

AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE MAKING? THE ROLE OF POLITICAL CULTURE AND INSTITUTIONS IN THE ALBANIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Elections are a prime concern for democracy. The study of elections and electoral systems becomes important in understanding how a political system will function. On the other hand, an anti-democratic political culture can distort democratic institutions. Thus one might wonder whether it really matters more which electoral system a country adopts or what political culture there is in that country. We argue that beside the constitutional arrangements and reformulating its electoral system and mechanism, an un-democratic culture of authoritarianism has underpinned much of Albanian political activity lately. The latter has been the prime cause of the lack of consolidation of Albanian democracy and not its institutions. Two empirical snapshots of the most important Albanian recent political events are delineated in order to understand the intricate mechanisms of institutions and political culture in shaping and re-shaping the political system.

1. Introduction¹

The process of democratization became one of the most central political questions of the post-transition period in Central Eastern European countries. The main challenge towards democratization of the region was the creation of new institutions to guarantee the separation of the state from party control. Other fundamental reforms and new legal and administrative practices had to be

¹The authors are grateful to the two anonymous reviewers of this journal for their useful comments and suggestions.

introduced, in order to break up with the institutional legacies of communism. Although the region faced common challenges, the developments of the democratization process in Central Eastern Europe were diverse. Studies have shown very different patterns of progress toward establishing a democratic regime where the Central European region is given as a picture of successful transition to democracy while the Balkans portrait is characterized by a number of setbacks.² Moreover, even among the Balkan countries, there are peculiarities and particularities of the democratization process. For example Albania is often regarded as a "most difficult case of democratisation or usually treated as an outlier compared to other post-communist experiences of regime change."³ What makes the Albanian case even more puzzling is the fact that it has not experienced the ethnic strife and the long and hazardous process of nation-building that was the case elsewhere in the Western Balkans region. Thus, it had fewer predispositions to falling behind in the democratization process, which is becoming a marathon even by regional standards. For this purpose it is relevant and important to study the often overlooked case of Albania and analyze what makes this country a rather hard case for successful democracy transitioning. The insights that will derive from such analysis can be telling for similar cases, as well as provide explanations for transitioning difficulties in the Western Balkans, the 'back door' of European Union.

This paper identifies the kind of democracy Albania experiences, with reference not only to political institutions but also to political culture. What we suggest here is that beside the constitutional

2 On the different patterns of progress toward democratization in Eastern Europe see Frank Schimmelfennig, "European Regional Organizations, Political Conditionality, and Democratic Transformation in Eastern Europe", *East European Politics and Societies* 21(1) (2007): 126-141. For a ten-year assessment of the transition process and a comparison between the Balkans and the Central European countries see: Jacques Rupnik, "Eastern Europe: the International Context", *Journal of Democracy* 11(2) (2000): 115-129.

3Arolda Elbasani, "EU Enlargement and State Institutions after Communism – Reforming Public Administration in Albania ", *L'Europe en Formation: Revue d'études sur la construction européenne et le fédéralisme / Journal of Studies on European Integration and Federalism* 349-350 (2008): 125.

arrangements and reformulating its electoral system and mechanism, an un-democratic culture of authoritarianism has underpinned much of Albanian political activity. The latter has been the primary cause of the unconsolidated Albanian democracy and not its institutions. The paper covers these issues by firstly bringing up theoretical considerations on the consolidation of democracy. Then, two empirical snapshots of two of the most important Albanian recent political events are delineated in order to understand the intricate mechanisms of institutions and political culture in shaping and re-shaping the political system. The methodology focuses on discourse analysis and an epistemological and ontological treatment of primary and secondary sources to study how this 'new' culture of authoritarianism has pervaded the democracy transitioning process and what it has to say about the role and functioning of the institutions.

2. Democratization, 'Transitology' and Countries (Caught) in Between

The process of democratization and the transition experienced in between is by no means a *sui generis* process in which Albania finds itself as an island. Quite on the contrary, in many regards Albania faces the same obstacles, and as well as 'stalled' progress experienced in most of the region. Below we refer to a conceptual apparatus offered in the form of a critique by Thomas Carothers in a seminal article of his, when criticizing the long- dominating 'transitologists', such as Schmitter and O`Donnell. The 'End of Transition Paradigm' takes into analyses the transition paradigm that came to dominate the democratization school from the early 1990s, with Huntington's thesis of a 'third wave' of democracy. The so-called 'transitology' school was particularly influenced by the work of O`Donnell and Schmitter who essentially coined the term and prescribed a set of core assumptions that are generally supposed to hold when a country is transiting from an autocratic rule toward a democratic form of regime.⁴ A critique of this

⁴Guillermo O`Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986). The five core assumptions that have served to

“three-part process of democratization consisting of opening, break-through, and consolidation” that never runs so smooth in reality has emerged in an influential piece by Carothers,⁵ where he addresses the shortcomings that most transition countries experience in the long and hazardous road to democracy.

What Carothers duly observes is that most transitory countries in today’s world do not fit in this black and white picture because they are caught somewhere in the middle. This fact, according to the author, is often overlooked by most indicators serving as measurements of the level of democracy in the world, in compatibility with the criteria established by the above set of assumptions. In order to address what he believes is the end of the transition paradigm because it has outlasted its ‘theoretical life’, Carothers proposes a new assumption that refers to the middle-ground between ‘full-fledged democracies and outright dictatorships’ and which “is actually the most common political condition today of countries in the developing world and the post communist world.”⁶ The overall scholarly discussion on the post-transition period in Eastern Europe is going beyond the old dichotomy of democratic and authoritarian classification. Many scholarly attempts have been put forward in order to search for more accurate and descriptive concepts which can be referred to as “democracy with adjectives”.⁷ Different qualifier adjectives have been added to the term democracy, trying to describe such unconsolidated regimes as ‘illiberal’, ‘near polyarchies’, ‘semi-democratic’ or more generally, ‘hybrid’ regimes. Aside from the

define the transition paradigm range from automaticity of the process of transformation itself; countries that are transiting usually follow a “three-part process of democratization consisting of opening, break-through, and consolidation”; free election will intrinsically guarantee greater participation and accountability; political elites` will and determination prevail over the `underlying economic, social, and institutional conditions and legacies,” which have little effect over their way of thinking and that state-building is an epiphenomenon to democracy-building and “largely compatible with it.”

5Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm.” *Journal of Democracy* 13(1) (2002): 17.

6 *Ibid.*, 18

7David Collier and Steven Levitsky “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research,” *World Politics* 49(3) (1997): 430-451.

many labels, their point is that such regimes are caught in between as they share both democratic and authoritarian elements simultaneously.

Our opinion is that the substantive argument of regimes caught in between democracy and authoritarianism put forward by scholars, besides its multiple labels, is strongly convincing and in addition, matches the political reality of Albania. The underlying idea of this argument is that although democratic institutions may be in place, there is a lack of democratic behaviour.

3. Democratization: A Question of Political Culture or Political Institutions?

Democratization in the post communist countries required first of all the creation of new democratic institutions to guarantee the separation of the state from party control. Furthermore, other fundamental reforms and new legal and administrative practices had to be introduced, in order to break with the institutional legacies of communism. In such an institutionalist perspective, the emphasis is put on the formal aspects of democracy, where the existence of formally democratic political institutions is very important for the development of democracy. According to supporters of political institutionalism it is enough that the democratic institutions and the set of rules are in place. It is especially in societies that demonstrate a great plurality of political interest and views, where the institutions become essential. In order to reflect such plurality of interests and better represent them, a proper set of rules are needed. The mechanism of how the votes will be translated into seats in the assembly becomes crucial. From such an institutionalist point of view, elections and their set of rules become main concerns of democracy. Studying elections and electoral systems becomes important in understanding how the political system will function. But is this enough to let us grasp the whole picture? Tagapeera notices that: “[e]lectoral systems affect politics, but they are also products of politics”⁸ and as such, an anti-democratic political

⁸Rein Taagepera “How electoral systems matter for democratization”, *Democratization* 5(3) (1998): 7.

culture can distort a democratic institution. This happens mostly in countries that previously have had severe totalitarian regimes (as in the case of communist Albania was), who may find it difficult to set up a legitimate democratic system, since changing their traditions and political culture takes longer than changing institutions. Thus one might wonder whether it really matters so much which electoral system a country adopts or what political culture exists in the country.

We would like to turn now to the empirics, and through snapshots that look at two important events in Albanian politics, we investigate where the current Albanian political system stands with reference to the two above mentioned pillars (political institutions and political culture) and how this influences the democratization process. In other words, what is the role of the Albanian political class and how are institutions and political culture are playing each other out? Which of the two has the upper hand in the political game and how it is it demonstrated in political outcomes, such as elections and electoral reforms?

Many Albanian political events could be used as illustrative examples of the democratization processes, but as space does not allow us to discuss each of them in-depth, we would like to focus our analysis on two important cases: the election of the new president and the reform of the electoral system. These two cases will be treated in detail, although other cases may also be used as examples of the growing authoritarianism in the country. The same can be said about the judiciary system, given the appointment of a new prosecutor-general affiliated with the ruling party or dubious appointments to the highest legal body, the Supreme Justice Council, which is in charge of the appointments of judges. All these have made both the civil society and opposition suspicious of a growing authoritarianism.

4. First Snapshot: Election of the new President

Not long ago, instead of a former consensual president, elected by bi-partisan agreement in the Parliament of 2002, the new president was until recently the vice-chairman of the ruling party. Apart from being seen as threatening to the general democratic

standards of the country by the opposition much of the civil society and media, the election of the vice-chairman of the biggest party (that already controlled the other important institutions as well)⁹ to the post of President of Republic, it also endangers the bi-partisan consensual mood that is needed to push forward with 'big' reforms, such as that of judiciary, electoral code, propriety rights and so on. The former president was elected as a result of a general agreement between the former Socialist government and the Democratic Party, which then constituted the opposition. The deal was brokered by OSCE and other international institutions (notably European Commission delegation in Albania and the US Embassy), which were interested mostly in preserving the stability and reducing the political fragmentation, rather than emphasizing the democratic credentials of such consensual bargaining. Naturally, the Socialists, now in opposition, expected the same 'courtesy' gesture by the Democrats and probably were hoping for a timely intervention of international bodies to help reach a new agreement. But the situation was not the same as in 2001, and this time through a series of shady mechanisms and through methods of co-optation of some unsatisfied members of the opposition, the majority (which is constituted by the Democratic Party and its allies), succeeded in electing the new president from their own ranks.¹⁰ This had three prime consequences.

9As a footnote of clarification here, the problem with this election laid especially in the opposition's growing fear that the majority with this move secured the 'trinity' of the most important institutions, that of prime minister, head of parliament and the president. This not only changed the 'rules of the game' agreed to only four year prior, under the supervision of international actors, but moreover increased the power of the Democratic Party to easily replace the heads of other (state) institutions with members affiliated either directly or indirectly with this party. Since the law for civil officials is rarely enforced in Albanian politics, the coming to power of one political force implies the hiring of its militants in place of the existing ones. Seen in this light, the fears of opposition were not entirely unfounded.

10There were several suspicions that made the round of press (mostly raised by the Socialist Party members) that some opposition members of parliament were bribed or co-opted in other forms to suddenly switch their position and vote with the majority for the new non-consensual president. In light of some circumstanced evidence, such suspicions had some valid basis.

First, it further alienated the opposition and 'froze' the 'big' reforms for an indefinite time, because most of these reforms require a 3/5 quorum, which was impossible to reach without the opposition. Second, all calls for a referendum in electing the new president were ridiculed and there was very little transparency in the election of the new president. This disappointed a large part of the population, which as several polls indicated, were deeply dissatisfied by the whole process, although generally the new president, Bamir Topi, was well liked and respected as a moderate and one of the most voted-for and popular politicians in the country.¹¹ The problem laid in the way that he was elected. Third, all calls for a popular referendum were ignored and moreover, the citizens were deprived of any kind of resolution that would have solved the impasse and at the same time allow for a degree of peoples' participation. However, yet another problem laid with the moment of election itself.

As soon as the new president was elected, the international institutions that had so far opposed any kind of resolution that would not involve the opposition rushed to congratulate the new president and offered no criticism at all of the highly suspicious process. Furthermore, the new political developments had undermined the previous precedent of bi-partisan consensus for the election of the president, while not offering any other (democratic) alternatives. Even more surprising is that after the *decision* was reached and the country had now a new president-elect, which paraphrasing Derrida is the climax of 'the political', a period of de-politicization soon followed, with most of the salient political issues being sidelined. These issues were the reform amendments that previously were discussed to be included in a common package with the election of the president. That was to be the big compromise, but with the presidential election of President already *fait accompli*, the government lost its incentive and saw cooperation with the opposition as redundant. Seen in this light, the 'political' becomes the moment that de-politicizes

11Several polls, published in the Albanian press at the time in fact indicated that Mr. Topi was the most favored candidate for the post of president and if an election would have taken place, he was favored to win by a landslide.

and moves away from public discourse, the contestation of salient political issues. International actors had undoubtedly played a great role in the process, albeit mostly by default, given their prominent position as arbiter in the process and the legacy of past intervention. Their failure to prevent a unilateral move that threatened the political willingness of the opposition and alienated large parts of civil society and the press guaranteed short-term stability, but threatened the processes of further democratization, by ignoring the 'fair play' rules which they themselves had helped broker. This undermined their legitimacy, as well as the legitimacy of the Albanian political class and led to a growing alienation of the public, making the public more willing to withdraw from political participation.¹²

5. The Second Snapshot: Re-reforming the Electoral System

One of the hottest recent debates boils around the necessary reform of the electoral code, which has been a controversial issue in the Albanian political sphere for most of its transition period. Some background information is needed here to better understand the current political debate around the issue of which electoral system would better represent the interests of Albanian citizens and increase representation, while reducing irregularities in (general) elections.

Most of the Albanian post-communist elections (except the 1991-1992), have been characterized as having irregularities ranging from neglect to outright theft of votes. International observers, especially the ones from OSCE, have always rated Albanian elections as problematic, partially free or generally regular and

12As the election for the depute seat to fill President Topi's parliamentary seat, less than 40 percent of citizens of that Tirana district actually voted, although it was one of the most important electoral zones in the country and the political parties campaigned hard for that seat. In the long run, we fear that an even larger number of people would simply refrain from voting, let alone other (more active) forms of political participation, as a general distrust with behind-the door bureaucratized politics that rely mostly on having their actions approved by internationals rather than their own constituencies.

free, but with minor problems.¹³ But even when international observers have accepted elections as generally in line with democratic standards, such as the general elections of 1996, the opposition has protested the results. Such was the case in the general elections of 1996, when the Democratic Party, headed by former President and current Prime Minister Sali Berisha, rejected the results outright and protested massively in defiance of the rigged results.¹⁴ In 1997 it was Berisha`s turn to denounce the Socialist Party for rigging the votes outright. But, at least until 2001, the debate was primarily focused on questions of the legitimacy of elections, lack of security and rigged results. In 2001, however, the debate shifted somewhat, for the first time revolving primarily around the questions of loopholes in the electorate code that allowed for deformed results. The reason was that since the electorate code followed closely the German system, which is `corrected majoritarian,` it meant that 100 deputies out of 140 would be elected directly, while the other forty through proportional lists. The Socialist Party which had secured a small but necessary majority already, in the second round,¹⁵ urged its potential voters to vote for coalition parties, which secured enough percentage to be represented in the 140 seats parliament and to artificially increase the weight of the governing bloc vis-à-vis opposition.

13See for example the OSCE report of 1997 that qualifies the 1997 elections as `admissible for the moment." Raporti i OSBE-ODIHR per zgjedhjet e 29 qershorit 1997" [The OSCE-ODIHR report for 29 July, 1997 elections], cited in Henri Cili, "Nderkombetaret si Pala e Trete: Nje Udhetim Bashke me Nderkombetaret neper Trazicionin Shqiptar 1990-2002" (The international actors as a third party: A trip with the internationals in the Albanian transition 1990-2002). Polis 4 (2007): 51.

14The Democratic Party won 122 seats in a 140 members` parliament and nobody could doubt the scale of irregularities, except the OSCE or EU observers, who due to political considerations, closed an eye and declared the elections as generally free, with few misconducts and irregularities.

15There was only one round of elections, but in some villages and towns the elections took place later than scheduled due to administrative issues. As an anecdotal note, the small village of Dushku became the most famous Albanian village ever, because it `produced` several deputies, due to the fact the Socialists urged their voters to vote for coalition parties that needed only a few percentage points to reach the quorum and be represented in the parliament.

In the 2005 general elections, the same story was repeated in even a larger scale, with the Democratic Party this time performing better, due to better organizational skills and use of the system. However, the third biggest party, the Socialist Party for Integration, headed by former prime minister, Ilir Meta, strongly contested the results, which he (as well as foreign observers and international organizations, such as OSCE), declared did not represent the will of the Albanian people. Moreover, the composition of the new parliament was really paradoxical, with parties that before had barely reached the threshold, now having ten or eleven deputies. On the other hand, the deputies that were elected directly represented only one of the two biggest parties (Democratic or Socialist Party) and were often perceived as shady businessmen who had either bought the votes outright or outspent their opponents by means of personal investment in their own campaigns. Together these factors led to a rising number of calls from international bodies (such as US Department of State, OSCE or EU), as well as some political parties and segments of civil society, to amend the electoral system in order to have a fairer representation of popular vote and democratic will.

After many *ad hominem* attacks and counter-attacks between the two main political parties, in a seemingly abrupt move they agreed to move forward with a new proposal that would drastically change the current electoral system. They have even appointed an electoral commission, headed by two high officials of their respective parties, and are in the final phase of reaching a deal to the detriment and fury of small parties in either camp. The proposed electoral code suits the so-called 'Spanish system,' which basically means a 'regional proportional' system. Without going into technicalities, or why the small parties are deeply dissatisfied with this plan that threatens their existence, I want to shortly present why this new system threatens a growing depoliticization of the public sphere and how international factors, notably OSCE, are involved in the process.

After the fall of communism, Albania adopted a mix electoral system.¹⁶ As one author put it, Albania has copy/pasted the German variation of a mixed system.¹⁷ In April 2008 the new law passed in parliament by the rare consensus of the Democratic and Socialist Parties with 115 votes pro (requiring at least 94 votes in the 140-seat parliament). The new voting rules made possible the constitutional amendments. Under such changes the majority to elect the president was notably reduced. Now, Albania's president, instead of its previous minimum of 3/5 (83) of the deputies, can be elected by a simple majority (only 50%+1, 71 votes) in the fourth round of voting.¹⁸

While regarding the electoral system the law gives voting system greater proportional representation. Albania has passed from the mix (a partial majority) system in favor of a regional proportional representation (fashioned around the Spanish system), within each of Albania's 12 administrative regions. All 140 members of parliament will in the future be elected by regional proportional representation from party lists. Most European countries have their electoral systems based on Proportional Representation where the seats in a constituency are divided according to the number of votes cast for party lists.

In the Albanian case, under the new electoral engineering the party lists will be open and the ranking subsequently cannot be changed in principle. Nevertheless, the critics point out the fact that it empowers political leaders' grip on their respective parties, since they are the highest authority in deciding who is included in

16For a review of previous electoral system changes in post-communist Albania see Arolda Elbasani, "Mixed Member Electoral Systems in Transition Contexts: How Has the System Worked in Albania?" CEU Political Science Journal 3(1) 2008: 79-82.

17Ibid., 73.

18Other changes included limiting the prosecutor general's term to five years, forcing an early election in the case of a no-confidence vote and reducing the majority required to elect the president from three-fifths to half the MPs. Also, Albania's prosecutor general will have a fixed five-year term instead of an unlimited one; and parliament will automatically be dissolved and early elections declared if the government loses a confidence vote.

these lists. One of the under-publicized elements of this new proposed deal is that it plans a 'closed lists' system, which means that the public can vote only for the party, without having any choice in electing their favorite candidate. The candidates are ranked beforehand by the respective leaders in these closed lists and they will take their seats according to the percentage of votes that each party receives in general elections. This allows the heads of the two biggest parties to give primacy to their clear favorites and to rid the party of any opposition, constructive or otherwise. Any dissenters would risk outright expulsion from the party list. This would increase the unity of the party around the leader, but on the other hand would increase the general public's dissatisfaction, as the lists do not offer any choice. We fear that this would lead to a further de-politicization and withdrawal of citizens from public sphere.¹⁹

On top of this, international actors are viewed as independent fair players neither by the Albanian political class, nor by different societal segments. The OSCE has not been seen as an impartial arbiter of this process by various media, civil society or small political parties. In a declaration for the media, the spokesperson of the Socialist Party, Mimi Kodheli, declared that the Socialist Party's stance is compatible 100 percent with that of OSCE in both opposing the open lists that would allow for public scrutiny and choice among the candidates.²⁰ One can do little but wonder why OSCE officially backs a plan proposed by one of the two biggest parties and supported by the other, but that largely ignores the will of the public, civil society actors and small parties? One suggestion offered for public consumption by the media that a popular referendum should decide upon this matter, has been largely opposed by the two biggest parties and OSCE. This partiality noticed in OSCE official stances has made the organization especially suspect in the eyes of the small parties. Some of these parties, notably the Democratic Alliance (a centre-right party) and the Social-Democratic Party (a left-centered)

19Irir Kalemaj, "Reforma Zgjedhore dhe Depolitizimi" (The electoral reform and depoliticization). Standard daily. March 16, 2008.

20Balkanweb, Raporti i OSBE. "PS: Kundërshtojme listat e hapura," (OSCE Report. "SP: We Oppose the Open Lists) Balkanweb, 02 March, 2008.

have publicly called for an end of the mission of OSCE in the country.²¹

This second snapshot is clearly telling in regard to the ineffectiveness of the institutions, such as electoral reform and electoral codes, which when left in the ultimate discretion of the main political players can inhibit democracy and democratic transition.

6. Additional Factors Needed for Democratization

In Albania the democratic system and the desirability of democracy is not disputed. The problem does not rest much on the electoral system *per se* but rather on the way in which politics is conducted. In Albania, limited rather than fully pluralist competition can be noticed, while elections are often marred by intimidation and corruption. If we refer to Freedom House surveys Albania can be classified as having, at best, partially free and democratic elections.²²

Almost two decade after the collapse of communism there are still authoritarian tendencies in terms of political behaviour. It is the party in power (or more often, the individual politicians) who takes over the political process and ignores the legislative. The country used to go into institutional or political crisis not because of lacking institutions (or improper electoral system), but mostly because of non-democratic behaviours from the party (or individuals) in power. All these disturbances limit the ability of the democratic system to function properly.

21The head of the Democratic Alliance, Dr. Neritan Ceka stated during a television appearance (Opinion Show, December 2007), that the country had already reached its political maturity and did not need to be babysat by organizations such as OSCE.

22Albania's Electoral Process rating remains 3.75 with the worst score 4.50 in 1998. Nations in Transit ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level and 7 representing the lowest level of democratic development. For more see: Freedom House "Freedom in the World: Aggregate Scores" access at

<<http://www.freedomhouse.org>>

The parties' political culture is still archaic, with little or no respect at all for the rule of law.²³ Manipulation of elections has become the norm and the unwritten law of the Albanian electoral system. With the exception of the 1992 parliamentary elections, all the other elections have been strongly contested by the losing party and the international community as well. In their reports we usually read that the elections in Albania "complied only *partially* with ... international standards for democratic elections."²⁴ Such evaluations leave Albania far from having a consolidated democracy on the base of fair competition and free elections. An alternation in power was hardly accepted by the governing party in the latest 2005 elections. The rotation of power took almost three months, creating an institutional vacuum for Albania.

Contested or fragile constitutional arrangements have been key features of the Albanian political landscape. The post-communist Albanian state had to reformulate its electoral system and mechanisms in April 2008. But besides re-adopting such democratic institutions, the main challenge is that of getting rid of the pervasive un-democratic culture of authoritarianism which has underpinned much political activity and which has resulted in a weakness in applying the rule of law. Albania has experienced difficulty developing a political culture where competition should govern all aspects of political life. Even where new laws and new mechanisms have been adopted, their implementation remains very weak.

7. Concluding Remarks

23For more on the implications of parties and party system in Albanian democratic development see: Dorian Jano, "On Parties and Party System in Albania: What Implications for Democracy", in *Central European Case Studies*, eds. Gergely Karácsony and Péter Smuk, (Universitas-Győr Nonprofit Kft.: Győr, 2008), 85-103.

24On the latest election of 2005 see: OSCE/ODIHR, Press release "Competitive Albanian elections weakened by insufficient political will and system open to abuse", Tirana, 4 July 2005.

Albania is still beset by a confrontational political culture where a tendency of confrontation and crisis has become the norms of Albanian political life. Such a mismatch of authoritarian political culture with democratic institutions has raised doubts and concerns about the quality of democracy in the country. Having the most effective electoral system is not everything, since democracy is not simply a machine that once set up, functions by itself. It depends on the elite and their political culture which should conform to the rules of democratic institutions. As it has been discussed so far with reference to the electoral system and its reforms, it can be said that it is not so much the (democratic) institutions who have framed political elites' behaviour, but rather the opposite. The authoritarian political culture of the Albanian political elites has distorted the democratic institutions. As such, Albania cannot be considered a consolidated (liberal) democracy. Rather it can be argued to be more of a 'hybrid' type of democracy with democratic institutions but still autocratic political behaviour. The latest report of Freedom House also favours such an argument, ranking Albania in the 'hybrid democracies' category. Albania is far from the only former communist country placed in this category, but it is an outlier in Central and Eastern Europe, being one of the hardest cases of democratization.

This paper sought to understand the deeper context in which political activity is embedded and pinpoint the absence of a consolidated political culture and institutional framework that could duly juxtapose any growing authoritarianism tendencies by political actors. After carefully thinking along Carothers' lines of discussing the features of these two systems that in fact are not too far apart from each other,²⁵ we would situate the Albanian case mostly at the 'feckless-pluralist' side, since it conforms to many of its features, like political freedom, regular elections and alternation of power. Or to put it differently, it subscribes to most

25Carothers (2002) distinguishes further between hybrid regimes. He labels 'feckless populism' regimes that have considerable pluralism and competitive electoral processes but still shallow and troublesome democracy and 'dominant-power politics' regimes that although they have some space for political competition, are still dominated by one grouping leaving little prospect for a real alternation of power.

of Dahl's seven characteristics of 'polyarchy.'²⁶ The real political participation nevertheless extends little beyond voting and there is not a true representation of various strata of population in policy-making. On the other hand, lately Albania has also seen some disturbing signs of moving toward a 'dominant-power' system, where the lines between the state and the ruling party are becoming blurry.

While the institutional architecture of a country can be changed relatively quickly through amending the constitution or adopting a new one, political behavior is difficult to change and takes time. It may take many years to build a democratic political culture. That institutions matter in a democracy is not to be denied but the question remains how much do they matter and in what context they are set. "There is a consensus in this literature that no 'perfect' bespoke electoral system fits every democracy. Instead, arrangements have to be tailored to each particular context; and choices involve trade-offs".²⁷ The complex picture of the Albanian political reality needs to consider both political institutionalism and political cultures.

For the consolidation of democracy "institutions should be congruent with political culture".²⁸ Democratisation therefore involves not only reforming the electoral system but also making the electoral process more democratic (competitive and depersonalised). Albania urgently needs to guarantee fully functioning democratic institutions and foster a more democratic political culture. It is not much the relevance of the electoral system choices that matter but rather the democratic context

26These characteristics, according to Dahl are: "elected officials, free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage, and the right to run for office, freedom of expression, alternative information and associational autonomy" Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1972) 221.

27Pippa Norris "Ballots not Bullets: Testing Consociational Theories of Ethnic Conflict, Electoral Systems, and Democratization", in *The Architecture of Democracy: Constitutional Design, Conflict Management and Democracy*, Andrew Reynolds (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 209.

28 Harry Eckstein cited in Rein Taagepera "How electoral systems matter for democratization" 5(3) (1998): 68.

elections are developing. In speaking about democratization one has to take into considerable account not only on the presence and level of democratic institutions but also on the way in which politics is conducted there. Consolidated democracies need not only democratic institutions; above all they need democratic culture.

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