with the philosophical and normative approach of principles and values adopted and continuing with concrete steps of policies and financial support undergoing. Hence, the most comprehensive definition of Europeanization comprises the idea of diffusion through processes of constructing and institutionalizing policies, procedures or rules, being these formal or informal, such as styles and “ways of doing”. Regarding all these shared procedures, norms and beliefs, which firstly defines EU public policies, the attempt is to incorporate them in the logic of domestic political structures, public policies and identities (Bache, George & Bulmer, 2011).

While, these mechanisms of Europeanization identified in the literature of EU, firstly are considered as mechanisms directly affecting the country members of EU, are likely to have operated and still operate for applicant countries too. The scope of Europeanization has moved beyond the boundaries of the EU membership to shed light on the dynamics of the process of enlargement both in terms of acceptance and assimilation of the formal *acquis communautaire* by accession states, in terms of the pressures on accession states to conform to less formal, but nonetheless important, norms of democratic behaviour – that is acceptance of both the “regulatory pillar” and the “normative pillar” (Bache, George & Bulmer, 2011).

The desire of Albania to get the EU membership also encompass all the efforts that the country does to prove the ability to implement the entire range of the *acquis communautaire*, and the

alignment on the EU legislation and practices. So, through this kind of obvious readiness and the conditionality policy applied, the influence of the EU has become more pervasive. However the extent and manners the EU exercises its influence in Albania and especially in the work and activity of Albanian Civil Society Organizations represents some mixed and significant features. These features involve some normative support as well as the impact of financial support, and being considered as positive and negative simultaneously.

Positive perception of the EU's influence, which means that EU pushes for political, democratic and market economic reforms. And negative perception of the influence present "EU as akin to a "colonial power" that exploits its superior bargaining power to the disadvantage of the socioeconomic and democratic developments" (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005:3) different from what EU want to introduce. "Despite their markedly different assessments of the appropriateness of the EU's influence, both sides in the debate take it very much as a given that the EU has, or at least could have, a pervasive influence on the domestic politics" (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005:3) of the country which aspire accession and Albania is one of the examples.

Apparently, the support of international donor agencies of EU are considered positively as spreading democratic principles and values that help the whole environment of the CSOs activity, but from the other side the financial dependence that this sector has toward these donors turns the CSOs' priorities dependent on what their donors want to do.

### *Normative dimension*

The approach here consists more in the considerable support that international donors like EU give to democracy-building and citizen participation, which is in the focus of donors priorities toward the development of CSOs, due to the legacy of the authoritarian past of Albania. Thus, besides its economic might, the EU is also perceived as a 'model of integration' and a 'promoter of democracy'. The Union is widely recognized as the most successful example of regional integration in the contemporary world. Its mechanisms and policies to help poorer member and non-member states and which acquire higher levels of economic well-being are also praised by civil society organizations in Albania.

The stability of Albanian democratic institutions is one of the most general conditions for accession to the EU, and the promotion of these democratic values determines even the priorities of the CSOs. So, among the important priorities that donor assign for allocating funds toward these organizations, almost 80% of them is oriented toward democracy-building and citizen participation, followed by support to marginalised groups, capacity building, technical assistance, training, environment and nature protection (Balkan Civil Society Development Network, 2012). Thus, the priorities that the Albanian CSOs define in developing their activities are entirely influenced by this donors' field of interest. This is noticed in the efforts of civil society to orient their issues in this direction. Almost the largest, fully professional CSOs and research institutions include in their agenda a high proportion of the country's right-based advocacy such as those organizations promoting human rights, the protection and the rights of children, democracy and good governance, as well as those dealing with economic development. These later ones more often take also the tasks of policy think tanks.

The importance of normative dimension it is noticed since in the beginning of the period because among the first established organizations were those that have on focus human rights issues. There were also two other moments when were noted a significant growth of CSOs, think tanks, conflict resolution and management organizations. This happened during the economic crisis in the late 1990s which was caused by the collapse of pyramid schemes and also during the Kosovo war that brought to a large increase in refugees. All these development were followed by another traditional phenomenon, the revival of the Kanun – a body of traditional laws - and ensuing blood feuds. Therefore, the necessity of settling organizations dealing with landmines, and women's rights, environment, economic development, youth and media organizations were seen of great importance. From the other side, the business community, unions, and religious groups although are all considered as important segments of society, again their significance was minimal compared with the other CSOs mentioned above. (CIVICUS, 2011)

What is meant by the definition "Eurocratization in practice" is the core argument that the work, activity, principles of the Albanian CSOs, as above discussed are mostly related with the leading democratic principles that EU impose toward them through the support of European agencies in Albania. However the conditions on democratic reforms and good governance are sometimes criticized for being so much inspired by Eurocentric values, but form the other side, on a positive

note, civil society organizations and political elites recognize that the EU has been at the forefront of important policies undertaken and adoption of international agreements based in the rule of law.

### ***Financial dimension***

The term used above about the “Eurocratization in practice” will be seen fully consistent in this section, which will deal with the financial support that EU gives to the Albanian CSOs. Data display that the largest donor to civil society is the EU with 4.5 million Euros, or 45% of the total amount provided from all donors funding civil society. The EU’s support to civil society is 4.8% of their overall amount of funding provided for the country (Balkan Civil Society Development Network, 2012). Thus, the financial dimension represents another important issue to be analysed, maybe the most important one, because the activity of the Civil Society Organizations is strongly conditioned by their (in) ability to find financial resources.

From the surveys done by Balkan Civil Society Development Network, considering donors’ strategies toward the work of CSOs in the countries of Western Balkan, part of which was also Albania, it is asserted that nearly 90% of answering CSOs accepted that civil society is able to function and represent interests, but definitely requires support from donors (Balkan Civil Society Development Network, 2012).

Therefore this displays the fact that CSOs in Albania in the absence of internal resources for their existence, have been and are largely dependent on foreign donors. The only reason of extinguishing and creating CSOs is establishing them in accordance with the projects that are given to them, which the latter ones have certain duration. Furthermore, the name and the purpose of these organizations are adjusted to the priorities of the donors which indicate difficulties for Albanian NGOs to establish their own physiognomy and maturity (Sokoli & Malaj, 2008).

This has led to some other implications and pessimism about the democratic system itself in Albania and the role of civil society in this process. This kind of phenomenon has constituted a different kind of image for Albanian CSOs, not the classical one, which is based in the roots of the society and emergence from the voluntarism and activism of citizens, but in some kind of managing of aids and funds allocated by the foreign donors. Donors funding priority consists on



delivering of services and relevance to the above assumption is the fact that as a consequence of donors influence there is a significantly increased number of NGOs that offer more services. (Sokoli & Malaj, 2008).

This reliance of CSOs on donors funding brings for social services many challenges, beginning with accountability: as we already stressed most of these CSOs are NGOs funded by foreign donors, and they are more accountable to their donor agencies than to the people they served. A second challenge is sustainability. These CSOs provide integral support to their communities and social groups that they support, but the local base for fundraising is poor; without the support of outside donors, the services might cease, as has happened often with the short-funding projects undertaken. And another problem related with this is the fact that donors sometimes change their funding priorities, which have a huge impact even in the sustainability and longevity of these organizations.

In principle, civil society construction is at least seen as a bottom-up process, and thus some kind of organized civil society input is necessary and required, but in these terms of financing the activities this concept of “input” is strongly influenced by the inability of CSOs to internal funds and the interference of foreign funds. Dependence on donors’ funds breaks this balance of inputs that is consequently reflected even in the balance of outputs, which means, more reliance in their donors’ priorities than the society’s priorities itself.

Other crucial implication from this dependence on donors’ funds tells for a representative gap created in geographical diffusion, emergence and support of civil society’s organizations in Albania. The frequent tendency of donors is to work and fund those medium-sized organizations that possess developing expertise and capacities, and this kind of profile of CSOs are always found in the capital of the country and some of the largest and most important cities. While, the donors’ funds and support follows this kind of selectivity, the small and not so much developed CSOs of rural areas remains without any incentive and concrete support. This afterwards not only reflects the geographical representative gap of donors’ support for these rural organizations but also a gap in solving and backing issues and problems that they have in focus.

In general, most of Albanian CSOs are based in Tirana, the capital, and a small number of these organizations are based in other major cities of central Albania (Durrës, Elbasan), in north

(Shkoder), and in south (Vlora and Gjirokastra). The civil society seems to be poorly represented in rural and remote areas. According to the data of a poll conducted in 2009, 89% of the CSOs are based and run their activities in Tirana and other major cities (which is so considerable as figure) and only 11% of them are based and operate in small towns and villages (Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2012).

It is commonly accepted that the work in rural and remote areas poses greater challenges and difficulties than work in urban areas, thus the rural and remote areas are less attractive to donors' support and funds. In other words, major donors tend to build and bolster organizations with existing capacities, instead of supporting smaller CSOs in rural areas. Only 15% of the multilateral respondents worked with smaller CSOs (Balkan Civil Society Development Network, 2012). This kind of selectivity affects strongly the development of this third sector in Albania, or better, foster more the underdevelopment of civil society in rural and remote areas.

## **Conclusions**

It is clear from the above reflections and analyse that the role of international actors such as the European Union, which also enjoy a powerful status in the international arena, is really significant not only in the political conduct of a country but also in its societal context and more specifically its civil society conduct. This kind of influence is mostly seen within those relations that do not have symmetrical features like the one of Albania – EU relations, where Albania poses the status of being conditioned as long as it aspires to become part of the European Union.

Thus, due to the scope of the paper this kind of EU's impact is narrowed to the work and activity of the Albanian civil society organizations and the implications that are derived from this influential relationship. The theoretical framework that supported this first assumption was based in the European Integrations theories and the closely related with the "Europeanization" concept of this EU's policy. As Grabbe cites in his book about the concept of "Europeanization", it is an ambiguous term that contains an asymmetrical power. It may be called even as the "EU-isation" process, meaning the meeting and adoption of EU norms, policies and institutional models in the national context. This represents a kind of downloading process of policies (Grabbe, 2006). In the case of Albania, the asymmetrical power relationship that it has with EU as applicant for membership means that is mainly downloading policy, with few or no opportunities for uploading its preferences. Democracy is the crucial "download" or outcome from EU's influence toward other

countries, at least this is what it is tented to be achieved by EU to back its international image as a “normative actor”.

In this regard it is argued then that the core “downloading” stuff from EU in the development of CSOs in Albania is mainly in terms of democratic principles, values and issues supported like human right, democracy-building and citizen participation. During the discussion in the paper this is considered the normative dimension of EU’s influence in CSOs activities and priorities, and also is the one which gain the positive credits even the public opinion. However, the implications of European donors in the evolution of these organizations are also undergone through a more critical light of arguments, where the impact is much more related with the financial dimension. Precisely, in this realm the EU and its financial support reflect some “negative” implications in this third sector of governance of Albania.

Firstly, the great dependence that Albanian CSOs display toward the foreign donors’ funds and especially to EU’s funds, as the largest donor to civil society sector in Albania, makes them depended also in following those priorities and issues that these donors require to put into focus. Therefore, the CSOs become more donors’ issue-oriented and the influence is directly reflected in the agenda-setting of these organizations. That is why it is noticed that the activity of CSOs in Albania is much more service-oriented because this is also the funding priority of the donors.

Secondly, this kind of financial dependence and priority imposing of foreign donors derives in other challenges for civil society organizations such as their accountability, longevity and sustainability. Reflecting most of the times donors’ priorities and being depended on their financial resources consequently means that these organizations will be more accountable to their donors than to their target groups which their support. Also, the short duration of donors’ project affect the longevity CSOs, which most of the time are compelled to change priorities and field of interest in order to attract donors’ funds. This is indisputably shaking their sustainability, too. Furthermore it is stressed that “strengthening civil society per se” to ensure sustainability and financial viability has almost never been the paramount single goal of any of such donor strategies” (Vrumo, 2013: 3).

Finally, it is also noticed that the selectivity of donors’ support, in terms of allocating funds, is reflected even in geographical terms. This means that donors select to support those kinds of

medium-sized organizations that have developing expertise and capacities and sidelining the small and underdeveloped SCOs in rural and remote areas. This applying selectivity, in fact, should be the vice versa, if it is pretended a comprehensive support in this sector. Hence the asymmetrical feature that consist in Albania-EU relations seems to be applied even in the EU's support of Albanian CSOs, reflecting positive and critical challenges for this sector of the Albanian society.

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