Working paper

D6.3: Selective Europeanisation and Conditional Trust: EU Democracy Promotion in Hybrid Albania

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WORKING PAPER

Selective Europeanisation and Conditional Trust: EU Democracy Promotion in Hybrid Albania

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SUMMARY

This paper examines how hybridity, trust dynamics, and geopolitical rivalry interact to shape democratic development in Albania and to condition the effectiveness of EU democracy-promotion assistance. Albania offers a revealing case because it combines a strong Euro-Atlantic alignment and substantial formal approximation to European standards with persistent informal power, selective enforcement, and uneven institutional credibility. Drawing on project process tracing and a survey-vignette study among Albanians (n = 560), the analysis shows that citizens distinguish sharply between the EU as a normative horizon and the everyday delivery of EU-linked reforms through domestic intermediaries. Trust is highly selective: confidence concentrates in a limited number of insulated "islands of integrity," while routine politics and administration are more often perceived through the lens of brokerage, clientelism, and capture.

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Introduction

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has re-centred the European Union's neighbourhood policy on questions of resilience, strategic competition, and the durability of democratic institutions under stress (Genini, 2025). In this setting, the limits of democracy promotion have become increasingly visible: formal legal approximation to EU rules and technocratic conditionality can coexist with stalled accountability, politicised implementation, and citizen fatigue toward reform promises that do not translate into everyday improvements. The Albanian case provides a particularly instructive lens through which to examine these tensions (Dafa, 2025).

Albania is widely described as a Western Balkans frontrunner—anchored in Euro-Atlantic security structures, consistently aligned with EU foreign policy positions, and has pursued one of the region's most far-reaching justice reform agendas since 2016 (European Commission, 2024). Yet it also concentrates many of the conditions that routinely blunt EU leverage in hybrid contexts: an institutional order where legal and procedural alignment coexists with informal power and clientelistic brokerage (Danaj & Iljazaj, 2023), and a trust landscape characterized by selective confidence in a small number of insulated "islands of integrity" rather than generalized trust in routine politics (Metani, 2023) and a geopolitical environment in which non-EU actors such as China, Turkey, Russia, and the Gulf states, continue to enter domestic bargaining through capital, contracts, narratives, and sectoral cooperation, even as the strategic horizon remains decisively European (Vulović, 2023) In this sense, Albania functions simultaneously as a showcase of Europeanisation and a stress test for the EU's democracy-promotion toolbox.

This paper asks how the intersection of hybridity, vertical–horizontal trust dynamics, and geopolitical rivalry shapes democratic development in Albania, and what that configuration implies for the design and sequencing of EU democracy-promotion instruments in pro-EU but hybrid settings. The core claim is that the effectiveness of external support is mediated less by the abstract legitimacy of the EU—which remains comparatively robust—than by how reforms are filtered through domestic intermediaries, how legible and attributable outcomes are to citizens, and how far enforcement can be insulated from partisan cycles and informal influence. Where citizens encounter institutions as slow, selective, or brokered through personalized access, they rationally retreat into private problem-

solving repertoires; this, in turn, sustains the very informal structures that technocratic reform is meant to displace.

Methodologically, the paper triangulates process tracing with a nationally representative survey containing embedded vignettes to connect macro-institutional trajectories to micro-level dispositions. Process tracing identifies where reforms have produced credible constraint, where they have stalled, where they have stalled, and how political and institutional actors adapt to new constraints; the vignette design tests how cues about institutional independence, media pluralism, patronage offers, and external actor endorsements condition trust and reform support. Together, these approaches allow us to specify mechanisms rather than only describe outcomes: reform is "trust-gated" when low confidence in impartiality keeps citizens reliant on informal ties; "capture-compatible" when formal compliance can be simulated without even-handed enforcement; and "geopolitically hedged" when alternative partnerships are used to dilute leverage inside a broadly pro-EU frame.

The contribution is therefore not to question Albania's European horizon, but to clarify the conditions under which that horizon is translated into experienced legitimacy. Albania's case suggests that the EU's credibility does not primarily hinge on symbolic identification—where support remains strong—but on whether assistance expands beyond formal alignment into visible, citizen-facing institutional performance, and whether the domestic channels of implementation reduce rather than reproduce the incentives that sustain hybridity. By treating Albania as both frontrunner and stress test, the paper aims to refine how EU democracy promotion can operate when formal convergence is high, but informal power remains resilient.

2. Literature review

2.1 Hybrid Regimes as Enduring Forms of Governance

Understanding the character of governance in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood requires a conceptualisation that moves beyond the linear expectations of democratic transition. The region's political systems display enduring forms of hybrid governance that fuse formal democratic institutions with informal networks of patronage, rent-seeking, and personal rule. As Bøås, Giske and Osland (2024) emphasise, explaining the resilience of these structures is essential for determining how to constrain the room for manoeuvre that both internal and

external illiberal actors exploit to obstruct the European Union's democracy-promotion efforts. Effective engagement must therefore begin from an accurate understanding of how hybridity operates as a durable mode of governance, rather than as a transient deviation from a democratic norm (Bøås, Giske & Rieker, 2024).

The "transitology" paradigm of the 1990s and early 2000s, which conceptualised regime hybridity as a temporary stage between authoritarianism and democracy (Carothers, 2002), has proven empirically obsolete. The expectation that post-socialist states would follow a linear path toward a Western model of representative democracy (Dufy & Thiriot, 2013; McFaul, 2002) has given way to the recognition that many have stabilised as distinct regime types. As Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) demonstrate, the past two decades have seen "gradual declines of democratic regime attributes" and the entrenchment of mixed systems combining pluralist procedures with illiberal practices. In Morlino's (2008, p. 7) terms, hybrid regimes are defined by "ambiguous institutions, lacking one or more essential characteristics of democracy but also failing to acquire those that would make them fully authoritarian."

Such unsettledness (Bøås, Giske & Osland, 2024) is constitutive, not transitional. Hybrid regimes oscillate between reform and retrenchment, producing what Knott (2018) describes as a "democratic–authoritarian dynamic equilibrium." The apparent movement toward either pole—democratisation or autocratisation—is typically partial and reversible, as elite competition occurs within a shared framework of neopatrimonial practice and rent extraction. These cycles of opening and closure recalibrate power among incumbents and extra-incumbents without altering the foundational logic of hybrid governance.

At the heart of this logic lies the entanglement of formal and informal rule. Public institutions coexist with parallel structures of control that operate through patron–client relations, elite networks, and informal exchange. Knott (2018) and Bøås, Giske and Osland (2024) conceptualise these dualities through the metaphors of the "theatre state" and the "shadow state." The theatre state performs legality and accountability to preserve legitimacy, while the shadow state manages the actual distribution of resources and loyalty through concealed channels of influence extending from national centres of power to peripheral municipalities. This coexistence allows regimes to maintain an appearance of democracy while preserving a highly centralised and personalised mode of governance.

The interpenetration of formal and informal institutions generates complex nexuses linking politics, business, media, and in some cases organised crime. These cross-cutting alliances blur the boundary between state and society, transforming public office into a resource for private accumulation. The result is a system in which access to rents determines political participation and policy outcomes. Rent-seeking, clientelism, and neopatrimonialism are thus not aberrations but core mechanisms through which hybrid regimes reproduce themselves.

The social foundations of this equilibrium are found in the distribution of trust. The quality of vertical trust—citizens' confidence in governmental institutions and political leaders—and horizontal trust—the interpersonal and inter-group trust that underpins social cohesion—directly shape political stability and democratic resilience (Bøås, Giske & Osland, 2024). Persistent deficits in both dimensions weaken accountability and increase the reliance of elites on informal instruments of control. Where vertical trust is low, rulers substitute legitimacy with patronage; where horizontal trust is eroded, citizens fragment into enclaves of selective solidarity, unable to coordinate collective action for reform. As Boese et al. (2021) argue, democratic resilience depends not merely on institutional continuity but on the societal capacity to "bounce back from autocratisation." In hybrid regimes, this capacity is constrained by the pervasive absence of trust, which transforms uncertainty into a governing resource.

Since 1991, Albania has epitomised this dynamic. The country has experienced recurrent fluctuations between democratic advances and authoritarian reversals, reflecting the competitive interplay of domestic elites embedded in overlapping formal and informal networks. The persistence of these equilibria has institutionalised hybridity as a mode of rule: formal institutions provide external legitimacy and access to international resources, while informal ones guarantee internal cohesion and rent distribution. Over time, this arrangement has become self-reinforcing, adapting to shocks and external pressures without abandoning its hybrid essence.

The institutionalisation of hybridity thus shapes not only domestic governance but also the degree of permeability to external influence. Regimes sustained by informal power and low trust depend on external rents, recognition, and security guarantees, creating openings for foreign actors to embed themselves within existing patronal networks. In such systems, external interference does not occur in a vacuum; it operates through the very structures that uphold hybrid rule. The same elite configurations that manage internal competition also mediate external

engagement, converting foreign linkages and resources into instruments of domestic control. Consequently, the internal logic of hybridity and the external strategies of authoritarian powers become mutually reinforcing, blurring the distinction between domestic and foreign arenas of governance.

Authoritarian Foreign Interference in Hybrid Regimes

Within such settings, the distribution of trust—both vertical and horizontal—plays a decisive role in conditioning the permeability of regimes to external influence. Low vertical trust weakens the legitimacy of public institutions, while fragile horizontal trust undermines social cohesion and collective action. Following Stollenwerk, Börzel, and Risse (2021), democratic resilience requires high levels of both; where they are absent, the social fabric becomes porous to foreign interference. Trust deficits thus interact with the structural features of hybridity to produce an environment in which external actors can exploit informal networks and institutional ambiguity to advance their interests.

The literature on linkage and leverage developed by Levitsky and Way (2005, 2010) offers a useful framework for understanding these dynamics. Linkage refers to the density of economic, social, and informational ties connecting a country to external actors, while leverage denotes the capacity of those actors to exercise influence through coercion, dependency, or conditional incentives. In contexts dominated by a single liberal pole of attraction, strong Western linkage and leverage historically fostered democratic diffusion. Yet in today's plural geopolitical field, multiple sources of external influence compete for dominance, generating what might be termed competing authoritarian interferences. The simultaneous presence of authoritarian and democratic linkages undermines the clarity of incentives and expands the strategic room for manoeuvre of domestic elites.

Actors such as Russia, China, and Turkey have become key black knights—a term used by Levitsky and Way (2010, p. 41) to describe external powers that bolster authoritarianism rather than democracy. In the broader literature, these actors are also identified as "autocracy promoters" or "negative external actors" (Ambrosio 2009; Tolstrup 2009, 2014, 2015). Their involvement often takes covert or informal forms: financial patronage, strategic investment, information operations, or the manipulation of energy and trade dependencies. By engaging in such practices, black knights sustain or deepen authoritarian tendencies in target states, shaping the balance between formal and informal power.

Although Russia's role as an autocracy promoter in its neighbourhood is well established, the literature also highlights that democratic powers may act as black knights under certain conditions. As Ladwig (2017), Downes (2021), and Scott (1972) show, even liberal states may support illiberal incumbents, sponsor regime change, or engage in patron–client relationships when these serve strategic objectives. The analytical distinction, therefore, lies not in the regime type of the external actor but in the purpose and effect of its engagement: whether it strengthens or weakens the prospects of accountable governance in the recipient state.

Within hybrid regimes, gatekeeper elites—those controlling access to resources, information, and decision-making—mediate external influence. As Tolstrup (2013) argues, foreign powers exert leverage only insofar as domestic elites are receptive; where they are not, external actors remain peripheral. Hybridity heightens such receptivity. The prevalence of clientelistic relations and rent-seeking networks creates multiple entry points for external manipulation, reducing the cost of influence and blurring distinctions between domestic and foreign interests. Consequently, foreign interferences are filtered through local power structures that transform external inputs into internal political capital.

The interaction between hybridity and foreign interference is thus mutually reinforcing. Hybrid regimes provide fertile ground for authoritarian linkages and leverage, while sustained external interference consolidates the hybrid equilibrium by legitimising informal power holders and perpetuating distrust. The result is a feedback loop in which low trust, concentrated patronage, and external dependency reproduce one another. In these conditions, the resilience of states and societies against negative external action remains markedly lower than in consolidated democracies, which depend on credible institutions, legitimate intermediaries, and robust social cohesion (Stollenwerk et al., 2021).

Understanding authoritarian foreign interference therefore requires situating it at the intersection of domestic hybridity and international competition. Theories of linkage and leverage explain the external vectors of influence; studies of hybrid regimes illuminate the internal channels through which that influence operates. Where both meet—amid weak vertical and horizontal trust—external engagement transforms from a source of democratic consolidation into an instrument of authoritarian diffusion.

Rethinking the EU's Approach to Enlargement

In the context of pervasive hybridity and competing authoritarian influences, the EU's enlargement policy faces the dual challenge of promoting democratic consolidation while safeguarding its neighbourhood from external manipulation. Traditional models of EU democracy promotion—linkage, leverage, and governance—have each contributed to partial successes but have failed to fully address the complex realities of hybrid regimes. As scholars such as Freyburg et al. (2015) and Lavenex and Schimmelfennig (2013) have shown, these approaches largely operated under assumptions of linear democratization, privileging formal institutions over the informal structures that actually shape political behaviour in many candidate countries.

However, as Giske and Rieker (2025) underline, hybridity and low social trust constitute structural barriers to effective democracy promotion. The EU's previous emphasis on conditionality and institutional alignment—the "carrot-and-stick" logic of leverage—often reinforced, rather than dismantled, informal patronal networks by empowering entrenched elites capable of mimicking compliance without substantive reform (Richter & Wunsch, 2019). In this sense, EU interventions risked consolidating stabilitocracies rather than fostering genuine democratic resilience.

In response, the RE-ENGAGE framework aligns with the embedded democracy model, which reconceptualises enlargement as a process of fostering resilient governance rather than simply institutional convergence. This approach foregrounds two dimensions essential for democracy promotion in hybrid contexts: (1) the interaction between formal and informal institutions and (2) the levels of vertical and horizontal trust within society. Trust, understood as both citizens' confidence in institutions and interpersonal solidarity across societal cleavages, becomes a critical determinant of resilience against authoritarian tendencies and external interference (Inglehart, 1988; Croissant & Lott, 2024).

Under this approach, EU engagement must move beyond conditionality to incorporate bottom-up mechanisms of resilience-building—strengthening independent media, civic participation, and local governance, while promoting transparency and accountability at all levels. Democracy support is thus reframed as an embedded process: one that integrates social cohesion, institutional adaptation, and proactive counteraction to authoritarian influence.

Ultimately, the EU's enlargement strategy can no longer rely on the assumption that formal compliance will translate into democratic consolidation. In regions marked by entrenched hybridity and strategic competition, the effectiveness of enlargement depends on the EU's capacity to engage with the hybrid logic of governance itself—addressing the informal networks, trust deficits, and societal vulnerabilities that enable both internal illiberalism and external interference. The embedded democracy model provides the conceptual foundation for such an approach, situating enlargement not only as a geopolitical tool but as a long-term investment in democratic resilience across the EU's neighbourhood.

2.2 Albania

Albania's contemporary hybridity is best read as a layered political formation in which formal democratic institutions coexist with entrenched informal practices. Historically, five strata have shaped the state's political sociology: Ottoman era rule ordered along kinship and tribal structures (Vickers 2014); a post Ottoman period of fragile state building and clientelistic competition (Bieber 2018); communist isolation under a personalized dictatorship; post-communist collapse marked by the 1997 pyramid scheme crisis and a near stateless interregnum; and, since 2000, an incomplete reconstruction of democratic institutions constrained by corruption and organized crime (Freedom House, 2023; 2024). The result is a hybrid order where legality and informality interpenetrate, producing recurrent risks of elite capture and "stabilitocracy," alongside fluctuations in international democracy indices (Bieber 2018). Within this environment, neo-patrimonial networks allow domestic and foreign elites to extract informal benefits in strategic sectors, distorting economic outcomes, undermining democratic reforms, eroding public trust, and ultimately impeding Albania's trajectory toward transparent governance and EU integration (Filipović et. al., 2024).

The country faces significant political and social divisions over the influence of non-Western actors, with elites and parties split on engagement with China, Turkey, Russia, and Gulf states. These actors deepen domestic polarization through economic deals, cultural and religious influence, and targeted disinformation, reinforcing ideological divides, undermining trust in institutions, and shaping electoral dynamics. Together, these external interventions exacerbate internal political tensions, fuel scepticism toward Western integration, and complicate Albania's democratic trajectory (Filipović et. al., 2024).

Socio economically, growth has been real but uneven. Inequality, while declining by some measures, remains salient: Albania's Gini index fell from 33.1% (2017) to 29.4 (2020) (World Bank/The Global Economy/Albania, 2020), even as spatial and social disparities widened between the Tirana Durrës growth corridor and remote rural/mountain areas (INSTAT, 2018; World Bank/The Global Economy/Albania, 2020). Rural communities face narrow economic bases, weak infrastructure, aging populations, and youth out migration, dynamics that thin the middle class and depress democratic participation (Azizaj, 2024; IDM 2024; INSTAT, 2023). Official poverty and unemployment have trended downward—poverty to ~22% (2021) and unemployment to ~11% (2022)—but hidden underemployment, especially for youth and women outside urban centers, complicates the picture (INSTAT 2022; INSTAT 2023).

Electoral rules have been unusually volatile. Since 1991, Albania has cycled through seven electoral designs, from majoritarian to mixed to variants of proportional representation—each reform shifting entry barriers and incentives for new or small parties (Krasniqi, 2012; Reli & Xhaferaj, 2024). The 2020 constitutional amendments introduced regional proportional representation with open lists, a change contested by the opposition as deepening incumbency advantages and unlikely—on current party practices—to alleviate highly centralized, leader driven control of candidate selection (Xhaferaj, 2022). Observation missions generally deem elections competitive but flag recurring violations—vote buying, pressure on public employees, misuse of state resources, and personal data abuse—most recently in 2021 and subsequent general and local contests (OSCE 20221; EU, 2021; NDI, 2021; OSCE 2025; Kalemaj, 2021; Xhaferaj, 2023). Party politics remains duopolistic and leader centric: the Socialist Party (in power since 2013) and the Democratic Party mobilize through regionalized clientelist networks, while splinters (notably the Freedom Party/LSI) have periodically played kingmaker (Bieber, 2020; Gërxhani & Schram, 2009; Krasniqi, 2016; Xhaferaj, 2018, 2022). Rule of law deficits sit at the heart of democratic fragility. Brussels has repeatedly tied accession progress to credible action against corruption and organized crime, warning of "state capture" risks (European Commission, 2016; 2023; 2024). The 2016 justice reform and the vetting of judges and prosecutors sought to reset judicial accountability and independence; implementation has been arduous—capacity shortfalls and politicization persist—but trust in the new anti corruption and organized crime structures (SPAK) appears to have risen alongside visible high profile cases (AHC, 2020; European Commission, 2024). Media freedom is constitutionally protected and supported by a modern legal framework, yet practice

lags: ownership concentration among conglomerates linked to politics, political appointments in public broadcasting, strategic lawsuits and intimidation, and sporadic violence—including a 2023armed attack on Top Channel's headquarters—erode independence and foster self censorship (AHC, 2020; IREX, 2019).

Civil society operates within largely adequate formal frameworks but struggles with limited resources, weak consultation mechanisms, and episodic governmental openness—conditions accentuated during the pandemic (Bino, Qirjazi, & Dafa, 2020; IDM 2022). The European Commission urges stronger, more meaningful CSO inclusion in policymaking and accession related reforms, beyond ad hoc or transactional engagement (European Commission, 2023). Against this institutional backdrop, a neopatrimonial political economy—tight linkages between political elites and illicit networks—has enabled vote buying, patronage distribution, and local state capture; recent prosecutions indicate partial pushback, but the structural incentives remain powerful.

Trust patterns mirror this hybrid governance. Vertical trust—confidence in government and state institutions—has been low: a 2022 Euronews Albania Barometer found only 18.5% trusted the government, with the parliament, courts, and political parties polling in single digits; international actors (the U.S. embassy, EU Delegation, OSCE) ranked higher than domestic institutions (Euronews Albania, 2022). By contrast, horizontal trust—interpersonal or society level trust—clusters in religious institutions (26.3% in 2022) and informal networks, whereas trust in civil society and media remains modest (Euronews Albania, 2022). Rising confidence in SPAK since 2022 appears linked to visible enforcement, suggesting that credible, non partisan accountability can repair vertical trust at the margins (Euronews Albania 2025; European Commission, 2024).

Russia's 2022 full scale invasion of Ukraine sharpened Albania's Western alignment. Tirana has condemned Moscow's aggression (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2024), aligned with NATO/EU positions (EU Parliament, 2022) (including in UNSC diplomacy), and used the regional security shock to press for faster EU integration; nonetheless, enlargement delays have fed public frustration and the specter of stabilitocratic bargains that trade accountability for short term "stability" (Reuters, December 6, 2022).

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economic deals, cultural and religious influence, and targeted disinformation, reinforcing ideological divides, undermining trust in institutions, and shaping electoral dynamics. Together, these external interventions exacerbate internal political tensions, fuel scepticism toward Western integration, and complicate Albania's democratic trajectory ((Filipović et. al., 2024).

Overall, Albania exhibits a non linear democratization trajectory in which electoral competition coexists with neopatrimonial resource allocation, weak yet reforming judiciaries, politicized media markets, and ambivalent vertical and horizontal trust. External engagement by Western and non Western actors alike is filtered through these domestic logics. Where international interventions reinforce transparent, impersonal rules (e.g., credible judicial vetting and enforcement), vertical trust can be nudged upward; where they rely on elite brokerage and opaque contracting, they risk reproducing the hybrid equilibrium that constrains democratic deepening (European Commission, 2016, 2024; SPAK, 2023; Transparency International, 2022).

3. Methodology and fieldwork

The study adopts a mixed-methods design that combines a population-based survey (n = 560) with embedded vignettes and qualitative process tracing of two important democracy-support interventions in Albania. The methodological strategy is grounded in the project's trust-hybridity framework and is designed to capture both micro-level perceptions and preferences and meso-level institutional dynamics. The survey component provides systematic evidence on how citizens evaluate political institutions, media environments, EU engagement, and competing external actors, as well as how vertical and horizontal trust interact in shaping resilience under conditions of hybridity. The embedded vignette experiment allows us to probe causal reasoning by observing how respondents rank external assistance options under a controlled crisis scenario. Complementing this, process tracing of the EU4 Justice and PRO-FREX (Protecting Freedom of Media and of Expression in Albania) interventions reconstructs the causal pathways through which EU democracy promotion operates in practice, drawing on interviews and focus groups to identify mechanisms of implementation, adaptation, and constraint.

Taken together, these methods enable triangulation between attitudes, behaviour, and institutional practice, linking citizen's trust allocations and geopolitical preferences to the concrete operation of EU-supported reforms in a hybrid

governance environment. Below is a detailed description of the data collection process.

3.1 The Survey-Vignette Methodology

The survey methodology of the RE-ENGAGE project pins on unpacking perceptions and trust among citizens concerning political institutions, media habits, contemporary EU engagements, external agency interventions, and general trust of local actors in communities. Duplicating the practice of the other surveys completed among the RE-ENGAGE case countries, the survey-vignette module was launched in the capital city and a 'secondary city' – allowing the analysis to capture citizen perceptions in the political capital of Albania and an important metropole which is geographically and culturally distinct from the capital (see Markusen et al. 1999). For this purpose, Tirana and Vlorë were selected to capture contrasting but analytically complementary governance and information environments. Tirana, as the political, administrative, and media centre of Albania, concentrates state institutions, EU delegations, civil society organizations, and national news production, making it the primary site where reforms are designed, communicated, and symbolically represented. Vlorë, by contrast, functions as a secondary city with weaker institutional density, stronger reliance on local networks, and more limited day-to-day exposure to national and EU-level actors. Including both cities enable a comparison between centre-proximate and non-capital urban contexts, illuminating how proximity to power, visibility of EU integrations, and local social capital condition trust, attribution, and perceptions of democratic performance.

Replicating similar practice conducted in the other RE-ENGAGE countries, the total sample size for the Albanian dataset is 560 respondents. 360 samples were allocated to the capital city (Tirana) and the remaining 200 for Vlorë.

The survey-vignette module seeks to capture the relationship between vertical and horizontal trust on the micro-level; between authorities and people, trust among close agencies (i.e., kin), and trust in geopolitical players. The results yield assumptions about Albanian resilience against hybridity, and how the ongoing EU engagements are viewed among ordinary citizens.

A vignette section is embedded in the survey instrument where the interviewee is presented a fictive, yet plausible, story about an impending crisis harming the Albanian economy. The fictive scenario illustrates an economic crisis affecting the country, including trade deficits, rising costs of living, rapid increase in inflation and possibility of state default. To assist the Albanian government, the EU alongside

the ‘black knights’ (non-democratic external interventionists competing with the EU): Russia, China and Turkey, offer three plausible rescue packages respectively. The bundles range from economic support packages to membership in the EU or BRICS, as well as debt relief plans or removal of certain tariffs. For each vignette, the respondent is requested to rank the support packages offered by each geopolitical player on a scale from "1" to "5" in terms of the perceived impact the support packages may play to address the economic crisis (i.e., from “very good impact” to detrimental impact”). Part II of the vignette allows the respondent to select three of the most preferable rescue packages of their choice offered by the geopolitical actors.

The vignettes seek to measure both implicitly and explicitly, perceptions of four different geopolitical actors in a crisis situation. The vignettes yield assumptions about how much traction the different geopolitical players have among Albanians, and how people see hybrid actors competing for influence on the expense of the EU.

A quota sampling design was implemented, with sample allocation stratified by gender (male and female), age group (18–29, 30–54, and 55+), and educational attainment (primary education or below, secondary or vocational training, and higher education). To address the non-proportional allocation applied in this approach, whereby certain subgroups were oversampled, post-stratification weights were applied. The population benchmarks used for the construction of these weights were derived from the most recent Albanian census. Post-stratification weights were computed using the raking procedure in SPSS version 27.0.

To mitigate potential clustering effects arising from interviewers or fixed survey sites, we randomized the assignment of quotas across pre-selected survey locations and interviewers. This procedure helps ensure that no single interviewer or site becomes disproportionately associated with specific demographic profiles, thereby reducing bias. By dispersing quota characteristics in this way, the sample better approximates random variation and enhances the representativeness of the data. Ten locations were randomly picked in Tirana, and 9 locations were selected in Vlorë. For each of these locations, a certain number of quotas were applied to be fulfilled by the enumerators.

Additionally, we applied a filter criterium for choosing interviewees, that the respondent must be a passport holder of the country (citizenship). The recruited interviewers were operating in urban areas for practical reasons (i.e. easy access to interviewees), but in two different cities: the capital city Tirana and a secondary city

Vlorë. We combine data collected from both cities for analysis, thus mitigating the bias of only collecting data in the capital and *vice versa*. The census data was collected by EUT and subsequently delivered to NUPI for quota stratum calculations. Accordingly, the quotas were randomly assigned to the different urban data collection sites.

CAPI Tools and Implementation

The Computer-Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) system was developed using CSPro 8.0.1, with data collection conducted via CSEntry version 8.0.1 on Android devices. Sample allocation data was preloaded into the CAPI, allowing interviewers to locate the pre-selected interview locations through Google Maps and identify eligible respondents using a built-in menu system. Interviewers were restricted to conducting interviews within a 500-meter radius of the designated locations.

When starting a new questionnaire, CAPI has a pre-installed control mechanism that controls whether the respondent fits the quota. The interviewer must confirm before proceeding towards the questionnaire.

The CAPI was installed on mobile devices, with data initially stored offline in encrypted SQLite databases. After a completed interview, the enumerators were trained to safely upload data to a secure Dropbox server administered by NUPI via the CSEntry application.

For the vignette section, three sequence orders were pre-assigned. During each interview, the CAPI program randomly selected one of the sequences for each respondent. This reduces potential order bias in the responses, i.e., that the interviewer tends to favour the first rescue package on the expense of the last one, or vice versa. The CAPI system also captured metadata, including GPS coordinates of interview locations and duration.

Accordingly, twice a week (Mondays and Fridays), the NUPI team distributed monitoring reports with a summary of the collected data, and reported the progression. The rationale behind this scrutinization of preliminary data was to enhance the validity of the dataset. We utilized SPSS and R tools to read data.

Data collection officially started on December 12th, 2024. The data was collected in two cities: Tirana (the capital) and Vlora (in the south). Overall, 16 interviewers (10 in Tirana and 6 in Vlorë) conducted the interviews. Tirana was divided in 10 locations and Vlorë in 6 locations. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with a

structured questionnaire. The interviewers have conducted 360 interviews in Tirana and 200 in Vlorë.

3.2 Process tracing of two EU interventions in Albania: EU4Justice and PRO FREX, 2019–2025

We process traced two EU/CoE democracy support interventions in Albania—the EU's EU for Justice Reform (EU4Justice), 2019-2023 (https://eu4justice.al/) and the Council of Europe's Protecting Freedom of Expression and of the Media in Albania (PRO-FREX), 2023-2026 (Council of Europe Albania/Projects/PRO-FREX) through desk review, key informant interviews conducted in May–June 2025, and actor triangulated focus group sessions held in October 2025 with funders, implementers and beneficiaries of the same projects. The focus groups were run as structured but open conversations around a "thematic battery" derived from the interviews; moderators animated (but did not steer) discussion, and participants were invited on the understanding this was not a project evaluation but a reflective exercise on causal processes and lessons learned. This set up followed the project's framework note for process tracing focus groups.

EU4Justice Reform – Improve the Capacity of Independent Justice Institutions in Albania

EU4Justice is an EU-funded projects that supports Albania's justice reform by strengthening the performance, transparency, and independence of key judicial governance bodies – particularly the Hight Judicial Council, High Prosecutorial Council, and High Justice Inspector – through capacity building, institutional support, and improved access to legal frameworks aligned with European standards.

For the EU for Justice Reform the interviews were conducted with key stakeholders directly involved in, or closely observing, the justice reform process, including representatives of judicial governance bodies, the Ministry of Justice, oversight institutions (such as the Ombudsman), prosecutors, and independent experts and civil society analysts. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing for comparability across respondents while leaving room for probing informal practices, unintended effects of reform, and perceived gaps between EU-supported objectives and on-the-ground outcomes. Particular attention was paid to issues of institutional independence, procedural safeguards, access to justice, accountability mechanisms, and public trust.

Focus groups complemented the interviews by capturing collective perceptions and interactional dynamics among participants with practical exposure to the justice system, including legal professionals and civic actors engaged in monitoring or advocacy. The focus groups were structured around guided discussion prompts on experiences with justice reform, awareness of EU-funded interventions, and perceived changes in transparency, efficiency, and fairness. This format allowed participants to articulate shared concerns, contest official narratives, and reflect on how reforms are experienced at the operational level.

Together, interviews and focus groups provided insight into both formal reform trajectories and informal constraints, enabling the analysis to link EU justice reform assistance to patterns of institutional practice, trust formation, and hybrid governance dynamics in Albania.

Protecting Freedom of Expression and of the Media in Albania (Pro-FREX) Project

PRO-FREX is and EU-Council of Europe programme (2023-2026) that supports Albania's media freedom reforms by aligning laws and practice with European standards, strengthening the protection of journalists, and building the capacity of regulators, courts, law enforcement, and media actors. Through legal advice, training grounded in ECtHR case law, and support for self-regulation and dialogue, it aims to foster a safer, more pluralistic media environment and improve the consistent application of freedom-of-expression standards across institutions and the media sector.

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with a purposive sample of key stakeholders involved in, or affected by, freedom of expression and media governance in Albania. Interviewees included journalists, editors, media experts, civil society organisations, self-regulatory bodies, regulatory authorities (including Audio-visual Media Authority -AMA), law-enforcement and judicial actors, and representatives of international partners engaged in media-freedom support.

The interview and focus group material are used not as stand-alone testimony but as process-tracing evidence to identify causal mechanisms linking formal standards, institutional behaviour, and lived practice. In particular, interviews help trace how European legal norms (notably Article 10 ECHR and EU standards) are interpreted, implemented, delayed, or circumvented across institutional settings,

and how these processes shape journalists' perceptions of safety, independence, and accountability over time.

Case-based analysis is applied to a set of recurring issue areas and critical episodes identified across interviews, including:

(1) responses to threats and attacks against journalists;

(2) the handling of SLAPPs and defamation cases;

(3) access-to-information disputes;

(4) regulatory enforcement by AMA; and

(5) the functioning of media self-regulation mechanisms.

Rather than evaluating individual cases normatively, the analysis examines patterns of institutional reaction, sequencing of decisions, and points of breakdown or adaptation within Albania's hybrid governance environment.

The trust–hybridity framework guides interpretation of the interview data by linking vertical trust (confidence in courts, police, regulators, and oversight bodies) and horizontal trust (solidarity within the journalistic community and between media and civil society) to observed governance outcomes. Interviews and focus groups are used to assess how trust is built, eroded, or selectively allocated in practice, and how these trust patterns interact with informal power relations, economic dependence, and politicised regulation—core features of hybridity.

4. Relating democracy promotion to social trust and cohesion

4.1. Demographic Description

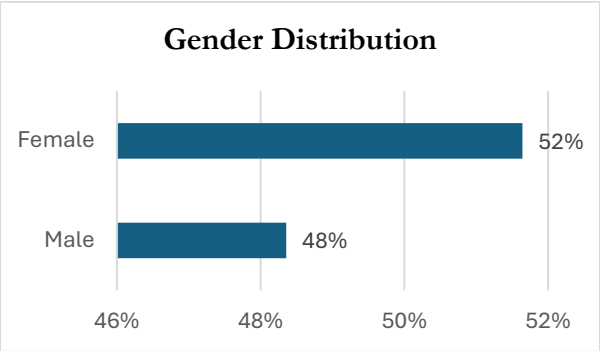
The survey sample includes respondents from Tirana and Vlorë and is broadly balanced across key demographic characteristics. Women constitute a slight majority of the sample (52%), while men account for 48%, with no meaningful gender differences between the two cities. The age distribution is centred on the working-age population: respondents aged 30–49 form the largest group (35%), followed by those aged 50–59 (25%). Younger adults aged 18–29 represent 19% of the sample, while respondents aged 60 and above account for 21%.

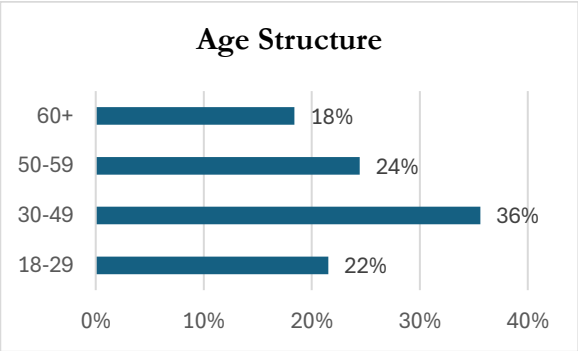
The sample is overwhelmingly composed of Albanian citizens (99%) and ethnic Albanians (99%), reflecting Albania's demographic structure. In terms of

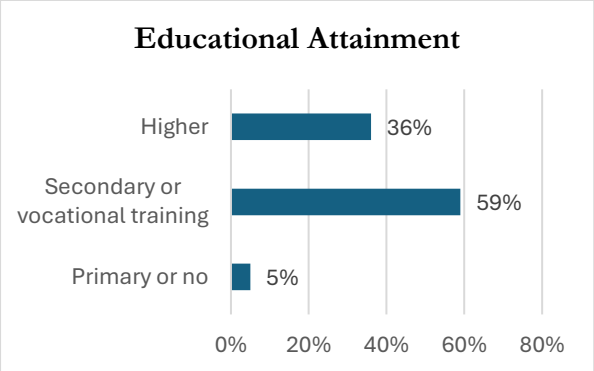
education, half of respondents report secondary or vocational education (50%), while 30% hold higher education degrees. Educational attainment differs by location: respondents in Tirana are considerably more likely to have higher education, whereas those in Vlorë are more concentrated in primary or secondary education categories.

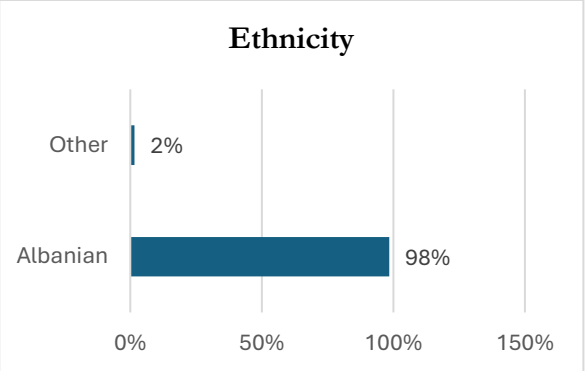
Religious affiliation mirrors national patterns. A majority identify as Muslim (62%), followed by Christian respondents (27%), while 11% report no religious affiliation or identify as atheist. Religious differences between Tirana and Vlorë are modest and do not indicate strong territorial segmentation.

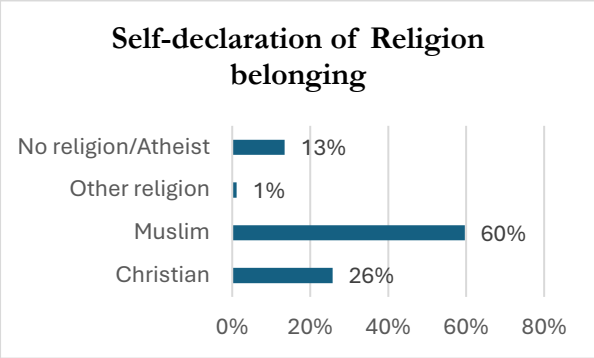
Most respondents describe their financial situation as average (57%) or below average (23%), while only small minorities identify as poor (7%) or well-off (1%). Reported monthly income levels are concentrated in the €300–800 range (62%), with around one quarter earning between €801 and €1400. Politically, respondents most frequently identify as social-democratic (28%) or right-leaning (21%), followed by socialist/communist (22%), indicating ideological pluralism without strong dominance of a single political orientation.

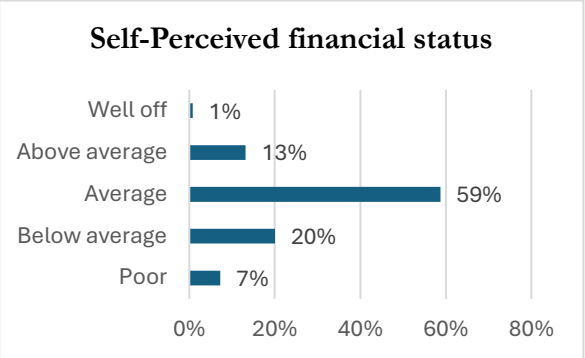


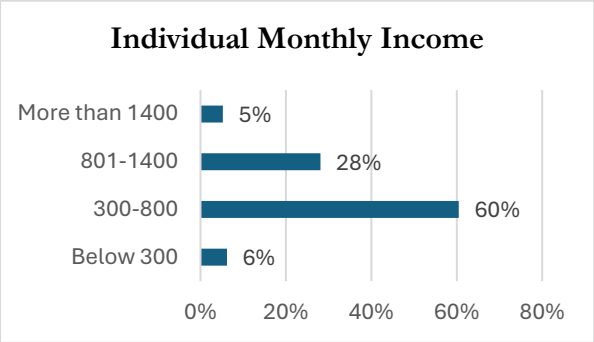


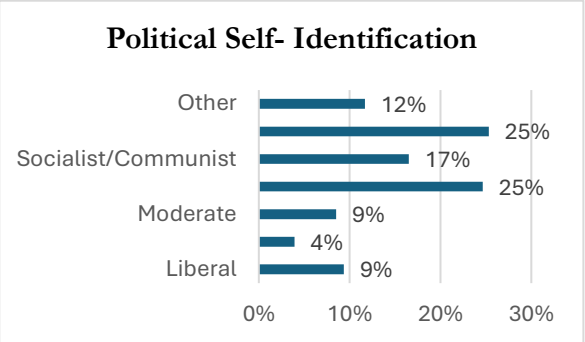






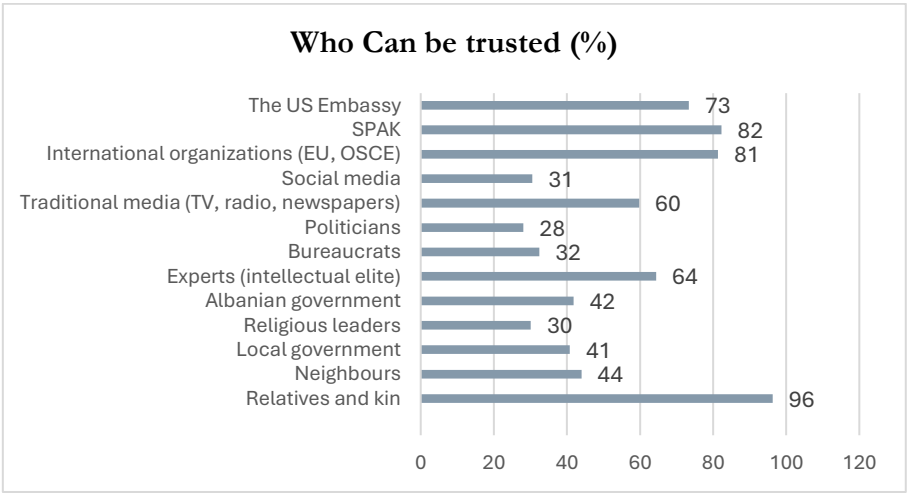






4.2 Trust Architecture in a Hybrid Context

Survey evidence points to a segmented trust structure characteristic of hybrid regimes: trust clusters into two relatively insulated spheres. On the one hand, there is dense trust within the private sphere, especially family and kinship networks; on the other, there is selective trust in apolitical or externally anchored actors. Nearly all respondents trust family members (96%), while confidence in core domestic political institutions remains low—politicians (28%), bureaucrats (32%), central government (42%), and local government (41%) (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025).



This persistent vertical trust deficit signals that democratic institutions are widely perceived as partial, politicized, or ineffective. In such settings, citizens do not expect rules to be applied universally, nor decisions to be made independently of

political affiliation or personal connections. Trust, therefore, is not withdrawn altogether but is reallocated away from political authority toward private networks, reinforcing informality as a rational coping strategy. This pattern aligns with hybrid governance logics in which legality coexists with discretionary power and selective enforcement.

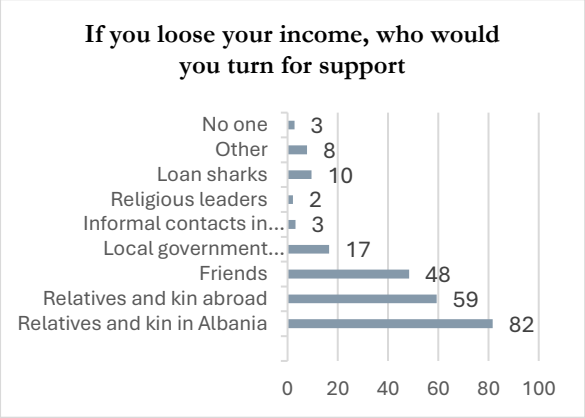
In contrast, trust is comparatively high in international organisations (EU/OSCE, 81%), SPAK (82%), and the expert or intellectual elite (64%) (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025), forming what can be described as "islands of credibility" within an otherwise low-trust institutional environment. These actors share two defining characteristics: they are perceived as professionally competent and as relatively insulated from domestic partisan competition. SPAK's particularly strong trust rating is analytically significant, as it suggests that where enforcement against corruption is visible, rule-based, and targets powerful actors, vertical trust can increase even in a system marked by chronic scepticism toward politics. This indicates that trust is not culturally absent but performance-contingent and highly selective.

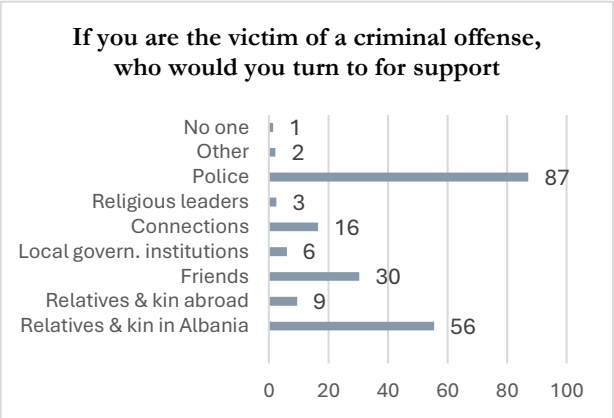
Media trust mirrors this segmented logic. Traditional television outlets retain moderate credibility (60%), reflecting their role as familiar, centralized information brokers, while social media—despite extensive use, especially among younger cohorts—are trusted far less (31%) (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). This consumption–credibility gap illustrates that citizens navigate a fragmented information environment with caution, relying on mass media for authoritative cues while using digital platforms instrumentally rather than normatively. Rather than serving as alternative trust anchors, social media function as amplifiers of uncertainty, reinforcing selective trust rather than broadening it.

4.3 Horizontal Trust, Bonding Social Capital, and Informal Coping

Horizontal trust in Albania is highly bonding but weakly bridging, producing dense solidarity within close social circles while limiting trust-based cooperation beyond them. When confronted with financial distress, a large majority would turn first to relatives in Albania (82%), followed by relatives abroad (59%) and friends (48%). By contrast, neighbours—often seen in the literature as a key indicator of bridging social capital—are trusted by fewer than half of respondents (44%) (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). This distribution confirms that trust remains intimate and selective, concentrated in relationships with strong emotional or reciprocal obligations rather than in territorially or civically defined communities.

The prominent role of relatives abroad highlights the diaspora as a transnational extension of horizontal trust. Remittances and informal support from family members outside the country function as a parallel welfare system, compensating for the perceived inadequacy or inaccessibility of state-based social protection. This pattern should not be read as a wholesale rejection of public authority, but rather as a rational hedging strategy in a context where institutional support is seen as uneven or uncertain.





This configuration is emblematic of non-linear hybridity. Instead of a gradual transition from informal solidarity to institutionalized welfare and civic trust, citizens adapt to institutional weakness by deepening informal coping strategies. Bonding social capital substitutes for, rather than complements, public provision. Importantly, this does not translate into generalized social breakdown or everyday conflict. On the contrary, neighbourhood relations are widely described as peaceful and cooperative: 86% of respondents report that "we get along," and only 24% believe that neighbourhood conflicts tend to escalate into violence. These figures suggest that Albania maintains a baseline of social cohesion at the interpersonal level.

In terms of neighbourhood relations, the data point to a highly cohesive landscape. An overwhelming majority of respondents (86%) report that relations in their neighbourhood are defined by "we get along," while explicit conflict – political, religious, or ethno-national -remains marginal (each at or below 4%). However, this cohesion is unevenly distributed. Tirana exhibits particularly strong neighbourhood harmony (92%), whereas Vlora shows a notably higher incidence of social conflict (18%), indicating a more strained local social environment outside the capital. Social conflict, rather than ideological or identity – based conflict, is the dominant form where tensions exists, pointing to material and social pressures rather than polarisation along ethnic or religious lines.

Socio-economic gradients matter. Respondents who are poor (13%), well-off (31%), or at the very high end of income (13%) report substantially higher levels of social conflict, while middle-income and "average" groups are more likely to describe harmonious relations. This pattern suggests that economic inequality – rather than absolute deprivation – may strain neighbourhood cohesion, especially at the extremes.

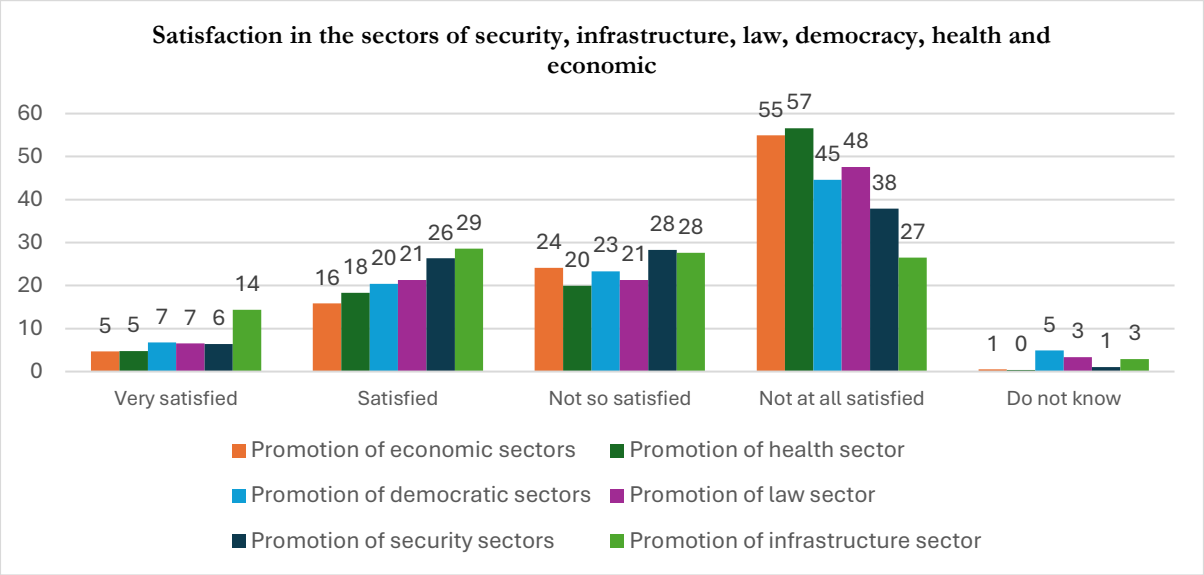
Age and education differences are modest, but younger respondents (18-29) and those with lower education report slightly higher levels of social conflict, consistent with broader patterns of economic precarity and weaker social embedding. Political identification introduces sharper variation: respondents identifying as liberal or anarchists are significantly more likely to perceive social conflict in their neighbourhoods, while those identifying with the right or socialist/communist traditions report the highest levels of cohesion. This points to perceptual filtering through ideological lenses, rather than objective exposure to conflict. In a nutshell, the findings about neighbourhood relations, indicate that Albania's horizontal trust at this level remains resilient, functioning as a stabilizing social resource. At the same time, the pockets of social conflict observed – especially outside Tirana and among socio-economic extremes – highlight the limits of this cohesion and its vulnerability to inequality and social stress rather than identity-based divisions.

A notable—and analytically important—exception concerns security provision. When faced with criminal victimization, respondents overwhelmingly turn to the police (87%), far exceeding reliance on family, friends, or informal "connections." This stands in sharp contrast to the patterns observed in economic distress and demonstrates that vertical trust can emerge where institutional roles are clearly defined, visible, and authoritative. Policing appears to function as a domain in which state presence is legible and expectations are relatively aligned with performance, even in a broader context of scepticism toward public authority.

Taken together, these findings suggest that horizontal trust in Albania is not deficient but structurally enclosed. It cushions social risk and maintains everyday cohesion, yet it also entrenches informality and weakens the link between citizens and democratic institutions. Where the state delivers tangible and credible outcomes—such as in policing—trust shifts upward. Where it does not, citizens rationally retreat into private networks. This dynamic reinforces hybridity by sustaining social stability without generating the civic trust necessary for deeper democratic consolidation.

4.4 Vertical Trust, Institutional Performance, and Democratic Satisfaction

Vertical trust in Albania is uneven, domain-specific, and socially stratified, reflecting a political order in which citizens evaluate institutions less on formal democratic credentials than on perceived performance and distributive fairness. Satisfaction with democratic governance (27%) and the rule of law (28%) (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) remains low, mirroring widespread perceptions of corruption, selective enforcement, and unequal access to justice. Economic governance is judged most harshly: nearly four out of five respondents (79%) report dissatisfaction. Infrastructure policy constitutes a partial exception, with opinions more evenly split—an outcome that appears closely tied to visible investment patterns and uneven territorial and class-based benefits. With 43% very satisfied or satisfied this is the sector that fares better than the others.



Socio-economic status further amplifies these divides. Poorer and financially insecure respondents are markedly more dissatisfied with economic policy, rule of law, health, and security.

Across all sectors examined (economy, health, democracy, law, infrastructure, and security), satisfaction with government performance is strongly and consistently structured by material conditions. Respondents with lower incomes and poorer self-perceived financial status display markedly higher levels of dissatisfaction, while satisfactions rise gradually with income and perceived economic security.

For the economic sector, dissatisfaction is overwhelming among respondents who identify as poor or below average: nearly nine in ten of the poorest respondents report being "not at all satisfied." This pattern softens among middle-income groups but remains dominant; even among those earning 800-1400 Euro/month,

negative evaluations still prevail. Only among above-average and well-off respondents does satisfaction become more visible, though these groups remain small in size.

A similar gradient appears in health, democracy, law, and security sectors, indicating that dissatisfaction is not issue-specific but systemic. Lower-income groups consistently interpret state performance through the lens of economic precarity, while higher-income respondents are more likely to express moderate or positive evaluations. Infrastructure stands out as the partial exception, where satisfaction is comparatively higher across all income groups, suggesting that visible and tangible outputs mitigate economic discontent. Thus, economic vulnerability translates into lower vertical trust: citizens who struggle economically are significantly less likely to view the state as effective ore responsive cross policy domains. Income and perceived financial security thus operate as key mediators shaping evaluations of governance performance.

Beyond economic status, satisfaction with government performance is systematically structured by age, education, religion, and political ideology, reinforcing the interpretation of dissatisfaction as a vertical trust deficit rather than isolated policy discontent (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025).

Age displays a clear gradient. Younger respondents (18-29) consistently report the highest levels of dissatisfaction across all sectors, particularly the economy, democracy, and law. Satisfactions increases steadily with age, with respondents aged 60+ expressing comparatively higher approval – especially in infrastructure and security.

Education produces a more ambivalent effect. Respondents with primary or no education exhibit high dissatisfaction, reflecting structural vulnerability and limited access to state benefits. However, dissatisfaction remains pronounced among the highly educated, particularly in democracy and law-related sectors. This indicates that education does not necessarily generate institutional trust; rather, it raises expectational thresholds and sensitivity to perceived governance failures. The result is a U-shaped pattern where both low and high education groups express scepticism, albeit for different reasons.

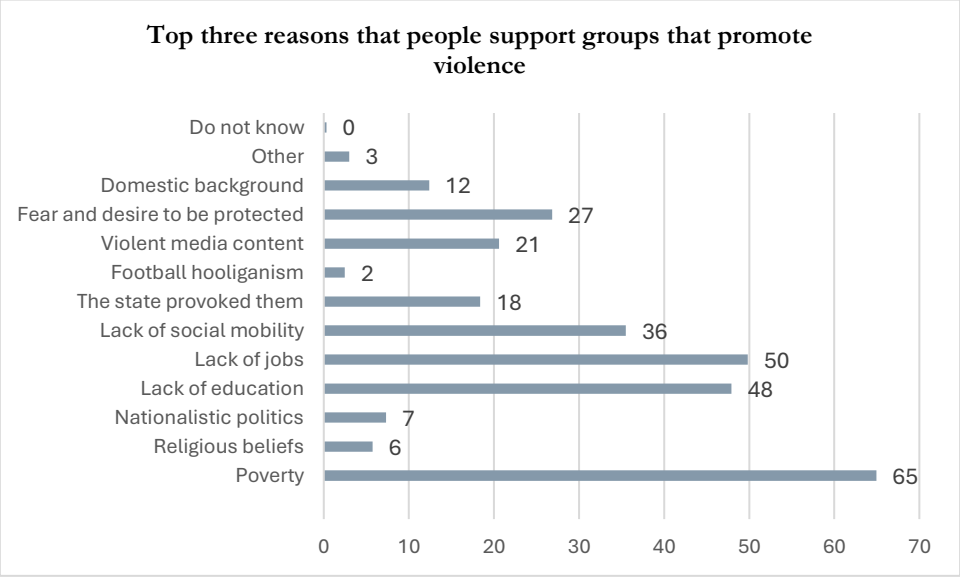
Religious affiliation shows limited polarisation. Muslims and Christians display broadly similar satisfaction profiles, suggesting that religious identity does not function as a primary cleavage in evaluations of government performance. Slightly

higher dissatisfaction among non-religious respondents points instead to a more critical, secular orientation toward authority rather than confessional divides.

Political ideology is the strongest non-economic predictor of satisfaction. Respondents identifying with left-wing or governing-aligned ideologies (particularly socialist/communist and social-democratic) report significantly higher satisfaction across sectors, including the economy, law, and infrastructure. In contrast, right-wing, liberal, and conservative respondents are overwhelmingly dissatisfied, especially in democracy and rule—of-law domains. This pattern reflects partisan filtering of institutional trust, where evaluations of performance are shaped by political alignment as much as by policy outcomes.

These findings suggest that satisfaction with government performance in Albania is shaped by a compound trust structure: material, insecurity, generational position, educational expectations, and ideological proximity to power jointly mediate citizens' willingness to extend trust to state institutions. Rather than producing uniform scepticism, these factors stratify vertical trust along predictable social and political lines.

In addition to the clear statements regarding satisfaction with government policies in, the drivers of perceived support for violent groups in Albania reflect primarily a vertical trust deficit, linked to socio-economic exclusion and weak institutional protection.



Across the full sample (N=560), support for groups that promote violence is overwhelmingly explained through structural socio-economic deprivation, rather than ideological or identity-based factors. Poverty (65%), lack of jobs (50%), lack of education (48%), and lack of social mobility (36%) dominate respondents'

explanations, forming a consistent narrative in which violence is seen as a response to blocked life chances and material insecurity. By, contrast, religious beliefs (6%) and nationalistic politics (7%) remain marginal across virtually all demographic groups. This pattern holds across cities, age cohorts, educational levels and religious affiliations, indicating that violence in Albania is not widely perceived as driven by ideological radicalisation or confessional conflict.

Secondary factors add nuance but do not alter this core interpretation. Fear and the desire for protection (27%), violent media content (21%), and the state provocation (18%) point to affective insecurity and institutional failure as enabling conditions rather than primary drivers. Respondents in Vlora and economically vulnerable groups are more likely to emphasis fear-based explanations, suggesting that local insecurity and weaker institutional presence shape perceptions. Therefore, support for violent groups is understood less as a by-product of socio-economic exclusion and low institutional trust, consistent with Albania's broader hybrid context where weak vertical trust and limited opportunities push individuals toward informal and risky coping strategies rather than political mobilisation.

Taken together, these findings indicate that vertical trust in Albania is performance-contingent, selective, and reversible. Where institutions demonstrate autonomy and tangible results, trust can be rebuilt; where governance is perceived as captured or distributively unjust, scepticism prevails. This produces a fragmented legitimacy landscape in which democracy is neither rejected nor fully internalized—another hallmark of hybridity that stabilizes the system while constraining its democratic deepening

4.5 Trust in Media

Daily media consumption in Albania is dominated by commercial national television and digital platforms, reflecting a hybrid information environment rather than a polarized one. Top Channel (55%) and Klan TV (48%) are the most frequently used outlets, followd by News24/BalkanWeb (27%), indicating the continued centrality of television-online hybrids. Public broadcasting (RTSH, TVSH) plays a secondary role (11%), with higher usage among older cohorts, suggesting generational segmentation rather than institutional trust.

Social media platforms – especially Instagram (31%), Facebook (25%), and TikTok (17%) are deeply embedded in daily information routines, particularly among younger respondents. However, usage does not translate automatically into trust, underscoring the distinction between exposure and credibility. International media

(CNN, BBC) remain marginal in everyday consumption, reinforcing the domestic orientation of Albania's media ecosystem.

When asked which outlets are most trusted for providing correct information, respondents again prioritize Top Channel (48%) and Klan TV (38%), followd by News24/BalkanWeb (28%) and Euronews Albania (12%). Trust in public broadcasting remains modest, suggesting that institutional legitimacy does not automatically confer epistemic authority.

A key finding is the selective downgrading of social media: while widely used, platforms such as Facebook and Instagram attract significantly lower trust scores than their usage rates. This gap points to instrumental consumption without normative confidence, consistent with hybrid trust environments where citizens rely on multiple sources while remaining sceptical of their reliability.

Age and education introduce differentiation. Older respondents and those with lower education levels display higher trust in television outlets, while younger and higher-educated groups distribute trust more diffusely, including toward international media and digital-native sources. Political ideology does not produce sharp polarisation, indicating that media trust in Albania is not strongly partisan.

In the case of unexpected incident, respondents converge even more clearly around mainstream national television and established online news portals. Top Channel (50%), News24/BalkanWeb (31%), and Klan TV (36%) dominate crises information-seeking behaviour. Social media usage declines relative to daily consumption, though Instagram (17%) and Facebook (10%) remain relevant, particularly among younger cohorts.

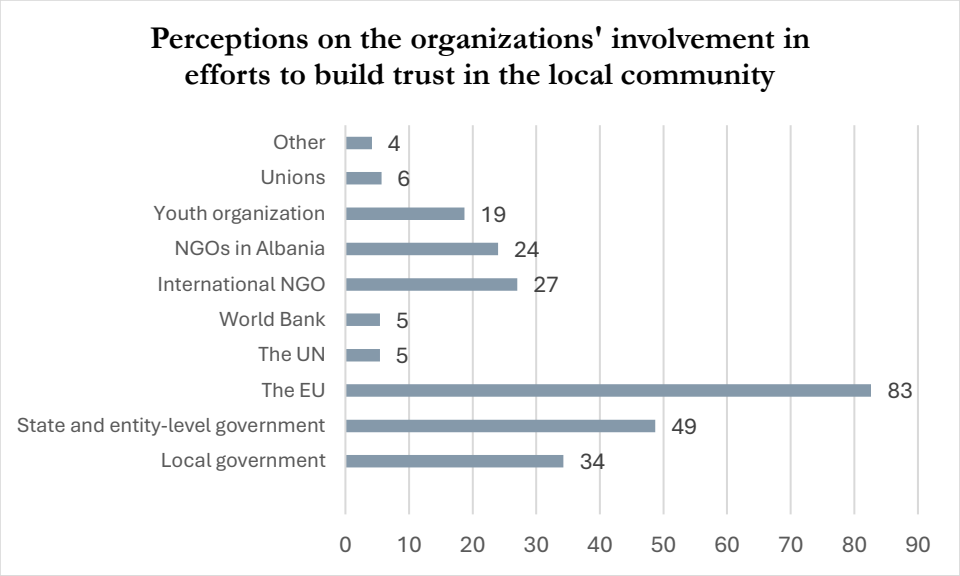
This shift highlights a hierarchy of trust activation: in routine contexts, citizens tolerate fragmented and low-trust information flows, but in moments of uncertainty they revert to familiar, centralized media actors. Trust here is pragmatic and situation rather than ideological.

Overall, Albania's media landscape reflects low polarization but hight fragmentation. Trust is layered rather than consolidated: citizens rely on mainstream television for authority, digital platforms for access, and social media for immediacy – without fully trusting and single channel. This pattern aligns with hybrid governance contexts, where informational authority is negotiated pragmatically rather than granted institutionally.

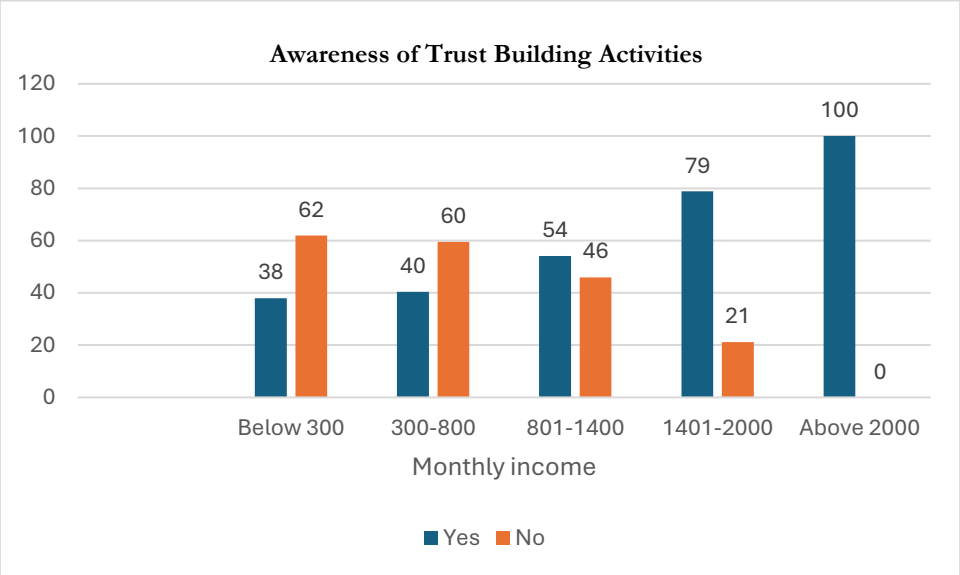
4.6 Awareness of Trust-Building Activities

The patterns emerging from the trust-building data map closely onto the logic of hybrid governance, where formal institutions coexist with informal networks, and where legitimacy is selectively distributed rather than systemically consolidated. Through the lens of vertical hybridity—relations between citizens and institutions—and horizontal hybridity—relations among social actors, communities, and intermediary organizations—the results testify to a trust environment that is both stratified and fragmented, yet anchored around a shared symbolic core: Europe as the normative horizon.

On the vertical axis, the EU remain the primary anchors of legitimacy. The fact that 83% identify the EU as an actor involved in local trust-building, far surpassing domestic institutional actors such as local government (34%) or NGOs (24%), illustrates how trust travels upward toward external, rule-oriented guarantors rather than downward through the national institutional chain.

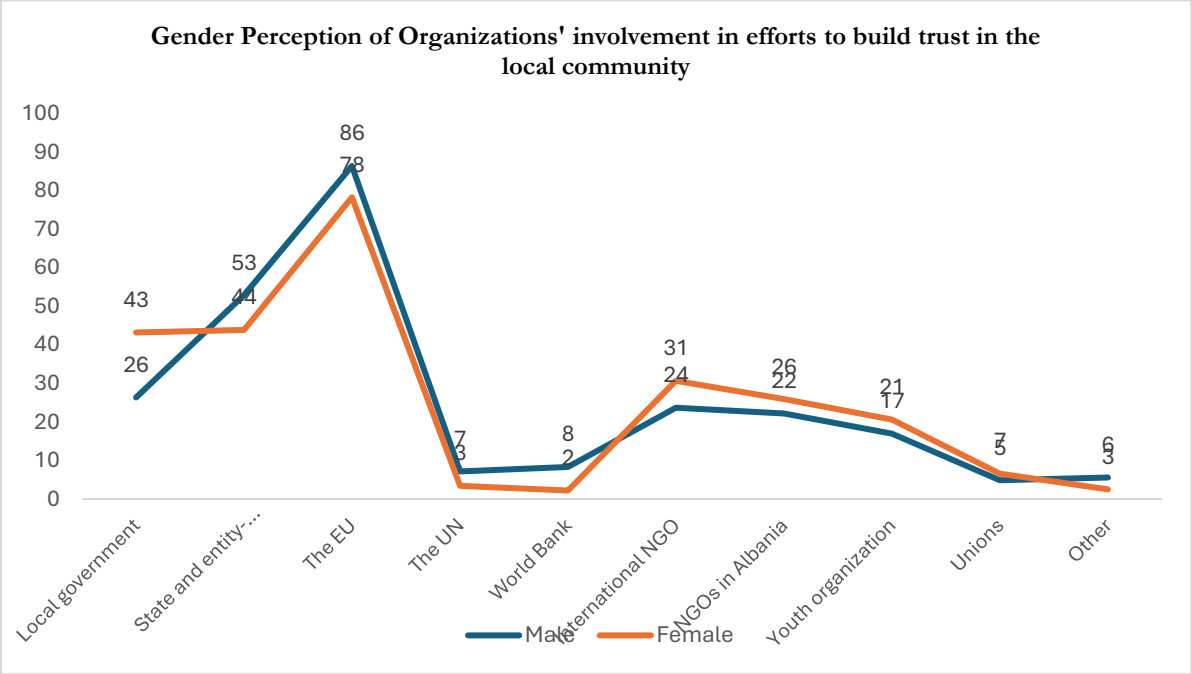


At the same time, vertical hybridity is socially stratified. Awareness and attribution are not evenly distributed but socially patterned along education, income, geography, and political identity. Higher-educated respondents show stronger recognition of trust-building actors (51% "yes"), as do higher-income respondents (awareness reaching 79% among those earning €1,401–€2,000, and 100% among the very high-income group, though the latter is very small). This implies that vertical trust is not universally accessible; it requires informational capital and institutional proximity.



Meanwhile, in Tirana—despite being the political centre—69% report being aware of local organizations trust-building projects, suggesting an "over-politicisation effect" where exposure to political discourse does not translate into concrete attribution. By contrast, Vlorë emerges as a high-engagement locality, with 69% aware of local trust-building initiatives. This suggests that vertical hybridity strengthens where EU and domestic actors embed projects municipally and visibly rather than keeping them technocratic or capital-centric.

The horizontal dimension reveals a complementary but equally hybrid formation. Awareness of local trust-building actors (45%) is significantly lower than awareness of European intervention, and even among those aware, attribution diffuses across a wide range of actors—local government, NGOs, youth groups, international organizations, and foreign states. The resulting pattern is not of a dense, coherent civic trust ecosystem, but of patchworked and uneven social capital, marked by gendered, generational, and socioeconomic differentiations.



Gender differences are illustrative. Women report slightly lower awareness on some categories and slightly higher in some others. For example, they demonstrate a lower level of awareness of EU projects (78% vs 86% among men), but higher for International NGOs (31% vs 24% among men). In terms of government women demonstrate higher level of awareness for local government as opposite to men who demonstrate higher level of awareness for central government efforts.

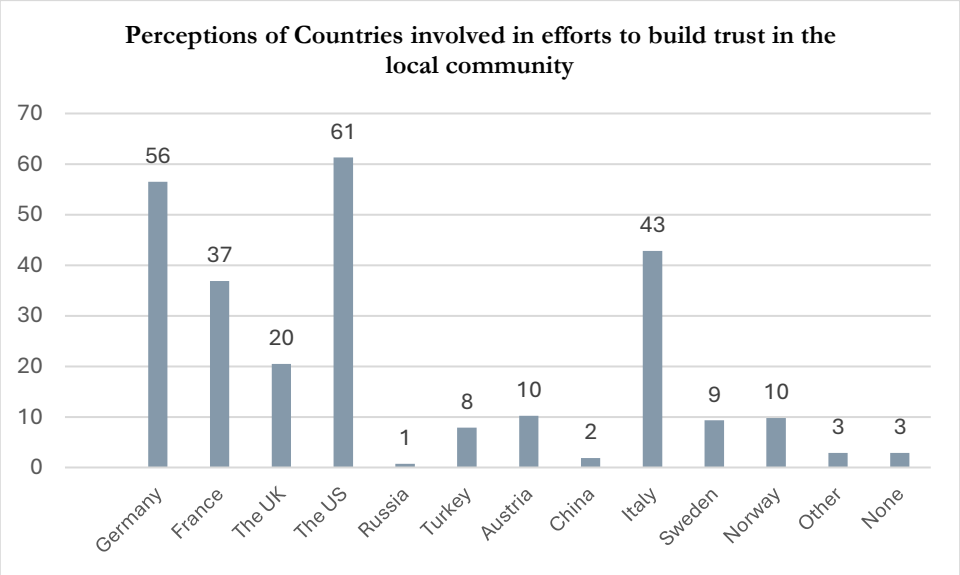
Age also plays a role in the level of awareness for trust building efforts. Younger respondents (18–29) and older respondents (60+) both display lower awareness of trust initiatives, though for different reasons: younger people inhabit digital information ecosystems with low platform trust, while older cohorts approach institutions through outcome-based rather than symbolic evaluation. Both groups thus demonstrate the limits of horizontal trust transfer when mediation is weak.

Socioeconomic vulnerability further constrains horizontal hybridity. Respondents who self-identify as poor display the lowest recognition of local trust-building with only 26% aware of local initiatives.

Political identity does shape awareness, but not the structure of preference. Liberals, moderates, and right-identifying respondents tend to report higher awareness levels, but across orientations the trajectory of trust attribution remains structurally similar: the EU remains the dominant trust actor, local government ranks below it, and NGOs occupy a middle ground. In other words, political identity affects degree, not direction. This confirms that even where ideological divides exist, the trust

architecture itself is shared—suggesting hegemonic legitimacy of the EU within Albania's trust landscape.

Comparing across organizations and countries reinforces the hybridity argument. When respondents identify countries involved in local trust efforts, the US (61%) and Germany (56%) dominate alongside the EU, with Italy (43%) as a familiar economic and migratory partner. Turkey retains a meaningful but secondary trust role (8% as a trust-building actor; 33–40% positive ratings in crisis vignettes), while Russia and China remain marginal but present, largely evaluated in transactional economic rather than normative terms. This hierarchy mirrors the EU-anchored but pragmatically hedged geopolitical imaginary: Europe provides the normative frame; others offer situational supplementation. Horizontally, this results in a plural trust ecosystem, but one in which actors are not equal; they are functionally differentiated according to symbolic authority, practical utility, and perceived impartiality.



Finally, whether these patterns replicate the broader trajectory of the general population, the answer is yes—but with stratified intensities rather than alternative shapes. Across gender, income, education, age, and political identity, we do not see rival trust logics; we see similar hierarchies with varying strength. The EU remains highest across strata, followed by prominent Western states, then domestic institutions, then NGOs, with uncertainty rising where vulnerability, distance from institutions, or informational disadvantage increases.

In theoretical terms, then, the trust-building data validate the core claim: Albania's trust environment is hybrid, selective, layered and conditional. Vertically, trust concentrates around external or insulated guarantors of rules-based order, while

domestic institutions remain unevenly trusted depending on delivery and impartiality. Horizontally, trust circulates through uneven civic infrastructures and socioeconomically stratified awareness fields, limiting the possibility of fully consolidated democratic trust. Europe remains the imagined normative anchor, but democracy support credibility depends on whether that symbolic authority becomes experientially legible in everyday institutional life.

5. Geopolitical representations and preferences

Albania's geopolitical imaginary is structured by a clear ordering: the EU is the primary reference point for "normality," while other external actors are evaluated as conditional complements rather than substitutes. In the data, "Europe" functions as the main reference point for what a legitimate order should look like; but when respondents are asked to think through a concrete economic shock, they also reveal a layered repertoire of crises reasoning in which additional partners may be considered. This means that Albania's external preferences are best read through the lens of hierarchical multi-alignment rather than binary alignment. External actors are evaluated according to their imagined capacity to deliver—speed, materiality, visibility, and perceived strings attached—while domestic hybridity shapes the background expectations against which those offers are judged. Where institutions are experienced as uneven or slow, citizens are more likely to entertain targeted external relief (energy, trade, investment) without translating that openness into deeper identification or a competing political model. The subsections below therefore map how Russia, China, and Turkey are positioned in this hierarchy: as contested, technocratic, or familiar options, each occupying a different place beneath the EU-centred strategic horizon.

Russia: Attitudes toward Russian measures in Albania are notably ambivalent and only weakly polarised. At the aggregate level, evaluations of Russian assistance in addressing an economic crisis are nearly evenly distributed between positive and negative assessments. Across the full sample (N = 558), 54% of respondents rate Russian measures as having a very good or good impact, while 37% evaluate them as bad or detrimental; 8% perceive no impact and 3% respond "don't know." This relatively narrow gap contrasts sharply with the Georgian data and suggests that Russia does not occupy a clearly hostile position in Albania's geopolitical imaginary. This balance is also visible across territorial and demographic categories. Differences between Tirana and Vlorë are modest: respondents in Tirana are

somewhat more critical, with 44% negative evaluations, compared to 24% in Vlorë, where positive responses are higher. Gender differences are minimal, indicating that attitudes toward Russia are not strongly gendered. Age-based variation points to mild differentiation rather than generational cleavage. Younger respondents (18–29) are slightly more negative (41% bad/detrimental) than those aged 30–49 or 50–59, but the differences remain limited. The 60+ group shows a more mixed profile, combining relatively high good evaluations (31%) with continued scepticism (42% bad/detrimental). Overall, age does not structure a coherent pro- or anti-Russian bloc. Socio-economic indicators introduce greater dispersion, but here interpretation must be cautious. Respondents who self-identify as poor display the most polarised pattern: 36% rate Russian measures positively, while 32% describe them as detrimental. This suggests not endorsement, but uncertain and instrumental reasoning under conditions of vulnerability. Those in the below average and average categories cluster close to the sample mean, reinforcing the picture of diffuse ambivalence rather than structured alignment. At the upper end of the economic scale, apparent contrasts between self-perceived financial status and monthly income require explicit methodological qualification. The "well-off" category (N = 5) and the €2000+ income group (N = 3) produce highly volatile percentages—ranging from strong negativity to high "very good impact" scores. These figures cannot be meaningfully compared and should not be interpreted substantively. They reflect extreme small-sample effects and the non-equivalence between perceived security and reported income, rather than genuine attitudinal contradictions. Education introduces a clearer gradient, though again without producing outright hostility. Respondents with primary or no education show higher positive evaluations (67% very good/good), while those with secondary or higher education are more divided, with roughly equal shares of positive and negative assessments (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). This pattern suggests differences in exposure and framing rather than ideological orientation.

Religious affiliation does not emerge as a structuring determinant of attitudes toward Russian assistance in Albania. Religious identity in Albania does not translate into symbolic or political alignment with Moscow. The weak and inconsistent religious gradient reinforces the interpretation of Russian assistance as pragmatically evaluated rather than identity-driven, embedded in Albania's broader pattern of secular and non-civilizational political reasoning (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025).

Political identification does not produce strong polarisation either. Liberal respondents are more critical, while conservative, socialist/communist, and right-identifying respondents show mixed profiles. No political group exhibits either overwhelming rejection or endorsement of Russian measures (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025).

Overall, Albania's attitudes toward Russia are best described as diffuse, weakly polarised, and contingent, rather than hostile or aligned. This ambivalence is consistent with Albania's broader hybrid context, where geopolitical preferences are shaped less by identity or memory than by limited engagement, uneven information, and low expectations. Russia is neither embraced nor clearly rejected; it remains a secondary and weakly articulated reference point within a decisively EU-oriented strategic horizon.

China: Attitudes toward Chinese measures to assist Albania in addressing an economic crisis are best characterised as ambivalent and weakly polarised, with a slight tilt toward positive evaluations but without strong consolidation. At the aggregate level (N = 557), 53% of respondents evaluate Chinese measures as having a very good or good impact, while 29% describe them as bad or detrimental. A relatively large share (15%) report no impact, and 3% respond "don't know." This distribution suggests that China is neither perceived as a threat nor embraced as a strategic partner, but rather evaluated through a functional, technocratic lens. Territorial variation is present but limited. Respondents in Vlorë are somewhat more positive (59% very good/good) than those in Tirana (50%), while Tirana respondents show slightly higher shares of bad evaluations. This pattern mirrors earlier findings that local exposure and attribution may shape perceptions more than proximity to national power, but the differences remain moderate and do not indicate a deep centre–periphery cleavage. Gender differences are negligible, and age-based patterns show only mild differentiation. Younger respondents (18–29) are marginally more sceptical, with 29% rating Chinese measures as bad/detrimental, compared to 21% among those aged 30–49. The 60+ group displays the highest share of negative evaluations (33% bad/detrimental) alongside a relatively high "no impact" response (18%), suggesting distance rather than opposition. Overall, age does not structure a coherent pro- or anti-China alignment. Education introduces a clearer but still moderate gradient. Respondents with primary or no education are the most positive (56% very good/good), while those with secondary or higher education are more divided, with roughly equal shares of

positive and negative evaluations and a higher tendency to report no impact. This pattern indicates differences in framing and expectations rather than ideological positioning, reinforcing the interpretation of China as an economic rather than normative actor. Socio-economic indicators again require careful interpretation. Respondents who self-identify as poor show a balanced profile (56% positive; 29% negative), suggesting pragmatic openness under conditions of vulnerability rather than strong approval. Those in the below average and average categories closely mirror the national mean. Apparent positivity among well-off respondents and those reporting monthly incomes above €2000 should not be over-interpreted, as these categories are extremely small (N = 5 and N = 3, respectively) (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). The inflated percentages in these groups reflect small-sample volatility rather than substantive attitudinal patterns and should be treated as indicative at best.

Religion does not play a role in the Albanian's perception of China. Christian and Muslim respondents report nearly identical distributions of positive evaluations (very good or good: Christians 52%, Muslims 52%), as well as comparable levels of negative assessments (bad or detrimental: Christians 31%, Muslims 28%). Respondents identifying as no religion/atheist are slightly more polarized, combining relatively high positive assessments (61%) with elevated detrimental responses (15%), suggesting ambivalence rather than alignment. The other religion category reports uniformly positive views, but given the very small sample size (N = 3), this result carries no analytical weight and should not be over-interpreted (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). The near absence of religious structuring reflects China's position in Albania's geopolitical imaginary as a technocratic and economic actor, largely detached from cultural, historical, or civilizational narratives.

Political identification does not produce strong polarisation either. Liberal respondents are relatively cautious, combining moderate approval with a notable "no impact" share, while conservatives and moderates show higher good ratings but also non-trivial bad evaluations. Socialist/Communist respondents stand out mainly for their higher "no impact" responses (27%), reinforcing the impression that China is not a salient political reference point even among groups otherwise critical of Western models.

Taken together, China is primarily assessed as a potential economic actor, detached from questions of governance, democracy, or political identity. Positive evaluations reflect expectations of material benefit rather than trust or alignment, while negative assessments remain limited and fragmented. In this sense, China's role in

Albania is best understood as technocratic and conditional. It neither triggers strong resistance nor generates significant enthusiasm, and it lacks the symbolic weight to restructure broader geopolitical preferences. This ambivalence is consistent with Albania's hybrid context, where citizens remain open to selective external economic support while reserving normative expectations for Europe. China is thus present in the public imagination, but as a secondary and situational option, not as a competing model or strategic anchor.

Turkey: Perceptions of Turkish measures to assist Albania in addressing an economic crisis are more positive and less polarised than those associated with Russia or China. At the aggregate level (N = 557), 73% of respondents evaluate Turkish assistance as having a very good or good impact, while only 13% describe it as bad or detrimental. A further 12% report no impact, and don't know responses remain marginal (2%) (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). This distribution positions Turkey as the most favourably viewed non-EU external actor in the Albanian case, though not as a normative reference point comparable to the EU.

Territorial differences reinforce this pragmatic reading. Respondents in Vlorë are particularly positive, with 80% reporting very good or good impact, compared to 69% in Tirana. Tirana respondents also show higher shares of no impact responses (16% vs. 4% in Vlorë), suggesting greater distance or lower salience rather than opposition. As with China, local visibility and perceived relevance appear to shape evaluations more than institutional proximity. Gender differences are minimal, and age gradients are shallow. All age cohorts report strong majorities of positive evaluations, ranging from 70% among those aged 18–29 to 78% among those aged 30–49. Older respondents (60+) display slightly higher "no impact" responses (16%), but still evaluate Turkish assistance more favourably than negatively. Overall, Turkey does not function as a generationally divisive actor. Education introduces some differentiation but not polarization. Respondents with primary or no education are the most positive (83% very good/good), while those with higher education remain strongly favourable (73%), albeit with slightly higher no impact and detrimental responses. This suggests that Turkey's appeal cuts across educational strata and is not confined to lower-information environments. Socio-economic indicators again point toward pragmatic acceptance rather than ideological alignment. Respondents who self-identify as poor, below average, or average all report high levels of positive evaluation (between 69% and 75%) (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). Apparent anomalies among the well-off and above €2000

income categories—such as very high "very good" or "good" ratings—must be interpreted with caution due to extremely small sample sizes (N = 5 and N = 3, respectively).

Religious affiliation does not function as a polarising axis in perceptions of Turkish assistance, but it does introduce modest gradations of intensity. Muslim respondents—who constitute the largest religious group in the sample—are the most favourable, with 74% evaluating Turkish measures as having a very good or good impact, compared to 68% among Christian respondents. Negative evaluations remain low in both groups (Muslims 11%, Christians 18%), indicating that differences are more about degree of approval than about opposition. Respondents identifying as having no religion or being atheist also report broadly positive assessments (73% very good/good), closely mirroring the national average. The small category of respondents identifying with other religions reports uniformly positive evaluations, but this finding should be treated with strong caution given the extremely limited sample size (N = 3) (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). These responses are best interpreted as non-informative outliers rather than evidence of a substantive pattern. Analytically, the absence of sharp religious cleavage suggests that Turkey's favourable reception is not driven primarily by confessional or civilizational affinity, but by pragmatic considerations linked to trade, mobility, and everyday economic interaction. Religion appears to operate as a background resonance rather than a mobilising frame: it may slightly amplify positive perceptions among Muslim respondents, but it does not structure attitudes in an exclusionary or identity-based manner. This aligns with Albania's broader pattern of pragmatic secularism, where religious identity rarely translates into geopolitical alignment or policy preferences. In this sense, Turkey's position in Albania's geopolitical imaginary is best understood as functionally regional rather than culturally hegemonic—accepted across religious groups as a useful partner, without challenging the primacy of the EU as the normative reference point.

Political identification further confirms Turkey's low polarisation profile. Liberals, moderates, conservatives, social-democrats, and socialist/communist respondents all cluster around high levels of approval, typically between 70% and 76% very good/good. Even right-leaning respondents remain largely positive (72%), while negative evaluations remain consistently low across ideological categories (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). This distinguishes Turkey from both Russia—where evaluations are more fragmented—and China—where ambivalence dominates.

Taken together, the data suggest that Turkey occupies a stable, middle-tier position in Albania's geopolitical imaginary. It is neither a normative horizon like the EU nor a distant technocratic actor like China, and it does not evoke the geopolitical sensitivities associated with Russia. Instead, Turkey is perceived as a functional regional partner, valued for its economic ties, mobility opportunities, cultural familiarity, and visible engagement, but without strong expectations of political or institutional transformation. Importantly, Turkey's favourable evaluation does not translate into a competing governance model or alternative alignment. Rather, it reflects instrumental trust grounded in everyday interactions and perceived utility. In this sense, Turkey complements rather than challenges Albania's pro-EU orientation, occupying a pragmatic layer within a broader hierarchy of external actors.

In the context of hybridity, Turkey's role illustrates how citizens differentiate between normative anchors and problem-solving partners. High approval of Turkish assistance signals openness to practical cooperation, not a reordering of geopolitical priorities. Turkey is thus best understood as a supplementary actor within Albania's external landscape—trusted, familiar, and useful, but not transformative.

Top Three Vignette Measures to Address the Economic Crisis: Hierarchy, Pragmatism, and Multi-Alignment

The vignette data provide a clear window into how Albanians hierarchically rank external measures for addressing an economic crisis, revealing a structured pattern of multi-alignment rather than geopolitical ambivalence. Across the full sample, EU-anchored options dominate decisively, while non-EU alternatives occupy secondary, instrumental positions.

EU Centrality as the Normative and Strategic Anchor: EU-related measures overwhelmingly top respondents' preferences. Full EU membership (with Eurozone participation) is selected by 78% of respondents, followed by an EU economic support package (58%) and temporary extension of the Schengen agreement (31%). This hierarchy is remarkably stable across gender, age, education, and income groups, confirming the EU's role as both the normative horizon and the primary problem-solving reference point in moments of crisis. The strength of this orientation is especially pronounced among younger respondents (18–29), higher-educated groups, and urban residents in Tirana, where EU membership reaches 83–

86% (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). Importantly, however, EU options remain the top choices even among older cohorts and financially vulnerable respondents, indicating that pro-EU preferences are not confined to elite or cosmopolitan strata but are broadly diffused across Albanian society. At the same time, the prominence of economic and mobility-related EU measures (economic support, Schengen extension) suggests that EU legitimacy is not purely symbolic. Respondents link EU integration directly to material security, labor mobility, and crisis mitigation, reinforcing earlier findings that trust in the EU is performance-oriented rather than abstractly ideological.

Limited appeal of non-Western alternatives: Measures associated with Russia and China attract notably lower levels of support. Russian- linked options – such as BRICS membership (6%) or Russian support package (8%) – remain marginal, even during economic hardship. The only relatively higher Russian-related measure is subsidized petroleum energy (26%), which reflects pragmatic cost-of-living concerns rather than geopolitical alignment. Similarly, Chinese economic support packages (6%) and increased Chinese investmet (7%) are weakly supported. Even tariff-free exports to China (10%) fail to generate broad enthusiasm, indicating scepticism toward dependency-based economic models or concerns about long-term strategic costs.

Turkey-related measures occupy an intermediate position. Economic support from Turkey (17%) and revision of the Turkey-Albania Free Trade Agreement (15%) attrackt moderate support, especially in Vlora, among lower-educated groups, and respondents with weaker financial status. This suggests that Turkey is perceived less as a strategic alternative to the EU and more as a pragmatic, short-term economic partner, particularly in regions or groups experiencing higher vulnerability.

Socio-demographic differentiation: Support for EU-centered solutions is strongest among younger respondents, higher-educated groups and urban respondents in Tirana. Conversely, respondents with lower education, lower income, or poorer self-perceived financial status display slightly higher openness to Turkish or energy-based Russian measures, reflecting material vulnerability rather than ideological re-alignment.

Political identification does not produce polarization, Across liberal, moderate, social-democratic, and even right-leaning respondents, EU membership remains

the dominant preference, reinforcing the idea that economic crisis does not translate into geopolitical fragmentation.

Overall, the data point to a high level of vertical trust in European institutions as the primary guarantor of economic stability. Even under economic stress, Albanian citizens do not meaningfully shift toward alternative power centres. Instead, they articulate a hierarchical preference structure: EU integration first, selective bilateral pragmatism second, and non-Western alternatives last. This pattern suggests resilience rather than vulnerability to geopolitical hybridity. While citizens recognize immediate economic pressures, they continue to frame solutions within a European institutional horizon, confirming the EU's role as the central reference point for economic legitimacy and long-term security in Albania.

6. Zoom in representations and perceptions of the EU and democracy promotion assistance

The survey data indicate a mixed awareness environment regarding EU projects. Only 39% of respondents reported awareness of the EU4Justice project and just 12% recognized projects related to media freedom; a majority of citizens (56%) could not identify any such initiative. However, the pattern is socially and spatially differentiated. Awareness is much higher in Vlora (57%-Justice Reform; 17% - PRO-FREX) than in Tirana (29% and 9% respectively). Men report higher awareness than women and awareness rises with education and monthly income, peaking among respondents earning above 1400 Euro (76% aware of EU4Justice; 22% aware of PRO-FREX). The youngest (18-29) and the oldest (60+) cohorts are least aware. Those who self-perceive as "poor" are the least aware (only 20%).

At first glance, the figures might suggest weak outreach or limited resonance. However, when juxtaposed with interview and focus group material, they depict a more nuanced picture: a public that strongly perceives "Europe" as an anchor for democracy and the rule of law, but struggles to associate that normative horizon with concrete, recognizable projects unless those interventions are tangible, highly visible, and mediated through trusted local institutions.

This disjuncture between macro-recognition of the EU and micro-level awareness of EU-funded initiatives reflects a recurring theme in the qualitative material: Europeanisation is widely acknowledged as a framework of rules and standards, yet

its translation into daily institutional experience remains uneven and often obscured by domestic structures.

EU4Justice: Awareness of the Justice Reform project (39%) is higher than for media related assistance. This aligns with interview findings indicating that justice reform has institutional visibility (new councils, vetting process, formal restructuring), strong symbolic salience as a state-wide transformation and extensive reference in political discourse and EU reporting. However, qualitative testimonies reveal that citizens evaluate justice not primarily through institutional blueprints, but through rights in practice: speed of procedures, access to justice, clarity of decisions, and the execution of rulings. Interviews systematically emphasise that reform has produced hight compliance and institutional consolidation, yet remains characterised by capacity stress, backlog, slow procedures, understaffing following vetting, and partial digital integration. The paradox documented in interviews is that as institutions become stronger and more consequential, attempts to influence them intensify, sustaining public scepticism. Citizens therefore see success but do not necessarily feel it. The fact that awareness is highest among higher-income and higher-education groups reinforces this interpretation: those with greater legal literacy and better institutional navigations kills perceive eU4Justice more clearly than those most dependent on accessible, efficient justice service. In this light, the Vlora-Tirana contrast become revealing. Vlora respondents show much greater awareness of justice reform project. Tirana respondents – despite living closest to central government – express lower awareness, suggesting saturation of political discourse without corresponding transformation in lived experience.

PRO-FREX: Awareness of EU support to media freedom stands at just 12% overall – far below justice reform. However, the interviews demonstrate that low awareness does not equal to low relevance. This reflects the structural invisibility of regulatory, training, and capacity-building work, a media environment where outcomes are difficult to attribute and public scepticism toward the media sector itself. Across interviews and focus groups, there is a striking agreement that Albania's media system is aligned formally with European standards, but structurally constrained by ownership concentration, economic precarity, political influence, and implicit pressure mechanisms. Respondents describe a hybrid repression ecology: not overt censorship, but a layered system of economic sanctions, SLAPP lawsuits, smear campaigns, intimidation, and procedural obstacles producing pervasive self-censorship. The same structural problems persist and have deepened in more subtle forms. The core diagnosis is a tight symbiosis between media owners, political elites

and business interests, sometimes overlapping with organized crime. Media outlets function less as autonomous watchdogs and more as instruments in power struggles, PR platforms, or bargaining tools in rent-seeking games. In this environment, EU support is valued for supporting journalist safety protocols, backing anti-SLAPP discourse, strengthening the Audio-visual Media Authority (although credibility gaps persist) and supporting legal aid and civil society coalitions. However, it is seen as operating in deeply adversarial terrain. The fusion of ownership, politics and business translates into opaque editorial lines, instrumentalised coverage, and a market where "quality journalism" is structurally disadvantaged compared to sensationalist, partisan, or clientelist content. Citizens seem to internalise this indirectly. The low awareness figures coexist with high levels of concern about disinformation and low trust in media institutions. Awareness increases significantly among: higher education respondents (20%), higher income categories (1400 euro+) and politically engaged liberal respondents. In other words, groups more attuned to debates about journalism, freedom of speech, and democratic protections are more likely to recognize PRO-FREX related activity.

The combined survey, interview, and focus-groups evidence explains why Albanians strongly trust EU while often not recognising specific EU democracy-promotion projects. Citizens broadly credit the EU with normative authority, see it as the anchor of rules, modernisation and fairness, and want its support; however, much assistance is experienced as fragmented, time-bound and "projectized", producing trainings, strategies and frameworks rather than visible transforming everyday institutional performance. In a hybrid governance environment – marked by informal power, politicisation, media capture and uneven implementation – EU standards are respected but perceived as fragile, generating conditional trust: people support Europeanisation but doubt domestic translation. Justice reform support is symbolically powerful but judged through speed, accessibility and enforcement; media freedom support is valued normatively but largely invisible beyond institutional circles. Awareness rises where education, income and locality integration increase exposure and attribution. Overall, Albanians do not reject EU democracy support—they often struggle to see it. Trust strengthens where assistance is materially felt, locally embedded and impartially enforced; it weakens where reforms remain procedural, elite-circulated or absorbed into the country's hybrid governance order.

7. Conclusions

Albania today stands at the intersection of three mutually reinforcing dynamics: persistent trust asymmetries, a hybrid political economy that sustains partial Europeanisation without fully consolidating effectiveness, and a geopolitical environment in which the European Union remains the dominant normative anchor while other external actors are engaged pragmatically. Together, these forces shape how citizens interpret democratic performance, how elites and practitioners narrate "Europe," and how EU democracy-promotion assistance is translated—or fails to be translated—into everyday legitimacy. What emerges is not disengagement from Europe, but a deeply conditional relationship between standards, implementation, and trust.

Across surveys, vignettes, interviews and focus groups, trust does not appear as absent but as highly selective. Citizens rely intensely on family and close interpersonal networks, while trust beyond these circles thins out, and confidence clusters around a small number of insulated institutions and international organisations rather than the political system as a whole. This produces a political sociology in which dissatisfaction with routine governance rarely converts into collective mobilisation; instead, it tends to generate pragmatic workarounds—private ties, informal brokerage, and personalised channels—because these remain the most reliable ways of navigating institutions experienced as slow, uneven, or selectively applied. Democratic evaluation is therefore filtered through lived institutional encounters rather than through constitutional promises or reform narratives: people judge democracy not through abstract alignment with European standards, but through courts that deliver (or delay), police that protect (or do not), services that function (or fail), access to information that works (or is obstructed), and labour protections that are real (or aspirational).

Geopolitical rivalry enters precisely through these gaps between promise and experience. Attachment to the EU as the long-term political and civilisational horizon remains strong, yet attribution of concrete change to EU-supported interventions weakens when initiatives are not visible, locally embedded, or communicated through trusted intermediaries. This does not dislodge the EU's symbolic authority; instead, it produces a pragmatic calculus. The EU is imagined as the actor capable of guaranteeing rule-bound order and institutional stability over time, while other partners—Turkey, China, or others—are sometimes approached

for specific, bounded forms of material relief in the present. The critical issue for democracy promotion is therefore not preference competition in the abstract, but whether EU standards and assistance become legible to citizens as improvements in precisely those institutional interfaces where legitimacy is constructed.

Taken together, Albania's trajectory is best described as selective Europeanisation under conditions of conditional trust. Albanians invest normative confidence in European standards and reward visible, impartial enforcement where it exists, but they do not automatically generalise this confidence to the wider political system. EU democracy-promotion assistance is valued as a reputational and procedural anchor, capable of establishing professional routines, stronger safeguards, and "islands of integrity." Yet its credibility ultimately depends on whether these islands expand beyond formal architecture into everyday experience: faster and more predictable justice, safer and genuinely independent journalism, enforceable labour rights, transparent accountability, and services that demonstrate fairness without requiring personal connections. Where that translation fails, trust remains fragmented; Europe retains its symbolic place, but democracy promotion risks remaining technically impressive while socially thin.

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ABOUT RE-ENGAGE

Russia's war against Ukraine has radically altered European security. Confronted by the direst security crisis in decades, EU policymakers are forced to fundamentally rethink their security policies. Europe has demonstrated unexpected unity and resolve, adopting a series of sanctions against Russia, increasing national defence spending, but also by deciding on a historic revival of the EU enlargement process.

Still, there is an urgent need to make sure that this process contributes to democratic, well-functioning and stable neighbourhood states, capable of countering external threats, particularly those posed by hybrid warfare. A thorough investigation is required to determine how this can be achieved without compromising the EU's values and security in the current context.

RE-ENGAGE's overarching ambition is to assist the EU in refining its foreign policy toolbox, including its enlargement and neighbourhood policies. This will enhance the Union's geopolitical leverage and provide better tools for democracy promotion in its neighbourhood. To achieve this goal, RE-ENGAGE will conduct in-depth studies in six candidate countries – three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia) and three in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine).