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# BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

## Social Sciences in a Changing World; Building Equity. Empowering Children and Youth, and Advancing Human Development

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# Living with Lupus in Albania: A Psychosocial Perspective

**Aida Ndrea[1]**

**Asoc.Prof. Dr. Juliana Ajdini[2]**

[1]General Practitioner at Primary Health Care Center No. 6, Durrës; Resident in Rheumatology at University Hospital Center "Mother Teresa" (QSUT), Tirana

[2]Department of Social Work and Social Policy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana, Bulevardi Bajram Curri, Tirana, Albania

**Abstract**

Systemic lupus erythematosus is a chronic autoimmune disease with unpredictable symptoms that deeply impact the psychological and social lives of patients. In Albania, where public awareness and institutional support for chronic illness is limited, individuals living with lupus face additional challenges of stigma, social isolation, and lack of access to psychosocial care. This qualitative study aimed to explore the lived experiences of lupus patients, focusing on emotional wellbeing, social relationships, and interactions with the healthcare system. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 patients (13 women and 2 men, aged 22–58) and 4 professionals (2 rheumatologists and 2 social workers). Participants were recruited using snowball sampling. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: the invisibility of symptoms such as chronic fatigue; multidimensional stigma and disbelief; limited communication and support within the healthcare system; and patients' self-developed coping mechanisms, often relying on informal support networks. The study highlights the need for more integrated and

sensitive approaches to care that go beyond clinical treatment. Findings suggest that it is important that patients' voices are heard in health policy, and that healthcare and social professionals receive training that reflects an understanding of the psychosocial challenges of chronic illness. These results provide a foundation for developing inclusive support systems and community-based interventions tailored to the Albanian context.

**Keywords:** *Systemic lupus erythematosus, social exclusion, chronic illness, psychosocial wellbeing, healthcare access.*

## Introduction

Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) is a chronic autoimmune condition with a multifactorial and systemic nature. It is characterized by the production of autoantibodies that attack self-tissues, resulting in widespread inflammation and damage to all organs such as the skin, joints, kidneys and the central nervous system. SLE predominantly affects women of reproductive age, creating not only medical but also psychosocial vulnerabilities. Although advances in diagnosis and treatment have improved survival rates, the lived reality of patients remains shaped by enduring emotional, social and structural challenges that extend beyond the clinical domain.

International research increasingly acknowledges that the impact of SLE is multidimensional. Beyond its physical manifestations, the disease profoundly affects the psychological well-being, identity and social relationships of patients (Jolly et al., 2019; Gallop et al., 2020). Living with lupus often involves uncertainty, loss of control, and fear of flare-ups, which can contribute to anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal. The invisibility of many symptoms—such as fatigue, widespread pain, or cognitive fog—intensifies experiences of stigma and misunderstanding.

Patients often report that their suffering is questioned or minimized by family members, employers, and health care providers, reinforcing a sense of isolation. These dynamics align with broader theoretical frameworks of chronic illness biography (Bury, 1982) and stigma (Goffman, 1963), which emphasize the social negotiation of illness identity and the moral dimensions of visibility and legitimacy in chronic illness.

Despite increasing global awareness, the psychosocial aspects of SLE remain underexplored in low- and middle-income countries. In Albania, awareness of lupus as a condition requiring psychosocial support is minimal. The healthcare system continues to face structural barriers, including a lack of national epidemiological data, limited interdisciplinary coordination, and few psychological or social services within rheumatology care. Patient narratives rarely inform public health discourse, and institutional mechanisms for patient participation in care design or policy-making are still in their infancy. This context amplifies the psychosocial burden of the disease, particularly for women who face the intersecting challenges of gender expectations, economic constraints, and inadequate institutional response. Addressing lupus solely through a biomedical perspective overlooks how patients construct meaning, cope with uncertainty, and maintain dignity in the face of chronicity. Therefore, a psychosocial approach is essential to capture the lived experience of the disease as a medical and social phenomenon. By exploring how individuals experience and manage lupus in Albania, this study aims to illuminate the interplay between personal resilience, social context, and systemic constraints.

The aim of this study is to examine the psychosocial experiences of individuals living with systemic lupus erythematosus in Albania.

Specifically, it investigates their emotional and social challenges, their interactions with the healthcare system, and the perspectives of professionals involved in their care. Through a qualitative and phenomenological perspective, the study aspires to contribute to a more holistic and context-sensitive understanding of chronic illness - an understanding that informs future policies, training curricula, and integrated psychosocial interventions tailored to the Albanian context.

## Materials and Methods

### Study Design and Theoretical Orientation

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design with a phenomenological orientation to investigate the lived psychosocial experiences of individuals diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) in Albania. The phenomenological approach was selected to capture how individuals make sense of illness, interpret bodily and emotional changes, and reconstruct identity amid chronic uncertainty. The research design was informed by the theoretical frameworks of stigma (Goffman, 1963) and coping with chronic illness (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), providing conceptual grounding for both the data collection and analysis.

### Context and Setting

The study was conducted in Albania, a lower-middle-income country where chronic illness care remains largely biomedical and underdeveloped in psychosocial dimensions. Data collection took place in four cities—Tirana, Durrës, Elbasan, and Shkodër—chosen to reflect variations in access to healthcare, social services, and cultural attitudes toward illness between urban and semi-urban environments.

### Participants and Sampling

A total of 19 participants were included: 15 patients with a confirmed diagnosis of SLE (13 women and 2 men, aged 22–58 years) and 4 professionals (2 rheumatologists and 2 social workers involved in chronic illness care).

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, initiated by a patient previously known to the researcher in a professional context. This method was appropriate given the absence of a national SLE registry and limited patient advocacy structures in Albania, which made probabilistic sampling infeasible. To reduce the risk of homogeneity, recruitment followed the principle of maximum variation, seeking diversity in gender, age, illness duration, socioeconomic background, and geographic location. Professionals were recruited through purposive sampling, primarily via referrals from patients and contacts within the Rheumatology Department of the University Hospital Center "Mother Teresa." Their inclusion enabled triangulation of perspectives and deeper insight into institutional and systemic responses to SLE.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

**Inclusion criteria for patients:** adults aged 18 years or older, confirmed SLE diagnosis, ability to provide informed consent, and willingness to share personal experiences.

**Exclusion criteria:** acute health deterioration preventing participation or communication limitations without support.

**Inclusion criteria for professionals:** at least one year of clinical or psychosocial experience working with SLE patients.

**Recruitment and Data Saturation**

Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved—defined as the point where three consecutive interviews produced no new codes or

subthemes across major participant groups (patients/professionals; female/male). Saturation was reached after 19 interviews. The underrepresentation of male and rural participants is acknowledged as a study limitation and addressed in the discussion section.

**Data Collection**

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to explore how people living with lupus experience and interpret their condition. The interviews focused on core psychosocial dimensions, including symptom invisibility, stigma, emotional well-being, coping strategies, and relationships with healthcare and social systems. The interview guide was informed by international literature and refined after a pilot interview to ensure clarity, cultural sensitivity, and emotional safety. Each conversation began with broad prompts such as *"Can you tell me about your experience of living with lupus?"* and gradually moved toward more specific topics, including daily challenges, social connections, and sources of support.

This flexible structure allowed participants to lead the discussion toward aspects most meaningful to them, while ensuring that the main research themes were consistently explored. Interviews with patients lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, and those with professionals between 30 and 60 minutes. Sessions were conducted face-to-face or online, depending on participants' comfort and access. Of the nineteen interviews, seven took place online, mainly to accommodate participants who lived outside major cities or faced health-related mobility challenges. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were used to capture contextual and emotional observations. When participants

used regional dialects, transcripts were lightly standardized for clarity while preserving their original tone and meaning.

**Ethical Considerations**

The study adhered to the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and general standards for qualitative research involving human participants. All participants received clear and detailed information about the purpose of the study, procedures, confidentiality protections, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Before participation, each individual provided written informed consent, confirming their voluntary agreement to participate in the study. Participants were also informed that they could refuse to answer any question that caused discomfort. All data were treated confidentially. Identifying information was removed during transcription, and pseudonyms were used in all notes and reports. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on password-protected devices, accessible only to the research team. Although the study did not undergo formal institutional ethics review, it complied with international ethical norms and local professional standards for research involving human subjects. Every effort was made to ensure respect, dignity, and psychological safety throughout the research process.

**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), combining inductive and deductive coding at a semantic level, with openness to latent, experience-based meanings.

The analytical steps included:

1. Familiarization**:** repeated reading of transcripts and field notes.

2. Initial coding: line-by-line coding by two independent analysts to establish a shared codebook.
3. Theme development: clustering of codes into subthemes and themes through iterative team discussions.
4. Review and refinement: evaluating coherence and distinction among themes.
5. Definition and naming: articulating clear analytic definitions and inclusion criteria for each theme.
6. Interpretation and reporting: selecting illustrative quotations and integrating them with theoretical concepts and contextual insights.

An audit trail documented all analytical decisions, ensuring transparency and rigor. Analyst triangulation and source triangulation (patients and professionals) reinforced the credibility of interpretations. Comparative matrices (e.g., gender × urban/rural, illness duration) were used to identify divergent or minority perspectives. Data management and coding were supported by NVivo qualitative software.

**Rigor and Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through multiple strategies designed to enhance transparency and analytical depth. Trustworthiness was strengthened through double coding of a subset of transcripts, regular peer discussion sessions, and triangulation between patient and professional perspectives. These steps helped confirm that the themes identified reflected the actual experiences of participants and not the assumptions of the researchers.

Trustworthiness was supported by systematic documentation of each stage of data collection and analysis. An audit trail was maintained to record

coding decisions, analytical reflections, and revisions, allowing the process to be both transparent and traceable.

Transferability was achieved through rich and contextualized descriptions of participants' backgrounds, social settings, and healthcare settings. This detailed portrayal enables readers to judge the applicability of the findings to other contexts with similar sociocultural or systemic characteristics.

Finally, confirmability was ensured through the maintenance of reflective memoranda and open discussions within the research team, helping to minimize bias and preserve the authenticity of participants' voices. Together, these measures reinforce the integrity of the study and its contribution to a more person-centered understanding of living with lupus in Albania.

**Limitations**

The snowball sampling method may have introduced sample homogeneity and limited representation of male and rural participants. The exclusion of policymakers, family members, and insurers constrained systemic depth. These limitations are acknowledged and provide directions for future research and policy development.

**Results**

Thematic analysis of the interviews with 15 patients and 4 healthcare and social care professionals revealed four core themes that reflect the complex psychosocial impact of systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) in the Albanian context: (1) the ambiguity of the illness and the burden of invisible fatigue; (2) social isolation and layered stigma; (3) strained relationships with the healthcare system; and (4) internal coping mechanisms and the role of informal support. These themes reflect the

ways in which biological uncertainty, social misunderstanding, and institutional gaps intersect to shape the lived experience of SLE.

### *1. The ambiguity of illness and the burden of invisible fatigue*

Almost all patients described a long, uncertain journey to diagnosis, marked by repeated medical visits, inconclusive results, and conflicting opinions. The sense of not being believed or understood was a recurring experience. Several participants recounted years of searching for explanations for symptoms that were often minimized or attributed to stress.

*"No one can see how tired I am. I look fine from the outside, but my body is fighting a war every single day."* (Patient, 34 years old)

Fatigue emerged as one of the most pervasive and misunderstood symptoms — not merely physical tiredness, but an existential depletion affecting one's identity, social presence, and emotional balance. Patients described feeling trapped in an invisible body, simultaneously functional and unwell. Because others rarely recognized the legitimacy of this fatigue, participants often internalized guilt for not meeting social or professional expectations.

The invisibility of suffering generated tension between outward appearance and internal reality, gradually eroding self-confidence. This theme underscores how ambiguous symptomatology contributes to social disbelief and to what participants called *"a constant need to justify my illness."* Professionals acknowledged this challenge, noting that the lack of objective indicators of fatigue complicates both diagnosis and empathy within the healthcare system.

### *2. Social isolation and layered stigma*

Participants described living with SLE as an experience of progressive social withdrawal**.** Fear of being misunderstood, judged, or pitied led many to distance themselves from friends, colleagues, and even extended family. The invisible nature of the illness fostered a painful contradiction: while patients longed for recognition, they also avoided disclosure to protect themselves from stigma.

*"Even at home, they tell me, 'Don't exaggerate.' That's the worst part—when no one believes you."* (Patient, 41 years old)

The stigma associated with SLE emerged in two primary forms. On the one hand, many patients struggled with the perception that their condition was not "real" due to the absence of visible symptoms. On the other hand, when visible symptoms did occur—such as facial rashes or hair loss—patients described feelings of shame and insecurity regarding their appearance. In more traditional or rural communities, some patients even encountered moral judgments about their illness, with implications that it was a sign of weakness or divine punishment.

This double burden—of being invisible yet also exposed—amplified patients' emotional distress and discouraged open communication about their condition. Several participants said they avoided talking about lupus altogether, even with close relatives, to protect themselves from skepticism or pity.

Several women described feeling doubly stigmatized—first as individuals with a chronic, unpredictable illness, and second as women in a cultural context where physical endurance and caregiving roles are highly valued. Concerns about fertility, motherhood, and body image added layers of vulnerability, often reinforced by silence and lack of public awareness.

Professionals confirmed that stigma remains largely unaddressed within institutional settings. They noted that SLE is frequently perceived as a "rare and dramatic disease," which fuels stereotypes and discourages open discussion. The social isolation that results is not only emotional but also structural, shaped by the absence of peer networks or advocacy groups that could provide validation and solidarity.

### *3. Strained relationships with the healthcare system*

Many patients expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of communication and support received from healthcare providers. While most acknowledged the clinical competence of physicians, they felt the psychosocial aspects of their illness were often dismissed or neglected.

*"The doctor told me, 'You'll live with this for the rest of your life.' But no one explained how. What am I supposed to do? Where do I go?"* (Patient, 28 years old)

Once diagnosed, participants reported limited continuity of care and short consultations focused mainly on medication, with little attention to emotional or psychosocial aspects. Some expressed gratitude toward individual physicians who showed empathy, but these experiences were exceptions rather than the norm.

Interviews with professionals confirmed that healthcare providers themselves often feel ill-equipped to address the emotional and social dimensions of chronic illness. One social worker in a regional hospital commented:

*"We don't have specific protocols for lupus patients, especially when it comes to emotional support. The focus is purely medical—nothing beyond that."* (Social worker)

Healthcare professionals recognized these systemic constraints. They emphasized heavy caseloads, lack of psychosocial support structures, and insufficient training on chronic illness communication. As one rheumatologist noted, “We treat the body, but there is little time or space to treat the person.”

The result is a relationship characterized by mutual frustration — patients feeling unheard and professionals feeling powerless within an under-resourced system. This theme highlights the urgent need for integrated care models that acknowledge the interplay between physical symptoms and psychosocial well-being.

### *4. Coping mechanisms and the role of informal support*

Despite these challenges, many participants demonstrated remarkable resilience. Over time, several had developed personal coping strategies that helped them manage the uncertainty and emotional toll of their illness. These included engaging in spiritual or creative activities, reframing their expectations of themselves, and becoming peer supporters for other patients.

*“At first, I was alone. Now I help other women who’ve just been diagnosed. It’s a kind of healing for me too.”* (Patient, 36 years old)

Informal support networks—particularly from spouses, siblings, or close friends—emerged as critical sources of emotional stability. However, participants emphasized that this support was often inconsistent and not a substitute for structured care. Most had never had access to a support group, psychological counseling, or a care coordinator. The absence of organized peer networks in Albania left patients with little opportunity to connect with others who shared their experiences or to receive validation outside of clinical settings.

The accounts also suggested a gendered dimension to coping. Women, who made up the vast majority of the sample, were often expected to maintain caregiving and household roles despite their illness. Several described internal conflicts between social expectations and their physical limitations, reinforcing feelings of failure or inadequacy.

**Summary of Psychosocial Themes**

Participants' narratives revealed a clear psychosocial trajectory, moving from emotional shock and uncertainty to gradual adaptation and resilience. The first phase was dominated by fear, anxiety, and a pervasive sense of uncertainty. Many participants spoke of the unpredictability of their symptoms and the anxiety of "*not knowing what tomorrow will bring.*" This emotional burden was closely linked to the uncertain and fluctuating nature of lupus, which made it difficult for patients to plan their daily lives or imagine a stable future. As their illness became more visible—or paradoxically, remained invisible—participants encountered social stigma and misunderstanding. They often described experiences of judgment or distrust from others, especially when their symptoms were not outwardly visible. Statements such as *"People think I'm faking it because I don't look sick"* reflected the profound emotional impact of social ignorance. This social dimension of suffering often led to withdrawal, loneliness, and a sense of alienation from peers and even close family members.

At the structural level, participants highlighted institutional challenges and systemic gaps that exacerbated their distress. Encounters with healthcare professionals were often brief and focused solely on physical symptoms. Emotional needs remained unacknowledged, as described by one participant who said: "*Doctors only focus on the physical part; no one asks how I feel emotionally.*" The lack of coordinated psychosocial services left

patients to cope with their illness largely on their own, deepening feelings of abandonment and invisibility.

Despite these difficulties, the narratives also conveyed remarkable strength and resilience. Many participants described developing coping strategies based on mindfulness, acceptance, and emotional regulation. Over time, they learned to "listen to their bodies," set boundaries, and redefine what wellness means in their daily lives. One participant summed up this transformation by saying, "*I learned to listen to my body and protect my peace*." Taken together, these themes illustrate a non-linear psychosocial journey—one marked by uncertainty, misunderstanding, and institutional neglect, but also by resistance, self-discovery, and the search for meaning.

**Discussion**

This study explored the lived psychosocial experiences of individuals diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) in Albania—a setting where chronic and invisible illnesses often remain marginal in both public discourse and institutional response. The findings reveal a multidimensional burden that extends beyond medical symptoms, encompassing emotional distress, social exclusion, fragile relationships with healthcare, and the vital yet fragile role of informal coping networks. These results resonate with existing literature emphasizing how chronic illness intersects with identity, culture, and social structures (Stoll et al., 2022; Tsokos, 2011), while also highlighting distinct contextual features of the Albanian setting.

**Invisible Fatigue and the Weight of Uncertainty**

The experience of fatigue and bodily ambiguity was central in participants' narratives. Fatigue was not merely described as a physical state but as an *existential exhaustion*—a disruption of everyday life, identity, and sense

of control. This echoes international findings that define fatigue in SLE as a "hidden disability" (Jolly et al., 2019), often dismissed or misunderstood due to the absence of visible markers. In Albania, the invisibility of the illness appears to deepen this emotional burden. Participants' reflections suggest that cultural expectations of strength and endurance, particularly for women, amplify feelings of guilt and inadequacy when illness limits productivity or caregiving roles. The uncertainty surrounding disease progression creates a constant negotiation between hope and fear—what participants often described as *"living in between good and bad days."* This theme underscores that invisibility is not only medical but also social and moral**:** when illness is unseen, suffering risks being invalidated.

**Social Isolation and Layered Stigma**

The findings demonstrate that living with SLE in Albania entails profound social vulnerability**.** Participants often experienced disbelief and judgment, even from close family members, leading to silence, withdrawal, or self-censorship. This reflects the "double stigma" described in chronic illness literature—where individuals oscillate between invisibility (when symptoms are hidden) and exposure (when visible signs appear) (Charmaz, 1991). In a context where health is largely understood through visible indicators, patients with lupus must constantly justify their condition. The cultural invisibility of chronic illness in Albania compounds this problem: public awareness is low, patient organizations are absent, and discussions about mental and emotional well-being are still stigmatized. The study thus reveals not only interpersonal stigma but also structural stigma, rooted in social attitudes and institutional neglect. Such dynamics reinforce the need for community-level education and advocacy**,** to foster empathy and understanding toward people living with chronic and invisible conditions.

**Strained Relationships with the Healthcare System**

Participants' accounts reflected a healthcare experience marked by fragmentation, limited communication, and emotional distance. Many described feeling reduced to their biological symptoms, while their emotional suffering remained unacknowledged. This mirrors structural constraints in Albania's health system—high workloads, time pressures, and limited interdisciplinary collaboration—where the psychosocial dimension of care is still not institutionalized. Professionals themselves recognized these limitations, noting that *"we treat the disease, not the person."* This dual frustration—patients feeling unheard and clinicians feeling under-resourced—illustrates a systemic gap between biomedical treatment and psychosocial care. Integrating psychosocial support as a standard element of chronic illness management would not only improve patient well-being but also enhance professionals' capacity to deliver compassionate, person-centered care. Such integration aligns with global models advocating for holistic management of autoimmune diseases (Barlow et al., 2002).

**Coping, Resilience, and Informal Support**

Despite systemic and social barriers, participants demonstrated remarkable emotional resilience. Coping strategies varied from acceptance and spiritual faith to reprioritizing daily activities and developing self-awareness. Over time, many participants described learning to "live with lupus rather than fight it," transforming their relationship with the illness from resistance to coexistence. Informal support networks—particularly family members and online communities—played a protective psychological role. They provided empathy and validation in the absence of structured services. However, reliance on such informal coping also

exposes the fragility of social safety nets, emphasizing the need for institutionalized psychosocial resources such as counseling, peer groups, and patient education programs. This theme illustrates that resilience in chronic illness is not purely individual—it is socially constructed, emerging through relationships, cultural meaning, and access to supportive environments.

**Implications and Reflections**

Taken together, these findings highlight an urgent need to move toward a psychosocially informed, person-centered model of care for lupus and other chronic illnesses in Albania. The current system, rooted predominantly in biomedical logic, overlooks the lived realities of patients and risks perpetuating their marginalization.

Two areas of action emerge clearly:

1. Public awareness and education to challenge stigma and misinformation surrounding invisible illness.
2. Professional training to strengthen healthcare providers' psychosocial competencies and communication with chronic illness patients.

Equally important, this study demonstrates the value of narrative inquiry as a method for illuminating the human dimensions of health. Listening to patients' stories enables researchers, clinicians, and policymakers to see beyond diagnostic categories and recognize the moral and emotional labor involved in living with chronic disease. Future research should expand this work by including family members, policymakers, and advocacy actors, to build a more comprehensive understanding of the social ecology of chronic illness in Albania. In doing so, future initiatives can contribute to creating

systems of care that not only treat disease but also restore dignity, belonging, and voice to those who live with it.

**Conclusion**

This study provides a deeper and more human understanding of the psychosocial realities of living with systemic lupus erythematosus in Albania. The narratives of participants reveal how the illness extends far beyond physical symptoms, shaping identity, relationships, and social belonging. Living with lupus was experienced not only as a struggle with pain and fatigue, but also as a constant effort to be understood and believed in a society where invisible suffering often goes unrecognized. These experiences are profoundly intertwined with cultural expectations, gender norms, and systemic gaps in care. The findings highlight that the emotional and relational dimensions of illness cannot be separated from their social context. Yet amid uncertainty and misunderstanding, participants showed remarkable resilience, creativity, and solidarity—building informal networks of care and meaning where formal structures were absent.

The study calls for a paradigm shift toward integrated, person-centered approaches in both healthcare and social services. Psychosocial support, interdisciplinary collaboration, and continuity of care should be viewed as essential components of treatment, not as optional add-ons. Training for medical and social professionals must explicitly address communication, empathy, and the psychological impact of chronic illness. Moreover, policies should be developed with patients, ensuring that their voices shape the systems intended to serve them. Ultimately, people living with lupus need more than medical management—they need recognition, dignity, and connection. Their experiences remind us that healing is not only biological, but also emotional and social. Listening to their stories is the first step

toward a more compassionate and equitable system of care—one that treats the person, not just the disease.

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# Psychotherapeutic Intervention and Its Impact on Quality of Life Among Women Diagnosed with Breast Cancer in Albania: A Clinical and Psychosocial Case Analysis

***Alketa Çoku*** *PhD Candidate*

*alketa.coku@umed.edu.al*

Mother Teresa University Hospital Center,

Psychologist at Oncology Service, Tirana, Albania

***Prof. Asoc. Artemisi Shehu***,

*artemisi.shehu@unitir.edu.al*

*Orcid No: 0009-0006-1816-3889*

University of Tirana Faculty of Social Sciences

Department of Education and Psychology

**Abstract**

Breast cancer poses profound psychological challenges that severely impair patients' quality of life (QoL). This study examines the impact of long-term psychotherapeutic intervention on the QoL of a woman diagnosed with breast cancer in Albania. Utilizing a qualitative, intrinsic single-case clinical study design grounded in a psychodynamic framework, the paper explores the subjective experience of illness, coping mechanisms, and identity reconstruction. The clinical component focuses on "Era," a 31-year-old female patient who presented with severe anxiety following a unilateral mastectomy. She engaged in weekly psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy sessions over a two-year period, covering various treatment phases including chemotherapy and

remission. Data were gathered through clinical interviews, continuous psychological observations, and longitudinal clinical notes. The findings demonstrate substantial functional and psychological improvements, including reduced distress, enhanced autonomy, and the successful resumption of professional activities. Ultimately, this case underscores the crucial efficacy of sustained psychodynamic psychotherapy in facilitating emotional processing and enhancing long-term psychosocial well-being, highlighting the need to integrate psycho-oncology into multidisciplinary cancer care.

**Keywords:** *Breast Cancer; Psychotherapy; Quality of Life; Psychosocial Support; Women's Health; Albania*

## Introduction

The epidemiological profile of breast cancer in Albania is highly comparable to global averages. Breast cancer accounts for more than 11% of all newly diagnosed cancer cases annually, and it is estimated that approximately one-fourth of all Albanian women living with a malignant neoplasm have breast cancer. Alongside lung cancer, it represents the most frequent cancer in the general population and carries the highest proportional risk nationwide. In 2023, 744 women were diagnosed with breast cancer across the country, translating to an incidence rate of 61.4 per 100,000 women. During the same year, 15 cases were also diagnosed in men. Until new retrospective projections based on the 2022 Census are calculated, analyzing precise incidence trends over time remains

challenging; however, the absolute number of cases diagnosed in 2023 was significantly higher than that reported in 2022 (a 4.8% increase). This shift might partially reflect a delayed compensation for lower diagnostic numbers during the 2020 pandemic.

A gradual increase in diagnosed breast cancer cases has been observed since 2015 (representing approximately a 14% increase by 2023), a trend that is expected to continue. Age-standardized incidence analysis—standardized using the World Health Organization (WHO) standard population 2000–2025—indicates that the incidence has remained generally stable over the years when eliminating the effect of an aging population. Currently, it is estimated that around 5,000 women are living with this disease in Albania.

Cancer represents not merely a biological condition but a complex biopsychosocial crisis that destabilizes an individual's identity, body image, relationships, and existential meaning. Upon receiving a malignant diagnosis, patients confront a profound fear of death, acute uncertainty, loss of autonomy, and disruptions to familial and social roles. From a psychological perspective, a cancer diagnosis acts as a potent stressor that can traumatically reactivate shock, denial, intense anxiety, and depressive symptoms across different stages of the illness trajectory. Because a significant minority of cancer patients experience substantial psychosocial challenges and report unmet informational and care needs, integrating structured psychological support into oncology services is imperative.

Psychological support assists patients in making adaptive decisions regarding screening and treatment, managing treatment-related side effects, improving health-related behaviors (such as diet and exercise), and enhancing overall psychosocial well-being. Most psychological

interventions aim to improve patient outcomes by modifying maladaptive risk factors. Patients can be motivated to reframe stressful situations, shifting their focus away from ruminating on negative aspects toward elements of life that remain positive and functional. Instead of focusing on the uncontrollable dimensions of the illness (such as prognosis and disease course), patients are encouraged to identify controllable factors (such as lifestyle adjustments and symptom management) and redirect attention toward family or vocational domains.

Evidence indicates that both individual and group psychosocial interventions effectively enhance patient well-being. While many existing interventions rely on psychoeducation and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) to target current maladaptive thoughts and behaviors, such approaches are primarily suited for mild-to-moderate distress. Conversely, specialized psychotherapy or psychiatric guidance is more appropriate for patients exhibiting severe, complex, or deeply rooted psychological difficulties. In these complex cases, cancer-related distress often interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities, such as traumatic life events, personality traits, or a history of clinical depression (Faller et al., 2013). This paper presents a clinical case followed at the oncology service, demonstrating how oncological pathology intertwines with a patient's personal history, subjective emotional experiences, and broader social situation.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research methodology utilizing an intrinsic clinical case study design. The case study approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth, nuanced exploration of the psychological experiences, emotional processes, and psychosocial adaptation of an individual diagnosed with breast cancer within her real-life context. Case studies are particularly valuable in psycho-oncology, where the complex interactions between medical, psychological, relational, and social factors cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone. The study aimed to examine the contribution of long-term psychotherapeutic intervention to psychological adjustment and quality of life in a young woman diagnosed with breast cancer. Through detailed clinical observation and longitudinal follow-up, the study sought to understand how psychotherapy facilitates emotional processing, identity reconstruction, coping, and psychosocial functioning during and after cancer treatment.

**Methodological Approach**

A qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive methodology was adopted. The research was grounded in a psychodynamic and psychoanalytic theoretical framework, focusing specifically on the subjective meaning of illness, emotional adaptation, defense mechanisms, identity transformations, and interpersonal functioning. The study followed a longitudinal single-case design, enabling the observation of psychological changes over time and the evaluation of therapeutic processes throughout different stages of the disease trajectory, including diagnosis, chemotherapy, surgery, recovery, and remission.

**Participant and Clinical Context**

The participant was a 31-year-old woman, referred to under the pseudonym "Era" to preserve strict confidentiality. She was diagnosed with breast cancer and referred for psychological support by her oncologist following the emergence of severe anxiety symptoms associated with the diagnosis and treatment process. At the time of referral, the patient was undergoing medical assessment and preparation for oncological treatment. The diagnosis represented a significant psychological stressor, affecting multiple domains of functioning, including emotional well-being, body image, maternal identity, interpersonal relationships, and future plans.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Data were gathered longitudinally through multiple qualitative sources over the two-year intervention period, including:

- In-depth clinical interviews conducted throughout the therapeutic process;
- Continuous psychological observations during psychotherapy sessions;
- Narrative accounts provided by the patient regarding her subjective emotional experiences;
- Documentation of therapeutic progress across different phases of oncological treatment;
- Detailed clinical notes recorded after each session.

This longitudinal approach provided rich, contextual material concerning emotional reactions, defense mechanisms, coping dynamics, and subjective changes in quality of life over time.

**Psychotherapeutic Intervention**

The intervention consisted of individual psychodynamic psychotherapy informed by psychoanalytic principles and elements of Psychoanalytic Crisis Intervention. This approach was selected due to the complexity of the patient's psychological presentation and the profound existential

challenges associated with confronting a life-threatening illness at a young age. Psychotherapy was conducted weekly, with sessions lasting approximately 50 minutes. Treatment extended over a two-year period, accompanying the patient through neoadjuvant chemotherapy, a unilateral mastectomy, post-surgical recovery, and remission. A flexible therapeutic framework was maintained to accommodate the patient's changing medical condition, incorporating face-to-face consultations, bedside sessions during hospitalization, and online psychotherapy during periods of severe medical vulnerability.

The explicit therapeutic goals included:

- Containment and regulation of acute anxiety and emotional distress;
- Facilitation of emotional expression and processing of cancer-related fears;
- Exploration of changes in body image, femininity, and maternal identity;
- Support during adjustment to illness and treatment-related bodily losses;
- Strengthening adaptive coping mechanisms and psychological resilience;
- Promotion of identity reconstruction and psychosocial reintegration.

**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis combined with psychodynamic clinical analysis. Particular attention was given to recurring emotional themes, shifts in defense mechanisms, identity transformations, interpersonal dynamics, and clinical indicators of psychosocial adjustment. Changes in quality of life were evaluated qualitatively through observed improvements in emotional functioning, social participation, occupational engagement, relational stability, autonomy, and the patient's subjective sense of well-being.

**Ethical Considerations**

The study adhered strictly to the ethical principles governing psychological practice and clinical research. Written informed consent was obtained from the participant for the use of anonymized clinical data for scientific and educational purposes. All identifiable personal details were removed or significantly altered to protect confidentiality. The patient's participation was entirely voluntary, and the therapeutic process remained strictly independent from the research objectives, ensuring that clinical care took absolute priority at all times.

**Clinical Case Presentation and Therapeutic Process**

Era, a 31-year-old woman diagnosed with breast cancer, was referred for psychological support by her oncologist due to severe anxiety symptoms following her diagnosis. Given the profound biopsychosocial impact of a life-threatening illness at a young age, a psychodynamic psychotherapeutic approach informed by principles of Psychoanalytic Crisis Intervention was implemented. The intervention aimed not only to alleviate symptoms but also to provide a secure therapeutic environment in which the patient could process the emotional consequences of her illness, including fears related to mortality, bodily changes, maternal identity, and future uncertainty.

Psychotherapy began following diagnostic staging and was conducted through weekly 50-minute sessions. The intervention extended over a two-year period, encompassing all major phases of the patient's oncological treatment: neoadjuvant chemotherapy, unilateral mastectomy, post-surgical recovery, and remission. A flexible therapeutic framework was maintained to accommodate changing medical needs, with sessions conducted in person, at the hospital bedside during treatment, or online when physical health limitations required remote support.

During the initial phase of treatment, therapy focused primarily on emotional containment and psychological stabilization. The patient presented with intense anxiety, fears of death, profound concerns regarding separation from her young child, and overwhelming uncertainty. The therapeutic relationship provided a safe space for the expression of distress, allowing the patient to verbalize emotions that were often difficult to share with family members or healthcare professionals. Rather than emphasizing symptom reduction alone, the intervention prioritized empathic listening, emotional validation, and the gradual processing of the existential crisis triggered by the diagnosis.

As chemotherapy progressed, the patient experienced complete alopecia, severe fatigue, and significant changes in body image. Therapeutic work shifted toward exploring the psychological meaning of these changes and their impact on self-esteem, femininity, and maternal identity. Sessions facilitated the expression of grief associated with physical loss and helped the patient differentiate her personal value from her physical appearance or professional role. Particular attention was devoted to addressing feelings of vulnerability, shame, and perceived inadequacy that emerged during treatment.

The post-surgical phase introduced additional psychological challenges related to her mastectomy and the experience of bodily loss. Through psychodynamic exploration, therapy supported the patient in processing the emotional impact of surgery and integrating these changes into a revised self-concept. Discussions focused on themes of identity, motherhood, femininity, and interpersonal relationships. Over time, the patient demonstrated an increasing capacity to acknowledge and tolerate

difficult emotions without becoming overwhelmed by anxiety or emotional withdrawal.

Throughout the therapeutic process, the patient initially relied heavily on defense mechanisms such as emotional detachment and intellectualization. Within a psychodynamic framework, these responses were understood as adaptive attempts to manage overwhelming emotional distress. Rather than confronting these defenses prematurely, therapy allowed them to gradually soften as psychological safety increased. This process facilitated a transition from emotional avoidance toward active mourning, acceptance, and emotional integration.

A significant turning point in treatment emerged through the rediscovery of the patient's longstanding interest in dressmaking and tailoring. Engagement in creative work became an important source of meaning, competence, and personal agency. Beyond its practical value, this activity functioned as a symbolic process through which the patient reconstructed a sense of control and continuity at a time when cancer had disrupted many aspects of her life. Gradually, dressmaking evolved from a personal interest into a professional aspiration, contributing substantially to her psychological recovery.

During the second year of therapy, the focus shifted toward adjustment to remission and the persistent fear of cancer recurrence. Although medical treatment had ended successfully, the patient continued to experience anxiety regarding her future health and the possibility of relapse. Therapeutic work addressed these concerns while supporting the development of more adaptive coping strategies and greater psychological resilience. The patient was encouraged to integrate the cancer experience

into her broader life narrative rather than defining herself exclusively through illness.

The outcomes of the intervention suggest significant improvements across multiple domains of functioning. The patient demonstrated reduced anxiety, improved emotional regulation, enhanced self-esteem, and greater psychological flexibility. She developed healthier interpersonal relationships, expanded her social network, and reported more open communication with family members. Furthermore, she successfully pursued a new professional pathway as a fashion designer, achieving greater personal and financial independence.

Overall, this case illustrates the potential value of long-term psychodynamic psychotherapy in supporting women diagnosed with breast cancer. Beyond symptom reduction, the intervention facilitated emotional processing, identity reconstruction, adaptive coping, and psychosocial reintegration. The therapeutic process contributed to the patient's ability to transform a profoundly traumatic experience into an opportunity for personal growth, resilience, and renewed engagement with life. These findings support the importance of integrating psychological care within multidisciplinary oncology services and highlight the contribution of psychotherapeutic interventions to improving quality of life among cancer survivors.

**Discussion**

The present case study highlights the profound contribution of psychodynamic psychotherapy to the psychological adjustment and comprehensive quality of life (QoL) of a young woman navigating breast cancer. While conventional oncological care prioritizes medical stabilization and physiological survival, psycho-oncological literature

emphasizes that breast cancer induces severe psychological trauma, commonly manifesting as clinical anxiety, depression, body image disruptions, and existential distress, all of which directly impair long-term QoL (Faller et al., 2013; Guarino et al., 2020). The clinical findings obtained from "Era's" two-year therapeutic trajectory demonstrate that structured, long-term psychotherapeutic interventions can successfully target these psychosocial sub-dimensions, facilitating multi-domain recovery.

A critical aspect of Era's psychological recovery involved the evolution of her defense mechanisms. Initially, the patient exhibited significant reliance on emotional detachment and intellectualization to insulate herself from the acute terror of her diagnosis and subsequent unilateral mastectomy. Within psychodynamic theory, these defenses are recognized as highly adaptive internal structures that preserve ego integrity during catastrophic real-world stressors (McWilliams, 2011). Rather than challenging these defenses prematurely—which can exacerbate distress and undermine therapeutic alliance—the longitudinal framework provided a continuous holding environment (Winnicott, 1965). This containment allowed the patient's psychological defenses to gradually soften, transitioning from rigid emotional avoidance toward active mourning, integration, and emotional processing of her somatic reality.

Importantly, the clinical outcomes demonstrate a direct link between psychodynamic processing and improvements across key QoL dimensions, particularly body image, gender identity, and maternal roles. Younger breast cancer patients face distinct developmental challenges compared to older cohorts, experiencing greater disruption in perceived femininity, sexuality, and maternal efficacy (Fingeret et al., 2014; Paterson

et al., 2016). Era's hair loss from chemotherapy and her subsequent mastectomy severely damaged her self-esteem, inducing underlying feelings of shame and somatic alienation. Through regular psychodynamic exploration, she was supported in separating her intrinsic self-worth from her altered physical appearance, allowing her to process her physical losses and construct a re-integrated, adaptive bodily self-concept.

Furthermore, the study highlights the therapeutic role of creative sublimatory activities in restoring personal autonomy and enhancing psychosocial QoL. Era's engagement in dressmaking and tailoring served as a critical vehicle for post-traumatic growth. Serious medical illnesses frequently strip individuals of their perceived agency, casting them into a passive "patient role" dominated by medical dependency (Schroevers et al., 2006). By channeling her internal struggles into fashion design, Era reclaimed external control, transitioning from a state of existential helplessness to creative mastery. This activity facilitated her return to work and fostered a distinct occupational identity, which substantially elevated her psychological well-being and financial independence, confirming prior findings regarding the utility of creative occupational engagement in cancer rehabilitation (Collie et al., 2006).

In conclusion, while the structural limitations of an intrinsic single-case design preclude broad epidemiological generalization, these clinical findings add to the empirical evidence supporting the integration of specialized mental health services within standard oncology protocols (Guarino et al., 2020; Rosendahl et al., 2023). Long-term psychotherapeutic care operates beyond simple symptom reduction; it targets the structural re-organization of the patient's inner world, offering

a viable pathway for surviving patients to transition from traumatic fragmentation to long-term psychosocial flourishing.

**Conclusions**

This clinical case study highlights the significant role that psychotherapeutic intervention can play in supporting psychological adaptation and improving quality of life among women diagnosed with breast cancer. The findings demonstrate that breast cancer affects not only physical health but also emotional well-being, self-image, interpersonal relationships, maternal identity, and overall psychosocial functioning.

The longitudinal psychodynamic psychotherapy provided a secure therapeutic environment in which the patient was able to process intense emotions associated with diagnosis, treatment, bodily changes, and fear of recurrence. Over the course of the intervention, substantial improvements were observed in emotional regulation, self-esteem, interpersonal functioning, social engagement, and occupational reintegration. The patient gradually developed greater psychological resilience, improved coping strategies, and a renewed sense of agency and purpose.

The case further illustrates the importance of addressing existential concerns, identity reconstruction, and emotional suffering as integral components of cancer care. Psychotherapeutic support contributed not only to symptom reduction but also to the patient's capacity to integrate the cancer experience into a coherent and adaptive life narrative. Although the findings cannot be generalized due to the single-case design, they provide valuable clinical insights into the potential benefits of long-term psychotherapeutic intervention as part of multidisciplinary oncology care.

**Clinical Implications**

The findings suggest that psychological assessment and psychotherapeutic support should be considered essential components of comprehensive breast cancer treatment, particularly for younger women who may experience significant disruptions in identity, family roles, and future life expectations. Integrating mental health professionals within oncology services may facilitate early identification of psychological distress and provide timely interventions that enhance patients' overall quality of life and treatment adjustment.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future studies should seek to expand the evidence base regarding psychotherapeutic interventions for women with breast cancer through:

1. Conducting larger-scale longitudinal studies involving diverse populations of breast cancer patients to examine long-term psychological outcomes.
2. Comparing the effectiveness of different psychotherapeutic approaches, including psychodynamic psychotherapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, supportive-expressive therapy, and mindfulness-based interventions.
3. Investigating the impact of psychotherapeutic interventions on specific dimensions of quality of life, including emotional well-being, body image, family functioning, social adjustment, and return to work.
4. Exploring psychological adaptation among younger breast cancer survivors, who face unique developmental and psychosocial challenges related to fertility, parenting, career development, and intimate relationships.
5. Examining the role of creativity, meaningful occupational engagement, and post-traumatic growth in facilitating recovery and resilience following cancer treatment.

6. Conducting mixed-method and quantitative studies using standardized measures of quality of life, anxiety, depression, resilience, and fear of cancer recurrence to complement qualitative clinical findings.
7. Investigating the effectiveness of integrating psycho-oncology services within routine oncology care in Albania and other developing healthcare contexts.

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# RECONCEPTUALIZING JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM AS A SOCIAL PROTECTION POLICY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

**Arba OLLOMANI**

**Faculty of Law, University of Tirana**

arbaollomani7@gmail.com

**Abstract**

**Background:** In the context of growing social inequalities and institutional transformations, juvenile criminal justice is increasingly being reconsidered not only as a mechanism of penal control but also as part of broader social protection policies. Contemporary approaches emphasize rehabilitation, restorative justice, and social reintegration rather than punitive responses, reflecting international human rights standards and the objectives of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This paper critically examines criminal policies directed toward juveniles, focusing on their capacity to foster social reintegration and address structural inequalities related to youth delinquency.

**Theoretical Framework:** The study is grounded in the concept of restorative justice developed by Howard Zehr, who views crime as a social phenomenon that harms relationships and weakens community cohesion rather than merely violating legal norms.

**Methodology:** The research uses a qualitative approach based on the analysis of academic literature and policy frameworks. It includes a comparative examination of criminal and social policy approaches in the United Kingdom and Italy in addressing juveniles in conflict with the law, focusing on alternatives to detention and community-based interventions

consistent with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

**Keywords:** Juvenile justice; social protection; restorative justice; social inclusion.

## 1. Introduction

Juvenile justice has undergone a fundamental transformation over recent decades. Traditional juvenile justice systems primarily viewed juvenile offending through a punitive lens, emphasizing legal responsibility and punishment. Contemporary approaches, however, increasingly recognize that juvenile delinquency is closely associated with social exclusion, poverty, educational disadvantage, family instability, and limited access to social services. Consequently, juvenile justice is no longer understood solely as a mechanism of criminal law but also as an important instrument of social protection.

This shift has been strongly influenced by international human rights standards, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Beijing Rules (1985), the Riyadh Guidelines (1990), and the Havana Rules (1990). These instruments encourage States to prioritize rehabilitation, diversion, restorative justice, and reintegration while ensuring that deprivation of liberty remains a measure of last resort. Such principles are also consistent with Sustainable Development Goal 16, which promotes peaceful, just, and inclusive institutions, and Sustainable Development Goal 10, which aims to reduce inequalities.

The Albanian Juvenile Criminal Justice Code (Law No. 37/2017) defines a minor as “every person below the age of 18 years.” This standard definition reflects the internationally accepted approach, as also established in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,

which emphasizes the need for special protection and care for children due to their ongoing physical, emotional, and intellectual development.

According to the Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania, criminal responsibility begins at the age of 14 for criminal offences, while responsibility for serious criminal offences begins at the age of 16. This differentiated approach reflects an effort to balance accountability with the developmental characteristics of minors.

However, the concept of minors cannot be understood solely from a legal perspective. From a developmental standpoint, adolescence is recognized as a sensitive transitional period characterized by significant biological, psychological, emotional, and social changes. During this stage of life, young people are more susceptible to impulsivity, peer pressure, environmental influences, and identity formation processes, which may increase their vulnerability to involvement in antisocial or deviant behavior.

For this reason, modern juvenile justice systems, in line with international conventions and standards, increasingly emphasize rehabilitation, education, and social reintegration rather than purely punitive responses.

Albania has substantially reformed its juvenile justice framework through the adoption of the Juvenile Criminal Justice Code in 2017, introducing a child-centered approach consistent with European and international standards. Nevertheless, important challenges remain regarding institutional capacity, implementation of restorative justice measures, and effective reintegration of juveniles after contact with the justice system.

Although previous studies have examined juvenile justice reforms in Albania, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of juvenile justice as a broader social protection policy. Moreover, comparative

research evaluating Albania alongside countries with more established rehabilitation-oriented systems remains limited. Addressing this gap contributes to a better understanding of how criminal justice policies may simultaneously promote public safety and social inclusion.

Accordingly, this paper analyses juvenile justice from the perspective of social protection by comparing the legal and institutional approaches adopted in Albania, Italy, and the United Kingdom. These countries represent different legal traditions while sharing a common commitment to international child protection standards.

The study seeks to answer the following research question:

**To what extent can the juvenile justice system function as a social protection policy, and what lessons can Albania learn from the experiences of Italy and the United Kingdom?**

The article argues that juvenile justice systems that prioritize restorative justice, diversion, rehabilitation, and community-based interventions are more effective in reducing recidivism and promoting the long-term social inclusion of children in conflict with the law than systems primarily based on punitive sanctions.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design to examine the extent to which juvenile justice systems function as social protection policies. The analysis is based on a review of academic literature, national legislation, policy documents, international legal instruments, and reports published by governmental and international organizations. The research further adopts a comparative policy analysis approach, examining how criminal justice and social policy frameworks in the United Kingdom and Italy address juveniles in conflict with the law, with particular emphasis

on alternatives to detention and community-based interventions. This approach is aligned with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to justice, social inclusion, and strong institutions.

The research focuses on three countries: Albania, Italy, and the United Kingdom, which were selected because they represent different legal traditions while sharing a commitment to international standards on children's rights. The comparison is structured around four analytical dimensions:

1. The legal framework governing juvenile justice,
2. The use of restorative justice and diversion measures,
3. Alternatives to detention and rehabilitation policies,
4. Institutional mechanisms supporting the social reintegration of juveniles.

Secondary statistical data on juvenile offending in Albania for the period 2019–2024 are also examined to provide contextual evidence regarding recent developments in juvenile crime. Rather than measuring the effectiveness of specific policies quantitatively, the study aims to identify similarities, differences, and best practices that may contribute to strengthening Albania's juvenile justice system.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### *3.1 Juvenile Justice as a Social Protection Policy*

Modern juvenile justice has gradually shifted from a punitive model towards one that recognizes children in conflict with the law as individuals requiring protection, education, and rehabilitation. This transformation

reflects growing evidence that juvenile offending is often linked to social and economic vulnerabilities, including poverty, family instability, educational exclusion, and limited access to community support services.

The concept of a "child" or "minor" is clearly defined in Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which states that *"a child means every human being below the age of 18 years, unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier."* A consistent approach is also adopted in Albanian legislation, particularly in Law No. 37/2017, the Code of Criminal Justice for Minors, which defines a minor as *"every person below the age of 18 years."* This definition reflects the need for special protection due to the incomplete physical, emotional, and intellectual development of children.

International legal instruments have played a decisive role in shaping this approach. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, together with the Beijing Rules, establishes that the best interests of the child must guide all decisions affecting minors and emphasizes that detention should be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period. These standards have significantly influenced national juvenile justice systems, including Albania.

From a legal perspective in Albania, criminal responsibility begins at the age of 14 for certain offenses, while full criminal responsibility applies at the age of 16, reflecting a differentiated approach that takes into account developmental maturity. However, the concept of minors cannot be limited to legal definitions alone. Adolescence is a sensitive developmental stage characterized by profound biological, emotional, and social changes, during which individuals are more susceptible to impulsivity, peer pressure, and environmental influences.

From this perspective, juvenile behavior should not be understood solely as a violation of legal norms, but rather as the result of a complex interaction between individual and structural factors such as family environment, education, socio-economic conditions, and community context. Therefore, juvenile justice requires an integrated approach that considers psychological, developmental, and social dimensions alongside legal responsibility. This supports the view that responses to juvenile offending should prioritize rehabilitation and reintegration rather than punishment.

From a social protection perspective, juvenile justice extends beyond criminal accountability. It aims to prevent reoffending by addressing the underlying causes of delinquent behavior through education, psychological support, family engagement, vocational training, and community-based interventions. Consequently, the effectiveness of juvenile justice systems should be assessed not only through conviction rates, but also through their capacity to promote rehabilitation, reduce recidivism, and ensure long-term social inclusion.

Howard Zehr's theory of restorative justice provides a strong conceptual foundation for this approach. Rather than viewing crime solely as a violation of law, restorative justice understands crime as harm done to people, relationships, and communities. Accordingly, justice should focus on repairing that harm through dialogue, accountability, victim participation, and community involvement. This approach is particularly relevant in juvenile justice, as minors generally have a higher potential for behavioral change and successful reintegration compared to adult offenders.

In this sense, juvenile justice is increasingly understood within the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly Sustainable Development Goals 10 and 16, which emphasize reduced inequalities, inclusive institutions, and access to justice for all. Nevertheless, in many contexts, including transitional systems, a more traditional punitive approach still persists, focusing on control and sanction rather than rehabilitation. This ongoing tension between punitive and protective models remains a central issue in contemporary comparative juvenile justice analysis.

*3.2 Evolution of Juvenile Justice in Albania*

The development of juvenile justice in Albania reflects a gradual evolution from a punitive and age-based criminal responsibility framework toward a more child-centered model grounded in rehabilitation, education, and social reintegration. This transformation has been influenced both by internal legal developments and by international human rights standards.

The earliest structured regulation of juvenile justice can be traced to the Criminal Code of the Zog Republic (1928), which was heavily influenced by the Italian Criminal Code of 1889. This Code introduced a differentiated approach based on age and mental capacity. Children under the age of 10 were considered not criminally responsible, although in serious cases they could be placed in re-education institutions until the age of 20. Juveniles aged 10–15 could be held criminally liable only if they were capable of understanding their actions, and even then, they were subject to reduced penalties and placement in specialized institutions. For those aged 15–18, criminal responsibility applied with mitigated sentences, reflecting an early recognition of developmental differences and the importance of re-education over punishment.

During the period 1945–1990, juvenile justice was shaped by socialist legal ideology. Criminal responsibility began at the age of 14, with juveniles receiving reduced penalties, generally up to half of adult sentences. The legal framework also allowed courts to exempt minors from punishment when rehabilitation could be achieved through educational measures or when they lacked full understanding of the social danger of their actions. Despite the punitive nature of the system, this period still incorporated elements of education and correction as alternative responses to juvenile offending.

A significant shift occurred with the post-1990 transition and subsequent legal reforms. The adoption of the Juvenile Criminal Justice Code (Law No. 37/2017), which entered into force in 2018, marked a turning point in the Albanian juvenile justice system. The Code established a comprehensive child-centered framework in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and related international standards, including the Beijing Rules (1985), Riyadh Guidelines (1990), and Havana Rules (1990). It emphasizes rehabilitation, restorative justice, diversion, and social reintegration, while detention is defined as a measure of last resort.

The Juvenile Criminal Justice Code also provides extensive procedural safeguards and clearly defines the objectives of juvenile justice, including reintegration, resocialization, protection of victims and witnesses, prevention of reoffending, and strengthening institutional accountability. Central to the Code is the principle of the best interests of the child, which requires that all decisions consider the child's physical, psychological, educational, and social development, as well as their family and social relationships.

Beyond legislation, the organization and treatment of juveniles in Albania is further regulated through secondary legislation, particularly Council of Ministers Decision No. 209 (2022) on the general regulation of prisons. Article 43 establishes standards for the placement of juveniles, requiring their accommodation in specialized facilities or separate sections from adults, with attention to gender separation, family proximity, and access to rehabilitation services. Institutions are required to ensure individualized treatment plans based on multidisciplinary assessments, including educational, psychological, and social interventions.

These individualized plans typically include formal education, vocational training, psychosocial support, restorative justice programs, and activities aimed at developing social and civic skills. Reintegration is not limited to the period of detention but continues after release through cooperation with state institutions and civil society organizations.

Overall, the evolution of juvenile justice in Albania demonstrates a clear shift from a punitive and custodial approach toward a rehabilitative and rights-based system. However, the effectiveness of this transformation remains dependent on institutional capacity, inter-agency coordination, and the availability of sustainable rehabilitation programs.

*3.3 Juvenile Delinquency Trends in Albania (2019–2024)*

Official statistics indicate that juvenile offending in Albania has fluctuated considerably during the period 2019–2024 rather than following a consistent upward or downward trend, with significant fluctuations from year to year, which suggests the influence of social, institutional and economic factors on the involvement of minors in criminal activity.

In 2019, 1,337 juvenile offenders were registered, representing a relatively lower level compared to subsequent years. In 2020, a very significant

increase is observed, with the number of perpetrators reaching 3,308, marking the peak of the entire analyzed period. This strong increase can be linked to various social factors, including the impacts of the pandemic period and social restrictions.

After this year, the trend changes significantly. In 2021, the number of perpetrators drops to 1,940, showing a significant decrease compared to the previous year. This downward trend continues in 2022, where 1,773 perpetrators are registered, reflecting a relative stabilization of the situation, although still at high levels.

In 2023, a slight increase is observed to 2,005 juvenile offenders, signaling a partial return to the upward trend. While in 2024, the number drops again to 1,803 perpetrators, showing a moderate decrease compared to the previous year, but without returning to the levels of 2019.

Data on the percentage of juvenile offenders, relative to other age groups, also show a fluctuating pattern over the period 2019–2024, reflecting significant changes in the involvement of juveniles in the juvenile justice system.

In 2019, offenders under 18 years of age accounted for 3.11% of total juvenile offenders, marking a relatively low level compared to other age groups. In 2020, a significant increase is observed, with this percentage reaching 8.1%, representing the peak of the entire analyzed period and indicating a strong increase in the share of juveniles in the total number of offenders.

After this peak, the trend declines in 2021, with the percentage dropping to 4.9%, signaling a significant decrease in the relative involvement of juveniles. In 2022, this value decreases further to 4.64%, indicating a stabilization at lower, but still significant levels.

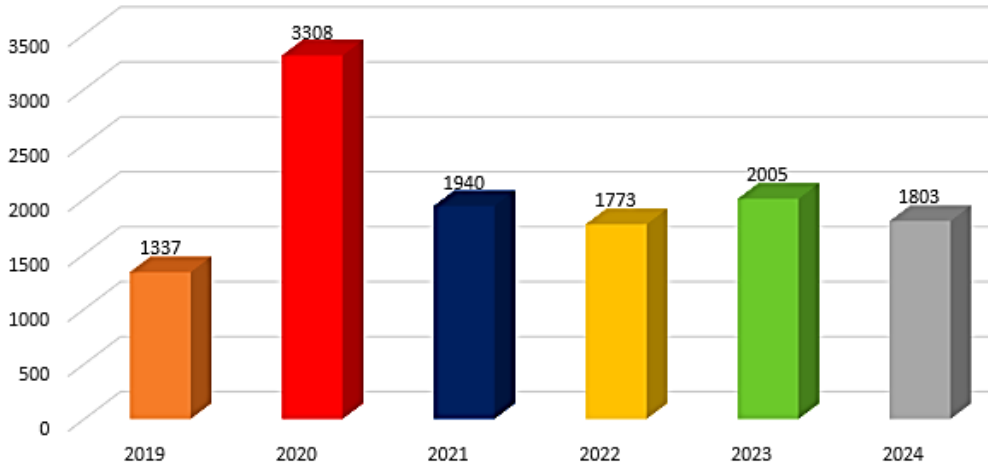
In 2023, a slight increase to 5.08% is observed, reflecting a new fluctuation in the trend, while in 2024 the percentage drops again to 4.5%, indicating a moderate decrease and a return towards the average levels of the period. Overall, the data do not indicate a stable trend, but rather continuous fluctuations, suggesting the influence of changing socio-economic conditions, policy measures, and institutional responses.

These fluctuations suggest that juvenile offending is influenced by multiple social and institutional factors rather than by criminal justice policies alone. Economic uncertainty, educational disruption, family circumstances, and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic may all have contributed to changes observed during this period.

The statistical evidence reinforces the argument that juvenile justice policies should not rely exclusively on punitive measures. Instead, they should operate alongside broader social protection mechanisms capable of addressing the underlying causes of juvenile offending.

Preventive interventions, family support programs, educational opportunities, and rehabilitation services are therefore essential components of an effective juvenile justice system.

**Figure 1. Juvenile offenders in Albania (2019–2024)**




*Source: Author's calculations based on data from the General Directorate of State Police and INSTAT.*

*3.4 The treatment and organization of juvenile offenders in Albania*

In addition to the Juvenile Criminal Justice Code of the Republic of Albania, which remains the basis and foundation for regulating the method of organization regarding the treatment of juveniles in conflict with the law, we must emphasize that there are also other regulations or programs that serve as guidance to institutions for the execution of criminal decisions regarding the treatment of juveniles.

As previously noted, in addition to the Code that summarizes the essential principles for the protection of the integrity and dignity of juveniles in conflict with the law, there are other legal and more detailed regulations for the treatment, placement in institutions, rehabilitation plans and protection of the rights of juveniles, always based on the protection of the best interests of the child.

A key regulatory instrument is Council of Ministers Decision No. 209, dated 06.04.2022, “On the approval of the general regulation of prisons,” which provides detailed provisions on the placement and treatment of juveniles deprived of liberty. In accordance with Article 43 of this Decision, juveniles must be accommodated in specialized institutions or, where this is not possible, in separate sections from adults, ensuring gender separation and prioritizing proximity to family residence to support reintegration (Council of Ministers Decision No. 209/2022, Art. 43).

Institutional organization is guided by principles of child protection, rehabilitation, and social reintegration. Juveniles are classified according to age, offense severity, and psychosocial needs, and must be provided with access to education, psychological support, and social services in line with compulsory education legislation. Individual treatment plans are developed for each juvenile, based on multidisciplinary assessments and implemented by social workers in cooperation with institutional staff and, where possible, families. These plans include education, vocational training, psychosocial interventions, restorative justice activities, and behavioral support, and are regularly updated to ensure continuity and effectiveness.

At the institutional level, the main specialized facility is the Juvenile Institute of Kavaja (established in 2009 with EU support), which accommodates juveniles aged 14–18. The institution is characterized by a multidisciplinary staff structure, where approximately 80% are civilian professionals (social workers, psychologists, and educators), reflecting a rehabilitative rather than punitive approach. Despite the implementation of educational and psychosocial programs aligned with European models, the

limited capacity of the institution (approximately 40 juveniles) remains a structural challenge.

The Ministry of Justice has initiated the development of a new juvenile facility in Mëzez, Tirana, which is expected to expand capacity and improve compliance with international standards of juvenile justice (Ministry of Justice, 2026).

Furthermore, Albania has benefited from the Albanian–Swedish Juvenile Justice Program (SIDA-funded), launched in 2017, which supports institutional capacity-building across the justice chain, including police, prosecution, courts, probation services, and correctional institutions. The program emphasizes alternatives to detention, restorative justice, and reintegration measures, contributing to reduced recidivism and improved social inclusion of juveniles (SIDA, 2017; Albanian Probation Service & Swedish Prison and Probation Service, 2018).

Overall, the Albanian juvenile justice system shows a clear shift towards a restorative and reintegrative model, in line with European and international standards. However, challenges remain in terms of institutional capacity and full implementation of rehabilitation-oriented policies.

*3.5 The case of Manjani v. Albania (March 2026)*

While the analysis of the juvenile justice framework in Albania demonstrates a progressive alignment with international standards focused on rehabilitation and the best interests of the child, the recent case of *Manjani v. Albania* highlights important tensions between the principle of rehabilitation and its long-term legal consequences. The case demonstrates a certain regression in the consistent application of rehabilitative principles within the Albanian legal system.

In this case, Shiqiri Manjani, an Albanian citizen, was convicted in 2006 at the age of 15 for theft and sentenced to eight months' imprisonment, suspended for three years. He was subsequently considered rehabilitated in 2017 and built a professional career, working as a lawyer and later as a judicial police officer.

However, in 2020, his application to the School of Magistrates (prosecutor profile) was rejected on the basis of his juvenile conviction. Although he passed the admission exam, the High Prosecutorial Council denied his entry, a decision later upheld by domestic courts on the grounds of public trust and integrity in the justice system.

The case was brought before the European Court of Human Rights, which found that Albania had violated Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (right to private life). The Court held that the automatic and indefinite exclusion of the applicant, based on a criminal conviction committed as a minor, was disproportionate and failed to take into account his subsequent rehabilitation and professional reintegration.

According to the Court, such a blanket restriction disregarded the fundamental principle that juvenile offences should not produce permanent barriers to social and professional reintegration. Consequently, Albania was ordered to pay compensation for non-pecuniary damage and to reconsider its exclusionary practices in light of proportionality and rehabilitation principles.

The judgment reveals a degree of inconsistency within the Albanian legal framework. Although the juvenile justice system formally emphasizes rehabilitation and reintegration, the persistence of automatic and long-term professional restrictions undermines these objectives in practice. In this sense, the case represents a step backward in the effective realization of

rehabilitative justice, as it prioritizes formalistic integrity concerns over the individual's right to social reintegration after demonstrated rehabilitation.

### *3.6 Comparative Analysis of Juvenile Justice Systems in Albania, Italy, and the United Kingdom*

Although Albania, Italy, and the United Kingdom operate within different legal traditions, their juvenile justice systems increasingly converge toward international standards that emphasize the best interests of the child, rehabilitation, and social reintegration. However, important differences remain in institutional capacity, the use of diversion measures, and the effectiveness of community-based interventions.

In Albania, the juvenile justice system has been reformed through the Juvenile Criminal Justice Code (Law No. 37/2017), which incorporates restorative justice principles and establishes rehabilitation and reintegration as key objectives. Detention is formally considered a measure of last resort. However, the system continues to face challenges related to limited institutional capacity, insufficient specialized services, and inconsistent implementation of individualized rehabilitation programs.

Italy represents a more advanced rehabilitative model within Europe, where juvenile detention is strictly applied as *extrema ratio*. In practice, only around 3–4% of juveniles are placed in Juvenile Penitentiary Institutes (IPM – *Istituto Penitenziario Minorile*), reflecting a strong preference for diversion and educational measures. A central feature of the system is *messa alla prova*, which allows the suspension of criminal proceedings while the juvenile completes an individualized rehabilitation program that may lead to the dismissal of charges. The Italian approach is strongly oriented toward education, family-based support, and reintegration through social services, although it also faces limitations such

as shortages of specialized staff and increasing system pressure due to migration-related cases.

The United Kingdom follows a similarly prevention- and rehabilitation-oriented approach. The system relies heavily on early intervention and diversion, with many cases resolved without formal court proceedings. Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) play a central coordinating role by bringing together professionals from social work, education, psychology, probation, and policing to design individualized intervention plans. Restorative justice is widely applied, particularly through victim-offender mediation, while custodial sentences are reserved for serious or persistent offending and apply to a small proportion of juveniles, estimated at around 3–4%.

A comparative perspective shows that while all three systems are aligned with rehabilitative principles, Italy and the United Kingdom demonstrate more developed institutional frameworks and stronger integration of community-based alternatives. Italy stands out for its legally structured rehabilitation mechanism (*messa alla prova*), while the UK is characterized by strong multi-agency coordination and early intervention strategies. In contrast, Albania has established a solid legal framework but still struggles with full and consistent implementation due to institutional and resource limitations.

Overall, the comparison indicates that the effectiveness of juvenile justice systems depends not only on legislation but also on the level of institutional coordination and the availability of social and rehabilitation services. Systems with stronger integration between justice, education, and social welfare institutions tend to achieve more sustainable rehabilitation outcomes and lower recidivism rates.

*3.7 Restorative Justice as a Mechanism of Social Protection*

**Howard Zehr's Restorative Justice Theory**

The restorative justice theory developed by Howard Zehr, presented primarily in *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, represents an alternative approach to traditional criminal justice. His different approach from traditional justice, also elaborated in *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice*, shifts the focus from punishing the offender to repairing the harm caused to victims, relationships, and the community (Zehr, 1990, 2002).

Zehr defines restorative justice as "a process that involves, to the extent possible, those with a stake in a specific offense to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations in order to heal and make things right as much as possible" (Zehr, 2002, p. 37).

In this theory, Zehr does not view crime simply as a violation of the law, but as a concrete harm to people and social relationships. For this reason, justice must address the needs arising from this harm and require active responsibility from the offender to repair it through inclusive and collaborative processes between the victim, the offender, and the community in order to correct the injustices created and restore broken relationships.

Restorative justice, according to his theory, is based on several key ideas:

a) focus on harm and needs: crime creates real consequences for victims, offenders, and the community, and justice must address these needs;
b) active responsibility of the offender: the offender must accept responsibility and contribute concretely to repairing the harm;

c) involvement of the parties: victims, offenders, and the community must participate in the process through dialogue and cooperation
d) restoration and healing: the ultimate goal is the restoration of social balance and the emotional healing of the parties (Zehr, 2002).

Zehr described this theory as "a compass and not a map," explaining it as a flexible orientation guide rather than a fixed procedural model or a final destination that can be followed rigidly like the traditional juvenile justice system (Zehr, 1990). This highlights its adaptive and context-based application in contrast to formal and rigid legal procedures.

The theory may be applied through several practical mechanisms, in cases where alternative intervention is possible, such as mediation programs aimed at achieving the best possible resolution for both the offender and the victim, whenever communication between the parties is feasible and appropriate. Another important mechanism highlighted by Zehr is the use of therapeutic and healing programs for both victims and offenders, placing the offender in front of the consequences of their actions and fostering awareness of the harm caused.

Finally, Zehr also emphasizes reintegration programs as a crucial transitional mechanism for offenders after serving their sentence, ensuring continuous support and structured communication with the community. Through these programs, the focus remains on restoring social relationships and facilitating reintegration rather than exclusion.

*"In traditional societies, particular problems are caused by the lack of justice and treatment opportunities, as well as social pressures."*

**4. Conclusion**

This study examined whether juvenile justice can be understood as a form of social protection through a comparative analysis of Albania, Italy, and

the United Kingdom. The findings show that contemporary juvenile justice systems increasingly prioritize rehabilitation, restorative justice, diversion, and community-based interventions rather than purely punitive responses. The comparison demonstrates that all three countries formally recognize detention as a measure of last resort and emphasize the best interests of the child. However, Italy and the United Kingdom have developed more comprehensive institutional mechanisms that integrate criminal justice with education, probation, social services, and community support. Albania has made significant progress through the Juvenile Criminal Justice Code, but practical challenges remain regarding institutional capacity, the availability of specialized professionals, and the consistent implementation of restorative justice measures.

The study also highlights the importance of viewing juvenile offending as a social phenomenon linked to exclusion, educational disadvantage, family instability, and limited opportunities. From this perspective, juvenile justice should not focus solely on punishment but should contribute to social inclusion and long-term reintegration. Howard Zehr's restorative justice framework supports this approach by emphasizing the repair of harm, accountability, and community participation.

Overall, the evidence suggests that juvenile justice functions most effectively when integrated into a broader system of social protection. For Albania, strengthening restorative justice programs, expanding alternatives to detention, improving interinstitutional cooperation, and investing in rehabilitation services would further align the juvenile justice system with European standards while reducing the risk of recidivism and promoting the successful social reintegration of children in conflict with the law.

4.1 Recommendations for Improving Juvenile Justice System in Albania

- Strengthen rehabilitation and reintegration programs for juveniles during and after serving sentences.
- Increase psychological, educational, and social support services for children in conflict with the law.
- Expand the use of restorative justice and mediation programs instead of imprisonment.
- Improve cooperation between schools, families, social services, and justice institutions to prevent juvenile delinquency.
- Ensure detention is used only as a last resort and in accordance with European standards.
- Develop vocational training and employment opportunities for rehabilitated juveniles.
- Raise awareness in schools about civic education, social values, and prevention of deviant behavior.
- Strengthen community-based programs that support social inclusion and reduce recidivism.
- Improve infrastructure and rehabilitation conditions in juvenile institutions, including the new campus in Mëzez.

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# Interdisciplinary approaches to youth in contact with the law: secondary victimization, institutional experience, and the need for integrated support

*Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ardita Prendi*

*Department of Law, Barleti University, Tirana, Albania*

ardita.prendi@gmail.com

**Abstract**

Young people in contact with the law constitute a particularly vulnerable population, as engagement with the justice system generates consequences that extend well beyond the formal legal domain into psychological and social spheres. Secondary victimization emerges as a critical phenomenon within this context, shaped by institutional practices, procedural communication deficits, and the absence of coordinated support mechanisms, all of which may compound stress, stigmatization, and emotional insecurity. This article examines the role of interdisciplinary approaches in responding to the needs of young people in contact with the law, integrating legal, psychological, and social perspectives in the analysis of institutional experience. The study draws on qualitative empirical data collected from young people aged 18–21 within the Albanian penal system, for whom social isolation, anxiety, perceptions of institutional treatment, and the need for psychological support emerge as defining features of their experience during criminal proceedings and detention. The findings demonstrate that institutional fragmentation and insufficient inter-service coordination increase exposure to secondary victimization, undermine rehabilitation outcomes, and constrain social reintegration. The article advocates for developmentally sensitive

institutional models in which justice, psychology, and social services function through coordinated interdisciplinary intervention to strengthen protection, rehabilitation, and long-term social inclusion.

**Keywords:** youth in contact with the law, secondary victimization, institutional experience, psychological support, interdisciplinary intervention.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary criminal justice system faces a fundamental challenge: balancing the punitive function of the state with the protection of the psychosocial integrity of the individual, particularly where vulnerable groups are concerned. In this context, young people aged 18–21 represent a transitional category of significant analytical importance: although legally treated as adults, they continue to exhibit developmental, emotional, and social characteristics that necessitate a differentiated institutional approach (Lamb, 2016). This study analyzes the impact of criminal proceedings and the execution of criminal sentences on the psychological and social well-being of young people aged 18–21 in Albania, situating the analysis in relation to the standards established by the Juvenile Criminal Justice Code (2017) and the contemporary principles of rehabilitative and restorative justice. Central to the analysis is the concept of secondary victimization, which refers to situations in which the institutions, procedures, and practices of the criminal justice system themselves produce or deepen traumatic experiences for the individual (Doerner & Lab, 2017). Institutional fragmentation and the absence of an integrated interdisciplinary approach among justice, psychology, and social services professionals risk undermining the rehabilitative function

of the penal system. Rather than serving as a mechanism of support, accountability, and reintegration, the system can become a structure that reproduces stigmatization, social isolation, and institutional exclusion. This issue may also be interpreted through labeling theory, according to which repeated interaction with penal institutions can promote the internalization of an imposed deviant identity, limiting opportunities for reintegration and full social participation (Becker, 1963).

The institutional experience of young people in conflict with the law is frequently characterized by technical legal language, inadequate communication, and insufficient ongoing emotional and psychological support. These factors can generate feelings of helplessness, insecurity, and anxiety, positioning the young person as passive in relation to the system and undermining the foundational principles of restorative justice (Schmalleger, 2021). Through a qualitative approach conducted at the Kavajë Juvenile Institute and the Fier Penal Sentence Execution Institution, this study examines the experiences of eleven young people with the aim of identifying the gap between the normative framework and institutional practice. The findings suggest that, in the absence of integrated interventions addressing psychological, social, and developmental needs as an essential component of the rehabilitation process, the penal system risks failing in its preventive and reintegration function. This concern is corroborated by monitoring reports on human rights in Albanian penitentiary institutions, which document ongoing problems related to institutional conditions, access to services, and the treatment of persons deprived of liberty (People's Advocate, 2023). The article argues for a shift from a predominantly punitive model towards one grounded in integrated, interdisciplinary, and developmentally oriented

support, contributing to the broader debate on institutional reform with a focus on minimizing traumatic effects, reducing secondary victimization, and strengthening sustainable rehabilitation and social reintegration.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The analysis of the psychosocial transition of young people in relation to the criminal justice system requires an interdisciplinary approach that brings together perspectives from developmental criminology, psychology, neuroscience, and jurisprudence. This review critically reassesses the traditional paradigm of adulthood, arguing that chronological legal boundaries do not always reflect the actual level of biological, emotional, and social maturity of the individual. Drawing on contemporary developmental theories, this section examines the gap between cognitive ability, emotional regulation, and legal responsibility, with particular attention to young people aged 18–21 within the Albanian legislative context.

### 2.1 Psychosocial development and criminal responsibility: the legal gap in early adulthood (18–21)

Contemporary literature in developmental criminology and legal neuroscience calls for a rethinking of how the criminal justice system treats young people in the early stages of adulthood. The period from 18 to 21 constitutes a critical transitional stage—referred to in the literature as emerging adulthood—during which the individual is no longer a minor in the formal legal sense but has not yet attained the psychological and social maturity of a consolidated adult. Neuroscientific findings indicate that the prefrontal cortex, which governs executive functions, impulse control, planning, and rational risk assessment, does not reach full structural and functional maturity until the mid-twenties (Lamb, 2016). This

developmental asymmetry helps explain why young people in contact with the law often display decision-making, emotional, and self-regulatory capacities more closely resembling those of adolescents than fully mature adults (Steinberg, 2008). In the Albanian legal context, this developmental reality confronts the rigidity of chronological criminal responsibility thresholds. Although the Juvenile Criminal Justice Code (2017) is grounded in the principle of the best interests of the child and the need for differentiated treatment, this protective framework does not extend in a clear and mandatory manner to the 18–21 age group, leaving early adults in an intermediate space: biologically and psychosocially still developing, yet legally treated as full adults. This gap creates what may be termed a "protection vacuum," in which the criminal treatment of young people aged 18–21 depends more on institutional interpretation and discretion than on clear legal standards, thereby weakening the rehabilitative and reintegration potential of criminal justice (Loeber & Farrington, 2012).

### *2.2 Secondary victimization and procedural trauma: institutional mechanisms of harm*

Analysis of young people's contact with the criminal justice system requires critical examination of secondary victimization—situations in which psychological and social harm stems not only from the initial involvement in a criminal event, but also from the manner in which institutions treat the individual. Secondary victimization arises from negative interactions with police, prosecutors, courts, sentence execution institutions, and support services, particularly when such interactions are characterized by poor communication, formalistic treatment, technical language, and insufficient sensitivity to psychological needs (Doerner & Lab, 2017). For young adults aged 18–21, still in a sensitive phase of

emotional, social, and identity development, this experience carries particular weight. Confronting a complex, bureaucratic, and often incomprehensible criminal justice system can produce anxiety, uncertainty, and helplessness. The absence of clear information about procedural progress, the consequences of institutional decisions, and realistic rehabilitation prospects positions the young person as passive vis-à-vis the system—a condition that may be understood as procedural trauma, in which the institutional process itself becomes a source of psychological harm.

### *2.3 The therapeutic justice paradigm: the need for interdisciplinary integration*

The fragmentation of institutional services constitutes one of the primary systemic obstacles to effective rehabilitation of young people in contact with the criminal justice system. Contemporary literature emphasizes the need for a shift away from a narrowly punitive and formal-legal model towards a therapeutic justice paradigm, in which the legal process functions not only as a mechanism for determining guilt and administering punishment, but as a psychosocial intervention with preventive, rehabilitative, and transformative potential (Wexler, 2013). Therapeutic justice proceeds from the premise that the manner in which an individual is treated during criminal proceedings directly affects psychological well-being, motivation for change, and the prospects for social reintegration. For young adults, this approach is particularly important: institutional treatment of this age group cannot be limited to sentence administration, but must encompass psychological support, social orientation, education, skills development, and genuine preparation for return to the community. In the Albanian context, Ombudsman monitoring reports (2023) have

identified persistent deficiencies in the provision of psychological and social services in penitentiary institutions—services that are often insufficient, sporadic, or disconnected from the individual's full rehabilitative trajectory, exposing the 18–21 age group to a form of institutional abandonment during critical phases of detention, trial, and preparation for reintegration. Integrated support requires sustained and functional cooperation among lawyers, psychologists, social workers, educators, and other institutional actors, organized through interdisciplinary case management teams that treat the young person not merely as a criminal subject, but as a developing individual with personal history, psychological needs, social circumstances, and capacity for change (Schmalleger, 2021).

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research design

This study applies a qualitative exploratory approach using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). This methodological framework enables examination of the idiosyncratic experiences of participants, aiming to understand the meaning that young people attribute to complex phenomena such as isolation and institutional stigmatization. The interdisciplinary analytical framework assesses the impact of formal legal procedures on individual emotional well-being, building a bridge between developmental criminology and legal practice.

### 3.2 Sampling and data saturation

Purposive sampling was applied to select participants meeting strict research criteria: young people aged 18–21, convicted by final judgment and serving sentences at IMR Kavajë and IEVP Fier. The sample of N = 11 participants was determined on the basis of theoretical saturation (Guest

et al., 2006); during the final interviews, the data reached a point of thematic convergence at which new information proved redundant and no longer contributed meaningful analytical dimensions.

### 3.3 Instrument and analytical framework

Primary data were collected through a semi-structured interview guide designed to encourage free narrative and facilitate the emergence of authentic participant experiences. Prior to the main data collection phase, the instrument underwent pilot testing with two subjects to ensure terminological clarity, age-appropriate language, and ethical sensitivity in relation to potential trauma. The instrument was operationalized through three phenomenological exploratory dimensions: (1) Secondary victimization, focusing on perceptions of legal language, feelings of procedural powerlessness, and the impact of formal legal mechanisms on identity reconstruction; (2) Institutional experience, assessing the quality of interaction with correctional staff, real access to rehabilitation services, and the participant's perception of the institution's function (punishment vs. resocialization); and (3) Social isolation and Stigmatization, addressing the disruption of family relationships during custody and anxiety related to social labeling following sentence completion.

### 3.4 Data validity

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, a data triangulation procedure was employed, confronting participant narratives with analyses of the legal framework (JCJC, 2017) and monitoring reports from independent institutions (People's Advocate, 2023). A member-checking procedure was also implemented: extracts from the initial phenomenological analysis were returned to three participants for validation, confirming the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations.

### 3.5 Thematic analysis and reflexivity

Empirical material was processed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following a rigorous six-stage procedure beginning with verbatim transcription and in-depth familiarization with the data, followed by inductive code generation. To ensure interpretive fidelity, the study maintained a constant reflexive position through the technique of bracketing), in which the researcher identified and suspended prior assumptions, legal knowledge, and potential influences of professional training.

### 3.6 Ethical considerations

The research protocol was guided by strict principles of scientific ethics, following official authorization from the General Directorate of Prisons. Given that participants constitute a vulnerable group, the following safeguards were applied: (1) Informed consent: each participant was informed of the study's purpose and signed a consent form, with explicit notification of the right to withdraw at any time without penalty; (2) Confidentiality and anonymity: absolute anonymity was ensured through pseudonymization and coding of narrative data, with participants identified as P01–P11 and all identifying references removed during transcription; (3) Principle of Beneficence: the interviewing process was conducted with clinical sensitivity to avoid re-traumatization, functioning as a neutral and safe space for the expression of experience.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of narrative data from participants (N = 11) at IMR Kavajë and IEVP Fier produced eight core themes that illuminate the complexity of the institutional experience of early adults in contact with the criminal justice system.

### 4.1 Social isolation and fragmentation of developmental identity

The findings suggest that for the 18–21 age group, separation from primary support networks is experienced not merely as a punitive legal measure, but as a traumatic disruption of the developmental trajectory. During this phase of emerging adulthood, social connections serve as a critical reference point for emotional stability and the construction of prosocial identity (Lamb, 2016).

*"More than the walls, what destroys me is the fact that life goes on outside while I am frozen in the same place. I am afraid that when I get out, I will no longer recognize the people I care about, or myself in relation to them." (P04, 19 years old)*

P04's account reveals existential anxiety and pronounced concern about the atrophy of social relationships, consistent with the findings of Doerner and Lab (2017) on the disproportionate psychosocial harm caused by imprisonment in this population. This isolation functions not merely as a physical constraint but as a form of "social death" that undermines the individual's sense of self in relation to the future and to society (Goffman, 1961).

### *4.2 Secondary victimization and procedural cognitive powerlessness*

The findings identify a deep communicative gap between the criminal justice apparatus and the worldview of the young person. Participants describe a process that tends toward dehumanization, reducing subjects to mere "procedural objects" (Schmalleger, 2021).

*"In court I felt as though I were absent. The lawyer and the judge spoke a language I did not understand; I simply waited to be told how many years I would serve. We inhabited two entirely different worlds." (P07, 20 years old)*

P07's narrative reflects what criminology terms procedural cognitive powerlessness—a condition in which the individual loses any sense of agency over their legal fate. This alienation demonstrates that the effectiveness of the justice system depends not only on the legal correctness of decisions, but on procedural justice: the degree to which the young person understands, processes, and accepts the process as legitimate (Tyler, 2006). When proceedings are experienced as a hermetic dialogue among professionals in which the young person remains a passive spectator, a sense of cynicism toward the law is produced, diminishing future law-abiding motivation.

***4.3 The Paradox of support: subjective need versus institutional access***

Although the Juvenile Criminal Justice Code (2017) explicitly enshrines the right to specialized psychosocial support, the findings document a fragmented and largely formal reality. This gap between the legal framework and practical implementation confirms observations from the People's Advocate (2023) regarding the lack of human resources and the overload of social services in sentence execution institutions.

*"We see the psychologist mainly when delegations visit or for routine assessments. We need someone to listen to us in our most difficult moments, not someone who simply comes to fill out forms." (P02, 18 years old)*

P02's testimony highlights a structural problem: the bureaucratization of the support function. When the psychologist's role is reduced to that of a data administrator, the primary clinical intervention function is lost, creating what may be termed "illusory support"—in which the institution reports services rendered, but the individual experiences no genuine therapeutic benefit. According to Ward and Maruna (2007), successful

rehabilitation within the Good Lives Model requires active engagement and a trust-based relationship between professional and participant; the fragmentation identified in this study underscores the urgent need for a transition from administrative to holistic interdisciplinary models.

### *4.4 Proleptic stigmatization and "labeling" anxiety*

A significant finding is the participants' chronic pessimism regarding reentry into social life following sentence completion. According to Becker (1963), the process of labeling as "deviant" transforms into a stigmatized identity that overshadows all other attributes of the individual. The findings suggest that young people experience proleptic (anticipatory) stigmatization, in which the fear of social judgment begins to form within the walls of the institution itself.

*"Even if I change completely, the outside world will always see me as 'the one who came out of prison'. That stain does not wash away. Who would risk giving me a job or trusting me again?" (P11, 21 years old)*

P11's account demonstrates that reintegration anxiety stems not only from a lack of professional skills, but from the perception of a social stigma (Goffman, 1963) that follows criminal conviction. Without community bridges and labor market access, the individual may be drawn toward deviant subcultures as a defense against social rejection—a process Lemert (1951) classifies as secondary deviance.

### *4.5 Crisis of trust and support as "procedural formality"*

A critical finding is the discrepancy between participants expressed desire for psychological support and their perception of its actual utility. Although the majority of participants (82%) consider psychological support "very important," evidence indicates that real interactions are

experienced as cold and bureaucratic, focused on documentation rather than therapy.

*"The psychologist comes, asks questions, fills out the papers, and leaves. I feel like I am just a number in a file. We need someone who sees us as people, not as cases to be closed." (P08, 20 years old)*

This reflects what may be termed institutional formalism, in which rehabilitation services are delivered to satisfy legal criteria without generating a genuine therapeutic alliance. According to Liebling (2004), quality of life in custody depends not only on physical conditions but on relational justice—the manner in which staff interact with those in their care.

### *4.6 Economic determinism and employment anomie*

The empirical data indicate that pre-conviction socioeconomic status plays a determining role in the criminal trajectories of early adults. Over 50% of participants reported unemployment or financial precarity before their involvement in criminal proceedings, consistent with Merton's (1938) theory of anomie, in which the gap between cultural aspirations and legitimate means of achieving them may push individuals toward illegitimate alternatives.

*"When you have nothing and see no other way forward, prison does not seem as frightening as poverty. The problem is that when I leave, I will be unemployed again—this time with a stain on my record." (P10, 21 years old)*

P10's testimony reveals a vicious cycle: poverty as an initial push factor, and criminal conviction as a barrier to exiting it. Without inter-institutional coordination linking probation services, employment offices, and the

private sector, young people remain trapped in a downward trajectory toward recidivism (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

### *4.7 Developmental stasis and the suspension of the maturity trajectory*

One of the most significant findings is the identification of developmental stasis. For young people aged 18–21, the period of incarceration does not function as time for productive reflection, but as a suspension of natural maturation processes. Within closed environments, individuals are deprived of the challenges and responsibilities that shape adult identity, risking regression to early adolescent modes of functioning.

*"In here, time stands still. Outside, my friends are finishing school, finding jobs, becoming adults. Here I do the same things every day, with no responsibility. I am afraid that when I leave, I will still be the child who came in, while the world has moved on." (P09, 20 years old)*

This phenomenon confirms Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adulthood, which emphasizes the need for exploration and autonomy-building during this developmental stage. Institutional isolation produces a paradoxical effect: rather than fostering maturity, it imposes a passivity that leads to the atrophy of psychosocial skills, increasing vulnerability to recidivism upon release.

### 4.8 Family as a resource of resilience and a source of developmental anxiety

In contrast to the isolating effects of incarceration, the findings identify family as the primary resilience factor for early adults in contact with the law. For participants, family represents not merely a source of material support but the sole emotional anchor protecting identity from total rupture. However, this connection is frequently accompanied by secondary

guilt, as young people express anxiety about the emotional and financial burdens their incarceration has imposed on their families.

*"The only thing keeping me going here is my mother. When she visits, I forget about the walls. But when she leaves, I feel wretched, because I know how hard it is for her to get here—both financially and because of the shame I have brought her." (P01, 18 years old)*

P01's narrative reflects Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory, in which individuals in extreme situations seek security from primary figures. The findings indicate that reintegration outcomes are substantially influenced by the stability of these family bonds; however, the current system offers little space for family-inclusive interventions or contact facilitation programs (Comfort, 2008).

***4.9 Dissonance between subjective remorse and structural support***

A significant finding from the data is the high level of reflection and remorse reported by participants. The majority indicate that incarceration has prompted genuine reconsideration of past actions. Yet this internal motivation for change encounters a profound cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957): the system provides no mechanisms through which remorse can be channeled into concrete plans for transformation. The Albanian penal system appears content with "remorse as punishment" rather than "remorse as transformation."

*"I understand that I made a mistake and I want to be a different person when I leave. But the problems I had outside—debts, bad company, no work—are still there waiting for me. My regret is worth little if the roads outside remain closed." (P03, 19 years old)*

P03's testimony reflects the limits of restorative justice in the absence of structural support. Remorse is a necessary first step, but without the social

capital to sustain it, individuals risk returning to deviant behavior as a means of survival. The penal system needs to move from measuring "time served" to measuring "capacity built" (Maruna, 2001).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### *5.1 Justice as traumatic experience versus rehabilitative paradigm*

This research highlights that the institutional experience of early adults (18–21) in Albania is dominated by an ontological asymmetry: while the legal framework (JCJC, 2017) aspires toward a restorative justice paradigm, everyday practice remains deeply repressive and alienating. The phenomenological analysis produced four critical conclusions:

1. Erosion of procedural justice and secondary victimization: Secondary victimization stems not only from the severity of punitive measures, but from what may be termed "imposed procedural illiteracy." When court proceedings remain hermetic and incomprehensible to the subject, the process loses its moral legitimacy (Tyler, 2006), and the sentence is experienced as arbitrary force rather than corrective action.

2. Isolation as developmental regression and premature civil death: Social isolation within sentence execution institutions produces a premature "civil death" for this transitional age group. The absence of family contact and interdisciplinary support networks transforms the sentence into a process of "developmental freezing," reinforcing deviant labeling (Becker, 1963) and rendering post-release reintegration extremely difficult.

3. Crisis of integrated support and the formalism of protocols: A critical finding is the identification of a deep gap between legal aspirations and therapeutic reality. Psychological services in custodial settings frequently function as bearers of administrative protocols rather than as agents of therapeutic change, failing to address developmental trauma and

undermining the "best interests" principle enshrined in the Juvenile Criminal Justice Code.

4. Dissonance between subjective remorse and social capital: Participants demonstrate an internal will for change, but this remains unfulfilled in the absence of structural mechanisms. Without social capital to support the post-release transition, individual remorse risks transforming into disillusionment and recidivism. The system must move toward creating "turning points" (Sampson & Laub, 1993) through education and employment.

### *5.2 Recommendations for a new interdisciplinary paradigm*

To transform the Albanian penal system from a re-traumatizing model into an authentic reintegration model, this study proposes the following:

1. Institutionalization of interdisciplinary case management: Every young person aged 18–21 in contact with the law should be supported by a hybrid team (lawyer, clinical psychologist, and social worker) from the moment of arrest, functioning as a bridge between the individual and the system, reducing procedural illiteracy and providing cognitive and emotional guidance (Doerner & Lab, 2017).

2. Differentiation of the penitentiary regime based on neurological maturity: Institutions such as IMR Kavajë and IEVP Fier should develop treatment modules that formally recognize the incomplete neurological maturity of the 18–21 age group, replacing traditional isolation with intensive vocational training and continuing education programs (Lamb, 2016).

3. Creation of employment bridges as a means of de-stigmatization: The state should design active employment policies, including fiscal incentives for employers who integrate young people leaving the criminal justice

system. This "guaranteed social capital" is essential for breaking the cycle of stigmatization (Becker, 1963) and providing a genuine economic alternative to recidivism.

4. Audit of psychological well-being as a monitoring standard: It is recommended that the Ombudsman (2023) and the National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture expand their monitoring focus beyond physical and infrastructural conditions to include the measurement of the psychological impact of incarceration, using specific indicators to assess mental health, anxiety levels, and therapeutic progress throughout the institutional process.

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# Future Shock Anxiety: The Psychological Impact of Rapid Societal Change on Albanian Youth

*Artemisi Shehu[1]* artemisi.shehu@unitir.edu.al*

*Elda Vladi[2] elda.vladi.fshsstudent@unitir.edu.al*

*Arjana Muçaj[3] arjana.mucaj@unitir.edu.al*

*[1]Prof. Asoc. Dr., Department of Psychology, University of Tirana, Albania*

*[2]Department of Psychology, University of Tirana, Albania*

*[3]Prof. Dr., Department of Psychology, University of Tirana, Albania*

**Abstract**

This quantitative study examines how perceived societal instability influences future-oriented anxiety and adaptive decision-making, and the moderating role of resilience among Albanian youth. Drawing on Future Shock Theory (Toffler, 1970) and Intolerance of Uncertainty Theory (Carleton, 2016), we investigate the psychological consequences of rapid societal transformation in post-communist Albania. A cross-sectional design was employed with 512 young adults (aged 18–29 years). Participants completed validated measures including the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (IUS-12), Dark Future Scale (DFS), Adult Decision-Making Competence Scale (A-DMC), and Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-10). Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that perceived societal instability positively predicted future-oriented anxiety ($\beta = .58$, $p < .01$), while future-oriented anxiety negatively predicted adaptive decision-making ($\beta = -.46$, $p < .01$). Resilience significantly moderated the relationship between perceived societal instability and future-oriented anxiety ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .01$). The model explained 38% of the variance. These findings extend Future Shock Theory into Balkan

contexts and demonstrate resilience as a protective buffer against societal uncertainty. Practical implications include youth mental health programs, university counseling services, resilience training workshops, and policy interventions to reduce the impact of societal uncertainty on young people's psychological well-being.

**Keywords:** *future shock, future-oriented anxiety, adaptive decision-making, resilience, Albanian youth*

## 1. Introduction

Rapid societal transformations create uncertainty and disrupt expectations about the future, a phenomenon labeled as "future shock" (Toffler, 1970). In contemporary globalized contexts, young people are particularly vulnerable to future-oriented anxiety as they navigate economic, political, and technological changes that reshape their life trajectories (Siri et al., 2022). The psychological impact of such rapid change has become increasingly relevant in transitional societies undergoing post-communist transformation and European Union integration processes.

Albania represents a compelling context for examining these dynamics. Following decades of isolationist communist rule, the country has experienced accelerated economic liberalization, political democratization, and technological modernization since the 1990s (Muçaj et al., 2021). These post-communist transformations, combined with ongoing EU integration efforts, have created heightened uncertainty about opportunities, stability, and identity among young Albanians (Kamberi & Koliqi, 2020). Unlike established Western democracies, transitional Balkan societies face unique stressors including institutional instability,

economic volatility, and ambiguous future prospects that may intensify psychological strain (Zhang et al., 2022).

Future Shock Theory posits that when the rate of change exceeds individuals' capacity to adapt, it produces stress, disorientation, and maladaptive responses (Toffler, 1970). Recent extensions of this framework suggest that perceived societal instability—characterized by intolerance of uncertainty about macro-level social, economic, and political conditions—serves as a key predictor of individual anxiety (Carleton, 2016; Bardeen et al., 2020). Intolerance of Uncertainty Theory further elaborates that individuals who find uncertainty distressing and believe it should be avoided experience heightened anxiety and maladaptive outcomes (Carleton, 2016; Birrell et al., 2011).

Future-oriented anxiety, defined as excessive worry about negative future outcomes, has emerged as a significant psychological construct in youth populations (Jonas et al., 2016). This form of anxiety impairs well-being and functioning by consuming cognitive resources and reducing psychological flexibility (Sirois & Hirsch, 2018). Critically, future-oriented anxiety predicts lower decision-making competence, as anxious individuals struggle to process information effectively and update their choices in dynamic environments (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2007; Ceschi et al., 2017).

Adaptive decision-making competence refers to the ability to make sound, flexible decisions in uncertain and changing contexts (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2007). In transitional societies where young people must navigate rapidly shifting educational, employment, and social landscapes, adaptive decision-making represents a crucial developmental task (Gati & Asher, 2001). However, anxiety disrupts adaptive processing by

fragmenting cognitive pathways and reducing cognitive flexibility, making flexible and effective decisions harder to achieve (Jonas et al., 2016).

Resilience—the ability to bounce back and grow from adversity—may function as a protective factor against the negative psychological consequences of societal instability (Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007; Windle, 2011). Resilience helps individuals adapt positively in the face of adversity and uncertainty, promoting adaptive outcomes even under stress (Luthans et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2018). Recent empirical evidence indicates that resilience buffers the negative impact of stressors on psychological outcomes, suggesting it may moderate the relationship between perceived societal instability and future-oriented anxiety (Anyan & Hjemdal, 2016).

Despite the theoretical importance of these constructs, significant research gaps remain. First, there is a scarcity of studies examining future shock and anxiety specifically in Albanian youth (Muçaj et al., 2021). Second, limited evidence exists on how perceived societal instability influences adaptive decision-making in transitional contexts. Third, few studies have tested the moderating role of resilience in the relationship between societal instability and future-oriented anxiety. Fourth, there is a need for validated measurement models in the Albanian context to ensure cross-cultural applicability of psychological instruments.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining three hypotheses: (H1) Perceived societal instability is positively associated with future-oriented anxiety; (H2) Future-oriented anxiety is negatively associated with adaptive decision-making; and (H3) Resilience moderates the relationship between perceived societal instability and future-oriented anxiety, such that the positive relationship is weaker at higher levels of resilience. By integrating Future Shock Theory, Intolerance of Uncertainty

Theory, and resilience research within a transitional Balkan context, this study contributes to understanding how rapid societal change affects youth psychological functioning and identifies protective mechanisms that may mitigate negative outcomes.

## 2. Methodology

### *2.1. Study Design*

A cross-sectional quantitative design was employed to examine the relationships among perceived societal instability, future-oriented anxiety, adaptive decision-making, and resilience in Albanian youth. This design was selected to capture the patterns of associations between key psychological constructs at a single point in time, which is appropriate for theory-testing research in transitional contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### *2.2. Participants*

Young adults aged 18–29 years residing in Albania were recruited through universities, online platforms, and social media. The total sample consisted of N = 512 participants. Demographic characteristics indicated that 62.1% were female (n = 319) and 37.9% were male (n = 193). The mean age was 22.4 years (SD = 2.9). Regarding education level, 28.1% had completed high school, 63.5% held a bachelor's degree, and 8.4% had completed master's level education or higher. Participants were recruited from all regions of Albania, with higher concentration in urban centers.

### *2.3. Measures*

All variables were measured using validated multi-item scales on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Table 1 presents the measurement instruments, number of items, sample items, and Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients.

**Table 1**

*Measurement Instruments and Reliability Coefficients*

| Construct | Instrument (Scale) | Items | α (Reliability) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Perceived Societal Instability | Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (IUS-12; Carleton, 2016) | 12 | .89 |
| Future-Oriented Anxiety | Dark Future Scale (DFS; Jonas et al., 2016) | 12 | .91 |
| Adaptive Decision-Making | Adult Decision-Making Competence Scale (A-DMC; Bruine de Bruin et al., 2007) | 14 | .86 |
| Resilience | Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-10; Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007) | 10 | .87 |

*Note. All scales administered in Albanian following standard back-translation procedures.*

The IUS-12 (Carleton, 2016) measures intolerance of uncertainty, conceptualized as perceived societal instability at the macro level. The DFS (Jonas et al., 2016) assesses worry about negative future outcomes. The A-DMC (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2007) evaluates decision-making competence in adult populations. The CD-RISC-10 (Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007) measures resilience as the ability to bounce back from adversity.

### *2.4. Procedure*

Data collection followed a structured four-step recruitment process: (1) university outreach through collaboration with faculties and student networks at public and private universities; (2) online platform promotion through social media, student groups, and online communities; (3) survey completion where participants accessed the online questionnaire and provided informed consent before completion; and (4) final sample determination after data screening and removal of incomplete responses. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Tirana ethics committee. Informed consent was secured from all participants, anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and participation was entirely voluntary.

### *2.5. Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 28.0. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) were computed for all variables. Pearson correlations examined bivariate relationships among constructs. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to test H1, H2, and H3. Moderation analysis was performed using an interaction term (Perceived Instability × Resilience). Assumptions were checked for normality, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity. The significance level was set at $p < .05$.

## 3. Results

### *3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations among the study variables.

**Table 2**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables*

| Variable | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Perceived Societal Instability (PSI) | 4.78 | 1.21 | — | | |
| 2. Future-Oriented Anxiety (FOA) | 5.02 | 1.18 | .58** | — | |
| 3. Adaptive Decision-Making (ADM) | 4.31 | 1.07 | –.41** | –.46** | — |
| 4. Resilience (RES) | 4.92 | 1.12 | –.26** | –.31** | .48** |

*Note. N = 512. ** p < .01 (two-tailed).*

The correlation matrix revealed significant associations in the expected directions. Perceived societal instability was positively correlated with future-oriented anxiety ($r = .58$, $p < .01$) and negatively correlated with adaptive decision-making ($r = –.41$, $p < .01$) and resilience ($r = –.26$, $p < .01$). Future-oriented anxiety was negatively associated with adaptive decision-making ($r = –.46$, $p < .01$) and resilience ($r = –.31$, $p < .01$). Resilience showed a positive correlation with adaptive decision-making ($r = .48$, $p < .01$).

### *3.2. Hypothesis Testing*

H1: Perceived societal instability positively predicts future-oriented anxiety. Hierarchical regression analysis indicated that perceived societal instability significantly predicted future-oriented anxiety ($\beta = .58$,

SE = .04, t(510) = 14.35, p < .01, 95% CI [.50, .66]). The model explained 34% of the variance in future-oriented anxiety ($R^2$ = .34, Adjusted $R^2$ = .34). H1 was supported.

**Table 3**

*Hierarchical Regression Analysis for H1 (PSI → FOA)*

| Predictor | β | SE | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Perceived Societal Instability | .58 | .04 | 14.35 | < .01 |

*Note. $R^2$ = .34, Adjusted $R^2$ = .34. Dependent variable: Future-Oriented Anxiety.*

H2: Future-oriented anxiety negatively predicts adaptive decision-making. Regression analysis revealed that future-oriented anxiety significantly predicted lower adaptive decision-making (β = –.46, SE = .05, t(510) = –11.24, p < .001, 95% CI [–.55, –.37]). The model accounted for 21% of the variance in adaptive decision-making ($R^2$ = .21). H2 was supported.

**Table 4**

*Regression Analysis for H2 (FOA → ADM)*

| Predictor | β | SE | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Future-Oriented Anxiety | –.46 | .05 | –11.24 | < .001 |

*Note. $R^2$ = .21. Dependent variable: Adaptive Decision-Making.*

H3: Resilience moderates the relationship between perceived societal instability and future-oriented anxiety. Moderation analysis using the interaction term (Perceived Instability × Resilience) revealed a

significant moderating effect (β = –.18, SE = .06, t(508) = –3.12, p < .01, 95% CI [–.29, –.07]). The full model explained 38% of the variance in future-oriented anxiety ($R^2$ = .38). At higher levels of resilience, the positive relationship between perceived societal instability and future-oriented anxiety was significantly weaker. H3 was supported.

**Table 5**

*Moderation Analysis for H3 (Resilience as Moderator)*

| Predictor | β | SE | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Perceived Societal Instability | .52 | .04 | 12.89 | < .01 |
| Resilience | –.22 | .05 | –4.51 | < .01 |
| PSI × RES Interaction | –.18 | .06 | –3.12 | < .01 |

*Note. $R^2$ = .38. Dependent variable: Future-Oriented Anxiety. PSI = Perceived Societal Instability; RES = Resilience.*

All three hypotheses were supported. The model explains 38% of the variance in future-oriented anxiety. Results indicate meaningful relationships in the expected directions, with resilience functioning as a significant protective buffer against the anxiety-inducing effects of perceived societal instability.

## 4. Discussion

### *4.1. Integration of Findings*

This study integrates societal shifts, psychological impact, and protective factors to understand how rapid societal change affects Albanian youth. Three interconnected themes emerge from the findings. First, rapid

external changes reshape the context in which individuals live. Globalization creates increased interconnectedness and cultural exchange, forming complex, dynamic societies (Siri et al., 2022). Technological acceleration drives continuous adaptation demands through constant innovation and digital transformation (Zhang et al., 2022). Identity stability is challenged as shifting norms and roles disrupt traditional identities and life trajectories (Kamberi & Koliqi, 2020).

Second, individuals experience heightened internal pressures in response to external change. Anxiety manifests as worry about the future and fear of not coping with change (Jonas et al., 2016). Stress emerges from overload due to constant demands and lack of control (Bardeen et al., 2020). Uncertainty reduces decision confidence and direction as ambiguity about the future increases (Carleton, 2016). Third, personal and social resources help buffer negative psychological outcomes. Resilience—the ability to bounce back and grow from adversity—strengthens mental well-being (Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007). Adaptation through cognitive and behavioral flexibility supports effective adjustment to new challenges (Windle, 2011). Social support through strong relationships and community connection provides emotional and practical support (Luthans et al., 2015).

### *4.2. Theoretical Contributions*

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it expands Future Shock Theory into Balkan contexts by examining how rapid social change and information overload create psychological strain in post-socialist environments (Toffler, 1970). Second, it supports Intolerance of Uncertainty Theory by linking intolerance of uncertainty to lower acceptance of change in high-uncertainty transitional settings (Carleton,

2016). Third, it strengthens the resilience buffering framework by demonstrating how resilience mitigates the negative impact of uncertainty on change acceptance. Fourth, it adds evidence from transitional societies by providing empirical insight from the Balkans, a region underrepresented in psychological theory research (Muçaj et al., 2021).

### *4.3. Practical Implications*

Four practical applications emerge from this research. First, youth mental health programs should implement early screening, psycho-education, and support programs that build coping skills, reduce anxiety, and promote psychological resilience among young people. Second, university counseling services should be strengthened with trained professionals to support students in managing uncertainty, stress, and academic pressures. Third, resilience training workshops should be offered as structured programs that enhance resilience, emotional regulation, and tolerance of uncertainty through evidence-based techniques. Fourth, policy and social support strategies should be developed to promote social safety nets, inclusive communities, and youth-friendly environments to reduce the impact of societal uncertainty.

## 5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that rapid societal change triggers psychological strain, but resilience and support systems enhance adaptability and promote well-being. Perceived societal instability intensifies future-oriented anxiety among Albanian youth, which in turn impairs adaptive decision-making competence. However, resilience serves as a significant protective factor, weakening the anxiety-inducing effects of perceived instability. These findings extend theoretical understanding of Future Shock and Intolerance of Uncertainty into transitional Balkan

contexts while providing actionable insights for mental health interventions and policy development.

### *5.1. Limitations*

Several limitations should be considered. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences among variables. Second, data were collected using self-report questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability and response biases. Third, cultural factors specific to the Western Balkans may influence findings and limit applicability to other contexts. Fourth, the sample consisted primarily of university students, which may limit generalizability to other age groups or populations.

### *5.2. Recommendations for Future Research*

Longitudinal designs are needed to establish causal pathways between perceived societal instability, future-oriented anxiety, and adaptive decision-making. Mixed-methods approaches could provide deeper contextual understanding of how Albanian youth experience and cope with rapid societal change. Cross-cultural validation of measurement instruments in Albanian contexts would strengthen methodological rigor and ensure cross-cultural applicability. Intervention studies testing the effectiveness of resilience training programs would advance practical applications and inform evidence-based mental health policies for youth in transitional societies.

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# How Gen Z Creates New Words: Productivity of Word-Formation Processes and Lexical Innovation in the Contemporary Digital Discourse

**MSc. Azra Thaqi Gashi**

*Teaching Assistant, University "Ukshin Hoti" Prizren*

*English Language Teacher, ShFMU "Lidhja e Prizrenit" Prizren*

*Email: azra.thaqi@uni-prizren.com*

## Abstract

The rapid shift of Generation Z to digital platforms and online communities reflects ongoing lexical innovation in contemporary English. This continuous development requires the creation of new lexical items by a generation whose vocabulary is heavily shaped by online spaces. This study investigates new words used by Generation Z, specifically focusing on the underlying word-formation processes and their relative structural productivity. A specialized corpus of 50 contemporary words was compiled through targeted data collection from widely used social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and X, as well as online slang databases. The study uses a qualitative morphological analysis supported by quantitative frequency counts to categorize each word into its respective process, including blending, clipping, and acronyms. The findings reveal that economy-driven processes, particularly clipping (30%) and blending (24%), are the most productive mechanisms in Gen Z's lexical creativity. Ultimately, this research provides empirical insights into how digital communication drives language change, highlighting the active role of younger speakers in contemporary morphology.

**Keywords:** *Generation Z, word-formation processes, morphological productivity, lexical innovation, digital sociolinguistics, contemporary English.*

## 1. Introduction

Languages are dynamic, evolving systems shaped by technological, social, and cultural transformations. Throughout linguistic history, periods of significant societal disruption have introduced structural innovations into languages, resulting in the regular emergence of newly coined words, expressions, and phrases. In the 21st century which is a period defined by hyper-accelerated technological advancements, the expansion of digital communication and the emergence of consumer-facing artificial intelligence have created unprecedented conditions for linguistic change and morphological creativity. The production and global expansion of new lexical items have intensified due to online interactions characterized by immediate speed, brevity, multimodality, and borderless connectivity.

Among contemporary demographic cohorts, Generation Z (hereafter Gen Z), generally defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, represents the first generation fully immersed in a ubiquitous digital landscape. Unlike their predecessors, Gen Z grew up alongside highly interactive social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and X (formerly Twitter). Within these digital spaces, language is constantly reshaped to fit the fast-paced, high-volume needs of online communication. Consequently, Gen Z's daily linguistic practices reflect a distinct blend of structural innovation, linguistic playfulness, morphological economy, and strong in-group identity signaling.

From a morphological perspective, this ongoing lexical innovation relies on established word-formation processes. These include blending, clipping, compounding, affixation, acronyms, initialisms, conversion, back-formation, and semantic shift. While these morphological operations are themselves traditional structural features of English grammar, the digital medium modifies their active productivity and usage frequency. The structural demands for brevity, instant impact, and algorithmic virality within digital discourse appear to favor specific mechanisms over others. Clipping and blending, seem prioritized due to their efficiency.

Although an expanding body of research tracks internet slang and computer-mediated communication, previous literature shows limited systematic focus when analyzing the precise productivity metrics of specific word-formation processes within Gen Z's creative lexicon. Much of the existing research remains heavily descriptive, often prioritizing the cultural or sociological motivations of slang without grounding these observations in formal morphological classifications combined with frequency counts. This study addresses this gap by analyzing which word-formation processes are most active and structurally productive within contemporary digital discourse.

To achieve this, the study addresses the following four research objectives:

1. To identify newly coined words and popular lexical items actively used by Gen Z across major digital networks;
2. To categorize these collected words into their respective structural word-formation processes;
3. To determine the relative productivity of each morphological process through frequency distributions;

4. To explore the structural relationship between digital communication media and contemporary lexical innovation;

To fulfill these objectives, a dedicated corpus of 50 contemporary lexical items was compiled using targeted data collection from TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, X, and online slang databases. This study applies a qualitative morphological analysis supported by quantitative frequency counts to evaluate underlying productivity patterns. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the broader fields of morphology, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics. It offers empirical insights into how digital communication modifies traditional word-formation rules, highlighting the active role of younger speakers in driving contemporary language change.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Morphology and Word-Formation Productivity

Morphology is the branch of formal linguistics that examines the internal architecture of words and the structural mechanisms through which new lexemes are generated. As Fábregas (2015) notes, morphological systems demonstrate how speakers systematically expand their vocabulary by creating rule-governed connections between a word's formal structure, its core meaning, and its grammatical features. Traditional English morphology relies on a well-defined set of word-formation processes. These are broadly divided into concatenative processes, such as derivation (affixation) and compounding, and non-concatenative or extra-grammatical morphology, including conversion, clipping, blending, back-formation, acronyms, and initialisms (Bauer, 1983; Haspelmath & Sims, 2024; Plag, 2003).

These word-formation mechanisms are highly adaptive rather than static. Azimova (2025) emphasizes that contemporary English word-formation should be evaluated through both synchronic (current state) and diachronic (historical development) lenses. This dual perspective is valuable because real-world lexical innovation occurs at the intersection of stable morphological rules, semantic developments, and shifting sociolinguistic factors. Mattiello (2008) highlights that slang and non-standard linguistic varieties regularly push the boundaries of conventional grammar, employing playful variations and structural operations that enrich the colloquial lexicon long before they are institutionalized.

In morphological theory, the concept of productivity serves as a central metric for tracking vocabulary expansion. It reflects the inherent capacity of a given structural rule to generate new words that are accepted by a speech community (Bauer, 1983; Plag, 2003). Azimova (2025) further notes that structural productivity is heavily shaped by three modern constraints: semantic transparency (how easily a word's meaning can be inferred from its parts), phonological well-formedness, and sociolinguistic evaluation within user networks. Consequently, analyzing Gen Z's creative output requires both a formal classification of these processes and an empirical measurement of their relative productivity under these shifting social constraints.

### 2.2 Digital Communication and Lexical Innovation

Over the past decade, the rapid expansion of digital communication channels has notably accelerated the pace of language change. Crystal (2011) describes digital communication as a structural hybrid that blends the features of spoken and written discourse. This "hybrid mode" creates an adaptable linguistic space that encourages creative play, stylistic

experimentation, and strict linguistic economy. Furthermore, the architecture of modern social media networks allows these newly generated expressions to spread globally across diverse user bases in exceptionally short periods. Hnatyuk (2025) emphasizes that the pervasive nature of virtual spaces creates modern linguistic practices where graphic, phonetic, and lexical transformations happen concurrently, shifting slang from localized subcultures to global trends within days.

The unique conditions of digital platforms directly alter how speakers approach word-formation. Azimova (2025) observes that the speed of modern online interaction requires rapid vocabulary adaptation, which changes how speakers select structural patterns. This rapid transition highlights how micro-level morphological modifications are bound to macro-level cultural changes, illustrating the close link between morphological structure and sociolinguistic behavior. As Zhu and Jurgens (2021) observe in their computational analysis of online platforms, the structural dynamics of internet communication reward rapid, dense typing, creating environments where users naturally favor abbreviations, word-shortening mechanisms, and structural blends to sustain fast-paced conversational threads.

This shift toward structural compression is clearly visible in recent empirical studies. For example, in a structural study of 150 shortened vocabulary items, Liu (2026) demonstrated that clipping functions as a highly active word-formation process in modern digital communication. The study found that approximately 68% of these clipped words were produced using back-clipping, the process of truncating the final syllables of a base word, as seen in everyday terms like *app* (application), *blog* (weblog), and *pic* (picture).

Liu (2026) points out that these shortened forms integrate into standard use because of their efficiency, noting that a process's overall productivity is heavily guided by usage frequency, structural optimization, semantic transparency, and register variation. These structural findings are relevant to Gen Z's linguistic choices. Because modern digital platforms prioritize brevity, rapid delivery, and character limits, abbreviatory processes like clipping and blending become efficient strategies for optimizing communication.

### 2.3 Generation Z and Lexical Identity

Generation Z represents a distinct demographic cohort of digital natives who grew up alongside smartphones, social media algorithms, and early-stage AI tools. As a result, their daily communication styles are closely linked to digital culture. In sociolinguistic theory, language choice serves as a primary tool for constructing and projecting social identity. Younger speakers routinely serve as the primary drivers of linguistic innovation, especially within informal and colloquial registers (Tagliamonte, 2016).

Within youth subcultures, slang and innovative word-formation processes do more than simply convey information. They perform essential social functions, such as signaling group membership, establishing in-group boundaries, expressing humor, and demonstrating stylistic creativity. Grandez et al. (2023) observe that modern slang operations allow Gen Z speakers to construct creative, brief identity markers that navigate their immediate cultural environments while maintaining an exclusive social territory. This platform-driven creativity is highly visible on short-form video applications; Jaya (2024) demonstrates that clipping and imitative word-play dominate spaces like TikTok because they allow creators to

immediately communicate complex cultural impressions and shared humor within brief, attention-restricted contexts.

Contemporary Gen Z terms like *rizz* (derived via clipping), *delulu* (formed through reduplicative clipping), *gate-keep* (applied via compounding and conversion), and *IYKYK* (an initialism for "if you know, you know") illustrate how traditional morphological processes are repurposed to suit the functional and social needs of digital communication.

## 2.4 Research Gap

Despite the expanding literature tracking computer-mediated communication, a clear research gap persists at the intersection of formal structural morphology and quantitative productivity analysis regarding Gen Z's vocabulary.

**Descriptive vs. Analytical Focus:** A large portion of internet linguistics literature (e.g., Crystal, 2011) operates on a descriptive level, focusing on the cultural motivations behind slang rather than its underlying structural architecture.

**Need for Mixed-Methods Integration:** While isolated studies have focused on specific processes, such as Liu's (2026) work on clipping, there is a lack of comparative, corpus-driven studies that quantify the relative productivity of multiple competing word-formation processes operating at the same time.

**Accelerated Digital Constraints:** Classical morphological frameworks (e.g., Bauer, 1983; Plag, 2003) were established before the rise of algorithmically driven platforms like TikTok. Consequently, further empirical data is needed to understand how traditional constraints on productivity such as semantic transparency and sociolinguistic evaluation

(Azimova, 2025), operate when words are selected for immediate global circulation.

This study addresses these gaps by combining qualitative morphological classification with quantitative frequency distributions, providing an empirical assessment of contemporary lexical productivity among digital-native speakers.

## 3. Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods research design to evaluate the productivity of English word-formation processes within contemporary digital discourse. By pairing qualitative morphological analysis with quantitative frequency distributions, the research evaluates both the structural mechanisms of these words and their relative occurrence rates.

### 3.1 Data Collection and Corpus Selection

A specialized corpus of 50 distinct lexical items was compiled using purposive sampling. Data extraction focused on high-traffic digital platforms where Gen Z linguistic identity is most prominently displayed: TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and X (formerly Twitter). To ensure the corpus accurately reflects contemporary linguistic patterns rather than temporary internet typos or isolated slang, candidate terms were filtered using three specific selection criteria:

1. **High Usage Frequency:** The term must display widespread, active use within digital public discourse between 2020 and 2026.
2. **Lexicographical Recognition:** The term must be documented within established online slang repositories, such as *Urban Dictionary*, or tracked by contemporary neologism registries to verify its status as an recognized lexical item.

3. **Morphological Stability:** The token must demonstrate stable structural and semantic usage across at least two distinct digital platforms. This cross-platform validation ensures that the selected words are genuinely integrated into Gen Z's shared vocabulary rather than being confined to a single app's internal culture.

### 3.2 Data Analysis and Classification Criteria

The compiled 50-word corpus was processed through a systematic, two-stage analytical framework:

- **Qualitative Morphological Analysis:** Each lexical item was systematically broken down into its component morphemes to identify its exact structural origin and determine the primary word-formation process responsible for its creation. The classification criteria followed traditional morphological boundaries while adapting to non-concatenative structures. For instance, a word was classified as *clipping* if it involved the truncation of syllables from a longer base word without changing its meaning (e.g., *rizz* from *charisma*, or *sus* from *suspicious*). It was categorized as *blending* if parts of two distinct words were merged to create a new semantic concept (e.g., *brainrot* combining *brain* and *rot*). Other established operations like acronyms, initialisms, and semantic shifts were categorized based on their structural behavior in text and speech.
- **Quantitative Frequency Counts:** To evaluate the relative productivity of each process, the occurrences of each identified mechanism were aggregated. These raw

frequency counts (ɳ) were converted into percentages of the overall corpus (%). This step provides an empirical hierarchy showing which word-formation rules are actively preferred by speakers in modern digital environments.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Statistical Distribution of Word-Formation Processes

The quantitative analysis of the 50-word corpus shows a clear structural preference for economy-driven, non-concatenative morphological mechanisms. Rather than relying on traditional lengthier processes, digital-native speakers heavily use truncation and compression to maximize communication speed. The exact distribution and relative productivity metrics of these identified word-formation processes are organized in Table 1 below:

**Table 1**

*Frequency and Relative Productivity of Word-Formation Processes in the Gen Z Corpus*

| **Morphological Process** | **Count (n)** | **Relative Productivity (%)** | **Core Empirical Examples from Corpus** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Clipping** | 15 | 30% | *Rizz* (from charisma), |

| Morphological Process | Count (n) | Relative Productivity (%) | Core Empirical Examples from Corpus |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | *Cap* (from capital), *Sus* (from suspicious) |
| **Blending** | 12 | 24% | *Brainrot* (brain + rot), *Staycation* (stay + vacation), *Glowup* (glow + up) |
| **Acronyms / Initialisms** | 10 | 20% | *IYKYK* (If You Know You Know), *FR* (For Real), *L* (Loss/Loser) |

| Morphological Process | Count (n) | Relative Productivity (%) | Core Empirical Examples from Corpus |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Semantic Shift** | 8 | 16% | *Ghost* (v., abruptly ending contact), *Tea* (n., exclusive gossip) |
| **Other Operations** *(Conversion/Affixation)* | 5 | 10% | *Gatekeeping* (Noun to Verb to Gerund), *Mid* (Clipped Adjective) |
| **Total Corpus Size** | **50** | **100%** | |

## 4.2 Discussion: The Drive for Linguistic Economy and Theoretical Synthesis

The clear dominance of clipping (30%) and blending (24%) within the collected corpus strongly supports the primary hypothesis: modern digital communication prioritizes structural economy. This structural compression directly aligns with Crystal's (2011) view of digital communication as a hybrid mode that bridges spoken immediacy with written conventions. In fast-paced, media-heavy environments like TikTok or Instagram, short monosyllabic items like *rizz* or *sus* offer high practical utility. They integrate easily into rapid verbal voiceovers, video text overlays, or character-limited captions. This structural compression meets the needs of an online culture where a term's value relies on instant recognition and rapid decoding.

Furthermore, these empirical distributions show how digital communication networks modify the traditional dimensions of morphological productivity described by Plag (2003) and Bauer (1983). In classical morphological theory, structural productivity is often limited by historical path dependencies, phonological constraints, and gradual, long-term sociolinguistic evaluation across an entire language base.

In the Gen Z digital ecosystem, however, the constraint of sociolinguistic evaluation operates through decentralized, peer-driven validation networks accelerated by platform algorithms like likes, shares, and views. When a newly coined term effectively signals an in-group identity or shared humor, its social capital allows it to bypass traditional, slow-moving linguistic filters. This accelerates its acceptance and spread within the global speech community.

It is also notable that semantic shift accounts for 16% of the corpus. This indicates that Gen Z's linguistic innovation relies on conceptual recontextualization alongside structural manipulation. Repurposing

established vocabulary items, such as shifting *tea* to mean exclusive gossip, or converting the noun *ghost* into a verb describing the abrupt ending of personal communication maintains high semantic transparency while providing an efficient sociolinguistic marker. Ultimately, the collected data indicates that complex concatenative processes, such as classical affixation, are frequently sidelined in informal digital registers. Instead, speakers demonstrate a clear preference for flexible, abbreviatory, and synthesizing processes that deliver maximum social and pragmatic impact with minimal structural density.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusion

This study investigated the morphological mechanisms through which Generation Z drives lexical innovation in contemporary lexical discourse, specifically measuring the relative productivity of these word-formation processes. By analyzing a targeted 50-word corpus collected from dominant digital spaces, including TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and X (formerly Twitter), this research provides empirical evidence that traditional morphological operations are actively adapting to the communicative and technological pressures of the digital era.

The quantitative findings reveal a clear hierarchy of productivity, led by clipping (30%) and blending (24%). This distribution confirms that linguistic innovation among digital natives is strongly guided by principles of economic optimization, brevity, and high-impact social signaling. Because digital communication continues to function as a hybrid medium that bridges spoken and written conventions (Crystal, 2011), Gen Z

speakers regularly use structural minimization and truncation to match the accelerated pace of online interactions.

Crucially, this research demonstrates that morphological productivity is an adaptive behavioral response rather than a static feature of grammar. The rapid spread of shortened terms like *rizz* or semantic adaptations like *tea* highlights how structural word-formation is bound to contemporary sociolinguistic evaluation (Azimova, 2025; Plag, 2003). In online spaces, traditional barriers to widespread morphological productivity are bypassed by algorithmic virality and peer-to-peer validation within globalized digital communities. Generation Z is not merely creating temporary slang; they are actively utilizing the structural rules of English morphology, showing that youth subcultures remain an active driver of contemporary language change in the 21st century.

## 5.2 Recommendations for Further Research

While this study outlines the structural features of Gen Z's contemporary vocabulary, the rapid evolution of digital platforms offers several avenues for ongoing academic inquiry. Based on these findings, the following areas are recommended for future research:

**Long-Term Lexicalization and Diachronic Stability:** Future research could implement longitudinal frameworks to trace which specific items from the current Gen Z corpus successfully transition into standardized English dictionaries (such as Oxford or Merriam-Webster) versus those that prove temporary and fall out of use. This would provide deeper insights into the structural thresholds required for a digital-native neologism to achieve permanent lexicographical entrenchment.

**Platform-Specific Morphological Variation:** A comparative analysis separating text-centric digital spaces (e.g., X, Reddit) from video-centric,

multimodal environments (e.g., TikTok, YouTube Shorts) could reveal whether the communication medium itself alters structural output. Such studies would help clarify if video-based delivery favors phonetic clipping and blending, whereas text-heavy platforms show a higher productivity of acronyms, initialisms, or orthographic variations.

**Sociolinguistic Subgroup Nuances:** To avoid treating Generation Z as an entirely uniform linguistic group, future studies could integrate sociolinguistic variables such as geographic region, socio-economic context, and intersecting cultural identities. Tracking how these productivity percentages fluctuate between different regional subcultures would clarify the development pathways of digital dialects.

**Pedagogical Implications in EFL/ESP Frameworks:** Given the global reach of digital networks, a practical line of inquiry should examine how the high frequency of these economy-driven words affects formal English language acquisition. As highlighted by Sultanbaeva et al. (2021), language markers function as immediate reflections of cultural and generational values. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) educational settings, such as those in Kosovo, understanding the structural gap between formal academic classrooms and digital-native registers can help educators develop updated materials for building sociolinguistic and communicative competence.

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# Technocratic Shield: How European Integration Stabilizes Managerial Autocracy in Albania

**Blendi Çeka**

*Department of Political Science, University of Tirana*

## Abstract

The 2025 parliamentary elections in Albania presented a notable empirical puzzle: citizens and voters expressing concern about the economy, the cost of living, and mass emigration nevertheless granted a qualified majority to the incumbent Socialist Party (PS). Drawing on data from the Euronews Albania Barometer (November 2024), the 2023 Census, Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index, and the official results of the 2025 elections, this paper argues that Albania has consolidated into what may be characterized as a "managerial hybrid regime." In contrast to autocracies that distance themselves from Western integration, the Albanian model has incorporated it. The opening of negotiation cluster-chapters with the European Union has provided an "external shield," positioning the government as a competent "state-builder" and complicating domestic critique on corruption. This mechanism has split the electorate into a domestic base associated with "competitive clientelism," and a newly enfranchised diaspora oriented toward the technocratic image of European integration. The findings suggest that EU conditionality, when narrowed to technical indicators, may inadvertently support incumbent authoritarian powers by granting them a privileged position in international legitimacy.

**Keywords:** Managerial hybrid regimes; technocratic legitimacy; competitive clientelism; Europeanization; split legitimacy; diaspora voting; state capture.

## 1. Introduction: The Paradox of the "Poor Hegemon"

The third decade of the twenty-first century has been associated with a noticeable contraction of democratic practice in several regions (Krastev & Holmes, 2019; Levitsky & Way, 2010). In the Western Balkans, democratic backsliding has often followed a familiar script: an illiberal nationalist leader positions the European Union as an antagonist, draws on ethnonational grievance, and treats accession as a transactional burden. The Albanian case in 2025 departs from this script in an important respect. The ruling Socialist Party did not consolidate its supermajority against Brussels; it consolidated it through Brussels.

The puzzle is empirical. Six months before the vote, the Euronews Albania Barometer captured a population reporting considerable concern about national conditions: opposition-aligned voters rated the national economy at 2.0 on a 1–4 scale, the non-aligned "grey electorate" rated the country's overall direction at 2.7, and the 2023 Census indicated that the population had contracted to roughly 2.40 million, with the largest reductions among working-age private-sector cohorts (INSTAT, 2024). Under standard assumptions of economic voting, twelve years of incumbency combined with this profile of dissatisfaction would typically be associated with an alternation of power. Instead, the Socialist Party received 53.3 percent of the vote and 83 of 140 parliamentary seats — its largest margin since the end of the single-party period in 1991.

This paper develops the case for a Managerial Hybrid Regime sustained by split legitimacy. The argument proceeds descriptively across the proceedings format: section 2 sets out the conceptual framework; section 3 outlines the structural context of the 2025 vote; section 4 describes the data; section 5 presents the descriptive findings on economic perception,

institutional trust, leadership profiles, crisis authority, and the diaspora; section 6 considers the implications for European Union enlargement policy.

## 2. Conceptual Framework: Split Legitimacy

A common theoretical lens for Western Balkan democratic regression has been the concept of stabilitocracy (Bieber, 2018; Pavlović, 2017) — a configuration in which a government provides external stability and basic cooperation with Brussels while domestic democratic standards stagnate or decline, with Western actors accepting this trade-off for reasons of geopolitical reliability. The Albanian case shares features of this model but extends it in a particular direction. Rather than receiving Western indulgence passively, the incumbents appear to draw on European integration as a domestic governing resource (cf. Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; Vachudova, 2005). EU clusters, Commission reports, and Council decisions are not treated as external constraints to be managed quietly; they are integrated into the day-to-day legitimation script of the ruling party.

This paper characterizes the configuration as a Managerial Hybrid Regime, sustained by a mechanism here termed split legitimacy. In established democracies, legitimacy is largely unitary: governments derive authority from domestic electoral competition. In the managerial hybrid, legitimacy is divided into two spheres that operate according to different logics.

- **The Technocratic Shield.** Externally, the government draws moral authority from technical alignment with the West — the opening of EU clusters, positive screening reports, high-level summits, and partnership with bodies such as SPAK (the Special Structure against Corruption). This sphere produces a steady

stream of legible international validation that can be drawn upon in response to domestic critique.

- **The Clientelist Machine.** Internally, support is organized through competitive clientelism. In a context of demographic contraction and a weakened private sector, the state becomes a primary provider of economic stability: public salaries, pensions, licences, and administrative favours organize political loyalty along lines that Grzymala-Busse (2007) characterizes as party–state exploitation (see also Innes, 2014).

These two spheres appear to reinforce each other. The Technocratic Shield provides the symbolic resources that reframe partisan consolidation as "state-building"; the Clientelist Machine translates that framing into electoral dominance among a shrinking, more dependent electorate. The result is what this paper describes as a Competence Premium at the voter level: even citizens who are economically pessimistic may still support the incumbents because they perceive them as the more credible managers of the state apparatus on which their livelihoods partly depend.

Three contrasts may help clarify what is distinctive about this regime type. Compared with Orbán's Hungary, the Albanian managerial hybrid does not draw on illiberal nationalism: the EU is positioned not as a cultural opponent but as a primary arbiter of competence. Compared with Vučić's Serbia, the government does not rely on anti-Western framing but, instead, mobilizes pro-Western technocracy. Compared with the technocratic populisms of Southern Europe (Müller, 2016), it lacks a developed anti-elite narrative — the incumbents are the establishment, and the claim is not that elites must be removed but that they alone are equipped to manage the technical demands of accession.

## 3. Context: The Structural Anatomy of the 2025 Vote

### 3.1 A decade of "state-building"

Since 2013, the Socialist Party has framed its mandate as a foundational state-building project. Visible early initiatives — campaigns against electricity theft, removal of illegal coastal construction, the 2014 territorial-administrative reform that reduced local government units from 373 to 61 — signalled order-making as a central component of managerial legitimacy. A pivotal turn came in 2016 with the constitutionally anchored Justice Reform, passed unanimously under significant US and EU pressure. The vetting of judges and prosecutors and the creation of SPAK were intended as a cornerstone of rule-of-law alignment with the European Union. In practice, the prolonged institutional gap during vetting (2018–2020) reduced judicial oversight at a time when executive authority was expanding (cf. Hellman, 1998), and the anti-corruption agenda became closely associated with the governing elite rather than with pluralistic accountability (see Magyar, 2016).

### 3.2 Demographic contraction

The 2023 Census recorded a population of approximately 2.40 million — some 420,000 fewer residents than in 2011 (INSTAT, 2024). Emigration disproportionately affected younger cohorts and private-sector workers. The electorate that remained behind is, on average, older, more cautious, and more reliant on state-mediated income: roughly 185,000 public-administration employees and around 690,000 pensioners came to represent a larger share of the voting pool. Households increasingly rely on a combination of one public-sector salary, one pension, and remittances rather than on independent market incomes. Under these conditions,

elections tend to focus less on choices among policy alternatives and more on the preservation of existing economic arrangements.

### 3.3 Constraints on the opposition

The 2025 election cannot be fully understood without reference to the judicialization of the opposition. The historic leader of the Democratic Party, Sali Berisha, was designated persona non grata by the United States in 2021, contributing to a three-year internal conflict in the party between Euro-Atlantic and sovereigntist factions. By the campaign's opening weeks, Berisha was under house arrest and the former President and leader of the Freedom Party, Ilir Meta, was in detention. The visual contrast — the incumbent in Brussels, the opposition in court — reinforced the managerial narrative and produced what this paper describes as a moral asymmetry: the government appeared as a partner of the West, while the opposition appeared as a subject of Western scrutiny (see ODIHR/OSCE, 2025; Freedom House, 2025).

### 3.4 The accession calendar as campaign script

The twelve months leading to the May 2025 vote were marked by an unusual synchronization between Tirana and Brussels. Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) opened in October 2024; Cluster 6 (External Relations) followed in December 2024; Cluster 2 (Internal Market) opened on 14 April 2025, during the campaign; and Cluster 3 (Competitiveness) was approved by the EU Council on 8 May 2025, in the election week (European Commission, 2025). The sequence continued on 16 May 2025 — five days after the vote — when Tirana hosted the sixth meeting of the European Political Community, gathering more than forty heads of state (Council of the European Union, 2025). The returning incumbents thus appeared on the European stage in the immediate post-election period.

## 4. Data

The analysis draws on four sources, in line with the data combination announced in the abstract. First, the Euronews Albania Barometer (Wave 2, November 2024) provides public-opinion data from a stratified random probability sample of N = 1,000 respondents aged 18 and over, with a margin of error of ±3.1 percent at the 95 percent confidence level (Euronews Albania, 2024). Fieldwork was conducted between 10 and 20 November 2024 via Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI), with stratification by region, gender, and age in line with 2023 Census parameters.

Second, the analysis uses the official precinct-level results of the 11 May 2025 parliamentary elections published by the Central Election Commission (KQZ), which for the first time include out-of-country voting and therefore allow a direct descriptive comparison between domestic and diaspora electorates. Third, the 2023 Population and Housing Census published by INSTAT (2024) provides demographic context. Fourth, institutional benchmarks are drawn from Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2025), the European Commission's 2025 Albania Report (European Commission, 2025), and the ODIHR/OSCE Final Report on the 2025 elections (ODIHR/OSCE, 2025).

## 5. Descriptive Findings: The Architecture of Hegemony

### 5.1 The pocketbook split

The Euronews Albania Barometer data point to a structural divergence between voters' perception of the national economy and the situation of their own household — a pattern that aligns with the abstract's observation that voters concerned about the macro-economy nonetheless supported the

incumbent. Across the full sample, respondents rated the national economy at 2.52 on a 1–4 scale but their family economy at 3.04 — a gap of half a point in favor of the private household. The pattern is more pronounced for the politically pivotal grey electorate, where national pessimism (2.45) co-exists with relative private stability (3.15), producing the widest gap of any voter group (+0.70).

This pattern is consistent with a survivalist electorate. Voters appear to view the macro-system as underperforming but to vote in ways that preserve the micro-stability of their own household — typically a state salary, pension, or licence. The "grey electorate" do not appear as enthusiasts of the government; their assessment of the country is rather negative. Their relative comfort at home likely reflects structural dependency, and their vote may be read as a defensive choice rather than as an endorsement.

**Table 1. The Pocketbook Gap, by voter affiliation**

| Voter Group | National Economy (Q2) | Family Economy (Q3) | Survival Gap |
|---|---|---|---|
| Socialist Party (PS) | 3.12 | 3.42 | +0.30 |

| Voter Group | National Economy (Q2) | Family Economy (Q3) | Survival Gap |
|---|---|---|---|
| Democratic Party (PD) | 2.01 | 2.55 | +0.54 |
| Grey Electorate | 2.45 | 3.15 | +0.70 |
| **Total Population** | **2.52** | **3.04** | **+0.52** |

*Source: Euronews Albania Barometer (November 2024), N = 1,000. Scale 1 (very bad) – 4 (very good).*

## 5.2 The displacement of trust

A notable feature of the managerial state is the outward displacement of institutional trust. The Euronews Albania Barometer asked respondents to rate seventeen institutions on a 1–10 trust scale. The hierarchy that emerges is steep: international actors sit at the top, followed by justice institutions modelled on Western templates; domestic representative bodies sit at the bottom. The US Embassy receives a mean trust score of 6.62 and the EU Delegation 6.45; SPAK, the new anti-corruption prosecution, follows closely at 6.22. Parliament records a mean trust of 4.02, and political parties 3.49 — meaning Albanians on average report trust in the EU Delegation that is roughly twice the level reported for their own elected parties.

This gap creates the conditions for what the abstract refers to as the external shield. When the trusted external actors validate the government — by opening a cluster or co-signing a reform — their endorsement tends to carry disproportionate weight relative to domestic criticism. A

government aligned with the top of the trust hierarchy can position the opposition as being aligned against it, somewhat independently of the substance of the critique.

**Table 2. The Institutional Trust Hierarchy**

| Rank | Institution | Category | Trust Score (1–10) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | US Embassy | International | 6.62 |
| 2 | EU Delegation | International | 6.45 |
| 3 | SPAK (Special Prosecution) | Hybrid / Justice | 6.22 |
| 4 | State Police | Executive | 5.84 |
| 5 | Religious Institutions | Civil Society | 5.70 |
| … | … | … | … |
| 16 | Parliament | Domestic Rep. | 4.02 |
| 17 | Political Parties | Domestic Rep. | 3.49 |

*Source: Euronews Albania Barometer (November 2024), N = 1,000. Mean trust on a 1–10 scale.*

## 5.3 The Competence Premium: managers versus neighbours

To distinguish affection from technocratic respect, the survey instrument deployed two projective questions about the same leaders. The first asked respondents whether they would leave their house keys with the leader — a measure of personal, affective trust. The second asked whether they

would hire the figure to manage their company — a measure of perceived managerial competence.

The pattern is informative. Prime Minister Edi Rama records an affective-trust score of 28.8 percent but a managerial score of 34.4 percent — a Competence Premium of +5.6 percentage points. Respondents report being more inclined to entrust him with the management of assets than to interact with him in a personal context. The historic opposition leader, Sali Berisha, ranks lowest on both metrics and shows no premium (+0.3 points), which suggests that the electorate does not currently perceive the traditional opposition as a likely governing alternative. The newcomer Adriatik Lapaj records the highest premium (+5.8 points), though from a smaller base, suggesting that the more plausible challenge to the managerial state in the eyes of the electorate comes from a figure framed as competent rather than from one framed primarily in ideological terms.

**Table 3. The Competence Premium**

| Political Figure | Affective Trust (House Keys) | Technocratic Trust (Hire as Manager) | Managerial Gap |
|---|---|---|---|
| Edi Rama (Incumbent) | 28.8% | 34.4% | +5.6% |
| Adriatik Lapaj (New) | 16.0% | 21.8% | +5.8% |
| Sali Berisha (Opposition) | 14.1% | 14.4% | +0.3% |

*Source: Euronews Albania Barometer (November 2024), N = 1,000.*

## 5.4 Crisis authority and the paternalistic equilibrium

When the question shifts from peacetime governance to existential security, the configuration shifts from managerial to paternalistic. The Euronews Albania Barometer asked respondents whom they would want in charge in the event of war. Edi Rama's support rises from 28.8 percent on the personal-trust measure to 43.7 percent on the war scenario — a Fear Premium of close to 15 percentage points. Notably, the "nobody / don't know" category declines by 13 points: the existential frame appears to push undecided respondents toward a choice, and they tend to default to the incumbent.

The opposition becomes more fragmented under the same pressure. The traditional opposition leader remains broadly stable, while the newcomer registers a Flight-to-Safety reduction of 2.5 points: respondents who consider an untested figure in peacetime appear less inclined to do so under conditions of crisis, returning to the more familiar option. The two main opposition figures end the war scenario at very similar levels (13.7 versus 13.5 percent), leaving the incumbent as the most prominent figure on the security dimension.

**Table 4. The Paternalistic Equilibrium — the Fear Premium**

| Political Figure | Normal Trust (House Keys) | Crisis Authority (War Scenario) | Rally Effect |
|---|---|---|---|
| Edi Rama (Incumbent) | 28.8% | 43.7% | +14.9% |
| Sali Berisha (Old Opp.) | 14.1% | 13.7% | −0.4% |
| Adriatik Lapaj (New Opp.) | 16.0% | 13.5% | −2.5% |
| Nobody / Don't Know | 41.1% | 28.1% | −13.0% |

*Source: Euronews Albania Barometer (November 2024), N = 1,000.*

## 5.5 The diaspora verdict

The newly enfranchised diaspora vote provides something close to a natural comparison — and offers a way to consider the abstract's claim that the diaspora was oriented toward the technocratic image of integration rather than toward clientelist dependency. Domestic voters operate within the Clientelist Machine: exposed to administrative pressure, dependent on state-mediated income, and confronted daily with the friction of governance. Diaspora voters, by contrast, encounter Albania primarily as a digital image of tourism, reform, and EU summits.

If domestic incumbent support were primarily the product of clientelism and administrative pressure, one might expect diaspora support for the Socialist Party to be lower than domestic support. The data point in the

opposite direction. The Socialist Party received 52.17 percent of the domestic vote and 61.14 percent of the diaspora vote — a divergence of +8.97 percentage points in favour of the diaspora. The Democratic Party received 32.91 percent at home and 23.55 percent abroad. The newcomer Adriatik Lapaj more than doubled his share in the diaspora (3.51 → 7.40 percent).

This pattern is more consistent with the Technocratic Shield than with a clientelism-only account. Diaspora voters, encountering the government as a brand rather than operating inside its administrative apparatus, leaned toward the managerial options (the incumbent and the most credibly managerial newcomer) and were less supportive of the traditional opposition. The implication is worth noting: even setting aside the clientelist apparatus, the managerial narrative appears to generate electoral support.

**Table 5. The Diaspora Divergence**

| Political Subject | Domestic Vote Share | Diaspora Vote Share | Divergence |
|---|---|---|---|
| Socialist Party (PS) | 52.17% | 61.14% | +8.97% |
| Democratic Party (PD) | 32.91% | 23.55% | −9.36% |
| Nisma Shqipëria Bëhet (Lapaj) | 3.51% | 7.40% | +3.89% |

*Source: Central Election Commission of Albania (KQZ), Official Results, May 2025.*

## 6. Discussion: How the Shield Translates into Votes

Taken together, the descriptive evidence allows the paper to outline, step by step, how the external shield discussed in the abstract may be associated with electoral support. The sequence does not rest on any single causal claim; it is a layered process that the data make legible.

It begins with the trust hierarchy. Before any new EU decision is taken, the information environment is already tilted: the EU Delegation, the US Embassy, and SPAK report substantially higher credibility than Parliament or political parties. What "Europe" says about Albania therefore tends to carry more weight in the average voter's assessment than what the opposition says about the government.

Against this background, the cluster methodology produces a steady flow of discrete, communicable validation events: screening reports, the opening of Cluster 1 (Fundamentals), Cluster 2 (Internal Market), Cluster 3 (Competitiveness), and the choreography around the European Political Community summit (European Commission, 2025; Council of the European Union, 2025). Each step is modest in legal terms but legible in political terms, and they accumulate at relatively high frequency during the campaign window.

The governing party then tends to present these technical milestones in broader terms. A cluster opening may be framed as a verdict on the government's integrity; a positive Commission paragraph may be presented as a counter to allegations of state capture. In this rhetorical structure, opposition critiques can be re-presented as challenges to the EU and the United States rather than to the incumbents — a position that the trust data suggest the electorate is generally not inclined to adopt. This framing operates against a backdrop of persistent corruption indicators:

Transparency International's 2024 CPI scored Albania at 37/100 (Transparency International, 2025), a finding that the steady flow of cluster validations appears to soften in domestic discourse. Cross-national democracy indices have likewise recorded a downward trajectory in several procedural dimensions (V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Finally, for voters embedded in the Clientelist Machine, this framing interacts with material vulnerability. They are pessimistic about the country (Table 1) but feel relatively secure about their own household if existing arrangements are preserved. The Technocratic Shield reduces the perceived risk of remaining with the incumbent and increases the perceived risk of change. The Competence Premium (Table 3) and the Fear Premium (Table 4) are visible at the individual-leader level. The Diaspora Divergence (Table 5) suggests that the narrative is associated with electoral support even where the clientelist apparatus does not reach.

The result is a relatively stable equilibrium that does not require an enthusiastic electorate. It requires a structurally dependent one, a fragmented and judicialized opposition, and a steady supply of external endorsements that the incumbents are positioned to draw upon. This pattern is in line with the abstract's suggestion that EU conditionality, when narrowed to technical indicators, may inadvertently support incumbent authoritarian powers.

## 7. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Albania's 2025 election is not fully captured by economic-voting models, linear Europeanization, or generic stabilitocracy. Albania has consolidated into what may be characterized as a Managerial Hybrid Regime, sustained by a mechanism of split legitimacy. Internationally, the government draws on the procedural validation produced by the EU cluster framework,

complemented by US and EU diplomatic engagement. Domestically, it is supported by a competitive clientelism that operates with force in a shrinking, state-dependent electorate. The two spheres appear to reinforce each other, and the diaspora pattern suggests that the technocratic narrative is associated with electoral support independently of the clientelist apparatus.

The implications are challenging for the more optimistic assumptions of EU enlargement policy. A conditionality regime narrowed to technical benchmarks can be selectively engaged with: the government can highlight the opening of a chapter while consolidation of judicial, media, and administrative institutions continues with limited external constraint (Dimitrova, 2018). The cluster methodology, designed to make accession more rigorous, may also function as a generator of symbolic resources that the incumbent is well positioned to draw upon. EU institutions concerned with democratic substance, rather than only with legislative alignment, may wish to consider how their procedural communications are received in the domestic political contest — and to develop benchmarks that take into account the conditions under which an opposition can function, including limits on selective judicialization, equitable access to administrative resources, and meaningful media pluralism.

For domestic opposition forces, the proposition is equally clear. Critique focused primarily on corruption may be of limited effect when the electorate already perceives the national economy as underperforming but votes in any case to preserve household arrangements. Engaging with the Competence Monopoly may require articulating a credible, detailed claim to governing capacity along the same European trajectory — presenting an alternative profile as managers rather than only as critics. For civil society,

a possible task is to broaden the framing of Europe, treating accession as a field of democratic contestation rather than as the project of a single incumbent.

Without such recalibrations, Albania risks remaining in what is here called the paternalistic equilibrium: citizens who feel economically insecure repeatedly renew the mandate of a managerial elite, not necessarily out of satisfaction but in the perceived absence of a safer alternative. In that equilibrium, the Managerial State may continue to operate as a technocratic shield that limits both domestic accountability and the broader democratizing potential of European integration — in line with the puzzle set out at the start of this paper.

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# FAMILY AS A SOCIALIZING AND PREVENTIVE FACTOR OF VIOLENT BEHAVIOR IN YOUNG PEOPLE

**Prof. Asoc. Dr. Blerina Hamzallari[1]**

**Phd. Candidate Doralda Tanellari[2*]**

[1] University of Tirana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, Tirana, Albania.

[*2] University of Tirana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, Tirana, Albania.

blerina.hamzallari@unitir.edu.al

[*]*doralda_tanellari.fshsutdr@unitir.edu.al*

## ABSTRACT

Exposure of young people to violent behaviors has become an increasingly relevant social concern, particularly in societies experiencing social and economic transition. Violence encountered during adolescence whether directly experienced, observed within family or school environments, or mediated through digital spaces, can significantly influence young people's emotional well-being, social relationships, educational engagement, and future participation in society. Understanding the social contexts that shape these experiences is essential for promoting equity and sustainable human development. This study explores the role of family as central socialization institution in shaping young people's exposure to violent behaviors and in supporting preventive processes. The purpose of this paper is to explore how family dynamics and family support perform

as protective factors or as conditions that may increase vulnerability to violence. Special attention is paid to the ways in which family environment, family relationships, communication patterns, emotional and practical support contribute to the formation of young people's social behaviors. The methodology is based on a qualitative analytical approach, combining theoretical analysis and document review. The study draws on academic literature, international reports, and policy frameworks related to youth, violence prevention, education, and social development. The analysis is guided by social learning theory and the ecological model of human development.

This paper aims to contribute to the critical reflection of the role of the family as an environment with dual importance in the lives of young people, both as a socializer of violent behaviors and as a preventer of them. It seeks to inform future research, family-centered community training and intervention, social policies focused on prevention, youth empowerment, and the advancement of human development in contexts marked by inequality and social change.

**Keywords:** youth violence, family, socialization, prevention, social equity, human development

## 1. Introduction

### *1.1. Background and context*

Violence among young people has emerged as a significant social, educational, and public health concern in numerous regions worldwide. In recent decades, researchers and policymakers have increasingly focused on the factors influencing aggressive behavior during adolescence and the

social environments in which such behaviors arise (Krahé, B. 2020:334; Malvaso, C. G., et al. 2022; European Union, 2018). According to Andrews et al. (2021) adolescence constitutes a particularly sensitive stage of human development, marked by rapid biological changes, emotional variability, and the gradual formation of identity, during which individuals negotiate independence, redefine familial relationships, and establish stronger connections with peers and broader social networks. These developmental processes present both opportunities for positive growth and vulnerabilities that may elevate the risk of behavioral difficulties.

Within this complex developmental stage, the environments in which adolescents grow and interact play a crucial role in shaping their attitudes, emotional responses, and behavioral patterns. Family relationships, school environments, peer groups, and increasingly digital spaces all contribute to the socialization processes that influence young people's understanding of conflict, cooperation, and acceptable forms of behavior (Ingram, K. M., et al., 2020; Andrews, J. L., et al. 2021; Turanovic, J. J., 2022). Among these influences, the family remains one of the most significant contexts for early learning and social development. The ways in which parents communicate with their children, manage conflicts, and establish boundaries often become important reference points that guide adolescents' future interactions with others.

A systematic review of the literature study on factors that expose youth to violence reflect several levels of analysis that consider individual factors; peer, school, family factors; and neighborhood factors. Youth who live in strong family connections and supportive family environments during adolescence are significantly less likely to engage in violent or delinquent behaviors (Turanovic, J. J. 2022:S16-S17). Parental

monitoring, open communication, and emotional support have consistently been identified as key protective factors that contribute to healthy adolescent development and reduce exposure to risk behaviors (Steinberg, 2001). When adolescents feel understood and supported by their parents, they are more likely to seek guidance when facing social pressures and conflicts. In the opposite perspective, researchers Ingram, et al. (2020) and Herrenkohl et al. (2022) demonstrate that early experiences of adolescents and young people in families that manifest violence in any of its forms and at different levels of family relationships increase the chance of being associated with future violent behaviors by young people throughout the life course.

The Albanian social context provides an important setting for examining these dynamics. Over the past three decades, Albania has experienced profound social and economic transformations that have affected many aspects of everyday life, including family structures and parenting practices. Processes such as urbanization, labor migration, and economic transition have reshaped traditional family roles and communication patterns. In many cases, families have had to adapt to new social realities, including long periods of parental absence due to migration or increased economic pressures. These changes have inevitably influenced the social experiences of young people and the ecology of social environments in which they grow up.Reports from international organizations suggest that exposure to violence among children and adolescents continues to represent a concern in many regions, including the Western Balkans (UNICEF, 2021; World Health Organization, 2020). While legislative frameworks and child protection policies have improved in recent years, social norms and family practices remain important factors

that influence children's everyday experiences. Zenelaga and Hamzallari (2018:121) bring to attention the role of the family and family relationships as determining factors of violent behavior and youth deviance also in the Albanian context, highlighting the role of family instability in the violent behavior of young people. Understanding how family environments can act as protective factors against violent behavior is, therefore, essential for developing effective prevention strategies and policies that support both families and young people. It is evident that in the literature of studies in the Albanian context exist lack of empirical studies considering the role of the family as a factor in the prevention of violent behavior and in healthy socialization. This paper can serve as an indication for the promotion of empirical research in the field.

### *1.2.Research problem and objectives*

In light of these considerations, the objective of this paper is to explore the role of family dynamics as both a socializing institution and a preventive factor in shaping adolescents' attitudes and behaviors related to violence. By examining existing theoretical perspectives and empirical research, the study aims to contribute to broader discussions on youth development, family support systems, and violence prevention strategies. In doing so, the paper seeks to highlight the importance of strengthening family environments as part of comprehensive approaches to promoting healthy adolescent development and building safer and more supportive communities.

### *1.3. Theoretical relevance*

Social learning theory suggests that individuals acquire behaviors not only through direct instruction but also through observation and imitation of significant others within their environment. According to Bandura (1971:28, 30), children often model their behavior after the actions of parents or caregivers, particularly when those behaviors appear effective or socially accepted. When young people observe constructive communication, emotional support, and peaceful conflict resolution within the family, they are more likely to internalize similar approaches in their own relationships. In contrast, repeated exposure to hostility, aggression, or inconsistent discipline may contribute to the normalization of aggressive responses to interpersonal challenges.

According to Cosme (2021), classical studies and empirical evidence even today demonstrate the link between social observation, especially among young people, and aggressive behavior, underlining the importance of the theory of learning violent behavior from our environments of real or virtual interaction. The family is therefore widely recognized as the primary institution of "face to face" socialization where children first learn values, norms, and behavioral expectations that guide their participation in society. Through everyday interactions, parental guidance, and emotional support, families play a crucial role in fostering the development of empathy, emotional self-regulation, and social responsibility. As in Mead's theory on the creation of the self as a social process, the role of the family is emphasized as the first level of influence in the creation of the concept of self and society (look at: Newman, B. M., & Newman, P. R. 2018: 253-254). Parents play an important role in helping children understand how to manage frustration, express emotions appropriately, and build respectful relationships with others. When

families create environments characterized by warmth, trust, and open communication, they provide a strong foundation for healthy emotional and social development. However, not all family environments offer the same level of support. Family contexts marked by conflict, neglect, or inconsistent parenting practices may increase the likelihood that adolescents will struggle with emotional regulation and social adaptation. Studies have shown that exposure to family conflict, harsh disciplinary practices, or lack of parental supervision can increase the risk of aggressive and antisocial behavior among adolescents (Wei, Z. 2024)). These findings underline the importance of examining family dynamics not only as a source of guidance and protection but also as a potential context in which negative behavioral patterns may develop.

Ecological perspectives on human development further highlight the importance of family relationships in shaping children's behavioral outcomes. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasizes that human development takes place within a set of interconnected environments that influence one another (Bronfenbrenner, U., 1979). Systematic reviews of the literature on adverse childhood experiences consider individual factors; peer, school, and family factors; and neighborhood factors, which need to be considered by ecologically informed approaches to prevention and intervention in which different levels of influence, and the interaction between risk factors from these different levels, are considered (Malvaso et al. 2022: 1687). According to socio-ecological theory, the family is one of the microsystems with immediate and direct impact on young people and adolescents. The influences of life processes within the family guide the actions of young people at other levels of social ecology such as the mesosystem,

exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, causing their behaviors to be created as a combination of factors from different levels (look at: Paat, Y.-F., et al., 2025). Within this framework, the family represents the most immediate and influential context in which children develop their emotional and social competencies. Supportive family relationships can therefore act as protective factors that reduce the likelihood of violent behavior among young people by fostering emotional security and positive social norms.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative analytical research design based on the systematic review and synthesis of existing literature related to youth violence, family socialization, and preventive strategies. The research follows an interpretative analytical approach, as outlined by Kadyschuk, L. (2023) using qualitative data through this method enables understanding of the focused topic through an empathetic and responsive process. In this sense, in this article we can examine numerous theoretical and empirical contributions within the field of the role of the family in youth development and the role of the family in youth exposure to violent behavior. By analyzing existing studies, the research seeks to build a broader understanding of how family relationships influence young people's emotional development, social interactions, and vulnerability to violent behavior.

The study draws on multiple sources of academic and institutional knowledge. These include peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and reports produced by international organizations addressing youth

violence, family dynamics, and adolescent development. Particular attention was given to studies indexed in widely recognized academic databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar, which provide access to high-quality empirical research and theoretical contributions from various disciplines.

The literature reviewed in this study focuses on several interconnected areas of research. Theoretical perspectives on social learning and behavioral learning are examined to provide a conceptual framework for understanding how family interactions influence adolescents' development. In this context, social learning theory, developed by Bandura (1971), explains how individuals acquire behaviors through observation and imitation of significant others within their social environment. Similarly, ecological systems theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights the complex interaction between individual development and broader social environments, emphasizing the role of family as the most immediate context influencing children's behavioral outcomes.

The analytical process involved identifying recurring themes across literature related to family communication patterns, parental supervision and monitoring, emotional support, and exposure to conflict or violence within family environments. Through thematic analysis, the study examines how these factors operate either as protective mechanisms that promote resilience and positive development or as risk factors that may increase adolescents' vulnerability to aggressive behavior. This thematic approach allows for a deeper exploration of the ways in which family environments contribute to shaping adolescents' social attitudes and behavioral responses. Another important aspect of the methodology

involves the integration of knowledge from multiple academic disciplines. Research on youth violence and adolescent development often spans several fields, including psychology, sociology, education, and criminology. By bringing together insights from these different disciplines, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex processes that influence young people's development and behavior.

Ethical considerations were respected throughout the research process. The study relies exclusively on publicly available academic literature and previously published research. The research complies with established ethical standards set forth in social science research, including responsible use of academic resources and respect for ownership. While this methodological approach allows for a broad synthesis of existing research, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. Because the study is based on secondary sources rather than original empirical data, it may not fully capture the diversity of family experiences across different cultural and social contexts. Future research could expand upon these findings by conducting field-based studies.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

The literature reviewed in this article consistently highlights the central role of family environments in shaping the social, emotional, and behavioral development of young people (Zenelaga, B. & Hamzallari, B. 2018; Krahé, B., 2020; Andrews, J. L., 2021; Malvaso, C. G. et al., 2022). From the earliest stages of childhood, families represent the primary context in which children begin to understand social norms, communication styles, and ways of responding to interpersonal challenges.

Through everyday interactions with parents and caregivers, children gradually develop their understanding of acceptable behavior, emotional expression, and conflict resolution. These early experiences often form the foundation upon which adolescents build their relationships with peers, teachers, and other authority figures (Ingram, K. M., et al. 2020; Turanovic, J. J. 2022; Wei, Z., 2024;). Family environments, therefore, play a crucial role not only in supporting positive youth development but also in shaping attitudes toward aggression and cooperation. When families provide consistent emotional support, constructive communication, and clear behavioral guidance, they create conditions that promote empathy, trust, and respect for others. Conversely, when family relationships are characterized by conflict, neglect, or inconsistent parenting practices, young people may struggle to develop healthy emotional regulation and social skills.

One of the most influential theoretical perspectives explaining behavioral development within family environments is social learning theory. According to Bandura's social learning theory (1971) and Cosme, G. (2021), individuals learn behaviors not only through direct instruction but also through observation and imitation of the people around them. Children are particularly sensitive to the behaviors of parents and caregivers, who often serve as their most important role models. When children observe constructive communication, respectful dialogue, and peaceful conflict resolution within their family environments, they are more likely to replicate these patterns in their own social interactions. However, the same learning mechanisms can also contribute to the transmission of aggressive behavior when children are exposed to hostility or domestic conflict. Research has demonstrated that children who grow up in environments

where violence or aggressive communication is common may begin to perceive such behavior as a normal or acceptable way of responding to disagreements. Over time, this normalization of aggression can influence adolescents' attitudes toward peers and authority figures, increasing the likelihood of aggressive or antisocial behavior (Herrenkohl, T. I.et al., 2012; Herrenkohl, T. I. et al. 2022). These findings underline the importance of understanding family environments as both potential protective spaces and contexts in which negative behavioral patterns may emerge.

Another key factor emphasized in literature is the importance of emotional attachment between parents and children. Developmental research highlights that strong emotional bonds and secure attachment relationships contribute significantly to the development of empathy, emotional stability, and social competence among adolescents (Espejo-Siles, R., et al., 2020). When young people feel emotionally supported and valued by their parents, they are more likely to develop a sense of security and confidence that supports healthy social development. Secure attachment relationships also help adolescents develop better coping strategies when facing stress, peer pressure, or interpersonal conflicts (Malti, T., 2020).

Parental monitoring and involvement represent additional protective factors frequently identified in research on youth development. Studies indicate that adolescents who perceive their parents as attentive, supportive, and engaged in their daily lives demonstrate lower levels of aggression and higher levels of psychological well-being (Steinberg, 2001). Active parental involvement may include monitoring adolescents' activities, maintaining open communication about challenges they face,

and providing guidance in decision-making processes. When parents remain actively involved in their children's lives, they create opportunities for dialogue that help adolescents navigate complex social situations.

Large-scale empirical research further supports the protective role of strong family relationships. Parent-child relationships are consistently shown in studies to be important in shaping behavior in young people. Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health show that adolescents who report strong emotional connections with their parents are significantly less likely to engage in violent behavior, substance abuse, or other risky activities (Resnick et al., 1997). These findings suggest that the quality of family relationships may play an even more important role in adolescent well-being than certain structural factors such as socioeconomic status or neighborhood conditions. Evidence-based research reports consistently highlight the role of creating supportive family environments as a key factor in intervention strategies to prevent youth exposure to violence (David-Ferdon, C., 2016). As Kumpfer, K. L. et al. (2020) underline, research evidence points to the role of parenting in preventing violent behavior in youth, and intervention strategies in family-focused programs aim to improve parenting skills. International organizations have also highlighted the importance of strengthening family environments as part of broader youth violence prevention strategies. Reports from the World Health Organization emphasize that family-based prevention programs can significantly reduce risk factors associated with youth violence when they promote positive parenting practices, emotional communication, and supportive family relationships (World Health Organization, 2020). Parenting education programs, family counseling services, and community support initiatives can improve parents' ability to

manage conflicts constructively and support their children's emotional development.

Overall, the literature reviewed in this study demonstrates that youth violence cannot be understood solely as an individual behavioral problem. Instead, it must be examined within the broader social environments in which young people grow and interact. Families play a central role in shaping these environments by providing emotional support, guidance, and behavioral models that influence adolescents' development. Strengthening family support mechanisms and promoting positive parenting practices can therefore play a crucial role in promoting healthy social development and reducing the risk of violent behavior among young people. These findings also highlight the importance of adopting prevention strategies that involve multiple social institutions. While families represent the primary environment for early socialization, schools, community organizations, and social services also play essential roles in supporting young people and reinforcing positive behavioral norms. When these institutions work together, they create supportive social environments that help adolescents develop constructive social skills, emotional resilience, and responsible citizenship.

## 4. Conclusion

The family continues to play a fundamental role in shaping the behavioral development, emotional well-being, and social values of young people. As the earliest and most immediate environment in which children learn how to interact with others, the family strongly influences how adolescents understand conflict, regulate their emotions, and develop attitudes toward aggression or cooperation. From everyday conversations

at home to the ways parents respond to disagreements or challenges, young people are constantly observing and internalizing patterns of behavior. These daily interactions create the foundation upon which adolescents build their understanding of relationships, authority, and social responsibility. For this reason, the family remains one of the most important contexts for understanding both the roots of violent behavior and the mechanisms through which such behavior can be prevented.

The findings of this study highlight that family environments characterized by warmth, trust, and open communication can function as powerful protective factors against youth violence. Adolescents who grow up in families where they feel supported, respected, and emotionally secure are more likely to develop empathy and emotional self-regulation. When parents actively listen to their children, provide guidance, and maintain consistent involvement in their lives, young people gain important skills for managing frustration and resolving disagreements without resorting to aggression. These experiences contribute to the development of social competence and help adolescents build positive relationships with peers, teachers, and other members of their community.

Supportive family environments also provide adolescents with a sense of stability during a developmental period that is often marked by uncertainty and social pressure. Adolescence is a time when individuals begin to question established norms, explore new identities, and seek independence from parental authority. During this process, the presence of supportive and engaged caregivers can help adolescents navigate complex emotional and social challenges. When young people know that they can rely on their families for guidance and understanding, they are more likely

to adopt constructive coping strategies and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships.

At the same time, the analysis presented in this study indicates that family environments marked by persistent conflict, limited communication, or emotional distance may increase young people's vulnerability to aggressive behavior. In households where conflicts are frequently expressed through hostility or where emotional support is limited, adolescents may struggle to develop healthy emotional regulation skills. When communication between parents and children is weak or inconsistent, young people may feel misunderstood or unsupported, which can increase feelings of frustration and social alienation. Over time, these experiences may lead adolescents to view aggression or defiance as acceptable responses to interpersonal difficulties.

Exposure to violence within the household can also shape adolescents' perceptions of what constitutes normal social behavior. When young people repeatedly witness aggressive interactions between family members, they may internalize the belief that violence is a legitimate way to resolve disagreements. This normalization of aggression may later influence their behavior in peer relationships, school environments, or other social contexts. Consequently, family dynamics can play a significant role not only in shaping individual behavior but also in influencing broader patterns of social interaction among young people.

Strengthening family environments should therefore be seen as a key priority for promoting healthy adolescent development. Programs that support parenting skills, encourage positive communication between parents and children, and provide psychosocial assistance for families facing economic or social challenges can significantly reduce the risk

factors associated with youth violence. Parenting education initiatives, counseling services, and community support programs can help parents develop constructive approaches to discipline and conflict resolution.

Equally important is the need for stronger collaboration between families, schools, and community institutions. Schools represent one of the most influential environments in adolescents' daily lives and can play a critical role in reinforcing positive behavioral norms. Educational programs that promote social and emotional learning, empathy, and conflict resolution can complement the support provided by families. When teachers, parents, and social workers cooperate in addressing behavioral challenges, they create a more consistent and supportive environment for young people.

Community organizations and youth programs can also contribute to strengthening protective environments for adolescents. Safe recreational spaces, mentoring programs, and youth engagement initiatives provide opportunities for young people to develop positive social skills and build supportive relationships outside the family. When these institutions work together with families, they form a network of support that helps young people navigate social pressures and develop a stronger sense of belonging.

Although this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between family dynamics and youth violence, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The analysis is primarily based on existing literature and secondary data rather than primary field research. While this approach allows understanding the importance of the family in educating young people with the ability to cope with violent behaviors according to international literature, it poses the need for exploration of family experiences within the Albanian context. Future empirical research could

build by conducting interviews, surveys, or participatory studies involving adolescents, parents, teachers, and community professionals. Such research would provide a deeper understanding of how families experience social change and how these experiences influence youth development. Further studies could also explore regional differences within Albania, particularly between urban and rural communities, where access to educational resources and social services may vary. Understanding these differences would allow researchers and policymakers to design more targeted interventions that respond to the specific needs of different communities.

In conclusion, preventing youth violence requires a comprehensive understanding of the social environments in which young people grow and learn. The family remains one of the most influential institutions in this process, capable of shaping both vulnerability and resilience among adolescents. When families provide emotional support, constructive communication, and consistent guidance, they create conditions that promote empathy, social responsibility, and peaceful conflict resolution. Supporting families through effective social policies, educational initiatives, and community programs can therefore contribute significantly to reducing youth violence and promoting healthier developmental pathways for adolescents. Ultimately, investing in family well-being is not only an investment in violence prevention but also a broader investment in building more stable, cohesive, and inclusive societies where young people can thrive.

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# AN ASSESSMENT OF MEDIA LITERACY CHARACTERISTICS AND INFORMATIONAL VULNERABILITY AMONG STUDENTS

**Prof. Asoc. Dr. Blerina Hamzallari[1*]**

**Msc. Ornela Lleshi[2]**

**Msc. Semiha Koçi[3]**

[123]Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana

blerina.hamzallari@unitir.edu.al

**Abstract**

The developments in information technology and the digitalization of communication have revolutionized communication systems creating challenges for their users. Higher education institutions have a key role in training young people in the smart and critical use of technological and informational innovations. Students' cognitive and critical skills are increasingly challenged, and in this context, universities must respond to the immediate demand for media and digital literacy study programs. This article aims to assess several key characteristics related to understanding and use of media among students, with the purpose of identifying the features that make students a vulnerable group during media exposure. Data collection was carried out through quantitative methods using a structured questionnaire. This study is purposeful and designed as a case study with students of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana. The sampling technique is random sampling, and the distribution of the questionnaire was carried out through Google Forms platform. The

findings indicate that the main directions of intervention should focus on educating students about the safe use of digital communications/interactions, the importance of protecting personal data, the verification of information sources and increasing awareness and skills against disinformation, fake news and media bias literacy.
**Key words:** Media literacy, bias, students, digitalization, vulnerability, study programs

## 1. Introduction

Developments in information, communication and digital technology are increasingly challenging our models of cognition and action. Traditional communication is being "transferred" to new virtual spaces of communication mediated by new media, which are transforming not only the environment of interaction but also the way we perceive the world. In the flux of profit driven, competitive, clickbait driven developments, new media often expose deformed, misinformation or fake information, full of propaganda, have hidden agendas, and so on. Sánchez-Sánchez, A.M., et al., (2024) identify the importance of bias-based aggression among young people based on their perceptions and behavioral patterns driven by gender, race, and ethnicity. Social media operates through what Rodrigo-Ginés, F.J., et al. (2024) consider information bubbles according to which users access only information that matches their expectations and interests, reinforcing problematic attitudes in them and creating polarization of the information they are exposed to, confirming their biases. Considering these risks, contemporary studies in various fields of social sciences have become concerned about the impact of the media, especially on young people, and for this reason, the discourse is increasingly oriented towards

the need for media literacy education (Tripp, L., 2011; Bulger, M., & Davison, P., 2018; Swart, J., 2023).

According to INSTAT data (2023), which also coincides with the last year of reporting on the use of ICT by age group in Albanian society, it results that in 2023, almost 96.2% of the population aged 16-74 use it several times a day, and in the age group 16-24, 99.1% of them use it regularly. These data clearly reflect the panorama of the massive use of the Internet among young people and, along with the benefits of its use, young men and women are also exposed to the risks that are naturally active in these environments. Even in a study supported by the Albanian Media Institute regarding the role and trust that Albanians have in the media, it is proven that although 70% of the public think that the media plays an important role in the country's democracy, on the other hand, it is noted that a large number of individuals think that the Albanian media has several problems, where the highest percentage of 69.9% is given to bias, partisanship, political clientelism and in second place with 58% is dependence on the business interests of media owners (Zguri, R., 2019).

In the conditions of an amorphous and unsafe environment, as also emphasized by Bulger, M., & Davison, P. (2018) media literacy education becomes a necessity with the aim of enabling young people to be participants and to interact protected in dealing with the media, including, among other things, teacher training, curricular resources and evidence base construction. In this context, the media, with its influential and interfering power in various dimensions among young people, poses a fundamental challenge for higher education institutions. The involvement of higher education institutions would fulfill in a coordinated manner media education oriented towards objectives, competencies, learning

outcomes, activities and evidence-based and contextualized educational methods (Alvermann, D. E., & Hagood, M. C.; 2000; Wuyckens, G., et al. 2022:176; Dzogovic et al., 2025:314-315)

From the review of the existing research literature on Albanian society, it results that there is no assessment of the curricular inclusion of media literacy or digital literacy in higher education in a comprehensive analysis of higher education. The desk review identified an article by Hamzallari, B. (2023) on media and information education in university education with a focus on the University of Tirana and the integration of media literacy education into the curricula of teacher education study programs. The evaluation has shown that the Faculty of Social Sciences has good practices in media and information education, but in the flow of ICT developments, there is a need for a reassessment of students' skills in dealing with the media and the digital world. This study was also undertaken to contribute to completing the picture of the characteristics of media education and contextualizing its features among Albanian students.

The research conducted on media and information literacy has as its main objective to assess the characteristics of media literacy among young students, to describe the type of their engagement on the network and to consider their weak points that expose young people as a vulnerable group and that promote the need for informed education in media and digital literacy through study curricula.

The research questions that this article aims to answer are:

1- What are the characteristics of media literacy among young students?

2- Which forms of social media engagement are most common among youth?

3- What factors indicate that young people are a vulnerable group in front of new media use?

4- How can higher education institutions systematically enhance young people's media and digital literacy capacities?

## 2. Methodology

This study used quantitative methods and data collection was carried out through a survey. This method is commonly used in social research to obtain a set of data from a significant number of respondents in a short time. This method has also been used in similar studies such as that of Papaioannou, T. (2011) on assessing digital media literacy among youth through their use of social networking sites. The study sample is purposeful, as it aims to measure the characteristics of media use among students of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Tirana, with the aim of assessing the needs for media and digital literacy education in the curricula of the study programs. The study sample consists of 350 students. The sampling technique used is random sampling and the questionnaire distribution method was carried out through the Google Forms platform.

The research and data collection instrument, designed to assess the characteristics of media and information education as well as forms of youth engagement in media use, consists of three sections:

i. Section I: Demographic data.
ii. Section II: Informational section on the individual background of understanding and using media and information
iii. Section III: Activities and attitudes during the use of media and information

In each section the questions are closed, and in some cases, they are assessed on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where, depending on the attribute, 1 refers to the lowest attribute and 4 to the highest. The data analysis was carried out using the SPSS data processing package and has a descriptive character. The questionnaire did not request any sensitive or identifying data from students. This ensured that the data was anonymous and used only in quantitative analyses in accordance with the purpose of the study.

## 3. Findings and Discussion[1]

### *3.1. Characteristics of the use and understanding of media and information among students*

The analysis of the collected data showed that students are loyal users of smartphones, with a dominant proportion of absolute users compared to other electronic devices, which appear to play a complementary role in relation to the high proportion of smartphone users. Specifically, 99.8% of students stated that they use a smartphone as their primary and main means of internet access. Meanwhile, computers and laptops rank second with 32.3%, and smart TVs rank third with 15.9% of students, while other devices such as smartwatches, tablets, or other intelligent devices are used far less frequently (1.6%–4.4%). This preference may depend on several factors, such as ease of use, accessibility in different locations, portability, and the ability to perform most of the functions students may need. The data analyzed clearly indicates that there are no respondents who do not browse the internet at all during a week, and that internet browsing is a

[1] Important note: The manuscript was proofread with the assistance of artificial intelligence (AI) tools to improve language clarity, grammar, and readability. The authors take full responsibility for the content and originality of the manuscript.

constant part of students' daily lives. Most students (21.5%) stated that they spend more than 22 hours online per week. The remaining students are distributed across different time ranges, with the second most common category being 16 to 22 hours per week (15.9%), followed by 12 to 15 hours per week (13.1%).

The data identified are in line with the data reported by INSTAT in its reports on the results of the survey "Use of Information and Communication Technology by Households and Individuals (ICT)" (2023, 2024, 2025), which year after year reflect the dominance of smartphone use for internet access (99.9% of individuals aged 16–74). The findings of this study diverge from the INSTAT (2025) data regarding the second most frequently used category of devices. According to INSTAT, the second most used category among individuals aged 16–74 is Smart TVs, e-book readers, and smartwatches (59%), followed by laptops in third place (41.2%). In contrast, among students, laptops rank second among the most frequently used devices, while smart TVs rank third. This divergence can be easily understood in relation to the interests of this age group and their academic commitments, which require independent research and study work, activities that are mostly carried out on devices such as laptops and desktop computers. According to INSTAT (2023), 99.1% of individuals aged 16–24 had used the internet regularly during the previous three months. These frequencies are also confirmed by this study conducted with students, making technology and media a daily and inseparable part of their lives.

Safe media use, secure internet connections, data protection, safe online interaction, and the reduction of digital risk are topics of ongoing research and policymaking aimed at the controlled management of digital spaces in

interdisciplinary studies (Bulger, M., & Davison, P., 2018; Sánchez-Sánchez, A. M., et al., 2024; Dzogovic, S. A. et al., 2025). When respondents were asked about actions that correspond to their internet usage practices regarding security and privacy tools, 30.7% of students stated that they use fingerprint authentication or facial recognition technology to access a device or application or to make online purchases. The second most selected alternative, chosen by 29.9% of respondents, was the use of strong passwords while browsing the internet or on devices used to access online services. Meanwhile, one of the most common features encountered during internet browsing are cookies, through the acceptance of which servers are granted access to use part of the consumer's data. Only 24.3% of respondents stated that they do not accept cookies while browsing the internet.

Security during internet browsing is one of the main issues identified not only in practices of micro-social interaction in Albanian society, but also at the macro level, where governmental systems and banking systems have frequently become targets of cyberattacks that have seriously compromised the security of personal data and data important to national security. This dilemma regarding virtual security was also reflected in the students' responses. A total of 36.7% of responding students believed that they are neither secure nor insecure in this interaction environment, approximately 28.7% of young people stated that they do not feel very secure, and 12.7% reported that they do not feel secure at all. In all the assumptions listed in questionnaire, the dominant response was the option "Neither secure nor insecure" (neutral). This indicates that students are unable to form a consolidated and informed opinion regarding online security.

Online insecurity becomes even more evident when young people report that 21.9% do not feel very secure and 30.3% feel neither secure nor insecure regarding who has access to their data and how their data are used. Meanwhile, when asked about their ability to recognize whether information is marketing content or not, 44.8% stated that they felt very secure or fairly secure, whereas 36.9% reported feeling neither secure nor insecure. Regarding their perceptions of online data security in relation to the way they access and engage in online activities, 37.1% stated that they felt neither secure nor insecure, while 26.6% reported feeling not very secure or not secure at all. An interesting finding is that despite all respondents using online networks for interaction to a considerable and significant extent, they nevertheless demonstrate insecurity in using the internet as an interaction environment, accounting for approximately 78% of respondents.

The findings presented above generate the need for media and digital literacy to equip young people with the skills necessary to use online spaces safely, while also contributing to the creation of controlled and secure environments for online interaction not only for themselves but also for others. Reflecting the importance of online interaction and its dimensions in contemporary society, which influence communication, social and economic interactions, cultural exchanges, and governmental and educational institutional services, it becomes necessary to consider the virtual environment through the theoretical premises of network theory as elaborated by Castells, M. (2010). According to Castells, M. (2010), the central importance of interaction within digital networks makes it impossible to ignore the significance of trust in this alternative digital network environment due to its importance for social communication,

participation, and social inclusion. In societies focused on the importance of information and the role of interaction networks in the development of social capital, insecure digital interaction spaces may encourage new forms of social inequality and social exclusion, making education for media and digital literacy a necessity in contemporary societies that are increasingly organized around digital networks.

### *3.2. Activities and attitudes when using media and information*

One of the questions that clearly differentiated the patterns of internet use among young concerned the online activities they had engaged in. Based on the multiple responses provided by participants, it becomes evident that online engagement among young people is highly diverse, ranging from e-banking and e-buying to information-seeking. The responses show a strong dominance of online buying behavior, with most respondents (84.9%) reporting that they have purchased goods, services, or tickets online. Far fewer engage in financial and administrative digital services in around 24.3% reported using online banking functions such as transferring money, managing accounts, or making payments, while 16.3% stated that they use the internet to pay or check bills. A smaller proportion, 6%, reported paying municipal taxes or local service fees online, and only 4.8% had completed an online tax declaration. About 10.3% indicated that they had not engaged in any of these activities.

Beyond transactional use, students also reported a wide range of searching information behaviors online. The most common activity, reported by 72.1%, was searching for leisure information such as cinema, music events, theater, and museums, indicating the strong role of the internet in cultural consumption and free time organization. This was followed by 57.4% who use online platforms to access news, political information, and

current affairs, showing that digital media also functions as an important source of civic and informational engagement. Slightly more than half of the respondents (52.2%) reported using the internet for job-related purposes, including searching for employment opportunities or submitting applications, highlighting the platform's importance in economic integration and career development. Additionally, 39.8% of participants use online government services to access information about public administration and institutional services, reflecting growing familiarity with e-governance platforms such as official state portals. A smaller but still meaningful share of respondents (13.5%) stated that they have engaged in digital civic participation, such as signing online petitions or participating in campaign-related activities.

The data of this study confirm the main forms of engagement in digital networks identified by INSTAT (2025), according to which searching for information about goods and services: internet banking (e-banking), participation in social networks (creating a profile, etc.), online buying, receiving public services online are among the main forms of online engagement among individuals aged 16-74 in the Republic of Albania.

To understand how young people interact on social media and how they position themselves as users or content creators online, the findings reveal a relatively passive pattern of engagement for a significant share of respondents. Around 31.5% of participants stated that they tend to only read content on social media platforms and rarely like or post anything. A further 24.3% reported that they sometimes share, post, or comment on content, while 17.9% indicated that they often engage in sharing, posting, or commenting. Additionally, 19.9% stated that they usually engage in "liking" content on social media platforms.

The data further show that exposure to differing viewpoints is a common experience among young users. The most frequently selected response, at 46.6%, indicated that respondents sometimes encounter views with which they do not agree. A further 31.9% reported that they often come across such opposing perspectives. These results suggest that, to a considerable extent, young people on social media are exposed to content that does not necessarily align with their own attitudes and beliefs. Meanwhile, 12.7% stated that they rarely encounter views they disagree with, and 8.8% reported uncertainty, indicating that they were unable to identify which statement best described their experience.

Overall, the findings point to a pattern in which a large proportion of young users primarily consume rather than actively produce content, while also being regularly exposed to diverse and sometimes conflicting viewpoints within social media environments. Such a pattern can be interpreted through the dramaturgical perspective and the concept of self-presentation developed by Erving Goffman (1959) in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. According to this theory, individuals are continuously engaged in roles and are concerned with how they are perceived by others, constantly managing their personal performances and constructing a desired self-image. In this context, young people interacting through digital platforms actively manage their digital identities, which in online environments are constructed and expressed through profiles, posts, shares, comments, views and likes. The finding that most young people are primarily content consumers rather than content creators can also be understood in relation to concerns about privacy and digital security, as well as limited confidence in navigating online environments safely. Issues such as perceived insecurity in handling personal data and cybersecurity

risks may influence reduced levels of active participation online, as individuals seek to maintain control over their digital identity and personal information.

During online interaction, a natural question arises regarding the truth of information, the distinction between fake information and fabrication, and in this context, it is important to understand the actions that young people most frequently take when exposed to news or information in digital environments. The respondents self reported on 39.4% stated that they assess how professional an article looks, for example by checking whether it contains spelling mistakes or whether images and videos appear to be of high quality. Around 41% reported that they look at comments or what other people have said about the article, while 33.5% said they check whether the information comes from an organization they have previously heard of. A similar proportion, 33.1%, indicated that they verify whether the source is an organization they consider trustworthy. Furthermore, 31.9% reported checking whether the same information appears in other sources, suggesting cross verification practices. At the same time, a small minority reported low levels of verification behavior, with 4% stating that they would not tend to check whether information is true, 4.8% indicating that they do not consume news or articles on social media, and 7.2% stating that they do not know. These findings suggest that young people rely on a combination of source credibility evaluation when assessing information online, reflecting a mixed but active approach to evaluating digital news credibility.

In online buying activities, the findings of the study suggest that students are generally vigilant. Their attention is primarily directed toward visual trust cues and reputation rather than technical security checks, indicating a

basic level of knowledge regarding online purchasing safety. The most common safety related action is checking whether a website appears secure, reported by 39.8% of respondents. Closely followed is the verification of whether the website or company is known or has a good reputation (33.9%), as well as checking for guarantees or security-related details (33.5%). Around 28.7% of respondents rely on reading recommendations or user comments before making a purchase, showing the importance of social validation in decision making. In contrast, more technical forms of security verification are less frequently used. Only 15.9% of respondents check for HTTPS connections or security icons, suggesting limited attention to technical indicators of website safety. Even fewer engage in checking the payment method (12%) or verifying whether the website is listed or recommended by trusted sources (6.8%).

The primary and secondary analyzed data point to digital environments that increasingly operate on algorithms and user profiling, exposing young people more frequently to information shaped by bias in media content. Considering this context, it becomes essential that through structured and intentional educational processes, young people are equipped with the skills necessary for effective interaction within digital environments. Within the framework of framing theory, which emphasizes how media, through the structure of presentation, analysis, and interpretation of information, seeks to construct and influence individuals' opinions, judgments, perceptions, attitudes, and interpretations of events (Zaklama, S., 2025), the need for guided and informed navigation of digital networks is not merely a skill but a strategy aimed at transforming the online environment into a safer space and maximizing its benefits. From this perspective, media risks becoming a key factor in shaping social behavior

and contributing to fragmented, selective, and potentially problematic forms of youth socialization. Therefore, intervention through structured, long-term educational processes would likely generate positive effects and contribute to the creation of safer and more responsible digital environments.

## 4. Conclusions

At the end of this study, which aimed at the assessment of several key characteristics related to understanding and use of media among students, with the purpose of identifying the features that make students a vulnerable group during media exposure, it resulted that:

1. The surveyed students are highly engaged in digital interactions on a daily basis, and in 99.8% of cases they report smartphones as their primary tool for online interaction. Approximately 50.5% of respondents reported spending more than 12 hours per week browsing the internet, of whom 21.5% stated that they spend more than 22 hours online weekly. The findings indicate that young people generally secure their electronic devices through biometric security measures and protect applications using passwords or other security options intended to make unauthorized access more difficult. Nevertheless, a considerable level of insecurity within the digital environment continues to be reflected in their perceptions. Around 78% of respondents (calculated cumulatively through the categories “neither secure nor insecure,” “not very secure,” and “not secure at all”) expressed some degree of insecurity regarding the digital environment, while 41.4% specifically reported feeling either not very secure or not secure at all. This insecurity is consistently reflected when respondents are asked about who has

access to their personal data. A considerable proportion of participants expressed uncertainty regarding who can access their data and how these data are used, accounting for 52.2% (in cumulative categories with similar interpretive meaning). Although marketing content structures and advertisements are generally identifiable by young people, the proportion of respondents who reported insecurity in recognizing and identifying advertisements remains concerning. Specifically, 36.9% expressed uncertainty regarding their ability to distinguish advertising content from other forms of information. The findings suggest that young people apply a mixed but relatively active approach to evaluating information online. Around 41% reported checking comments and other users' opinions about an article, while 39.4% evaluate how professional the content appears, including spelling accuracy and image or video quality. Additionally, 33.5% verify whether the information comes from a familiar organization, 33.1% check whether the source is trustworthy, and 31.9% compare the same information across different sources, indicating basic cross-verification practices. In online shopping activities, students generally demonstrate caution; however, their focus is directed more toward visual trust cues and reputation than technical security measures. While 39.8% check whether a website appears secure and 33.9% verify the reputation of the company or platform, only 15.9% check HTTPS connections or security icons, and even fewer verify payment methods (12%) or trusted certifications (6.8%). These findings suggest a basic level of media and digital security literacy among young users.

2. The most frequent forms of engagement with new media among students are related to online shopping activities (84.9%), the use of financial and administrative digital services (24.3%), and the use of the internet for paying or checking bills (16.3%). Students also highlight the importance of new media and digital platforms for accessing information related to leisure activities, including cinema, live music, theater, museums, and similar activities, reported by 72.1% of respondents. Important functions of digital media are also reflected in the use of online governmental platforms for accessing public service information (57.4%) and in searching or applying for jobs online (52.2%). At the same time, the findings suggest that young people tend to choose limited exposure on social media platforms, interacting in ways that preserve a certain degree of "anonymity." Rather than actively creating content, they are more frequently engaged in passive consumption of the content offered through social media. Around 31.5% of participants stated that they mainly read content and rarely like or post anything, while 24.3% reported that they only occasionally share, post, or comment on social media platforms.
3. The findings suggest that young people represent a vulnerable category when confronted with the technical skills and competencies required for informed online navigation and interaction with new media. Vulnerabilities are reflected in issues related to digital security, privacy, patterns of media use, exposure to media bias, and consumer risks shaped by algorithmic and biased content. These findings highlight the need to transform digital

technology into a factor of development and empowerment rather than a space of uncontrolled and potentially risky interactions.

4. The integration of compulsory curricular courses in higher education could significantly improve students' ability to recognize and avoid media bias while increasing awareness of algorithms and profiling mechanisms that shape online information exposure. Through structured and professionally guided educational processes, students could strengthen their competencies in fact by checking and verifying the credibility and accuracy of digital content. Curricular education would also contribute to the development of knowledge and practices related to data protection and cybersecurity tools, while promoting active, informed, and responsible participation in digital environments. Media and digital literacy education would not only consolidate digital competencies, but also foster understandings of digital citizenship, media ethics, and critical thinking.

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# Bridging the Gap Between Policy and Practice: Disability Policy Implementation and Social Inclusion in Albania.

**Dr. Blerta DRENOFCI, ALBANIA**

*LOGOS University College (LOGOS), Tirana, Albania,*

blerta.drenofci@kulogos.edu.al

***Abstract***

Although Albania has developed a comprehensive legal framework to promote the rights of persons with disabilities, significant challenges remain in translating these commitments into equitable outcomes. The paper aims to explore the perceptions of persons with disabilities and disability stakeholders and identify key barriers to effective policy implementation.

A qualitative approach was employed, using five focus group discussions with representatives of disability organizations, persons with disabilities, and family members across four cities of Albania: Tirana, Shkodra, Korça, and Vlora. Data were analyzed thematically across key domains, including accessibility, employment, education, social protection, healthcare, and participation in public and political life.

Findings indicate persistent implementation gaps despite legislative progress. Major barriers include limited physical and digital accessibility, unstable VET and employment opportunities, challenges in inclusive education, and insufficient services for independent living. Weak institutional coordination and limited participation of persons with disabilities further hinder effective policy outcomes.

The study underscores the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms, improved coordination, and meaningful involvement of persons with

disabilities in policymaking. These measures are essential for advancing social inclusion and equity in Albania.

**Keywords:** disability policy, policy implementation, social inclusion, accessibility, equity, Albania.

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, disability policy has undergone a significant paradigmatic transformation, moving away from medical and charity-based models toward a human rights-based approach centered on equality, participation, and non-discrimination. This shift was institutionalized through the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which conceptualizes persons with disabilities as rights-holders rather than passive recipients of care and emphasizes their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (United Nations [UN], 2006; Degener, 2016; Shakespeare, 2018). The CRPD introduced a multidimensional understanding of disability that recognizes the interaction between individual impairments and disabling social, institutional, and environmental barriers, thereby requiring states to adopt inclusive and cross-sectoral policy responses (World Health Organization [WHO], 2011; Lawson & Beckett, 2021).

Despite important legal advancements at the international level, a substantial implementation gap continues to characterize disability governance across many countries. Existing evidence demonstrates that the adoption of progressive legal frameworks does not necessarily translate into meaningful social inclusion or equal access to opportunities for persons with disabilities. Barriers often emerge due to weak institutional enforcement, fragmented governance systems, insufficient public funding,

inaccessible infrastructure, and limited participation of persons with disabilities in policymaking and monitoring processes (Grech & Soldatic, 2016; Shakespeare, 2018; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022). Consequently, disability inclusion increasingly requires not only legislative commitments but also institutional accountability and effective implementation mechanisms.

Accessibility remains one of the foundational dimensions of disability inclusion and a prerequisite for participation in education, employment, healthcare, political engagement, and community life. According to the social model of disability, inaccessible environments create exclusion by preventing equal participation in social and economic life (Oliver, 2013; WHO, 2011). International research consistently identifies persistent barriers in public infrastructure, transportation systems, digital services, and communication platforms, particularly for persons with sensory, intellectual, and multiple disabilities (Mitra, 2018; Grech & Soldatic, 2016). The expansion of digital public services has also highlighted new forms of exclusion when online platforms fail to comply with universal accessibility standards.

In response to these global developments, Albania has progressively aligned its disability legislation and institutional framework with international human rights standards, particularly following the ratification of the CRPD in 2013. Significant legal and policy reforms include Law No. 93/2014 'On the Inclusion and Accessibility of Persons with Disabilities', Law No. 15/2019 'On Employment Promotion', as well as the National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities 2021–2025 (Ministry of Health and Social Protection [MHSP], 2021). These policy instruments aim to strengthen accessibility, employment opportunities,

inclusive education, social protection systems, healthcare access, and institutional coordination mechanisms for persons with disabilities.

Despite notable progress in legislative development, evidence from governmental monitoring reports, civil society organizations, and independent assessments suggests that implementation remains inconsistent and uneven across sectors and geographical areas in Albania. Persons with disabilities continue to experience barriers related to inaccessible public infrastructure, limited employment opportunities, insufficient support services for independent living, and unequal access to education and healthcare (People's Advocate of Albania, 2023; European Commission, 2024; Ministry of Health and Social Protection [MHSP], 2021). Moreover, challenges in interinstitutional coordination and weak monitoring mechanisms have limited the effectiveness of disability policies at both central and local government levels.

The participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in policy evaluation processes is increasingly recognized as a key principle of inclusive governance. Stakeholder perceptions provide critical insights into how disability laws and policies are experienced in practice and help identify discrepancies between formal legal commitments and lived realities (Degener, 2016; Shakespeare, 2018; OECD, 2022). Understanding these perspectives is particularly important in contexts where formal policy frameworks appear relatively advanced, yet implementation outcomes remain contested.

Against this background, the present study aims to explore the perceptions of disability stakeholders regarding the implementation of disability policies in Albania and to identify key barriers affecting social inclusion. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do disability stakeholders perceive the implementation of disability policies in Albania?
2. What are the principal barriers affecting persons with disabilities in areas such as accessibility, education, employment, healthcare, social protection, and participation in public life?
3. What policy improvements are necessary to strengthen disability inclusion and policy implementation in Albania?

By examining the experiences and perspectives of persons with disabilities, family members, disability activists, and organizational representatives, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on disability governance in Albania and provides evidence-based recommendations for strengthening inclusive and rights-based policymaking.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative research design using focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore stakeholder perceptions regarding the implementation of disability policies in Albania. Qualitative approaches are particularly appropriate for examining complex social phenomena, capturing lived experiences, and understanding how individuals interpret policy impacts within their social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Given the multidimensional nature of disability inclusion and policy implementation, focus groups were selected as the primary method to facilitate interactive discussions and enable participants to collectively reflect on barriers, opportunities, and policy outcomes.

### *Study Setting and Participants*

The study involved participants from four municipalities in Albania: Tirana, Shkodra, Korça, and Vlora. A total of five focus group discussions were conducted, including two focus groups in Tirana and one in each of the remaining cities. Participants comprised representatives from 14 disability organizations, disability activists, persons with disabilities, and parents or family members of children and adults with disabilities. In total, 34 participants contributed to the study.

Participants represented diverse disability groups, including individuals with physical, visual, intellectual, and psychosocial disabilities, thereby enabling a broader understanding of disability-related experiences and policy implementation challenges across different impairment categories.

*Sampling and Recruitment*

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the inclusion of participants with direct experience and knowledge related to disability policy implementation (Patton, 2015). Participants were identified through disability organizations, local advocacy groups, and professional networks involved in disability rights and service provision. Selection criteria prioritized diversity in disability type, geographical representation, advocacy experience, and caregiving perspectives to ensure a comprehensive understanding of implementation challenges across contexts.

*Data Collection*

Focus group discussions were conducted during the last quarter of 2025 as part of the monitoring process of the National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities (NAPD) 2021–2025. Discussions followed a semi-structured format guided by thematic domains aligned with the policy objectives of the national disability framework. Key topics explored included: (a)

accessibility; (b) access to justice; (c) employment and vocational education and training (VET); (d) education; (e) social protection; (f) healthcare; (g) participation in political and public life; and (h) institutional cooperation.

The semi-structured format allowed participants to discuss personal experiences, identify systemic barriers, and propose policy improvements. Discussions encouraged interaction among participants, allowing shared concerns and divergent experiences to emerge organically (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

*Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analytical approach involved repeated reading of transcripts, coding recurring ideas, identifying thematic patterns, and organizing findings into broader categories relevant to disability policy implementation. The analysis focused on identifying both reported improvements and persistent structural barriers affecting the daily lives and social participation of persons with disabilities.

Themes were developed inductively while remaining aligned with the principal domains of disability policy implementation under examination. Particular attention was paid to recurring patterns across geographical locations and disability groups, as well as differences in stakeholder experiences. To enhance credibility, recurring themes were reviewed across focus groups to ensure consistency of interpretation.

*Ethical Considerations*

The study adhered to ethical principles concerning voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the use of data for monitoring and research

purposes. To protect anonymity, identifying personal information was excluded from the reporting of findings, and participant quotations were anonymized. The research process also sought to ensure accessibility and meaningful participation for persons with diverse disabilities during focus group discussions.

**Results**

*Accessibility*

Participants across all focus groups acknowledged that some progress has been made in improving accessibility in recent years, particularly in major urban centers and newly reconstructed public facilities. Improvements were most frequently observed in educational and healthcare institutions, especially in central areas of Tirana and several municipal centers. However, participants emphasized that such progress remains fragmented and often reflects partial compliance rather than a comprehensive accessibility approach.

A recurring concern raised by participants was the limited understanding of accessibility among public institutions and infrastructure developers. In many cases, accessibility was narrowly interpreted as the installation of an entrance ramp, without considering independent movement within buildings or access to internal services. Wheelchair users reported that ramps frequently fail to comply with technical standards, making them unusable or unsafe. Several participants referred to examples of recently reconstructed public spaces that remain inaccessible despite legal obligations.

One frequently mentioned case concerned the Pyramid of Tirana, where accessibility measures were perceived as symbolic rather than functional. Participants noted that while an elevator had been installed, its use

depended on a special access chip and poor signage, creating additional barriers for independent access. One participant explained: *"The ramp exists, but if no one tells you where it is, or if you cannot access the elevator independently, then accessibility remains only on paper." (Focus group participant, Tirana)*

Concerns regarding inaccessible sidewalks and public spaces were consistently reported across all municipalities. Participants emphasized that accessible pavements and curb cuts are generally concentrated in city centers, while peripheral areas remain largely inaccessible. Wheelchair users described difficulties navigating uneven surfaces, steep ramps, and blocked pathways. Similarly, participants with visual impairments highlighted that tactile paving and acoustic traffic lights are mostly available only in central urban zones, making independent mobility nearly impossible elsewhere.

One visually impaired participant stated: *"Once you leave the city center, independent mobility becomes almost impossible. Without tactile paths or acoustic traffic lights, we depend on someone accompanying us." (Focus group participant, Shkodra)*

Participants also raised concerns regarding the accessibility of newly constructed or renovated buildings, arguing that accessibility requirements are frequently ignored during implementation despite legal obligations. While accessibility provisions may formally exist in project documentation and construction permits, participants emphasized weak monitoring and limited enforcement mechanisms. Consequently, inaccessible public buildings continue to emerge, reinforcing structural exclusion.

Accessible transportation emerged as one of the most significant barriers affecting participation in education, employment, healthcare, and social life. Participants consistently emphasized the absence of accessible public transport systems across Albania. The few accessible bus lines identified were limited to specific routes in Tirana, including the Kamza and Institute lines, which provide wheelchair platforms and audio announcements for visually impaired passengers. However, these examples were considered isolated exceptions rather than representative of a broader accessible transport policy.

Participants stressed that inaccessible transportation significantly restricts employment opportunities and independent living. A visually impaired participant explained: *"Transport without audio announcements costs me time and energy because I often miss my station and must walk long distances to reach work." (Focus group participant, Tirana)*

Additional barriers included inaccessible intercity transport terminals, insufficient reserved parking spaces, bureaucratic procedures for obtaining disability parking permits, and inadequate reimbursement mechanisms for transport-related expenses. Participants further noted that support persons or caregivers accompanying individuals with disabilities are often excluded from transportation reimbursement schemes, increasing financial burdens on families.

Digital accessibility emerged as another major concern. Participants emphasized that government digital platforms, particularly the e-Albania portal, remain inaccessible for persons with visual or intellectual disabilities despite becoming the primary gateway to public services following the closure of one-stop service offices. According to participants, inaccessible digital services compromise autonomy and

disproportionately affect individuals who rely on alternative communication formats.

Participants repeatedly referred to the absence of screen-reader compatibility, simplified language formats, and accessible interfaces. Similar concerns were raised regarding educational and vocational platforms, public websites, and information systems more broadly. Participants stressed that inaccessible digital systems create a "second level" of exclusion by limiting independent access to rights and services.

Furthermore, barriers to accessibility were reported in cultural heritage sites, tourism infrastructure, and sports facilities, where participants highlighted insufficient consideration of physical, informational, and transportation accessibility.

*Access to Justice*

Participants acknowledged positive developments concerning free legal aid services, particularly due to awareness campaigns and projects implemented by civil society organizations in cooperation with public institutions. In several focus groups, participants reported increased knowledge regarding legal rights and procedures, especially among survivors of domestic violence, parents of children with disabilities, and individuals seeking access to social benefits.

A participant from Korça highlighted the importance of recent awareness initiatives: *"Before these projects, many people did not even know free legal aid existed. Once informed, families started using these services for social and family-related issues." (Focus group participant, Korça)*

Participants emphasized that significant barriers persist. Online legal aid systems were frequently described as inaccessible, especially for persons with visual impairments and those living in rural areas with limited digital

literacy or technological access. Participants also highlighted the absence of mobile or community-based outreach services capable of reaching geographically isolated individuals.

Another major concern related to supported decision-making and legal capacity. Participants reported that despite legal reforms aligned with the CRPD, supported decision-making mechanisms remain largely absent in practice. Cases involving restrictions on legal capacity continue to occur, particularly among individuals with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities.

One participant described a situation where banking procedures effectively forced a family to seek legal guardianship: *"When my son found employment, the bank refused to allow him to independently open an account. We had no choice but to pursue legal guardianship so that I could manage his financial matters." (Parent and organization representative, Tirana)*

*Employment and Vocational Education and Training (VET)*

Across all focus groups, participants acknowledged increased institutional attention toward employment services for persons with disabilities, particularly through efforts undertaken by the National Agency for Employment and Skills. Participants recognized recent attempts to improve employment modules, staff capacities, and individualized support mechanisms.

However, employment sustainability emerged as a major concern. Participants consistently reported that employment opportunities often remain temporary and linked to active labor market programs involving state wage subsidies. According to participants, many employers

discontinue employment once subsidies expire, raising concerns regarding the long-term inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labor market.

*As one participant explained: "Many people are employed only while the salary is subsidized. Once the program ends, employment often ends as well." (Focus group participant, Vlora)*

Participants also highlighted weak enforcement of employment quotas established under Law No. 15/2019, which requires employers exceeding specific staffing thresholds to employ persons with disabilities. Despite legal provisions, participants perceived monitoring mechanisms as weak and ineffective, with public institutions themselves failing to model inclusive employment practices.

Vocational education and training opportunities were also perceived as insufficiently adapted to labor market realities. Participants highlighted limited course availability, inaccessible facilities, shortages of specialized staff, and inadequate post-training employment support. Consequently, vocational programs were often viewed as fragmented and insufficiently connected to sustainable labor market integration.

*Education*

Participants across all focus groups acknowledged important progress in inclusive education during recent years, particularly regarding increased awareness of the educational rights of children with disabilities and the expansion of assistant teacher provision in schools. Participants noted that vocational secondary schools have increasingly adopted inclusive approaches and that the presence of assistant teachers has contributed to improved participation for some students with disabilities.

Despite these improvements, participants consistently emphasized that inclusive education remains unevenly implemented and highly dependent

on geographical location, institutional commitment, and available resources. A recurring concern related to the insufficient number of assistant teachers and the limited duration of their presence during school hours. Parents frequently reported being expected to compensate for institutional gaps by remaining in classrooms after assistant teachers had left.

*As one parent explained: "When the assistant teacher leaves, parents are often expected to remain with the child in class. This should not happen. Parents—usually mothers—have their own responsibilities and cannot replace institutional support." (Parent, participant, Tirana)*

Participants also emphasized considerable disparities between urban and rural areas. In smaller rural schools, participants reported that assistant teachers are often unavailable despite the presence of students with disabilities. Even where support exists, frequent turnover among assistant teachers was described as disruptive to children's learning and developmental continuity.

Several participants argued that inclusive education continues to rely excessively on individual commitment rather than systematic institutional support. According to focus group discussions, schools frequently lack adapted curricula, assistive technologies, accessible educational materials, and adequately trained staff. Participants stressed that effective inclusion requires not only physical access but also pedagogical adaptation and meaningful participation.

As one disability organization representative noted: *"Families do not simply ask for assistant teachers—they ask for quality education. Inclusion cannot exist without trained staff, adapted teaching methods, and reasonable accommodation." (Organization representative, Korça)*

Participants also identified major barriers in higher education. Although some national provisions exempt students with disabilities or students with parents with disabilities from tuition fees, participants reported inconsistent implementation across universities. In several cases, institutional autonomy was perceived as undermining equal access to educational rights.

Additional concerns included inaccessible university infrastructure, the absence of adapted examinations, limited implementation of reasonable accommodation measures, and insufficient accessibility in digital learning environments. Participants also highlighted the lack of practical professional training opportunities for future assistant teachers, emphasizing the need for stronger preparation of educational professionals in inclusive education practices.

Regarding school infrastructure, participants acknowledged improvements due to school reconstruction projects in recent years. Nevertheless, accessibility within schools remains incomplete. Missing elevators, inaccessible laboratories, and the absence of tactile navigation systems for students with visual impairments were frequently reported barriers limiting full participation in educational settings.

*Social Protection*

Participants generally acknowledged the expansion of community-based social services in Albania during recent years. However, they expressed concerns regarding the limited scope and orientation of these services. According to participants, most existing interventions remain heavily therapy-oriented and insufficiently focused on autonomy, empowerment, and independent living.

A major concern raised in all focus groups was the absence of personal assistance services, which participants viewed as essential for promoting independent living and reducing dependence on family members. Participants emphasized that caregiving responsibilities continue to fall disproportionately on families, particularly aging parents who often struggle to provide long-term care under financially constrained circumstances.

As one participant explained: *"Because state support is so limited, elderly parents are left with no alternative but institutional care. This pushes families toward institutionalization instead of independent living." (Focus group participant, Shkodra)*

Participants also reported substantial gaps in social services for adults with disabilities, particularly individuals over the age of 20. According to stakeholders, most available services remain concentrated on children, leaving adults with disabilities underserved and socially isolated. Families expressed concerns about the lack of transitional and lifelong support services that could facilitate independent adulthood.

The bio-psycho-social disability assessment system was also identified as requiring revision. Participants highlighted inconsistencies in eligibility criteria and reported cases in which individuals with significant health conditions encountered difficulties accessing disability-related benefits. One participant illustrated this concern by stating: *"A child with diabetes may not qualify unless severe complications already exist. Support often comes too late, after additional harm has already occurred." (Focus group participant, Vlora)*

Participants further emphasized dissatisfaction with disability-related financial support schemes, describing disability benefits and hygiene

assistance packages as insufficient to meet actual costs associated with disability. Several participants advocated for revised financial assistance levels, particularly in relation to personal assistance and disability-related living expenses.

*Healthcare*

Participants identified several positive developments within healthcare services for persons with disabilities, particularly regarding the expansion of specialized services and reimbursement mechanisms. Positive examples included the recruitment of psychologists and speech therapists in health centers and the expansion of reimbursement schemes for specific medical supplies and treatments, including diabetes-related equipment, stoma care, and fertility treatment support.

Despite these improvements, participants consistently highlighted substantial accessibility barriers within healthcare systems. Physical accessibility challenges in healthcare facilities—including inaccessible entrances, examination rooms, and sanitary facilities—were frequently reported. Participants emphasized that healthcare access remains dependent on physical mobility and family support rather than universal accessibility standards.

Participants also stressed the limited availability of rehabilitation services, assistive devices, prosthetics, and orthotics. Representatives from organizations of work-related disability groups highlighted the absence of a specialized rehabilitation institute for reintegration and recovery, arguing that current services remain fragmented and inadequate.

One concern raised particularly strongly in the Vlora focus group related to the lack of specialized hospital equipment for persons with severe physical disabilities: *"The absence of specialized beds and adapted toilets*

*makes healthcare difficult and undignified for people with severe mobility impairments." (Focus group participant, Vlora)*

Participants additionally emphasized shortages in assistive technologies, arguing that limited availability of mobility and communication devices restricts autonomy and daily functioning. Dental healthcare was also identified as an underserved area, with participants calling for expanded free healthcare services, especially preventive and restorative dental care.

*Participation in Political, Cultural, and Sports Life*

Participants consistently reported feeling underrepresented in political decision-making processes. Although disability rights have increasingly entered public discourse, participants perceived limited institutional commitment to ensuring meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in policymaking. Several participants highlighted the absence of systematic representation mechanisms within political institutions, emphasizing that disability-related issues often receive symbolic rather than substantive attention. As one participant stated: *"We are still one of the few social groups without real parliamentary representation." (Focus group participant, Tirana)*

Regarding voting accessibility, participants acknowledged improvements linked to the reconstruction of schools serving as polling stations, particularly through recent infrastructure investments. However, important barriers remain. Secret voting spaces were often described as inaccessible, electronic voting systems inadequately adapted, and electoral information rarely available in accessible formats.

Participants also highlighted the unresolved issue of voting access for persons unable to physically leave their homes, emphasizing the need for alternative voting mechanisms to ensure equal democratic participation.

Participation in cultural and sports activities was similarly described as constrained by inaccessible infrastructure and limited institutional support. Although legal changes have strengthened recognition for elite athletes with disabilities, participants reported minimal practical implementation. The lack of accessible sports facilities and free training spaces was repeatedly emphasized as limiting participation opportunities.

Cultural heritage sites, museums, sports centers, and tourism environments were frequently described as inaccessible in terms of physical access, transportation, and accessible information, further restricting cultural participation.

*Institutional Cooperation*

Institutional coordination emerged as a cross-cutting concern affecting the implementation of disability policies across sectors. Participants acknowledged the existence of formal coordination mechanisms, particularly the National Council on Disability Issues; however, many questioned its effectiveness, representativeness, and transparency. Participants raised concerns regarding unclear membership selection procedures, limited geographical representation, insufficient follow-up on decisions, and lack of transparency concerning meeting outcomes.

*One participant explained: "Meetings take place, but there is little follow-up. Minutes are not shared, and issues raised often disappear without implementation." (Organization representative, Tirana)*

At the local level, participants acknowledged some improvements in collaboration between central and local authorities, particularly through mechanisms related to the Social Fund. Nevertheless, stakeholders consistently reported weak coordination between municipalities and

national institutions, often describing local disability initiatives as fragmented and insufficiently integrated with national strategies.

Participants stressed the need for dedicated disability coordinators across ministries and municipalities to strengthen policy coherence and implementation monitoring. Additionally, concerns were raised regarding the limited financial support available for disability-focused civil society organizations, particularly at municipal levels, where dedicated disability funding mechanisms remain largely absent.

**Discussion**

The results of this study reveal a persistent gap between Albania's formal disability policy commitments and their implementation in practice. While participants acknowledged notable progress in legislative reform and selected areas of service provision, they consistently emphasized the fragmented and uneven realization of disability rights across sectors. These findings align with broader international evidence demonstrating that the adoption of disability-inclusive legal frameworks does not automatically translate into equitable social outcomes, particularly when implementation mechanisms remain weak or inconsistently enforced (Degener, 2016; Shakespeare, 2018; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022). In the Albanian context, despite significant legal advancements following the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), practical barriers continue to limit the realization of rights guaranteed by national legislation and international commitments (People's Advocate of Albania, 2023; European Commission, 2024).

Accessibility emerged as one of the most significant implementation challenges identified by participants, reinforcing international evidence

that inaccessible environments remain a principal driver of exclusion for persons with disabilities (World Health Organization [WHO], 2011; Grech & Soldatic, 2016). Participants described accessibility improvements as partial and frequently symbolic, often limited to isolated physical adaptations that fail to ensure independent navigation and meaningful use of public services. Such findings reflect broader critiques of disability policy implementation in transitional contexts, where legal compliance frequently prioritizes formal infrastructure adjustments without adopting universal design principles or holistic accessibility standards (Lawson & Beckett, 2021; Mitra, 2018). The concerns raised regarding inaccessible sidewalks, public buildings, transport systems, and digital platforms suggest that Albania continues to face structural challenges in mainstreaming accessibility across public policy domains.

The issue of digital accessibility is particularly important in the context of increasing digitalization of public services. Participants' concerns regarding the inaccessibility of the e-Albania platform and other digital systems underscore emerging forms of digital exclusion affecting persons with visual and intellectual disabilities. International evidence increasingly emphasizes that digital transformation can either reduce or deepen inequalities depending on whether accessibility considerations are integrated from the outset (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2023). The findings suggest that the rapid transition toward digital governance in Albania may unintentionally exacerbate inequalities if accessibility standards are not systematically embedded in public digital infrastructure.

Employment and vocational education results highlight an important paradox between policy intention and labor market outcomes. While participants recognized increased institutional attention toward disability employment, they consistently described employment opportunities as temporary and dependent on wage subsidy programs. Similar findings have been documented internationally, where disability employment policies often generate short-term labor market participation without ensuring sustainable employment trajectories or workplace inclusion (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022; Shakespeare, 2018). The reported weak enforcement of disability employment quotas further illustrates implementation deficits and suggests that legal obligations alone may be insufficient without stronger monitoring and accountability systems. Participants' observations that public institutions themselves frequently fail to model inclusive employment practices are particularly significant, given the state's normative role in promoting labor market inclusion.

The results concerning education indicate both progress and persistent structural barriers in Albania's transition toward inclusive education. Participants acknowledged increased awareness, expansion of assistant teacher provision, and greater acceptance of children with disabilities within mainstream educational environments. However, reported shortages of trained assistant teachers, insufficient pedagogical support, inaccessible educational environments, and regional inequalities demonstrate continuing implementation gaps. These findings resonate with international literature showing that inclusive education requires not only physical integration into classrooms but also institutional preparedness, teacher capacity-building, adapted curricula, and reasonable

accommodation measures (UNESCO, 2020; WHO, 2011; Slee, 2018). The challenges identified in higher education further suggest that inclusive educational pathways remain incomplete, particularly regarding accessibility, adapted assessment, and institutional accountability.

Participants' concerns regarding social protection and independent living highlight the continuing dominance of family-centered care models in Albania. Although participants acknowledged an expansion of community-based services, they consistently emphasized that existing interventions remain focused primarily on therapeutic support rather than empowerment and autonomy. The absence of personal assistance services, combined with limited adult-oriented services, reflects a policy orientation that remains insufficiently aligned with the CRPD principle of independent living and community inclusion (United Nations, 2006; European Expert Group on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care, 2022). Similar challenges have been documented across several post-socialist and middle-income countries, where deinstitutionalization efforts remain incomplete and family care continues to compensate for insufficient state support systems (Mladenov & Petri, 2020; WHO, 2011).

Healthcare results reveal a mixed picture of progress and persistent exclusion. Participants recognized improvements in access to specialized healthcare professionals and reimbursement mechanisms; however, structural barriers, including inaccessible infrastructure, limited rehabilitation services, and insufficient assistive technologies, continue to constrain equal healthcare access. These findings reflect broader evidence demonstrating that healthcare exclusion for persons with disabilities often results not only from medical limitations but also from inaccessible systems and discriminatory service design (Krahn et al., 2015; WHO,

2022). The concerns raised regarding dignity, autonomy, and accessibility within healthcare environments further underscore the need for disability-responsive healthcare reforms in Albania.

The findings concerning political, cultural, and sports participation illustrate broader challenges related to social citizenship and democratic inclusion. Although participants recognized isolated improvements in polling station accessibility, they consistently reported barriers limiting meaningful participation in political life, including inaccessible voting procedures and insufficient representation within decision-making structures. Existing literature emphasizes that participation in public and political life represents a core dimension of citizenship and social inclusion for persons with disabilities (Priestley et al., 2016; United Nations, 2006). The reported exclusion from cultural and sports activities similarly reflects broader environmental and institutional barriers that restrict social participation beyond essential service domains.

Finally, institutional coordination emerged as a cross-cutting issue influencing disability policy effectiveness across all thematic areas. Participants' concerns regarding fragmented governance, weak accountability mechanisms, and limited coordination between central and local authorities suggest that implementation challenges are systemic rather than sector-specific. International scholarship increasingly highlights the importance of intersectoral governance structures, monitoring systems, and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in ensuring effective disability policy implementation (Lawson & Beckett, 2021; OECD, 2022; WHO, 2022). The findings suggest that Albania's disability governance framework would benefit from stronger implementation oversight, improved interinstitutional cooperation, and

enhanced participation mechanisms capable of translating legal commitments into measurable outcomes.

**Conclusion**

This study explored the perceptions of disability stakeholders regarding the implementation of disability policies in Albania, focusing on experiences related to accessibility, justice, employment, education, healthcare, social protection, political participation, and institutional coordination. The results indicate that Albania has made important progress in developing a comprehensive legal and policy framework aligned with international disability rights standards, particularly following the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the adoption of key national laws and action plans.

Despite these advancements, the study demonstrates that substantial implementation gaps persist across multiple sectors. Participants consistently reported that accessibility measures remain fragmented, employment opportunities are often temporary and unsustainable, inclusive education continues to face structural and capacity-related barriers, and social protection mechanisms remain insufficiently oriented toward independent living. Healthcare services, while improved in selected areas, continue to present accessibility barriers, while political and cultural participation remain constrained by inadequate inclusion mechanisms and inaccessible environments.

The results further highlight that implementation challenges are not solely sector-specific but are strongly shaped by broader governance limitations, including weak institutional coordination, insufficient monitoring systems, inconsistent enforcement of legal obligations, and limited participation of

persons with disabilities in policymaking processes. The existence of progressive legal frameworks alone does not guarantee meaningful inclusion unless accompanied by effective implementation, accountability, and resource allocation.

This study reinforces the value of stakeholder perspectives in assessing disability policy effectiveness. The experiences shared by persons with disabilities, families, activists, and representative organizations reveal practical dimensions of policy implementation that are often insufficiently captured through formal monitoring mechanisms. Their perspectives demonstrate that meaningful disability inclusion requires moving beyond compliance-oriented approaches toward rights-based, person-centered, and cross-sectoral implementation strategies capable of addressing structural inequalities and enabling equal participation in society.

*Policy Recommendations*

Based on the results of this study, several policy recommendations emerge for strengthening disability policy implementation and advancing social inclusion in Albania: (i) Strengthening Accessibility Enforcement; (ii) Expanding Accessible Digital Governance; (iii) Promoting Sustainable Employment; (iv) Strengthening Inclusive Education; (v) Advancing Independent Living and Social Protection; (vi) Improving Disability-Responsive Healthcare; (vii) Enhancing Political Participation and Representation; (viii) Strengthening Institutional Coordination and Accountability.

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**Title: Out of Sight: Private Digital Communication and Institutional Blind Spots in Sexual Exploitation in Albania**

Blerta Bodinaku[a*], Anila Sulstarova[a], Skerdi Zahaj[a], Greta Hysi[a], Gerda Sula[a]

[a] *University of Tirana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Psychology and Education*

Abstract

Research on sexual exploitation increasingly refers to digital recruitment, yet prevention and safeguarding systems remain largely organised around visible locations, discrete incidents, and externally recognisable harm. This paper argues that the central shift is not simply that recruitment occurs online, but that private digital communication reshapes the conditions under which exploitation becomes recognisable. Drawing on qualitative interviews with survivors and professionals, together with institutional case files from a national study in Albania, the paper examines how exploitation develops within relationships that initially appear ordinary, supportive, or intimate. Findings show that sustained private communication accelerates emotional dependency, enables relational coercion, and fragments recognition by families, professionals, and institutions. Harm is often visible in behaviour, but misread through mundane frames such as adolescent conflict, disobedience, or personal choice. Rather than treating technology as a direct cause, the paper conceptualises private digital communication as an ecology of relational invisibility that delays recognition until coercion is already embedded. The study contributes to gender-based violence scholarship by shifting attention from recruitment alone to recognition, and by highlighting the

need for prevention and protection systems attuned to relational, gradual, and digitally mediated forms of harm.

*Key words: Sexual exploitation; digital communication; coercive control; recognition; gender-based violence*

## 1. Introduction and literature review

Research on sexual exploitation and trafficking increasingly recognizes the role of digital environments in recruitment, grooming, and control. Social media, private messaging applications, and informal online networks are now common points of contact between exploiters and those later subjected to sexual exploitation (Council of Europe, 2021; Europol, 2020; UNODC, 2024). However, much of the existing literature remains focused on where recruitment occurs or which technologies are used, rather than on how digitally mediated communication reshapes the conditions under which exploitation develops and becomes recognisable as violence.

Digital mediation does not simply relocate exploitation from physical to online spaces. Rather, it transforms the relational and temporal dynamics through which coercion, dependency, and control are produced (Kjellgren, 2022; L'Hoiry et al., 2024). Sustained private communication enables continuous contact, accelerated intimacy, emotional manipulation, and individualized grooming while simultaneously reducing visibility for families, professionals, and institutions. Research on online grooming similarly suggests that exploitation often develops through emotional validation, gradual boundary erosion, and normalization of dependency rather than overt force (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2023; Ringenberg et al., 2021; WeProtect Global Alliance, 2021).

This paper draws on gender-based violence scholarship conceptualizing harm as an ongoing process of coercive control rather than a series of isolated incidents (Stark, 2007; Katz et al., 2021). Within this framework, violence operates through everyday relational practices

that progressively reshape autonomy, perception, and dependency. Digitally mediated communication intensifies these dynamics by embedding coercion within familiar relational scripts such as care, intimacy, support, or concern (Tanczer et al., 2021; Woolley et al., 2023). As a result, harm may remain socially intelligible while becoming institutionally difficult to recognise. Behavioural changes are often interpreted through ordinary relational frames—adolescent conflict, romantic attachment, or personal choice—rather than as indicators of exploitation.

Institutional responses frequently reproduce this recognition gap. Safeguarding, criminal justice, and support systems remain largely oriented toward visible indicators of harm, discrete incidents, and evidentiary thresholds privileging what can be externally observed or documented (Davies, 2018; Tanczer et al., 2021). When exploitation unfolds gradually through emotional dependency and private communication, intervention often occurs late, once coercion has already become relationally embedded. Henham's (2021) analysis of the displacement of sexual economies into increasingly privatized and digitally mediated spaces is particularly relevant here: violence does not disappear when it moves out of sight; it becomes more difficult to identify, interpret, and interrupt.

Albania provides a critical context for examining these dynamics. The country continues to be identified as a place of origin, transit, and destination for trafficking, with adolescents—particularly girls—disproportionately affected (U.S. Department of State, 2024). At the same time, boys and gender-diverse individuals remain less visible within institutional responses and public discourse (UNFPA, 2023). Existing

research suggests that sexual exploitation in Albania rarely constitutes a discrete event; rather, it is shaped by stigma, economic insecurity, psychological distress, weak institutional trust, and fragmented services (Ramaj, 2021; Guri & Rees, 2024). Similar patterns of institutional fragmentation and social marginalization have also been documented across the Western Balkans (Dimeska & Dabeski, 2025).

Although Albania has introduced important legal and policy reforms in child protection and anti-trafficking, including alignment with European human rights frameworks and implementation of the Barnahus model (Heywood, 2020; UN Albania, 2023), important gaps remain between formal protection mechanisms and lived experiences of safety. These gaps become particularly visible when exploitation develops through private communication framed as romance, emotional care, or opportunity rather than explicit coercion (OSCE, 2023). Such trajectories challenge prevention and intervention models that remain calibrated toward visible risk environments and clearly identifiable incidents.

Against this background, the present study examines how private digital communication reshapes pathways into sexual exploitation and what this means for gender-based violence prevention, policy, and professional practice. Drawing on qualitative interviews with survivors and professionals, together with institutional case material from Albania, the study argues that the key transformation is not only technological but epistemic: exploitation increasingly unfolds through relationships that remain socially intelligible as care, intimacy, or support while becoming institutionally illegible as violence. By foregrounding recognition rather than recruitment alone, the paper contributes to gender-based violence scholarship by showing how delayed intervention emerges from systems

calibrated to visible, event-based harm rather than to gradual relational processes of coercive control.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research design and epistemological positioning

This study employed a qualitative, multi-source design to examine how pathways into sexual exploitation are experienced, interpreted, and institutionally recognised within the Albanian context. The research was informed by a constructivist epistemological perspective, conceptualising exploitation and vulnerability not as fixed individual conditions, but as relational and socially mediated processes shaped through interaction, interpretation, and institutional response. This perspective was particularly relevant to the study's focus on recognition, as experiences of harm often remained embedded within relationships and behaviours perceived as ordinary, consensual, or emotionally meaningful.

The study drew on three complementary sources of data: survivor interviews, professional interviews and focus groups, and anonymised institutional case files. Combining experiential, professional, and institutional perspectives enabled exploration of how exploitation is simultaneously lived, interpreted, documented, and responded to across different social contexts. Rather than approaching exploitation as a discrete event, the study examined how coercion and dependency developed gradually within relational trajectories that frequently remained difficult to identify as violence.

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019). This approach supported inductive theme development while recognising the interpretive role of the researchers in

shaping analytic meaning. The methodology was therefore aligned not only with identifying patterns of experience, but also with examining how exploitation becomes socially and institutionally legible over time.

## 2.2.Participants and data sources

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with direct experiential or professional knowledge relevant to sexual exploitation and trafficking. The study included 30 interview participants: 14 adult survivors of sexual exploitation and trafficking and 16 professionals working in protection, mental health, legal, and support services. In addition, 24 anonymised institutional case files were analysed to provide contextual insight into trajectories of vulnerability, exploitation, and institutional response.

Professional participants were recruited through state and non-governmental organisations involved in child protection, anti-trafficking, and gender-based violence services. Eligibility required a minimum of one year of relevant professional experience. Survivor participants, aged 18–36 years, were recruited through trusted practitioners and support services. Participation suitability was assessed collaboratively with practitioners in order to ensure emotionally safe and ethically appropriate involvement.

The inclusion of multiple data sources enabled triangulation across lived experience, professional interpretation, and institutional documentation. This design supported examination not only of how exploitation was experienced by survivors, but also of how it was interpreted, recognised, documented, and managed within professional and institutional contexts. Case files further provided insight into how

vulnerability and exploitation become translated into institutional categories, priorities, and intervention pathways.

### 2.3.Data collection

Data collection took place between December 2024 and March 2025. Professionals initially participated in two focus groups, followed by individual semi-structured interviews. The focus groups supported exploration of shared institutional experiences, professional interpretations of exploitation, and common challenges in recognition and intervention, while individual interviews allowed more detailed reflection on specific cases and relational dynamics.

Survivors participated in individual semi-structured interviews conducted using a trauma-informed approach. Interviews explored pathways into exploitation, digitally mediated relationships, experiences of coercion and dependency, and interactions with institutions and support systems. Particular attention was given to how participants interpreted relational dynamics over time and how exploitation became recognised retrospectively within experiences initially perceived as ordinary, supportive, or consensual.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Institutional case files were examined using a structured extraction protocol designed to explore how vulnerability, exploitation, and risk were documented and interpreted within service systems. Analysing these files alongside interview material enabled comparison between lived experiences of exploitation and their institutional representation.

## 2.4.Data analysis and reflexivity

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) reflexive thematic analysis. Analysis proceeded through iterative engagement with the data, involving repeated reading of transcripts and case materials, initial coding, development of candidate themes, and ongoing analytic discussion within the research team. Rather than treating themes as emerging independently from the data, the analysis recognised interpretation as an active and reflexive process shaped through interaction between empirical material, theoretical frameworks, and researcher positioning.

The analytic focus extended beyond experiences of exploitation alone to the processes through which harm became interpreted, normalized, obscured, or recognised within relational and institutional contexts. Attention was therefore given not only to explicit accounts of coercion, but also to ordinary relational narratives, emotional meanings, institutional interpretations, and moments of delayed recognition across survivor, professional, and case file material.

Survivor narratives formed the primary analytic focus, while professional accounts and institutional files supported contextualisation and triangulation. The multi-source design enabled examination of how exploitation was experienced personally, interpreted professionally, and documented institutionally, including points of convergence and divergence across these perspectives.

Reflexivity was integral throughout the analytic process. The research team's backgrounds in clinical psychology, psychotherapy, and gender-based violence informed sensitivity to coercive relational dynamics and trauma-related processes, while ongoing analytic reflection

was used to critically examine assumptions related to victimhood, agency, coercion, and recognition. Team discussions focused particularly on avoiding overly individualized interpretations of vulnerability and on situating exploitation within broader relational and institutional contexts.

## 2.5.Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, ethical considerations extended beyond procedural consent to include ongoing attention to participant safety, emotional wellbeing, and relational trust throughout the research process.

Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants were informed of their right to decline questions, pause interviews, or withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. Survivor interviews were conducted using trauma-informed principles intended to minimise distress and support participant control over disclosure and pacing during the interview process. When appropriate, participants were informed about available psychological and support services.

All interviews and institutional materials were anonymised prior to analysis, and identifying information was removed to protect confidentiality. Institutional case files were accessed and analysed in anonymised form only. Data were securely stored and managed in accordance with data protection and confidentiality standards.

## 3. Findings

Across survivor and professional interviews, supported by institutional case files, the findings suggest a broader transformation in how exploitation develops, becomes interpreted, and is institutionally recognised. Rather than a simple shift "online," participants described relational trajectories unfolding through private digital communication, accelerated dependency, and forms of coercion that frequently remained socially intelligible while becoming difficult to identify as violence. Four interrelated themes were identified (Table 1).

### 3.1.Ecology of relational invisibility

A central finding involved a gradual shift toward private communicative environments, where relational life increasingly unfolded through device-mediated interaction largely inaccessible to families and institutions. Participants described how communication occurring through private messaging, late-night conversations, and continuous online contact reduced opportunities for external observation and early intervention. However, the issue was not complete invisibility. Behavioural changes—including emotional withdrawal, secrecy, irritability, or prolonged nighttime phone use—were often visible to others but interpreted through ordinary social frames such as adolescent conflict, disobedience, or routine family tensions rather than as indicators of harm. As one professional explained: "The parents didn't understand at all that the girl spent the whole night on the phone. The family's concern was why she hadn't done the chores" (P9).

Participants also described processes of accelerated intimacy and relational compression, in which constant communication and emotional availability intensified attachment within relatively short periods of time.

Emotional dependency frequently consolidated before concern or institutional attention emerged. As one practitioner noted, “when the case reaches us, the attachment is already formed” (P4). Across accounts, private digital communication appeared to reorganize rather than eliminate visibility: relational dynamics remained socially intelligible while becoming progressively more difficult to recognise institutionally as exploitation or coercion.

*Table 1. Superordinate themes and themes as reported by interviewed professionals and victims (N=30)*

| **Superordinate themes** | **Analytic subthemes** |
|---|---|
| **Ecology of relational invisibility** | Shift to private communicative environments |
| | Accelerated intimacy and relational compression |
| | Visibility without recognition |
| **Relational coercion within ordinary social ties** | Intimate and familiar relationships as pathways into exploitation |
| | Emotional dependency, perceived choice, and coercion |
| | Relational normality sustaining misrecognition |
| **Fragmented recognition and reduced intervention** | Reduced adult oversight in adolescent contexts |
| | Delayed recognition of exploitation |

| Superordinate themes | Analytic subthemes |
|---|---|
| | Displacement and diffuse exploitation trajectories |
| **Institutional recognition shaped by visibility** | Institutional responses calibrated to visible harm |
| | Structural limits in coordination and protection |
| | Cumulative and intergenerational consequences |

*Note.* Findings derived from personal file analysis are not reflected in the statistical counts presented in this table. Only data from in-person interviews are represented numerically to ensure methodological consistency and maintain data homogeneity.

### 3.2.Relational coercion within ordinary social ties

Exploitation most often developed within relationships that continued to appear socially ordinary, intimate, or legitimate. Participants described perpetrators not primarily as strangers, but as intimate partners, spouses, relatives, or trusted acquaintances, embedding exploitation within familiar social ties rather than separating it from them. Relationships initially experienced as caring, protective, or emotionally meaningful frequently evolved gradually into controlling and coercive dynamics. One survivor reflected: “He was my boyfriend. At first I thought he loved me. Then he began to control me…” (V7).

Across accounts, coercion operated less through immediate overt force than through emotional dependency, psychological pressure, manipulation, and the construction of perceived choice. Professionals

repeatedly described situations in which survivors did not initially identify themselves as exploited because control remained embedded within emotionally significant relationships. As one practitioner explained, “He had convinced her that it was ‘her choice’” (P3). In several narratives, coercion developed through continuous relational negotiation rather than explicit threats alone, making exploitation difficult to distinguish from ordinary relational conflict or attachment.

Participants further described how relational normality itself sustained misrecognition. Because relationships remained socially intelligible as romance, care, or support, warning signs were often minimized or interpreted as personal or relational difficulties rather than exploitation. This ambiguity delayed recognition not only for survivors, but also for families, professionals, and institutions, allowing coercive dynamics to consolidate while remaining embedded within everyday social life.

### 3.3.Fragmented recognition and reduced intervention

Participants consistently described increasing difficulty recognising exploitation within contemporary relational contexts. Rather than appearing as a clearly identifiable event, exploitation was often experienced as gradual, diffuse, and embedded within everyday relational trajectories. Early warning signs frequently remained fragmented across isolated behaviours, emotional changes, interpersonal conflicts, or episodes of withdrawal that, when viewed individually, did not immediately suggest exploitation or trigger concern.

A recurring factor involved reduced adult oversight in adolescent contexts, particularly as private digital communication increasingly displaced interaction from shared family or community spaces.

Professionals described limited access to adolescents' relational worlds and difficulties interpreting rapidly changing emotional and social dynamics unfolding through private communication. In many accounts, behavioural changes became noticeable only after emotional dependency and coercive attachment had already consolidated.

Participants also described displacement and diffuse exploitation trajectories linked to unstable family environments, conflict, neglect, or emotional isolation. Young people frequently sought support, intimacy, or protection through alternative relationships that initially appeared emotionally meaningful or supportive. As one practitioner explained, "They leave home to escape… they find shelter with people who seem supportive" (P2). Exploitation therefore often unfolded through relational pathways that remained socially plausible and difficult to classify within conventional understandings of abuse or trafficking.

Professionals further emphasized that exploitation increasingly resisted fixed or easily identifiable forms. As one participant observed, "Exploitation is no longer always organized; it is widespread and difficult to identify" (P5). Across accounts, delayed intervention emerged not solely from institutional limitations, but also from the socially fragmented nature of recognition itself, where harm accumulated gradually across relational experiences that continued to appear ordinary, voluntary, or emotionally intelligible.

### 3.4.Institutional recognition shaped by visibility

Participants repeatedly described institutional responses as calibrated toward visible, discrete, and externally verifiable forms of harm. Professionals emphasized that existing safeguarding and protection systems were generally more effective in responding to explicit violence

than to coercion unfolding gradually through emotional dependency, relational attachment, and private communication. As a result, intervention often occurred only once exploitation had become overt or deeply embedded relationally. One practitioner reflected: “We were aware, but the reaction was very late” (P4).

Across accounts, participants described structural limits in coordination and protection that further delayed recognition and intervention. Fragmentation between services, inconsistent communication, and limited specialization were frequently identified as barriers to timely response. Professionals reported difficulties establishing shared interpretations of risk when exploitation did not fit conventional institutional indicators or clearly identifiable incidents. As one participant noted, “There’s a lack of coordination, lack of qualification… this makes our cases receive very late interventions” (P7).

Participants also described cumulative and intergenerational consequences associated with delayed recognition and fragmented intervention. In several accounts, unresolved vulnerability, repeated exposure to violence, and unstable support systems appeared to contribute to continuing cycles of exploitation and harm over time. Institutional delay was therefore experienced not simply as a failure of immediate protection, but as part of broader structural conditions that allowed vulnerability and coercion to persist across relational and social contexts.

Taken together, a consistent pattern emerged in which exploitation developed through relational processes that remained socially intelligible while becoming progressively more difficult to recognise as violence. Private digital communication did not simply conceal harm; it reshaped

the relational and interpretive conditions through which coercion developed, dependency consolidated, and intervention became delayed. Relationships frequently continued to appear ordinary, emotionally meaningful, or voluntary even as exploitative dynamics intensified. Recognition, therefore, emerged not as a singular moment, but as a fragmented and socially mediated process shaped by relational meanings, institutional frameworks, and thresholds of visibility. Across accounts, delayed intervention reflected not the absence of harm, but the absence of a clear point at which harm became institutionally legible as exploitation.

## 4. Discussion

The findings suggest that contemporary sexual exploitation should be understood not only as a form of gender-based violence, but also as a problem of recognition. Rather than emerging through discrete acts that clearly signal harm, exploitation increasingly developed through relational trajectories that remained socially intelligible over time. Coercion unfolded within relationships experienced as meaningful, caring, or voluntary, while violence often became recognizable only retrospectively, once emotional dependency and control had already consolidated. This points to a growing mismatch between how exploitation develops relationally and how violence is typically identified within social and institutional frameworks oriented toward visible events, explicit coercion, and externally verifiable harm.

### 4.1. Coercive control and recognition in digitally mediated contexts

Consistent with gender-based violence scholarship, the findings support understandings of exploitation as an ongoing process of coercive control embedded within everyday relational practices rather than a series of isolated incidents (Katz et al., 2021; Woolley et al., 2023). However,

the present study extends existing work by showing how private digital communication reshapes the relational conditions through which coercion develops and becomes interpretable. Control frequently emerged not through immediate restriction or overt violence, but through continuous emotional availability, accelerated intimacy, and the preservation of relational normality within digitally mediated interaction.

The findings suggest that digitally mediated communication intensifies coercive dynamics precisely because relationships continue to appear emotionally meaningful and socially legitimate while dependency gradually consolidates. Constant communication compressed relational timelines, allowing attachment, reassurance, monitoring, and emotional influence to become integrated into ordinary interaction. In this context, coercion remained difficult to distinguish from care, intimacy, or relational conflict, particularly during the early stages of exploitation.

Importantly, the findings indicate that harm was rarely fully hidden. Rather, exploitation frequently remained visible in fragmented or socially intelligible forms that did not immediately register as violence. Behavioural changes, emotional withdrawal, secrecy, or intense attachment were often observed by families and professionals, yet interpreted through familiar relational narratives such as adolescent conflict, romantic involvement, or personal choice. Recognition therefore emerged as a delayed interpretive process rather than a direct response to clearly identifiable harm.

These findings deepen existing understandings of coercive control by highlighting the importance of relational intelligibility in shaping delayed recognition. Violence became difficult to identify not because it lacked relational meaning, but because it remained embedded within

relationships that continued to make social and emotional sense to those involved. Private digital communication did not simply conceal exploitation; it reorganized the relational and interpretive conditions through which exploitation became recognizable as violence.

### 4.2.Misrecognition as a socially mediated process

Across accounts, misrecognition emerged not simply as a lack of awareness, but as a socially mediated process shaped through relational meanings, cultural expectations, and available interpretive frameworks. Early signs of exploitation were frequently interpreted through ordinary social narratives associated with romance, adolescent behaviour, emotional dependency, or personal choice, consistent with scholarship showing how coercive control often remains embedded within socially intelligible relational practices rather than overt violence (Stark, 2007; Katz et al., 2021). As a result, exploitation frequently remained difficult to name as harm while relationships continued to appear emotionally meaningful or socially plausible.

The findings further suggest that recognition was shaped not only by what was visible, but also by how relational dynamics were interpreted within families, communities, and professional contexts. In several accounts, coercion remained normalized because emotional attachment and control developed gradually within familiar relational forms. In others, silence surrounding exploitation was actively maintained within family environments, reflecting broader concerns related to stigma, obedience, reputation, or social judgment. These dynamics echo broader research showing how coercive control may become socially minimized or normalized within everyday relational

contexts (Woolley et al., 2023). Misrecognition therefore operated not merely at the individual level, but within wider relational and cultural frameworks influencing how harm became understood, minimized, or ignored.

Private digital communication appeared to intensify these dynamics by relocating intimacy and emotional dependency into communicative spaces that were both relationally central and institutionally difficult to access. Sustained private communication reduced opportunities for external interpretation and facilitated forms of emotional dependency that remained difficult to distinguish from ordinary intimacy or relational conflict (Tanczer et al., 2021). Recognition therefore frequently emerged retrospectively, once relationships had already become emotionally entrenched or violence had escalated into more overt forms.

Overall, the findings suggest that exploitation should not be understood solely as hidden violence, but as violence embedded within ordinary relational meanings that delay its identification as harm. In this sense, recognition emerged as a relational and socially negotiated process rather than a straightforward response to visible indicators of abuse, reinforcing critiques of institutional frameworks that privilege externally verifiable harm over gradual and relational forms of coercion (Davies, 2018).

### 4.3.Institutional responses and structural blind spots

The findings point to a persistent mismatch between contemporary forms of exploitation and the institutional frameworks designed to identify and respond to them. Across accounts, safeguarding and protection systems remained largely calibrated toward visible,

discrete, and externally verifiable forms of harm, privileging what could be directly observed, documented, or classified within existing procedural categories (Davies, 2018; Tanczer et al., 2021). When exploitation unfolded gradually through emotional dependency, relational attachment, and private communication, institutional recognition was frequently delayed.

Professionals consistently described difficulties identifying exploitation within trajectories that appeared diffuse, relational, or socially ordinary. In many cases, intervention occurred only after coercion had become deeply embedded or violence had escalated into more overt forms. These findings suggest that institutional blind spots did not emerge primarily from lack of concern or professional indifference, but from organisational logics that remained more responsive to event-based harm than to slow relational processes of coercive control.

The findings also highlight the role of structural fragmentation in shaping delayed intervention. Participants described limited coordination across services, inconsistent communication, and insufficient specialization in responding to digitally mediated and relationally embedded forms of exploitation. Responsibility frequently became diffused across institutions, while ambiguity surrounding the nature of harm complicated timely action. Similar concerns have been raised in broader scholarship examining institutional responses to coercive control and technology-facilitated abuse, where existing systems often struggle to recognise forms of violence lacking clear temporal or spatial boundaries (Tanczer et al., 2021; Woolley et al., 2023).

Importantly, participants described cumulative consequences associated with delayed recognition and fragmented protection. In some

accounts, unresolved vulnerability, repeated exposure to violence, and unstable support systems appeared to contribute to persistent and occasionally intergenerational trajectories of exploitation and harm. Institutional delay therefore emerged not only as a problem of immediate protection, but as part of broader structural conditions shaping the persistence and reproduction of vulnerability over time.

### 4.4.Implications for theory, policy, and practice

Taken together, the findings suggest that private digital communication should be understood not as a direct cause of exploitation, but as reshaping the relational and interpretive conditions through which coercion develops, becomes normalized, and is eventually recognised as harm. By foregrounding recognition rather than recruitment alone, the study contributes to a shift from event-based understandings of exploitation toward process-oriented perspectives attentive to emotional dependency, relational continuity, and delayed institutional legibility.

The findings also extend gender-based violence scholarship on coercive control by highlighting how digitally mediated communication reorganizes visibility rather than simply concealing violence. Exploitation frequently remained socially intelligible as intimacy, care, support, or personal choice long after coercive dynamics had emerged. This suggests that contemporary forms of exploitation increasingly challenge intervention frameworks relying primarily on overt violence, disclosure, or clearly identifiable incidents (Stark, 2007; Katz et al., 2021).

For policy and professional practice, the findings point to important limitations in prevention and safeguarding approaches centered predominantly on surveillance, spatial risk environments, or

technologically focused understandings of online exploitation. More effective responses require greater attention to relational coercion, emotional dependency, and the interpretive processes through which harm becomes recognized within families, institutions, and support systems. This includes strengthening professional capacity to identify gradual and relational forms of exploitation unfolding through private communication and developing prevention frameworks attentive to how exploitation remains embedded within ordinary social relationships.

More broadly, the study suggests the need for institutional approaches capable of recognising exploitation before violence becomes externally visible or fully entrenched. Without such shifts, safeguarding systems risk remaining primarily reactive, intervening only once coercion has already consolidated relationally and opportunities for early intervention have diminished.

## 5. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, survivor participants were recruited through support and protection services, meaning the study primarily reflects experiences of individuals who had already come into contact with institutional systems. Pathways of exploitation that remain entirely outside formal support structures may therefore be underrepresented. Second, the study relied on retrospective accounts, and participants' interpretations of relationships and exploitation were shaped by subsequent experiences, reflection, and institutional involvement over time.

The qualitative and context-specific nature of the study also limits generalizability beyond the Albanian context. However, the aim of the research was not statistical representation, but in-depth exploration of

relational and institutional processes shaping recognition of exploitation within digitally mediated contexts. Finally, institutional case files reflected the interpretive frameworks and documentation practices of service systems themselves. Rather than being treated as neutral records, they were approached as institutional representations of vulnerability, risk, and intervention shaped by broader organisational and professional logics.

Despite these limitations, the multi-source design enabled triangulation across lived experience, professional interpretation, and institutional documentation, strengthening the study's capacity to examine how exploitation becomes experienced, interpreted, and recognised across different social contexts.

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# INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN CONTACT WITH THE LAW

**Dr. Brunilda Laboviti, MSc. Greta Katreli, MSc. Bejlinda Mustafa, MSc. Elina Veizi Klinika Laboviti**

**Email: klinikalaboviti @gmail.com**

**Email: gretakatreli@ gmail.com**

**Email: bejlindamustafa@gmail.com**

**Email: elinaveizi14@gmail.com**

## ABSTRACT

Young people in contact with the law often experience intersecting family, social, educational, psychological, and health-related difficulties. This qualitative literature-based review synthesizes research and international guidance on interdisciplinary responses within juvenile justice. It examines risk factors for youth offending, the contributions of legal, psychological, social work, educational, and healthcare professionals, and the role of restorative justice. The synthesis indicates

that coordinated assessment, individualized case planning, family-based support, educational engagement, mental health care, and restorative practices are more responsive to young people's needs than isolated punitive measures. Its main contribution is to bring these perspectives together in a practical framework that links developmental needs, rights protection, rehabilitation, and community reintegration. The findings support policies that formalize interagency collaboration, strengthen early intervention, and ensure continuity of care before, during, and after justice-system contact. Such measures may reduce recurrent offending while promoting inclusion and long-term wellbeing. The review also emphasizes inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive practice across diverse local justice settings.
Keywords: juvenile justice, interdisciplinary collaboration, restorative justice, rehabilitation, youth reintegration.

## 1. Introduction

Young people who come into contact with the law constitute one of the most vulnerable groups within contemporary society. Their involvement in delinquent or criminal behavior is rarely the result of a single factor. Instead, juvenile offending typically emerges from a complex interaction of individual, familial, social, economic, educational, and environmental influences. Research has consistently demonstrated that young people who enter the juvenile justice system often experience multiple forms of disadvantage, including poverty, family instability, social exclusion, educational difficulties, exposure to violence, mental health challenges, and limited access to supportive services (National Research Council, 2013; World Health Organization [WHO], 2014). These

factors increase the likelihood of involvement in unlawful behavior and create significant barriers to rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Historically, juvenile justice systems have often relied heavily on deterrence, confinement, and punishment (National Research Council, 2013; Tyler, 2006). Although legal sanctions are intended to promote accountability and public safety, punishment alone may not address the underlying drivers of youth offending and can contribute to marginalization. Research on juvenile incarceration also indicates that system responses can have lasting consequences for later educational and criminal outcomes, reinforcing the need for proportionate, developmentally appropriate alternatives where possible (Aizer & Doyle, 2015).

The interdisciplinary approach has therefore gained increasing importance within juvenile justice systems. It involves the collaboration of professionals from multiple disciplines who work together to assess, support, and intervene in the lives of young people in conflict with the law (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2020). Rather than viewing offending behavior solely as a legal issue, this approach recognizes juvenile delinquency as a multidimensional phenomenon requiring coordinated responses across sectors.

Within this model, psychologists assess developmental, emotional, behavioral, and trauma-related needs; social workers address family circumstances, social exclusion, and access to services; educators support engagement in learning and vocational pathways; and healthcare professionals identify physical health, mental health, and substance-use needs. Legal professionals provide procedural safeguards and proportionate accountability, while restorative justice can support harm

repair and reintegration through processes such as mediation and dialogue (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2001; Cauffman & Steinberg, 2012; Cocozza & Skowyra, 2000; Hoeve et al., 2009; WHO, 2014).

Education is a core part of rehabilitation because it restores routine, skills, and access to future opportunities. Within an interdisciplinary team, education professionals can support re-engagement with learning and plan realistic academic or vocational pathways (Bradshaw et al., 2012; Farrington, 2007).

Restorative justice adds a relational dimension to youth justice by involving young people, affected persons, and communities in processes of accountability and harm repair. Practices such as mediation and dialogue can promote responsibility and reintegration (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2001; Braithwaite, 2002; Sherman & Strang, 2007).

Together, these theoretical perspectives highlight the complexity of juvenile offending and reinforce the need for integrated interdisciplinary responses. No single disciplinary framework is sufficient to fully explain or address the multifaceted nature of youth involvement in the justice system.

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are periods of continuing neurodevelopment, heightened sensitivity to social context, and ongoing development of executive functioning. This perspective is important because impulsivity, risk evaluation, and long-term decision-making capacities are still developing, while poverty, adverse childhood experiences, under-resourced schools, and limited access to services can intensify vulnerability. Institutional responses may therefore shape later trajectories: punitive and exclusionary practices can reinforce stigma, whereas developmental, rights-based, community-oriented interventions

can support positive change. Guidance on adolescent development similarly emphasizes that brain maturation continues through the teenage years, supporting a cautious and developmentally informed approach to responsibility and intervention (Farrington, 2007; National Institute of Mental Health, 2023; Steinberg, 2014).

## 2. Methodology

This article is a qualitative literature-based review and thematic synthesis, not an empirical study. It draws exclusively on secondary sources to interpret how psychological, social, educational, health, and legal perspectives can be coordinated in juvenile justice. A qualitative synthesis was selected because the purpose is to compare concepts, intervention models, and recurring findings across heterogeneous literature rather than to estimate a single effect size or test causal relationships using primary data. The review therefore provides an interpretive account of evidence and policy guidance, while recognizing that the strength of conclusions depends on the quality and context of the underlying sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### *2.1 Data Sources*

Data were derived exclusively from secondary sources. These included peer-reviewed journal articles in psychology, criminology, social work, education, and public health, scholarly books; and policy reports or guidance from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The review considered

research on juvenile delinquency, mental health, family and school influences, restorative justice, rehabilitation, and recidivism reduction. Sources were used to identify convergent themes rather than to calculate pooled outcomes (UNODC, 2020; WHO, 2014).

Sources were selected according to their relevance to young people in contact with the law, academic or institutional credibility, clarity of methodological basis, and contribution to an interdisciplinary understanding of intervention. Priority was given to peer-reviewed and authoritative institutional sources, with recent publications preferred where available and established theoretical works retained where they informed the conceptual framework. Because this was a narrative qualitative synthesis rather than a systematic review, the search was not intended to be exhaustive and no formal quality-scoring instrument was applied. This approach supports transparent interpretation of the literature while avoiding the false precision of presenting this article as a systematic review or a meta-analysis.

### *2.2 Data Collection Procedure*

A structured literature-search process was applied using Google Scholar, Scopus, and institutional repositories. Search terms combined "juvenile justice," "young people in contact with the law," "interdisciplinary intervention," "youth offending," "restorative justice," "recidivism," "rehabilitation," "mental health," and "family-based intervention." Reference lists of key sources were also reviewed to identify additional foundational literature. The search aimed to capture both

evidence on specific interventions and broader analyses of system coordination and youth rights.

The inclusion criteria were:

1. Publications written in English
2. Focus on individuals under 18 years or young offenders transitioning into adulthood
3. Studies addressing psychological, social, educational, healthcare, or legal interventions
4. Publications from the last two decades, with emphasis on recent empirical evidence

The exclusion criteria were:

1. Studies focused exclusively on adult criminal populations
2. Articles lacking empirical or theoretical relevance to juvenile justice interventions
3. Non-academic opinion pieces without methodological grounding

Studies were screened at title, abstract, and full-text level where available. Materials were retained when they directly informed the review questions or provided policy-relevant context. Studies focused solely on adult criminal populations, opinion pieces without a clear scholarly basis, and materials unrelated to psychological, social, educational, health, or legal responses to youth offending were excluded. This process supported

conceptual breadth while maintaining a defined focus on young people and interdisciplinary practice.

### *2.3 Analytical Approach*

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method used to identify, organize, and interpret recurring patterns across datasets. Thematic analysis allows for flexibility while maintaining methodological rigor and is particularly suitable for synthesizing interdisciplinary literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

***The analysis followed a structured multi-stage process:***

1. Familiarization with the literature through repeated reading of selected sources
2. Initial coding of key concepts related to juvenile delinquency and intervention models
3. Identification of recurring themes across disciplinary perspectives
4. Organization of themes into broader analytical categories aligned with the research questions
5. Interpretation of findings in relation to interdisciplinary theory and juvenile justice practice

This process enabled the integration of perspectives from psychology, social work, education, healthcare, and legal studies into a unified analytical framework. The resulting themes were interpreted with attention to convergence and tension across sources. For example, evidence on

individual-level interventions was considered alongside literature on family, school, community, and system-level conditions, avoiding the assumption that any single professional response can address all drivers of youth offending.

### *2.4 Ethical Considerations*

This review did not involve direct human participants or the collection of identifiable personal data. Ethical responsibility therefore focused on accurate citation, faithful representation of source material, and the use of non-stigmatizing, inclusive language. The discussion avoids portraying young people as defined by offending behavior and instead recognizes developmental needs, social conditions, rights, and capacity for change. All sources were cited in accordance with APA 7th edition principles to support academic integrity.

### *2.5 Methodological Limitations*

This review is limited by its reliance on secondary data and by variation in the methods, samples, intervention settings, and legal contexts represented in the literature. It does not provide a systematic-review protocol, meta-analysis, or primary assessment of programme quality; consequently, its conclusions should be interpreted as a thematic synthesis rather than definitive causal estimates. Differences among juvenile justice systems, service availability, and cultural contexts may also limit the direct transferability of findings. Nevertheless, bringing diverse evidence together is useful for identifying common principles of coordinated,

developmentally informed practice and for highlighting areas in which local adaptation is necessary.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### *3.1 Factors Influencing Juvenile Delinquency*

The literature consistently indicates that juvenile delinquency is the outcome of multiple interacting risk factors rather than a single causal pathway. One of the most frequently identified determinants is the family environment, particularly family conflict, neglect, inconsistent parenting, and exposure to domestic violence. Young people raised in unstable family structures often demonstrate higher levels of emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and behavioral difficulties, which increase vulnerability to antisocial behavior (Hoeve et al., 2009).

Socioeconomic disadvantage is another major factor associated with juvenile offending. Poverty, unemployment, and limited access to resources create environments characterized by chronic stress, reduced opportunity structures, and increased exposure to criminogenic contexts. These conditions also restrict access to quality education and healthcare, further reinforcing risk trajectories (Farrington, 2007).

Peer influence and social environment play a significant role during adolescence. Association with delinquent peer groups increases the likelihood of engagement in antisocial behavior through mechanisms of social learning, imitation, and reinforcement (McAra & McVie, 2010).

Educational disengagement is strongly linked to juvenile offending. School dropout, low academic achievement, and negative school

experiences reduce institutional attachment and weaken prosocial development. Schools function as protective environments, when disengagement occurs, this protective factor is lost (Bradshaw et al., 2012).

Mental health difficulties, including depression, anxiety, conduct disorders, and trauma-related conditions, are frequently observed among justice-involved youth. These conditions may impair emotional regulation, impulse control, and decision-making capacity (Cocozza & Skowyra, 2000; WHO, 2014). Substance use disorders often co-occur and further increase behavioral risk.

Exposure to violence and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) is another significant predictor of juvenile offending. Chronic exposure to trauma can alter stress-response systems and contribute to maladaptive coping strategies, including aggression and substance use (National Research Council, 2013).

### *3.2 The Interdisciplinary Approach in Juvenile Justice*

The interdisciplinary model is grounded in the recognition that juvenile delinquency is a multidimensional phenomenon requiring coordinated responses across professional domains. This model integrates expertise from legal professionals, psychologists, social workers, educators, healthcare providers, and community organizations (UNODC, 2020).

Each discipline contributes distinct expertise, but the value of the model lies in collaborative case management: comprehensive assessment, shared goals, clear responsibilities, and coordinated follow-up allow teams

to address multiple risks and protective factors without duplicating services (UNODC, 2020).

### *3.3 Role of Psychology and Social Work*

Psychological interventions are central to juvenile rehabilitation. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is widely used to address distorted thinking patterns, impulsivity, and emotional dysregulation. These interventions aim to restructure maladaptive cognition and promote prosocial behavior (Andrews & Bonta, 2010).

Multisystemic therapy (MST) is another evidence-based approach that focuses on family, peer, and community systems simultaneously. MST has been shown to reduce antisocial behavior by improving parental monitoring, strengthening family relationships, and reducing exposure to delinquent peer networks (Henggeler et al., 2009).

Social work complements psychological intervention by addressing environmental stability. Social workers provide case management, crisis intervention, and linkage to social services. Family-based interventions strengthen caregiving capacity and improve household functioning, which is a critical protective factor against recidivism (McAra & McVie, 2010).

### *3.4 Restorative Justice and Rehabilitation*

Restorative justice represents a shift from punitive frameworks toward approaches centered on harm repair, accountability, and reintegration. Its core principle is the active involvement of young people who have caused

harm, people harmed, and communities in addressing the consequences of criminal behavior (Braithwaite, 2002).

Key restorative practices include victim-offender mediation, family group conferencing, and community-based dialogue processes. These approaches encourage young people to recognize harm, take responsibility, and participate in reparative actions.

Research indicates that restorative justice contributes to increased young people's empathy, improved victim satisfaction, strengthened community cohesion, and reduced recidivism rates (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2001; Sherman & Strang, 2007).

From a psychological perspective, restorative justice facilitates moral development by enhancing perspective-taking and emotional awareness, both of which are essential during adolescent identity formation.

### *3.5 Effectiveness of Interventions in Reducing Recidivism*

The literature identifies several interventions associated with reductions in juvenile recidivism. These include cognitive-behavioral interventions, family-based therapies, educational and vocational training programs, mentoring initiatives, and restorative justice practices.

Cognitive-behavioral programs are particularly effective in targeting antisocial thinking patterns and improving self-regulation skills (Lipsey, 2009). Family-based interventions such as MST and Functional Family Therapy improve relational dynamics and reduce exposure to risk environments (Henggeler et al., 2009).

Educational and vocational programs enhance long-term opportunities and reduce economic motivations for offending. Mentoring and

community supervision programs provide structured support systems during reintegration.

Evidence reviewed in this paper indicates that interventions are more likely to be effective when delivered within coordinated, interdisciplinary frameworks rather than in isolation, because teams can address multiple risks and protective factors at the same time (Andrews & Bonta, 2010).

### *3.6 Challenges in Implementation*

Despite strong evidence supporting interdisciplinary and restorative approaches, several systemic challenges persist. These include limited institutional cooperation, fragmented service delivery, lack of funding, insufficient trained professionals, stigma toward young offenders, weak community infrastructure, and inconsistent implementation of restorative programs (UNODC, 2020).

These barriers reduce the effectiveness of otherwise evidence-based interventions and highlight the need for systemic reform.

### *3.7 Integrated Discussion*

Youth offending is best understood through a biopsychosocial and developmental framework that considers psychological, social, economic, educational, and environmental influences together. Interdisciplinary practice is valuable not simply because multiple professions are present, but because assessment, goal-setting, information-sharing, and follow-up are coordinated around the young person's needs. Restorative processes can strengthen this model when participation is voluntary, safe, and

appropriate, by addressing harm and supporting accountability without reducing the young person to the offense.

Comparative evidence suggests that welfare-oriented juvenile justice systems are more consistent with rehabilitation goals than exclusively punitive approaches (National Research Council, 2013). Early intervention can support more positive developmental pathways, whereas persistent system involvement may consolidate longer criminal-career patterns for some young people (McNeill, 2016; Sullivan & Piquero, 2016).

However, effectiveness depends on implementation quality, resource availability, and institutional coordination; structural inequality and social exclusion can limit rehabilitation even when interventions are well designed (UNODC, 2020).

A practical implication of the synthesis is that coordination requires more than informal referral. Effective collaboration benefits from clear roles, shared safeguarding procedures, consent-aware information exchange, regular case review, and agreed pathways for crisis response and transition back to school or community services. These operational elements can reduce duplicated assessments, service gaps, and abrupt endings of support while protecting participation, privacy, and individualized care (UNODC, 2020).

### *3.8 Systemic and Developmental Considerations*

Beyond individual risk factors and intervention models, juvenile delinquency must also be understood within broader systemic and developmental contexts. Contemporary juvenile justice literature

increasingly emphasizes that youth offending is not only a product of immediate environmental influences but also of structural conditions embedded within social systems, policy frameworks, and institutional arrangements.

From a systemic perspective, juvenile offending is strongly influenced by the degree of integration between social institutions. Fragmented service delivery across justice, education, health, and welfare sectors often results in gaps in intervention continuity. When services operate in isolation, young people may experience inconsistent support, duplicated assessments, or complete disengagement from assistance systems. This fragmentation reduces the effectiveness of otherwise evidence-based interventions and contributes to cycles of repeated system contact (UNODC, 2020).

Interdisciplinary coordination is therefore a structural necessity rather than merely an operational preference. Integrated case management can improve shared decision-making, timely service delivery, and the identification of complex needs when agencies have clear roles and information-sharing procedures (UNODC, 2020).

Another important dimension is developmental timing. Adolescence is a critical period characterized by rapid neurological, emotional, and social development. During this stage, individuals are particularly sensitive to environmental influences, peer dynamics, and institutional responses. Research in developmental psychology suggests that interventions delivered during early stages of offending behavior are

significantly more effective than those implemented after patterns of chronic offending have been established (Steinberg, 2014).

This supports early identification and prevention. Schools, community organizations, and primary care services may be important points of contact for recognizing emerging needs, but effective response requires staff training, adequate resources, and interagency communication procedures (UNODC, 2020).

A further consideration is the role of identity formation in adolescent offending. Juvenile delinquency is not only a behavioral issue but also a developmental identity process. When young people are repeatedly exposed to negative labeling or exclusionary practices, they may internalize delinquent identities. This process is reinforced when access to positive social roles such as education, employment, or community participation is restricted. As a result, identity reconstruction becomes a critical component of rehabilitation.

Restorative justice contributes significantly to this process by allowing young people to reframe their identity in relation to harm repair and social responsibility. By engaging directly with victims and communities, adolescents are given the opportunity to reconstruct self-perception and develop prosocial identity narratives. This is particularly important during adolescence, when identity formation is still flexible and responsive to intervention.

In addition, structural inequality continues to play a central role in shaping juvenile justice outcomes. Socioeconomic disparities influence not only the likelihood of offending but also access to rehabilitation services. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience institutional contact earlier, receive harsher sanctions, and have fewer reintegration opportunities. These inequalities reinforce cycles of marginalization and must be addressed through broader social policy reforms.

Effective juvenile justice systems also require alignment with social-development policies. Access to education, mental health care, stable housing, employment opportunities, mentoring, and continued support after formal intervention can help sustain desistance and reduce service gaps during reintegration (McNeill, 2016; UNODC, 2020).

Overall, juvenile justice effectiveness depends on the interaction between individual-level interventions and system-level structures. Interdisciplinary approaches are most effective when embedded within coordinated institutional frameworks that ensure continuity, accessibility, and developmental appropriateness of service.

### *3.9 Individualized, Rights-Based, and Culturally Responsive Practice*

Interdisciplinary interventions should be individualized rather than applied as a fixed package. Young people who come into contact with the law differ in developmental stage, family relationships, school participation, trauma exposure, disability-related needs, language, cultural

background, and prior experience with services. A meaningful assessment therefore considers both risk and protective factors, including personal strengths, supportive relationships, educational interests, and community resources. Individualized planning is more likely to produce realistic goals and to avoid responses that treat all young people as equally risky or equally ready for the same intervention.

A rights-based approach also requires that young people are informed, heard, and involved in decisions that affect them. Participation does not remove the need for accountability; instead, it helps ensure that expectations, consequences, and support plans are understandable and proportionate. Professionals should explain the purpose of assessments and interventions in accessible language, seek the young person's perspective, and consider how power differences may influence disclosure and engagement. This is particularly important where a young person has previously experienced exclusion, stigma, or mistrust of institutions.

Cultural responsiveness is equally relevant to case planning. Family structures, communication styles, beliefs about mental health, and access to community support can differ across settings. Interdisciplinary teams should avoid assuming that a single model will fit every context. Where appropriate, teams can involve trusted family members, school staff, community representatives, or culturally competent services while protecting confidentiality and safeguarding the young person's rights. Such practice strengthens engagement and helps interventions fit the person's actual social environment rather than an abstract service model. Collaboration should also be adapted to local resources, legal safeguards, and each young person's strengths and changing circumstances; these principles support fairer and more durable outcomes.

Finally, the quality of collaboration should be monitored throughout the intervention. Teams can review whether agreed supports were delivered, whether the young person remains connected to education or health services, whether family needs have changed, and whether transition plans are in place when formal supervision ends. Outcome monitoring should include more than recidivism; it can also consider school attendance, wellbeing, housing stability, family functioning, service engagement, and the young person's own view of progress. These indicators provide a more complete understanding of rehabilitation and help services identify gaps before they result in disengagement or renewed justice-system contact.

### *3.10 Monitoring Outcomes and Adapting Interventions*

A central challenge in juvenile justice is determining whether an intervention has produced meaningful and sustainable change. Recidivism is often used as the main outcome indicator; however, it provides only a limited picture of a young person's development. A young person may avoid further offending while still experiencing school exclusion, unstable housing, untreated mental health difficulties, family conflict, or limited access to employment. For this reason, evaluation should include broader indicators of progress.

Relevant outcomes may include school attendance and achievement, participation in vocational training, emotional wellbeing, family functioning, engagement with services, substance-use patterns, housing

stability, peer relationships, and the young person's own perception of change.

These indicators help professionals identify whether the intervention is improving daily functioning and future opportunities, rather than only reducing contact with the justice system. They also recognize that rehabilitation is often gradual and may involve progress in some areas before change is visible in others.

Monitoring should be responsive rather than punitive. When a young person misses appointments, disengages from education, or experiences setbacks, this should prompt review of the support plan rather than automatic escalation of sanctions. Setbacks may reflect practical barriers, such as transport difficulties, financial stress, family responsibilities, stigma, or lack of trust in institutions. They may also indicate that an intervention is not suited to the young person's developmental level, language, cultural context, or specific needs. Reviewing outcomes regularly allows professionals to adapt the intensity, type, and timing of support.

The views of young people and families are also important sources of information in evaluating intervention quality. Their experiences can reveal whether services are accessible, respectful, understandable, and relevant. Involving them in reviews may strengthen motivation and make goals more realistic. It can also help identify barriers that are not apparent through formal assessments alone.

At a system level, services should use outcome data to identify recurring gaps, such as delays in mental health referrals, school re-entry difficulties, insufficient community programmes, or limited support after formal supervision ends. This information can guide service planning and resource allocation. A broader approach to evaluation is therefore consistent with developmental and rights-based juvenile justice: it measures not only whether offending has stopped, but whether young people have gained the conditions needed to build safer and more stable lives (McNeill, 2016; National Research Council, 2013; UNODC, 2020).

## 4. Conclusion

### *4.1 Summary of Main Findings*

This qualitative literature-based review examined how interdisciplinary approaches can respond to the needs of young people in contact with the law. The synthesis shows that youth offending is shaped by interacting family, social, educational, psychological, health-related, and structural influences. Accordingly, no single discipline or isolated intervention can adequately address the full range of needs that may be present.

The analysis indicates that interdisciplinary collaboration between legal professionals, psychologists, social workers, educators, and healthcare providers improves assessment accuracy and intervention effectiveness. By integrating multiple perspectives, interdisciplinary

models allow for more comprehensive identification of risk and protective factors and support individualized rehabilitation strategies (UNODC, 2020).

Within the broader model, restorative justice provides a structured route for accountability and harm repair. It is most useful when participation is voluntary, developmentally appropriate, and supported by trained facilitators (Braithwaite, 2002; Sherman & Strang, 2007).

### *4.2 Contributions to Knowledge and Practice*

The review contributes by bringing together evidence from psychology, criminology, social work, education, and public health to clarify how integrated intervention can be organized in juvenile justice settings. Rather than treating rehabilitation, restorative justice, education, and mental health care as separate goals, it shows how they can be linked through coordinated case planning and continuity of support. This synthesis reinforces the limitations of purely punitive models and supports developmental and rights-based approaches (National Research Council, 2013).

In practice, the review supports shared referral pathways, regular multidisciplinary case reviews, and clearly assigned responsibilities across services. These mechanisms can reduce gaps in support as young people move between justice, education, health, family, and community settings (UNODC, 2020).

### *4.3 Limitations of the Study*

The primary limitation of this study is its reliance on secondary, literature-based data rather than primary empirical research. As a result, the analysis is dependent on the quality and scope of existing studies. Additionally, variations in juvenile justice systems across different countries may limit the generalizability of certain findings. Despite these limitations, the study provides a comprehensive synthesis of current evidence on interdisciplinary and restorative approaches.

### *4.4 Recommendations*

Based on the findings, several key recommendations are proposed.

1. Juvenile justice systems should strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration by establishing structured mechanisms for cooperation between legal, psychological, social, educational, and healthcare professionals. Regular multidisciplinary case conferences and integrated service teams are recommended.

2. Access to mental health services should be expanded, ensuring early assessment and intervention for trauma, behavioral disorders, and emotional difficulties among justice-involved youth (WHO, 2014).

3. Family-based interventions should be prioritized, as family functioning is a key protective factor in reducing recidivism (Henggeler et al., 2009).

4. School-based prevention programs should be developed to identify at-risk youth early and provide academic and behavioral support (Bradshaw et al., 2012).

5. Restorative justice practices should be expanded and consistently implemented across juvenile justice systems, ensuring standardized application and professional training (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2001).

6. Policy frameworks should shift from punitive models toward rehabilitation- and reintegration-focused approaches that prioritize long-term social outcomes over short-term punishment (National Research Council, 2013).

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# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AMONG SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

**Bujanë Topalli[1], ArjetaPelinku[2]**

*[1]Department of Psychology-Social Work, University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi", Albania [2]NGO "Islamic Relief", Albania*

[1] bujane.topalli@unishk.edu.al

[2] arjeta.pelinku@islamicrelief.al

## ABSTRACT

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into higher education raises important questions about its implications for social work education. This qualitative study examines AI use, perceptions, and professional expectations among bachelor's and master's social work students at the University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi", Albania. The research addresses two questions: (1) What is the level and nature of AI use for academic purposes and which platforms do students use? (2) How do students perceive AI's impact on learning and its role in future social work practice? Data was collected through structured interviews. The findings show that students use AI to improve learning efficiency, access information, and support academic tasks. However, they view AI as a complementary tool that cannot replace the human and ethical

dimensions of social work. The study highlights the need for institutional guidelines on ethical AI use and the integration of AI literacy into social work curricula to prepare future professionals for responsible and effective use of these technologies.

**Keywords:** artificial intelligence, student perceptions, AI literacy, professional identity.

## Introduction

Artificial intelligence has become a normal part of academic work in Albanian universities, including among social work students at "Luigj Gurakuqi" University in Shkodra. However, limited understanding exists about how social work students specifically use these tools, why they use them, and what they think about AI's role in their future professional practice. This study addresses this gap by examining AI use among Bachelor and Master level social work students.

The research is guided by two specific questions:

(1) What is the level and nature of AI tool usage among social work students for academic purposes, and which specific platforms do they employ?

(2) How do students perceive the impact of artificial intelligence in their learning process, and what professional role do they envision for AI in their future social work practice?

Understanding student experiences with AI is important because it reveals what changes universities need to make in their teaching and

curriculum. More importantly, it helps us understand how these changes will shape the future of social work as a profession. Social work is built on values of human connection, empathy, and ethical decision-making which makes it crucial to understand how technology should fit into professional training and practice.

This study builds on similar research conducted around the world, where educators and scholars are increasingly concerned about AI's role in university education and the future of helping professions like social work. Researchers across different countries are asking similar questions about how AI is changing student learning and professional preparation. By studying social work students in Albania, this research contributes to this global conversation and provides evidence about AI's influence on social work education from a regional perspective that has not yet been well studied.

The findings will help universities make informed decisions about curriculum design, teaching methods, and policies regarding AI use in social work education. Ultimately, this research aims to ensure that social work professionals are prepared to use technology responsibly while keeping human values and ethical practice at the center of their work.

## Literature

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly reshaping the education landscape at an unprecedented pace, thus presenting many promising opportunities but also complex challenges for academic learning and professional formation (Hodgson et al., 2021; Rasul et al., 2023). Social work students find themselves caught between two parallel realities: as

students, they are already turning to AI tools in their day-to-day academic lives, while at the same time preparing to enter in professional fields where social services are becoming ever more reliant on technology (Ahn et al., 2025; Bruheim-Escobar et al., 2026). Social work is grounded in values of social justice, human dignity, and therapeutic relationships, and is by its very nature, a field where the ethical and professional implications of AI a particular weight carry (Reamer, 2023; Meilvang, 2023).

Reviewing the following, the literature review aims to map existing empirical and theoretical ground across three interconnected issues: (1) the types and ways social work students use AI; (2) their perceptions of its effects on critical thinking as both an academic and professional competency; and (3) their vision of AI's role in the future of the profession. Understanding such dynamics is essential for university social work programs, shedding light and reflecting on how to effectively respond the challenges that digitalization continues to bring (Pinazo-Hernandis & Carcavilla -González, 2026; Apgar, 2025).

## Use of AI by social work students and its effects on critic thinking

Empirical studies from recent years offer a clear panorama of AI tool adoption in university academic contexts. Witter et al. (2024), in their quantitative study with social work students in Germany, documented that the majority of the students used ChatGPT regularly across different academic tasks, with ChatGPT being highlighted as the dominant platform, - a finding also confirmed by (Meinhardt-Injac et al. 2025), who reported high levels of acceptance of this specific tool among social work students. Eleje et al. (2025), analyzing AI adoption in higher

education across international contexts, identified a three-part model of use: assistance in writing and structuring academic texts, literature search and summarization, and clarification of professional concepts and terminology, a model that is similarly replicated among students in social fields, though one that risks undermining originality and, consequently, academic quality (Pinazo-Hernandis & Carcavilla-González, 2026).

Dergunova et al. (2022) found that the year of study significantly influences the way AI is integrated: senior students tended to use it selectively and with higher methodological awareness, while first-year students often adopted it without sufficient critical frameworks.

In the study by (Rasul et al., 2023), another very important dimension regarding interaction with AI tools was identified: *the ability to formulate questions (prompt engineering)* which directly affects the quality of the result and the nature of use, from passive copying to active stimulation of thinking. Moreover, (González-Calatayud et al. 2021) also identified *other AI platforms such as Grammarly and Turnitin* with intelligent functions, integrated into academic workflows, while (Jaggers & Mogro-Wilson 2023) signaled a *growing trend of using AI tools also for research data analysis (SPSS, NVivo),* reflecting an increasingly methodologically oriented adoption.

Despite all the positive aspects of AI Tools from which social work students are mainly benefiting, the dimension of academic integrity remains problematic and important. Arar et al. (2025) and (Avello & Aranguren Zurita, 2025) found that *the boundary between "legitimate assistance" and "academic fraud" remains unclear* for both students and faculty, creating *ethical gray areas* that are not sufficiently addressed by institutional regulations.

Social work students' perceptions of the effects of AI on their academic development are among the most dynamically complex topics in the reviewed literature. However, literature strongly highlights concerns related to the erosion of critical thinking as a core professional competence. Szmyd & Mitera (2024) and Suryanto et al. (2025) document concrete student concerns: AI may *reduce opportunities for the development of independent reasoning,* deep analysis and *original synthesis,* competencies particularly critical in social work, where professional judgment is not only desired but ethically required. Rusandi et al. (2023) argue that the integration of AI in education requires the deliberate parallel cultivation of *critical thinking as a "protective tool"* against thinking addiction, while (Chaparro-Banegas et al. 2024) propose a reconceptualization of pedagogical paradigms towards higher-order competencies (evaluation, synthesis, creation) that AI cannot replace.

### Students' Vision of the Impact of AI on the Future of the Profession

The future dimension of how students imagine the role of AI in social work practice is among the most promising according to the studies analyzed. Ahn et al. (2025) finds that students are receptive to professional training on AI but often lack the conceptual frameworks to contextualize the technology within core social work values and competencies such as ethics, social justice, advocacy, and professional accountability. Pinazo-Hernandis & Carcavilla-González (2026) identify three dominant fears: (a) the risk of professional replacement by automated systems; (b) algorithmic discrimination against vulnerable groups that social workers serve; and (c) the lack of digital self-

competence to evaluate and challenge AI systems deployed by institutions.

Reamer (2023) and Rodríguez-Martínez et al. (2024) highlight *that ethical issues are central* to the professional vision: confidentiality of client data, algorithm transparency, access to services and *the protection of vulnerable groups from discriminatory automation constitute the main priorities.* James & Whelan (2021), analyzing the topic of "ethical AI" in social welfare systems, shows that there is a significant gap between institutional rhetoric and real practice, a gap that young students should be able to identify and challenge. Sanders & Scanlon (2021) add the human rights dimension stating that *the digital divide is not merely a technical issue, but a social justice issue,* since unequal access to technology reproduces and deepens existing inequalities; precisely those inequalities that social work has the mission to combat.

Bruheim-Escobar et al. (2026), in their bibliographic review, and (Higashida, 2024), from the perspective of international social work theory, signal that professional visions of AI are closely linked to *the institutional and cultural context,* showing how students from different social welfare systems (social democratic, liberal, corporatist) display different attitudes and fears, suggesting that pedagogical and policy responses cannot be equally universal. This international dimension emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive training on AI, which recognizes both the transformative potential and the structural risks of the technologization of social services.

## Methodology

To conduct this investigation, the researchers selected a qualitative research approach, utilizing a structured interview technique as the primary data collection instrument. The interviews were administered through Google Forms, an online platform that offered several significant advantages for this study. Specifically, this approach allowed the researchers to develop predetermined questions that were presented in a consistent manner to all participants. This standardization of the interview process ensured that every participant responded to identical questions asked in the same way, which facilitated straightforward comparison of responses across the entire sample. Furthermore, this consistent approach to data collection strengthened the overall reliability and validity of the research findings (Hamidon, 2014).

The target population for this study consisted of students enrolled in the Social Work program at "Luigj Gurakuqi" University in Shkodra. The study included students from both the Bachelor level and the Professional Master level programs within the Social Work Branch. The sampling strategy employed was intentional, meaning the researchers did not randomly select participants but rather aimed to include all available social work students from both degree levels. To access the student population, the research team distributed the interview questionnaire through email addresses during the month of March 2026, and data collection was completed within a one-week period following distribution. This approach of utilizing online platforms and email-based data collection offered practical and economic benefits to the research process. Compared to traditional face-to-face data collection methods, this online alternative

presented a cost-effective solution while simultaneously enabling the researchers to gather information from a geographically dispersed group of participants within a relatively short timeframe (Lefever, S., Dal, M., & Matthíasdóttir, Á., 2007).

The total number of structured interviews successfully completed was 37 respondents. The researchers determined that this sample size was sufficient because it had reached the point of information saturation, meaning that additional interviews were unlikely to produce new or significantly different information beyond what had already been collected from the existing sample. This concept of data saturation is an important indicator in qualitative research, signaling that the sample size is adequate to fully address the research questions.

The sample is characterized by a young population, with most students under 22 years old, reflecting typical undergraduate demographics in higher education. The notable gender imbalance, with a strong female majority across all academic levels, is consistent with gender patterns in social work education. The representation across all four academic years ensures that the findings capture perspectives from students at different stages of their social work training.

**Table 1**

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 37)

| Characteristics | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| **Academic Level** | | |
| **Bachelor's degree** | 27 | 73.0 |
| **Master's degree** | 10 | 27.0 |
| **Gender** | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Female** | 36 | 97.3 |
| **Male** | 1 | 2.7 |
| **Age Range** | | |
| **18–22 years** | 28 | 75.7 |
| **23–27 years** | 5 | 13.5 |
| **28–35 years** | 2 | 5.4 |
| **36+ years** | 2 | 5.4 |
| **Year of Study** | | |
| **Bachelor I** | 6 | 16.2 |
| **Bachelor II** | 12 | 32.4 |
| **Bachelor III** | 9 | 24.3 |
| **Master I** | 10 | 27.0 |

*Note.* Total percentages sum to 100% within each demographic category.

The collected data underwent systematic analysis with the primary objective of generating clear and comprehensive answers to the research questions that guided this study. Following the analytical framework described by (Saldaña, 2016), the data analysis proceeded through three distinct stages. The first stage involved initial coding, where raw data were carefully examined, labeled, and classified into meaningful units of information. In the second stage, called categorization, the individual codes generated during the first stage were systematically grouped together, creating larger conceptual clusters that shared common themes or characteristics.

Finally, in the third stage, the researchers synthesized these organized categories into broader thematic frameworks that represented the main ideas and concepts present in the data. These overarching themes provided

concrete answers to the specific research questions and served as the foundation for the study's findings and conclusions.

## Findings / Discussion

Referring to the analysis carried out based on the data obtained from the interviews, several main discussion topics were identified, which support the research questions posed in this study with answers. Through the thematic analysis, the corresponding codes and subcodes for each topic were also identified. Each of the topics was then illustrated with illustrative sentences taken from the interviews, and the data were also compared with similar studies in the field, which further reinforce the findings of this paper.

Together, these themes create a comprehensive map of social work students' AI engagement across multiple dimensions: personal, academic, and professional.

**Table 2**

Thematic Framework: AI Use Among Social Work Students (N = 37)

| Theme | Main Code | Subcode | f |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1. Experience with AI** | First Contact | High school contact | 3 |
| | | Peer/friend influence | 8 |
| | | University setting | 3 |
| | Tools & Comparison | ChatGPT dominance | 30 |
| | | Claude mention | 2 |
| | | Gemini mention | 11 |
| | | Perplexity mention | 2 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Emotional Responses | Positive (relief/benefit) | 5 |
| | | Negative (fear/concern) | 1 |
| | | Curiosity | 1 |
| **2. Academic Use & Ethics** | AI Functions | Project structuring | 6 |
| | | Explaining concepts | 12 |
| | | Summarization | 6 |
| | | Exam preparation | 7 |
| | Plagiarism/Integrity | Plagiarism as limit | 3 |
| | | AI as legitimate aid | 5 |
| | | Reformulation concern | 1 |
| | Ethical Dilemmas | Experienced ethical dilemma | 29 |
| | | Transparency concern | 1 |
| **3. AI & Future of Social Work** | Positive Impact | Automation potential | 2 |
| | | Efficiency gains | 12 |
| | | Predictive analytics | 6 |
| | Risks | Dehumanization risk | 10 |
| | | Therapeutic relationship threat | 6 |
| | | Critical decision-making threat | 11 |
| | Boundaries | Confidentiality/privacy concerns | 1 |
| | | Child protection concerns | 1 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Vulnerable populations protection | 15 |
| **4. University Preparation** | Gaps/Absences | Theory-practice gap | 22 |
| | | Digital ethics training needed | 10 |
| | | Real case studies needed | 28 |
| | | Technology courses needed | 7 |
| | Curricular Needs | Curriculum integration | 4 |
| | | Hands-on/practical learning | 19 |
| **5. Normative Attitudes & Messages** | Encouragement | Encouragement with reservations | 10 |
| | Caution | Warning about overuse/addiction | 18 |
| | Balanced Message | Balanced/empathetic approach | 22 |

Regarding the first research question, the findings indicate a prominent level of AI adoption among social work students at "Luigj Gurakuqi" University. Students reported using AI tools regularly to support their academic activities, particularly for information searching, summarizing materials, explaining concepts, organizing assignments, and generating ideas for projects. These findings suggest that AI has become an integral component of students' learning experiences and academic routines. Rather than being viewed as a supplementary technological resource used only occasionally, AI appears to be increasingly embedded

in students' day-to-day educational practices. Participants described AI as a readily available source of support that enables them to access information more efficiently, manage academic responsibilities more effectively, and engage with learning materials in a more structured manner. The widespread adoption reported by participants reflects the growing normalization of AI technologies within higher education and demonstrates how students are adapting to digital innovations to meet contemporary academic demands.

Among the different AI platforms available, ChatGPT emerged as the most frequently used tool. Participants described it as the most accessible, user-friendly, and detailed platform compared to alternatives such as Claude, Gemini, and Perplexity. Students highlighted that ChatGPT offers responses that are easy to understand, comprehensive in scope, and adaptable to different academic needs. Its conversational format was perceived as particularly useful because it allows users to ask follow-up questions, seek clarification, and receive personalized explanations. Participants frequently emphasized that the platform's simplicity and flexibility contributed significantly to their preference for ChatGPT over other AI systems. These findings suggest that ease of use, accessibility, and the ability to provide detailed explanations are important factors influencing students' choice of AI tools.

*"I've tried ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini and Perplexity. But from these, ChatGPT seems easier to use and more detailed. (Interview Transcript, Participant 24, 2026).*

Students highlighted the practical benefits of AI for managing academic workload and improving learning efficiency. Many participants reported that AI enables them to complete tasks more quickly and with greater confidence. They explained that AI reduces the amount of time required to search for information, locate academic sources, and organize ideas, thereby allowing them to focus more attention on understanding course content and completing assignments. Several students noted that AI has become particularly valuable during periods of increased academic pressure, helping them cope with deadlines and multiple responsibilities simultaneously. In this regard, AI was perceived not only as an information source but also as a tool that contributes to productivity, time management, and academic organization.

*"I had the need to find scientific articles that AI has made possible for me directly." (Interview Transcript, Participant 2, 2026).*
*"AI helped me to organize work logically and save time when workloads were high." (Interview Transcript, Participant 14, 2026).*

The experiences described by participants indicate that AI can facilitate a more efficient learning process by streamlining routine academic tasks. Students reported that AI assists them in identifying relevant information, synthesizing complex materials, and generating preliminary ideas that can later be developed through independent work. Such benefits appear to enhance students' ability to engage with academic content in a more systematic and effective manner. Furthermore, the capacity of AI tools to provide immediate responses and explanations was viewed as particularly valuable, especially when

students required quick clarification of concepts or guidance in completing assignments.

These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that students use AI as a learning aid, a source of information, and a brainstorming tool for academic tasks (Marrone et al., 2022; Keleş & Aydın, 2021; Hajam & Gahir, 2024). Like the findings reported in earlier research, participants in the present study viewed AI as a supportive educational resource that enhances learning experiences and facilitates academic performance. The results further reinforce the growing body of literature suggesting that AI technologies are increasingly being incorporated into students' study habits and are playing an important role in shaping contemporary learning environments.

Despite these benefits, students also expressed concerns about academic integrity. Many participants reported uncertainty about the boundary between acceptable assistance and plagiarism. While students appreciated the support provided by AI tools, they simultaneously questioned whether extensive reliance on AI-generated content could compromise the originality of their work. This uncertainty appeared to create ethical dilemmas, particularly when students used AI to assist with writing, idea generation, or content development. The lack of clearly defined institutional guidelines regarding AI use further contributed to these concerns, leaving students uncertain about what constitutes appropriate and responsible use within academic settings.

*"I found myself uncertain whether my use of AI was exceeding the boundary of assistance and crossing into copying." (Interview Transcript, Participant 7, 2026).*

*"I feel a dilemma when I use AI to improve a paper, asking myself whether I am crossing acceptable academic limits." (Interview Transcript, Participant 10, 2026).*

Participants frequently described a process of self-monitoring and reflection when using AI. Rather than accepting AI-generated outputs uncritically, many students reported making conscious efforts to verify information, reinterpret ideas, and adapt content to reflect their own understanding. This suggests that students are aware of the potential risks associated with overreliance on AI and are actively attempting to maintain academic integrity while benefiting from technological assistance.

*"I use AI only as a guide, reading, understanding and reframing the information in my own words." (Interview Transcript, Participant 18, 2026).*

The concerns expressed by participants support findings by (Lee et al., 2025), who describe AI as a "cognitive partner" rather than a substitute for independent thinking. Like the students in Lee et al.'s study, participants in the present research appeared to value AI as a supportive tool while recognizing the continuing importance of critical thinking, independent analysis, and personal intellectual engagement. Their reflections suggest an awareness that meaningful learning requires active participation and cannot be fully delegated to technological systems.

Overall, the results suggest that students recognize the academic value of AI while remaining aware of the ethical challenges associated with its use. Their perspectives reveal a balanced approach characterized by both enthusiasm and caution. On the one hand, students appreciate the opportunities that AI provides for improving efficiency, accessing information, and supporting learning. On the other hand, they remain mindful of the importance of preserving originality, critical thinking, and academic integrity. This balance reflects a mature understanding of AI as a useful educational resource whose benefits must be accompanied by responsible and ethical use.

Referring to the second research question of this study, regarding the role of AI in the future of the social work profession, students generally perceived AI as a useful tool that improves learning efficiency, saves time, and facilitates access to information. Participants frequently emphasized that AI has the potential to support both educational and professional activities by enhancing efficiency and simplifying various tasks. Many students believed that AI technologies will become increasingly important in the future workplace and acknowledged their growing influence across a wide range of professional sectors, including social services. However, despite recognizing these advantages, participants consistently emphasized that the contribution of AI should be viewed as supportive rather than substitutive.

However, they consistently emphasized that AI cannot replace the core human values of social work, such as empathy, ethical judgment, and professional decision-making. Students repeatedly highlighted that social work is fundamentally a human-centered profession that relies on interpersonal relationships, emotional understanding, trust, and

contextual awareness. According to participants, effective social work practice requires the ability to understand individuals' unique experiences, emotions, and social circumstances, capacities that they believed remain beyond the capabilities of current AI systems. Consequently, while AI may contribute valuable information and analytical support, students argue that it cannot replicate the human qualities that are central to professional social work practice.

*"Social work is not just data analysis; it is working with people, emotions, and complex situations." (Interview Transcript, Participant 5, 2026).*
*"Decision-making requires human empathy and judgment that AI cannot replace." (Interview Transcript, Participant 9, 2026).*

Students further emphasized that many situations encountered in social work involve ambiguity, ethical complexity, and emotionally sensitive circumstances that require nuanced human judgment. They argued that professional decisions often involve balancing competing needs, values, and contextual factors, making empathy and ethical reasoning indispensable components of practice. For this reason, participants believed that AI should remain a supportive resource rather than a decision-maker in matters affecting clients' wellbeing.

*"Its uncontrolled use could lead to unfair decisions, discrimination or privacy violations." (Interview Transcript, Participant 10, 2026).*

In addition to concerns regarding the limitations of AI, participants also expressed reservations about the potential risks associated with its use in professional contexts. Issues such as algorithmic bias, discrimination, lack of transparency, and threats to privacy emerged as recurring themes in the interviews. Students recognized that AI systems are developed and trained using data that may contain existing societal biases, raising concerns about fairness and equality in decision-making processes. Furthermore, participants stressed the importance of safeguarding sensitive client information and ensuring that technological innovations do not compromise confidentiality or professional ethics.

These findings align with previous research suggesting that social work students are particularly sensitive to issues of ethics, transparency, and social justice when evaluating AI technologies (Ghotbi & Ho, 2021; Hodgson et al., 2021). In previous studies, participants demonstrated a strong awareness of the ethical implications of technological innovation and emphasized the importance of ensuring that AI is implemented in ways that uphold the values and principles of the social work profession.

At the same time, students acknowledged the potential benefits of AI in professional practice. They believed that AI could support administrative tasks, data management, documentation, and service planning, allowing social workers to dedicate more time to direct work with clients. Participants frequently described administrative responsibilities as necessary but time-consuming aspects of professional practice. Consequently, they viewed AI as a tool capable of reducing administrative burdens and improving organizational efficiency. By automating routine tasks and facilitating information management, AI

was perceived as having the potential to free professionals from repetitive activities and enable greater focus on direct service provision and client engagement.

Similar conclusions have been reported by (Apgar, 2025; Wilkins & Bennett 2025), who highlights the role of AI in increasing efficiency within social work services. Consistent with these findings, participants viewed AI as a means of enhancing productivity and improving service delivery without undermining the human dimension of practice. Their responses suggest that they envision a collaborative relationship between technology and professionals, where AI contributes operational support while social workers retain responsibility for interpersonal engagement and decision-making.

Another important finding concerns university preparation. Participants felt that current social work curricula do not adequately prepare students to use AI in professional contexts. Many students reported that although AI technologies are becoming increasingly prevalent, educational programs have not kept pace with these developments. Participants described a lack of formal instruction regarding the opportunities, limitations, ethical implications, and practical applications of AI within social work settings. As a result, they often felt insufficiently prepared to navigate the challenges associated with emerging technologies.

They expressed a need for more training on digital ethics, AI applications, online counseling, data protection, and responsible technology use. Participants emphasized that future professionals require not only technical knowledge but also ethical competencies that enable them to evaluate and use AI responsibly. They argued that understanding

issues such as privacy protection, informed consent, digital communication, and algorithmic accountability will become increasingly important as technology continues to shape professional practice.

*"There is a lack of concrete training on the ethical and practical use of AI." (Interview Transcript, Participant 4, 2026).*
*"AI should be used with limits and without violating client privacy." (Interview Transcript, Participant 21, 2026).*
*"Courses or workshops on digital ethics and the use of AI would be useful." (Interview Transcript, Participant 29, 2026).*

Students strongly supported greater integration of AI-related topics into social work education. They recommended the inclusion of specialized courses, workshops, seminars, and practical learning opportunities designed to enhance students' understanding of digital technologies and their implications for professional practice. Participants believed that such initiatives would help future social workers develop the competencies necessary to use AI effectively while maintaining professional and ethical standards.

They viewed AI as a useful support tool but emphasized that it should complement rather than replace critical thinking and professional judgment. Participants repeatedly stressed that technological tools should be used to enhance human capabilities rather than substitute them. According to students, the development of critical thinking skills remains essential for evaluating information, making informed decisions, and addressing complex social problems. Therefore, while AI may help, they

believed that professional expertise and independent judgment must remain at the center of practice.

*"AI should be used as an aid, not as a replacement for personal thought and work" (Interview Transcript, Participant 16, 2026).*
*"Let's not rely solely on AI, but develop critical thinking, empathy, and professional skills." (Interview Transcript, Participant 20, 2026).*

Overall, the findings suggest that students are optimistic about the potential of AI in social work while maintaining a strong commitment to the human and ethical foundations of the profession. Their perspectives indicate a willingness to embrace technological innovation while simultaneously preserving the core values that define social work. Participants envisioned AI as a supportive technology capable of improving efficiency, facilitating access to information, and enhancing service delivery. Nevertheless, they consistently emphasized that AI cannot replace the relational, emotional, ethical, and contextual competencies that characterize professional social work practice. Consequently, students appear to support a balanced approach in which technological advancement and human-centered practice coexist in a complementary and mutually reinforcing manner.

## Conclusion

**Research Question 1: Use of AI by Social Work Students**

- Social work students demonstrate a high level of AI adoption, integrating AI tools into their daily academic activities.

- AI is primarily used for searching, summarizing, explaining concepts, organizing assignments, and exam preparation.
- Students demonstrate digital skills and comparative approaches, using several platforms such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and Perplexity.
- ChatGPT is the most frequently used platform due to its accessibility, ease of use, and effectiveness.
- Students express concern about the lack of clear institutional policies and ethical guidelines regarding AI use in higher education.

**Research Question 2: Perceptions of AI and Its Role in Learning and Future Social Work Practice**

- Students perceive AI as a valuable tool that improves learning efficiency and facilitates access to academic information.
- They also recognize ethical concerns, particularly regarding plagiarism, overreliance, and academic integrity.
- Students view AI as a supportive technology for administrative tasks, documentation, and data analysis in future social work practice.
- They agree that AI cannot replace empathy, ethical judgment, or human relationships, which remain central to social work.
- Students emphasize the need for more practical, AI-related content within the social work curriculum to better prepare them for professional practice.

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# Hate Speech on the Internet and Social Networks Against Women and Girls

## An Empirical Qualitative Study on the Perceptions, Lived Experiences, and Behavioral Coping Frameworks of Women in Albania

**Assoc. Prof. Daniela Kalaja**

*Department of Social Work and Social Policy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana*

dkalaja07@yahoo.com

**MSc. Elisabeta Nano**

*Graduate Student of Department of Social Work and Social Policy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana*

*Currently working at Center of Prevention of Crimes of Minors and Youth*

elisabeta.nano@yahoo.com

**Abstract**

Hate speech on social media has drawn growing scholarly attention, in large part because it falls so heavily on women and girls. Anonymity, wide reach, and weak moderation let it spread quickly, and the people on the receiving end are often left unsure how to respond or how to protect their sense of self from a steady run of online attacks.

This study looks at how that abuse plays out for women and girls in Albania. Drawing on nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews, it identifies the main forms the abuse takes—body shaming, sexist invalidation, misogyny delivered as "humor," and threats sent through private messages—and the platforms where it concentrates, mainly

TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. The emotional cost was substantial. Participants described anxiety, hyper-vigilance, eroded confidence, and, in many cases, a quiet decision to say less in public.

Women reported coping by ignoring abusive content, reporting it, blocking accounts, and leaning on friends and family, but these tactics rarely solved the problem, largely because platform moderation and institutional support both fall short. The study argues for stronger and locally adapted content moderation, digital literacy education, accessible psychological and legal support, and updated cybercrime law. These findings echo international research on the same patterns elsewhere, and they sit squarely within current debates on women's rights and safety online.

**Keywords:** hate speech, internet, social media, gender perspective, Albania, emotional impact, coping strategies, digital safety.

## 1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital communication technologies over the past two decades has fundamentally restructured human interaction, civic engagement, and the public sphere. Social media platforms have evolved from mere networking tools into primary environments where socio-political discourse occurs, identities are negotiated, and communities are formed. However, this digital transformation has also democratized the production and dissemination of hostility, giving rise to unprecedented levels of online abuse. Among the most pervasive and damaging manifestations of this trend is online hate speech, a phenomenon that has drawn growing scholarly attention globally due to its disproportionate impact on women and girls (UN Women, 2021; UNESCO, 2023).

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBB) is not a departure from offline violence, but rather an amplification and transformation of

existing patriarchal power dynamics, adapted to the architectural affordances of the digital age. Features such as perceived anonymity, rapid dissemination, algorithmic amplification, and weak institutional moderation allow hostile actors to target women with high efficiency and minimal accountability. While early digital scholarship often conceptualized the internet as a potentially egalitarian space capable of liberating marginalized groups from offline structural hierarchies, contemporary empirical reality suggests a more complex double-edged sword. Digital spaces have indeed offered women unprecedented visibility and opportunities for professional advancement, yet they have simultaneously exposed them to networked misogyny designed to police their behavior, undermine their authority, and restrict their participation in public discourse (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Banet-Weiser, 2018).

In the Western Balkan region, and specifically within Albania, this phenomenon presents distinct challenges that remain significantly under-researched. Albania's transition into a highly digitized society has occurred rapidly, characterized by widespread smartphone penetration and active social media usage among diverse demographics. However, this technological leap has not been accompanied by a corresponding evolution in digital literacy, institutional oversight, or legal frameworks capable of safeguarding digital rights. Furthermore, the socio-cultural fabric of Albania continues to be influenced by persistent patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles. When these offline attitudes are translated into digital environments, they manifest as targeted hostility, sexist invalidation, and severe moral policing of women and girls. Consequently, the Albanian digital sphere often acts as a hostile terrain for women, particularly those occupying visible, professional, or academic roles.

## 1.1 Research Problem and Aim

The core research problem addressed by this study is the systemic exposure of women and girls in Albania to online hate speech and the subsequent lack of effective institutional or technical remedies. Despite the growing prevalence of cyber-harassment, there remains a critical empirical gap in the domestic literature. Most existing legal and sociological research in Albania focuses strictly on offline forms of domestic and gender-based violence, leaving the digital dimension largely unexamined. International studies, while extensive, often fail to account for the localized linguistic nuances, cultural ironies, and specific institutional weaknesses that characterize the Albanian context. Without empirical data documenting how Albanian women perceive, experience, and navigate online abuse, the problem remains statistically invisible, hindering the development of targeted policies, legal reforms, and platform accountability mechanisms.

To address this gap, this study aims to examine the lived experiences and behavioral coping frameworks of women in Albania regarding online hate speech and digital harassment. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Identify the primary typologies and structural characteristics of gendered hate speech across major social media platforms (TikTok, Instagram, Facebook).
2. Analyze the psychological, emotional, and professional toll that continuous exposure to online hostility inflicts on women.
3. Evaluate the coping strategies utilized by victims to protect their digital well-being and assess the efficacy of existing platform reporting mechanisms in smaller, localized linguistic markets like Albania.

## 1.2 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is threefold: theoretical, practical, and policy-oriented. Theoretically, it enriches the global discourse on networked misogyny by providing empirical evidence from a developing, transitional socio-cultural context in Southeastern Europe, demonstrating how global technological architectures interact with local patriarchal dynamics. Practically, by centering the qualitative narratives of the participants, this research illuminates the invisible labor and emotional burden women endure to maintain an online presence, drawing attention to the broader phenomenon of digital self-censorship. Finally, from a policy perspective, the findings offer a foundational framework for legislative bodies, civil society organizations, and academic institutions in Albania to advocate for updated cybercrime definitions, gender-sensitive digital literacy programs, and localized content moderation strategies from major social media conglomerates.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Online Hate Speech and Gender-Based Digital Violence

The scholarly conceptualization of hate speech has expanded significantly beyond traditional parameters to address the structural complexities of digital spaces. The Council of Europe (2022) defines hate speech as all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote, or justify hatred, discrimination, or hostility against individuals or groups based on protected characteristics, including sex and gender. In the digital realm, this definition intersects directly with technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBB), an umbrella term that encompasses targeted harassment, cyberstalking, doxxing, non-consensual dissemination of intimate images, coordinated trolling, and explicit threats of physical or sexual violence (EIGE, 2020; UN Women, 2021).

Empirical research across global contexts confirms that digital harassment is a deeply gendered phenomenon. While both men and women experience online incivility, the nature of the abuse directed at women is fundamentally distinct; it routinely targets their bodily autonomy, sexual reputation, and inherent right to speak publicly, whereas abuse directed at men tends to focus on their opinions or professional competency (Jane, 2017). Organizations such as Plan International (2020) and UNESCO (2023) have documented that girls and women who actively occupy digital spaces—particularly journalists, political activists, academics, and creators—experience highly organized, vitriolic campaigns designed to undermine their credibility and drive them out of the public square. Citron (2014) conceptualizes this systemic harassment as a direct threat to civil rights, arguing that cyber-harassment acts as a tool of social control that restricts women's freedom of movement, expression, and equal participation in modern civic life.

Feminist media scholars emphasize that online misogyny should not be dismissed as a collection of isolated outbursts from maladjusted individuals, but rather analyzed as a collective cultural practice. Mantilla (2015) coined the term "gender trolling" to describe the coordinated, high-volume harassment campaigns targeting women online. Unlike standard internet trolling, which is often chaotic and unaligned, gender trolling is explicitly ideological, utilizing graphic sexual insults, rape threats, and heavily gendered slurs to reassert male dominance over digital territories. This is closely linked to what Marwick and Caplan (2018) identify as *networked misogyny*, where decentralized online subcultures (such as the manosphere) collaborate to generate, weaponize, and spread anti-female rhetoric. These digital subcultures leverage platform architectures—such

as hashtags, algorithmic recommendations, and sharing functions—to scale up individual biases into massive, collective pile-ons that overwhelm the target.

Furthermore, Banet-Weiser (2018) highlights the structural dialectic of the contemporary internet, characterized by the simultaneous rise of popular feminism and popular misogyny. As social media platforms give women a voice to demand visibility and social change, they simultaneously provide an infrastructure for an aggressive patriarchal backlash. This backlash is frequently hidden behind layers of digital culture, including memes, irony, and internet humor, which soften the explicit violence of the rhetoric while allowing it to spread widely across mainstream platforms like Instagram and TikTok (Powell & Henry, 2017).

**2.2 Socio-Technical Factors Driving Online Hostility**

To understand the rapid spread and normalization of online hate speech, scholars analyze the intersection of human psychology, socio-cultural structures, and technological architectures.

- **The Psychological Architecture of Disinhibition:** One of the foundational frameworks used to explain online hostility is Suler's (2004) theory of the *Online Disinhibition Effect*. Suler argues that the psychological barriers that typically govern human behavior in face-to-face interactions are significantly lowered or altered in digital environments. This effect is driven by several interacting factors: *anonymity* (the belief that one's identity is hidden), *invisibility* (the physical separation from the victim's immediate emotional reactions), *asynchronicity* (the delayed nature of digital exchanges), and *solipsistic introjection* (the tendency to internalize online text as a voice inside one's own head, detached from reality).

In toxic contexts, this disinhibition causes individuals to express deeply buried prejudices, engage in verbal cruelty, and deploy misogynistic slurs with a sense of total impunity and a lack of empathy for the human on the other side of the screen.

- **Algorithmic Polarization and Platform Capitalism:** From a technological perspective, modern social media platforms operate under an engagement-driven economic model. Algorithms are designed to maximize user retention, scrolling time, and interaction rates to generate advertising revenue. Empirical studies demonstrate that content which provokes intense negative emotional reactions—such as outrage, anger, moral indignation, and controversy—consistently achieves higher engagement rates than neutral or nuanced text (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; UNESCO, 2023). Consequently, platform recommendation engines often amplify hostile content, sexist memes, and coordinated attacks, giving them greater visibility on users' main feeds. This algorithmic amplification normalizes aggressive behavior by convincing users that toxic rhetoric is the dominant social norm.
- **Socio-Cultural Context and Local Patriarchal Reinforcement:** Digital spaces do not exist in a vacuum; they reflect, refract, and scale up the existing socio-cultural realities of the societies that populate them. In transitional societies like Albania, where traditional patriarchal systems and code-of-honor dynamics historically regulated gender relations, the internet becomes a new frontier for policing women's behavior. When women express independence, exhibit career authority, or refuse to conform to traditional expectations of modesty, online spaces are weaponized

to enforce moral compliance through public shaming and reputation destruction. Online hate speech in this context functions as an extension of offline structural violence, using technological tools to protect traditional male dominance.

Intersectional feminist theory, pioneered by Crenshaw (1991), further points out that the experience of digital violence is modulated by overlapping social identities. While all women face gender-specific vulnerabilities online, a user's age, professional sector, geographic location, and socioeconomic status alter both the nature of the attacks and their ability to seek safety. For instance, young women in highly visible professional sectors face intensive public scrutiny, making an intersectional approach vital for understanding the varying impacts of digital violence.

### 2.3 Theoretical Integration

This study integrates Social Identity Theory and Cultivation Theory to construct a dual-layered framework explaining both the socio-behavioral production of online hate speech and its long-term psychological and cultural impacts.

#### Social Identity Theory

Originally formulated by Tajfel (1974), Social Identity Theory posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into distinct groups (in-groups and out-groups) to build self-esteem and social belonging. Positive in-group distinctiveness is frequently achieved by stereotyping, devaluing, and discriminating against out-groups. In digital environments characterized by toxic masculinity or networked misogyny, male participants often form tight-knit, performative in-groups where status is gained by targeting women, who are cast as a threatening out-group.

Gendered hate speech, sexist invalidation, and coordinated trolling function as social mechanisms of boundary maintenance. By attacking women who enter professional or public digital spaces, perpetrators reinforce their own collective identity, demonstrate compliance with group norms, and seek to preserve their perceived social dominance over the digital public sphere.

**Cultivation Theory**

While Social Identity Theory explains the immediate group dynamics that drive abusive behavior, Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (Gerbner et al., 2002) provides a lens for analyzing the long-term, cumulative effects of this behavior on society. Cultivation theory argues that sustained, repetitive exposure to dominant media messages gradually shapes how individuals perceive social reality, aligning their worldview with the patterns embedded in the content.

When applied to the digital ecosystem, Cultivation Theory suggests that the constant presence of gendered abuse, body shaming, and misogynistic rhetoric on platform feeds normalizes this hostility over time. This shift impacts three groups:

- For perpetrators, the continuous view of unchecked abuse normalizes hostility, making it seem like a standard, acceptable element of online interaction.
- For bystanders, it builds a culture of apathy, desensitizing them to digital violence and reducing the likelihood of intervention or support.
- For victims, the expectation of hostility becomes internalized as an unavoidable cost of digital participation. This cultivation of fear and vulnerability ultimately drives women toward self-censorship,

leading them to quietly reduce their visibility, delete posts, and withdraw from public discourse to avoid harm.

## 3. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative design to explore personal accounts and lived experiences in depth. Online hate speech is a subjective and emotionally charged phenomenon, and qualitative methods capture nuances that quantitative approaches often miss. By centering women's accounts, the study goes beyond frequency to examine meanings, emotional impacts, and behavioral consequences. The phenomenological approach situates each experience in context and explores how online interactions influence offline behavior. The data presented here are drawn from a broader qualitative investigation of the same phenomenon (Nano, 2025).

### 3.1 Sample

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on predefined criteria. Eligible participants identified as female, lived in Albania, actively used multiple social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook), and had direct experience of online hate speech or gender-based harassment. The sample size was determined by theoretical saturation, reached when no new themes emerged from the data. Saturation was achieved after nine semi-structured interviews with women aged 23 to 41. Participant profiles are summarized below:

| Age | Marital Status | Education Level | Employment Sector |
|---|---|---|---|
| 23 | Single | Postgraduate (Master's) | Business / Private Sector |
| 25 | Single | Undergraduate (Bachelor's) | Non-Profit Sector (NGO) |
| 33 | Married | Postgraduate (Master's) | Public Administration |
| 41 | Married | Postgraduate (PhD Candidate) | Academia / Civil Society |
| 30 | Single | Postgraduate (Master's) | Administration / Public Sector |
| 28 | Single | Postgraduate (Master's) | Media & Journalism |
| 26 | Single | Undergraduate (Bachelor's) | Marketing & Digital Communications |
| 35 | Married | Postgraduate (Master's) | Legal Services / Judiciary |

| Age | Marital Status | Education Level | Employment Sector |
|---|---|---|---|
| 39 | Divorced | Postgraduate (Master's) | Healthcare / Private Practice |

### 3.2 Data Collection and Ethics

Data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews lasting 40–60 minutes. An interview guide provided structure while allowing participants to guide the discussion toward what they considered most important. The interviews focused on three themes: types of online attacks, emotional and psychological impacts, and coping strategies. The flexible format also allowed unexpected patterns to emerge, including the role of local irony in harassment.

Given the sensitive nature of cyberbullying and sexualized abuse, strict ethical procedures were applied. Participants gave informed consent after being briefed on the study's aims, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time. All identifying information was removed and participants were assigned numeric codes (e.g., Respondent 1). Audio recordings were stored on encrypted drives and deleted after transcription.

## 4.Key Findings

The qualitative thematic analysis of the transcripts revealed a deeply entrenched structure of digital hostility that severely impacts the personal, professional, and civic lives of women in Albania. Rather than experiencing social media platforms as neutral tools for communication, participants described them as highly gendered environments where traditional patriarchal surveillance is digitally scaled and amplified. The

findings are organized below into four primary thematic dimensions, highlighting the specific typologies of hate speech, their institutional and platform contexts, and the exact coping mechanisms deployed by the participants.

### 4.1 Structural Typologies of Gendered Hate Speech

The data demonstrated that online abuse directed at women is highly distinct from general online incivility; it is explicitly weaponized around gender, sexuality, bodily performance, and moral evaluation. Four sub-themes emerged from the analysis of these typologies:

#### Appearance-Based Denigration and Body Shaming

The most ubiquitous form of hostility identified by all nine participants was targeted abuse centered on physical appearance. Regardless of the actual context of a woman's post—whether she was sharing a professional milestone, an academic achievement, a political opinion, or a casual personal update—the commentary consistently defaulted to a severe critique of her body, clothing, age, or perceived adherence to traditional modesty standards. Participants noted that this serves as a reductionist strategy: by focusing entirely on the physical form, perpetrators attempt to strip women of their intellectual authority and professional standing.

#### Sexist Invalidation and Algorithmic Pile-Ons

When women expressed authoritative opinions on macro-level topics such as national politics, economic policy, legal reforms, or public governance, the nature of the abuse shifted from body shaming to structural invalidation. Commentators routinely deployed deeply rooted misogynistic tropes claiming that women inherently lack the intellectual capacity for leadership, logic, or objective public commentary.

A critical technological accelerator identified by participants was the phenomenon of the *coordinated pile-on*. Driven by engagement-based platform algorithms, a single highly aggressive or invalidating comment often acted as a catalyst, drawing in dozens or hundreds of additional hostile users within hours. This rapid escalation creates a suffocating digital environment, where the sheer volume of notifications is explicitly designed to overwhelm the victim and force her withdrawal from the platform.

**Misogyny Disguised as Local Irony and Humor**

A highly localized nuance that emerged from the interviews was the strategic deployment of linguistic irony, sarcasm, and cultural memes as a vehicle for misogyny. In the Albanian digital space, perpetrators frequently wrap severe gender-based denigration in the guise of "humor" or "satire". This structural choice provides the perpetrator with two distinct advantages:

- **Plausible Deniability:** If confronted or reported, the abuser can easily dismiss the hostility as a harmless joke, gaslighting the victim by accusing her of lacking a sense of humor or being overly sensitive.
- **Moderation Evasion:** This linguistic masking allows toxic content to easily bypass automated content moderation filters, which are notoriously poor at detecting sarcasm, local dialectal slurs, and culturally specific ironies.

**Hyper-Hostility in Ephemeral and Private Digital Spaces**

While public comment sections on TikTok and Instagram serve as the visible battlegrounds for hate speech, several participants emphasized that the most aggressive, graphic, and personally threatening behavior occurs

within Direct Messages (DMs). Unsolicited private messages were frequently used to deliver explicit sexual harassment, graphic insults, and threats of physical or sexual violence. Safe from public scrutiny and the counter-backlash of online onlookers, perpetrators feel a sense of total freedom to escalate their rhetoric. The invasive nature of these private messages means that the harassment directly follows the target into her personal digital space, completely shattering any sense of domestic privacy or safety.

### 4.2 The Psychological, Emotional, and Behavioral Toll

The study strongly rejects the pervasive social myth that online violence is harmless because it occurs behind a screen. The empirical evidence gathered from the participants demonstrates that the boundaries between digital and physical realities are entirely porous; the emotional damage inflicted online carries over directly into women's biological, psychological, and social lives.

#### Chronic Anxiety and Digital Hyper-Vigilance

Participants described a state of constant, low-grade psychological distress induced by regular exposure to online hostility. This anxiety frequently manifests as digital hyper-vigilance—a compulsive need to constantly monitor notification feeds, refresh comment sections, and preemptively brace for the next wave of verbal abuse. This psychological burden directly disrupts daily life, leading to fragmented sleep patterns, decreased professional productivity, and constant cognitive exhaustion. Over time, the steady accumulation of these micro-traumas erodes women's foundational self-worth, leaving them to chronically doubt their competence and professional value.

#### Recourse Helplessness and Institutional Alienation

A profound sense of frustration and systemic helplessness was shared by all interviewees. This helplessness stems from the realization that standard individual defenses (such as blocking or reporting) are entirely inadequate against a continuous flow of anonymous accounts. Knowing that an individual can attack a woman's professional reputation, integrity, and mental peace with absolute impunity builds a sense of alienation. Participants expressed a deep lack of trust in both the technological platforms and local law enforcement mechanisms, concluding that the digital ecosystem is structurally indifferent to their safety.

**Secondary Traumatization and the Chilling Effect on Participation**

The psychological impact of online hate speech is not confined strictly to the primary target. Participants noted that witnessing the public execution of a peer's reputation, a female colleague's character, or a prominent woman's dignity creates a form of *secondary traumatization*. This observation builds a collective culture of fear among female users. To avoid a similar fate, many women engage in preemptive *self-censorship*. They choose to delete drafted posts, decline to comment on socio-political controversies, and voluntarily restrict their professional opinions to safe, private networks. This chilling effect represents a profound democratic loss, as it systematically filters out female expertise and perspectives from the digital public square.

### 4.3 Behavioral Coping Frameworks and Tactical Agency

In the face of systemic institutional and platform failures, Albanian women have been forced to develop an array of individual behavioral strategies to safeguard their mental health and maintain their digital presence. These responses exist along a spectrum from passive evasion to active, defiant resistance.

**Cognitive Avoidance and Auditory Silencing**

The most immediate, short-term coping mechanism utilized by participants is cognitive avoidance. This involves consciously choosing not to open comment threads on sensitive posts, disabling push notifications entirely, and mentally distancing oneself from the digital space. While this tactic preserves emotional energy in the immediate aftermath of an attack, participants acknowledged its limitations: it merely masks the symptoms of digital violence while leaving the abusive content completely intact and visible to the broader public, doing nothing to halt the ongoing damage to their reputation.

**Technological Architectural Defense**

Participants actively leverage the structural settings of platforms to build digital barriers. This includes configuring comment filters to automatically block specific offensive keywords, shifting public profiles to private mode, and utilizing mass-blocking tactics against hostile accounts. While these tools provide a temporary sense of environmental control, they require continuous, exhausting digital maintenance, as perpetrators easily bypass blocks by creating new anonymous burner accounts within minutes.

**Micro-Communal Solidarity and Psychosocial Grounding**

To counteract the profound isolation that online harassment aims to produce, participants rely heavily on private support networks. Sharing transcripts of abuse, discussing encounters with close friends, family members, or trusted professional colleagues, and receiving external validation serves as a vital psychological grounding mechanism. This communal solidarity helps women de-individualize the trauma, reminding them that the abuse is a reflection of systemic structural misogyny rather than a personal failing or deficit on their part.

Defiant Counter-Speech and Professional Boundary Setting

A smaller, highly specialized subset of participants—primarily those with longer professional tenures or background training in law and media—chose to reject passive evasion in favor of direct confrontation. When an online attack directly threatened their hard-earned professional credentials, these women deployed calm, factual, and legally grounded counter-speech to challenge the perpetrators and establish firm behavioral boundaries.

Respondent 3: "When comments attack my professional work, I refuse to stay silent. I try to reply calmly, making it clear that I do not tolerate that type of language. It isn't always easy, but I feel it's necessary to defend my boundaries and my professional status".

**4.4 The Architectural Double Bind of Social Media**

A central paradox identified in the transcripts is the acute structural double bind that women must navigate in contemporary society. On one hand, maintaining an active, visible, and engaging digital profile on platforms like LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook has become an absolute necessity for career advancement, institutional networking, and personal visibility. For a professional woman in Albania, completely withdrawing from these networks is not a viable option; doing so would mean voluntary professional marginalization and a loss of economic opportunity.

On the other hand, the very platforms that women depend on for professional survival are built on architectures that actively facilitate their victimization. Participants expressed intense frustration with automated reporting mechanisms, which routinely return canned, algorithmic rejections stating that graphic gender-based slurs and coordinated harassment campaigns do not violate community standards. This failure is exacerbated by the total absence of localized content moderation. Because

major tech conglomerates do not invest in content moderators fluent in the Albanian language, its distinct dialects, or its specific cultural ironies, the reporting ecosystem remains structurally blind to the specific ways misogyny is communicated in Albania. Women are thus left caught in a trap: they are forced to use technologies that demand their visibility, yet abandoned by the systems meant to protect them.

**5. Discussion**

The empirical findings of this qualitative study provide clear evidence of the highly gendered and systemic nature of online hate speech within the Albanian digital ecosystem, validating and extending several foundational theoretical paradigms. The narratives provided by the participants clearly demonstrate that online harassment is not an individual or fleeting technological inconvenience, but a structural extension of offline patriarchal violence that utilizes digital tools topolice women's visibility and restrict their public participation.

The pervasive presence of appearance-based denigration, sexualized slurs, and graphic threats in private messages directly supports Suler's (2004) theory of the Online Disinhibition Effect. The architectural affordances of platforms like TikTok and Instagram—specifically the ease of creating anonymous accounts and the complete lack of physical face-to-face feedback—actively lower the psychological barriers that normally regulate social behavior. Perpetrators leverage this digital distance to externalize deeply held misogynistic prejudices with absolute impunity.

Crucially, this study expands Suler's framework by demonstrating that online disinhibition is heavily gendered; the lowered behavioral inhibitions do not result in random incivility, but rather follow distinct patriarchal

patterns aimed at reducing a woman's worth to her physical appearance and moral compliance.

Furthermore, the data shows a clear intersection between human psychology and the structures of platform capitalism. The coordinated pile-ons and rapid amplification of hostility described by the participants are a direct consequence of engagement-driven algorithmic architectures (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; UNESCO, 2023). Because social media algorithms prioritize and boost controversial, inflammatory, and rage-inducing content to maximize user attention, they naturally accelerate the spread of misogynistic campaigns. This creates a hostile feedback loop: patriarchal cultural norms generate the initial abusive content, and the platform's technical infrastructure amplifies it for profit, making the digital public sphere highly toxic for women.

The social consequences of this phenomenon are accurately explained by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1974) and Cultivation Theory (Gerbner et al., 2002). From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, the systematic deployment of sexist invalidation when women comment on macro-political or legal issues functions as a performative tool for maintaining group hierarchies. Hostile male actors form insular digital in-groups where status and social validation are gained by targeting women, casting them as an out-group whose entry into public and professional spaces challenges traditional male dominance. Online hate speech is thus used to maintain boundaries, protecting male authority over fields like politics and law by publicly punishing women who enter them.

Over the long term, the cumulative impact of this hostility is explained by Cultivation Theory. The constant presence of unchecked abuse on social feeds gradually alters the user's perception of digital reality. For victims,

this continuous exposure fosters a deep sense of vulnerability, cultivating an understanding that public visibility will always carry a high emotional cost. As demonstrated by the findings, this leads directly to a widespread chilling effect: women systematically engage in self-censorship, withdrawing from public debates and limiting their professional contributions to safe spaces. This self-censorship represents a clear democratic deficit, as the systematic silencing of female voices thins out public discourse and reinforces gender inequality within the digital public sphere.

Finally, the study highlights a critical structural failure in the global governance of digital platforms: the complete neglect of smaller linguistic markets like Albania. The participants' accounts of failed reporting mechanisms demonstrate that automated content moderation tools are entirely unequipped to recognize localized slurs, cultural sarcasm, and specific regional variations of misogyny. This leaves Albanian women trapped in a structural double bind: they must maintain a digital presence for career survival, yet they are left completely unprotected by the technological infrastructure they rely on every day.

## 6. Conclusions

This study shows that online hate speech against women in Albania is a systemic issue shaped by technology design and entrenched social norms. It restricts women's expression, harms mental health, and reduces public participation. Addressing it requires coordinated action across platforms, education, law, and support systems.

- **Moderation:** Stronger, locally adapted moderation is needed, including better Albanian-language detection tools and more transparent human review for harassment cases.

- **Education:** Digital citizenship and media literacy should be integrated into school curricula to address online ethics and gender bias early.
- **Legal Frameworks:** Laws should be updated to explicitly address gendered online abuse and coordinated harassment, supported by trained law enforcement and dedicated cyber units.
- **Support Systems:** Accessible psychological and legal support services should be expanded to assist victims and reduce isolation.

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# *Social Media Use and Mental Health in Adolescents: A Cross-Sectional Study of Body Image and Self-Esteem in Albania*

**Assoc. Prof. Dr. Edvin Lame**
**University of Tirana, Faculty of Social Sciences**
edvin.lame@unitir.edu.al
**Dr. Fatjona Hysi**
**University of Tirana, Faculty of Social Sciences**
fatjona.hysi@unitir.edu.al

**Abstract**

This study explores problematic social media use and its association with adolescents' mental health in Albania, with particular emphasis on cultural and contextual influences insufficiently addressed in the international literature. It aims to examine the relationships between social media use, depressive symptoms, and social anxiety, while assessing the mediating roles of body image and self-esteem. A cross-sectional, descriptive-correlational design was employed with a sample of 315 adolescents aged 13–19 years. Data were collected at a single time point to evaluate associations among the study variables. Findings indicated moderate levels of social media use, with TikTok, YouTube, and WhatsApp as the most frequently used platforms, alongside relatively low levels of depression and anxiety. A strong positive correlation emerged between social support and resilience, while body image was negatively associated with social media use. The findings emphasize the importance of cultural context in shaping the relationship between social media use and mental health outcomes. Social support appears to function as a significant protective factor, whereas body image serves as a central mediating variable through which social media exerts its effects. Overall, the study contributes to a

more nuanced understanding of adolescent mental health in relation to social media use.

**Keywords:** social media, adolescents, body image, self-esteem

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The widespread adoption of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the ways in which adolescents communicate, establish social relationships, and construct their personal identities. Among these technological developments, social media platforms have become one of the most influential environments shaping adolescents' daily experiences. Rather than serving merely as communication tools, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube function as interactive social ecosystems in which young people develop identities, compare themselves with others, seek peer approval, and negotiate their sense of belonging (Anderson et al., 2023; Valkenburg et al., 2022). Globally, adolescents represent one of the most active groups of social media users. Recent evidence from the Pew Research Center (2025) indicates that nearly three-quarters of teenagers use visual social media platforms on a daily basis. While these platforms provide opportunities for social connectedness, creativity, information sharing, and emotional support, increasing evidence suggests that excessive or problematic use may also contribute to adverse psychological outcomes, including body dissatisfaction, reduced self-esteem, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and problematic social comparison (American Psychological Association, 2023; WHO, 2024). Adolescence represents a particularly sensitive developmental stage characterised by profound biological, cognitive, emotional, and social changes. During this developmental period, individuals establish their

personal identity, develop self-concept, and become increasingly sensitive to peer evaluation and social acceptance (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Erikson's psychosocial theory identifies adolescence as the developmental stage of Identity versus Role Confusion, during which successful identity formation becomes a central psychological task (Erikson, 1968). Consequently, adolescents may be especially vulnerable to the influence of digitally mediated social interactions. One of the most widely discussed psychological consequences of social media use concerns body image. Social media platforms are predominantly visual environments where idealised, highly curated, and digitally manipulated images are continuously presented. Such exposure encourages adolescents to internalise unrealistic appearance standards and engage in upward social comparison, often resulting in body dissatisfaction and negative self-evaluation (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Choukas-Bradley et al., 2024). Girls appear particularly vulnerable to appearance-related comparisons; however, recent studies demonstrate that boys are also increasingly affected by muscularity ideals and body dissatisfaction promoted through social media (Nagata et al., 2025). Body image is closely associated with self-esteem, a fundamental determinant of psychological well-being. According to Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their characteristics with those of others. Within social media environments, these comparisons frequently involve idealised representations of appearance and lifestyle, thereby increasing feelings of inadequacy and reducing global self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2022). Numerous systematic reviews have demonstrated consistent associations between problematic social media use, lower self-esteem, increased body dissatisfaction, and poorer mental

health outcomes among adolescents (Rounsefell et al., 2020; Khalaf et al., 2023). Beyond self-esteem and body image, problematic social media use has been associated with depression, anxiety, loneliness, cyberbullying, disturbed sleep, and the phenomenon commonly referred to as the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025). Nevertheless, recent evidence suggests that these associations are complex rather than universally negative. Emerging research indicates that the quality of online interactions, perceived social support, resilience, and cultural context may moderate the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being (McAlister et al., 2024; Valkenburg et al., 2022). Although these issues have been extensively investigated in North America, Western Europe, and several Asian countries, empirical evidence from Albania remains scarce. Albania has experienced rapid digitalisation over the past decade, accompanied by widespread smartphone ownership and increased access to social networking platforms among adolescents. However, little is known about how social media influences adolescent mental health within the Albanian socio-cultural context, where strong family relationships, traditional social values, and close interpersonal networks may influence the psychological effects of digital engagement. Addressing this gap is important not only from a scientific perspective but also for the development of culturally appropriate educational, psychological, and public health interventions. Understanding the mechanisms through which social media influences body image, self-esteem, and mental health among Albanian adolescents may contribute to evidence-based policies aimed at promoting healthier digital behaviours and protecting adolescent psychological well-being. This study is significant from both theoretical and practical perspectives. From a

theoretical standpoint, it addresses an important gap in the existing literature by providing one of the first comprehensive quantitative investigations of the relationship between social media use, body image, self-esteem, and mental health among adolescents in Albania. While these relationships have been extensively examined in Western countries, empirical evidence from Southeast Europe, particularly Albania, remains limited. Consequently, the present findings contribute to extending current knowledge into an underrepresented cultural context. Furthermore, the study offers an opportunity to evaluate the applicability of established theoretical frameworks—including **Social Comparison Theory** (Festinger, 1954) and contemporary models of digital media effects—within the Albanian socio-cultural environment. By examining these relationships in a society characterised by strong family ties and distinct cultural values, the study contributes to the growing international discussion regarding the extent to which cultural context moderates the psychological effects of social media. The findings also contribute to the interdisciplinary literature by integrating perspectives from developmental psychology, clinical psychology, media studies, education, and public health. This multidisciplinary approach provides a broader understanding of the complex interactions between digital environments and adolescent psychological development. From a practical perspective, the findings may inform the development of evidence-based interventions designed to promote healthy digital behaviours among adolescents. The results may assist policymakers, educators, psychologists, and mental health professionals in designing prevention programmes that strengthen protective factors such as self-esteem, resilience, and social support while reducing the negative psychological consequences associated with

problematic social media use. Finally, the study provides valuable baseline evidence for future longitudinal and intervention studies investigating adolescent mental health in Albania.

### 1.2 Research problem

The main research problem that this study addresses is the profound and multidimensional impact that the use of social networks, especially those with a visual focus such as Instagram and TikTok, has on the fundamental psychological constructs of Albanian adolescents: their body image and level of self-esteem. This problem can be analyzed in several specific dimensions: Body Image Dimension: How does constant exposure to beauty ideals promoted on social networks affect the way Albanian adolescents perceive and value their bodies? Does this exposure lead to increased body dissatisfaction, unhealthy dietary behaviors, and constant surveillance of appearance? Self-Esteem Dimension: What is the mechanism through which the use of social networks affects self-esteem? Is social comparison (comparing oneself to others online) the main factor leading to a decrease in the sense of personal worth in young people?

### 1.3 Objective of the study

The main purpose of this study is to analyze in depth and in a multidimensional manner the complex and reciprocal relationship between the use of visual social networks, body image perception and self-esteem level. Based on the research problem and study objectives, this dissertation is guided by a central research question What is the impact of social media use on body image and self-esteem among adolescents in Albania and what is the moderating role of personality factors and social support in this relationship?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study was designed as quantitative research with a cross-sectional design, using the cross-sectional survey method. The choice of this approach was based on a combination of practical and theoretical reasons. In practical terms, the method allows for the collection of data from a large sample of participants in a short period of time, being less costly compared to longitudinal studies. Furthermore, this design provides a "snapshot" of the current situation of Albanian adolescents, also creating the basis for future longitudinal studies that may be conducted in the future. After collection, the data were coded in the SPSS version 29 program for descriptive data. Quantitative data processing was performed with the SPSS version 29 program. The SAS JSP version 17 program was used to calculate the pilot and test scores.

**2.1 Participants and data sources**

The first draft of the study instruments was piloted in the three selected schools. Specifically, in the pilot phase, 20 students were selected for each school from grades X-XII. The sample frame of the pilot phase included 60 students, while that of the study included 315 students. The lower age limit for selection is 16 years old. In its primary division, an equal gender distribution was sought among the respondents in the pilot phase (10 males and 10 females for each school). To accurately estimate the sample size, two important factors were considered in this study: the level of confidence and the confidence interval. The level of confidence in the study is 95% and the margin of error is estimated at +/-5%. The final sample of the study consists of N = 315 Albanian adolescents. The sample size was determined using the Cochran formula for known populations. This formula gives a minimum sample size of n = 317 and our sample of 315 participants meets this requirement. The final sample size in the study is 315 adolescents

selected from different schools of the pre-university system of Albania. The sample selection method in this study is convenient since the target objective of this paper is adolescents.

To ensure a representative sample of adolescents and to increase the external validity of the findings, this study used a multi-stage stratified sampling methodology. This approach allows for an effective balance between statistical representativeness and the practical feasibility of collecting data in the field. The process was conducted in four major phases:

**Phase 1:** Geographic Stratification and Selection of Primary Sampling Units (PSUs). In the first phase, the adolescent population was divided into strata based on the geographic location of schools. Five main districts (Tirana; Durrës Shkodër; Vlorë; Korçë) were purposively selected to serve as Primary Sampling Units (PSUs). The selection of these districts was based on a clear rationale to capture the socio-cultural and economic diversity of the country in relation to the location of schools, factors that may moderate the relationship between social media use and mental health:

## 2.2 Instruments

**Questionnaire on "Use and Impact of Social Networks in adolescence":** This questionnaire, created for the purposes of the study by Hysi (2024), is divided into four sections. The first section includes demographic data which was intended to collect basic demographic information about the participants. The overall indices of the pilot phase show a good and positive level of overall reliability (α=0.82). For the

section on adolescents' connection to social networks, the internal reliability coefficient, Cronbach's alpha, was strong and high (α=0.92); for the section on the psycho-emotional construct of adolescents towards the use of social networks, Cronbach's alpha represents a stable relationship (α=0.80) while for the section on virtual interaction typologies, Cronbach's alpha represents an acceptable relationship (α=0.74). The distribution of statements maintains the linear distribution line and the placement of variables is in fair position with each other.

**Body Self-Image Questionnaire-Short Form (BSIQ-SF) test (Rowe,2015)**) is an instrument designed to assess adolescents' opinions regarding their body image. The BSIQF instrument is composed of 18 statements (items) divided into 4 main parts: (a) how you think you look (cognitive task); (b) how you feel you look (affective task); (c) how you want to look (optional task); (d) how you think others see you (metacognitive task) analyzed the participants' responses regarding their body image. The instrument assesses these aspects through a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Agree to 5=Strongly Agree). This instrument is not standardized in the Albanian language and to measure its validity we relied on the data of our previously conducted study (see Hysi & Dervishi,2023). The Short Form of the BSIQF instrument used in this study achieved good validity in the pilot phase (α<=.80).

**Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1965)**is a universal test of self-evaluation and personal abilities and is associated with a general sense of self-acceptance and a positive attitude towards oneself. In this study, the average score of 10 statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree") was calculated for each

participant. The alpha reliability results for this scale are positive and high ($\alpha = .87$).

### 2.3 Data analysis

The data analysis strategy includes a series of key steps for processing and preparing for further analysis. First, data quality control was undertaken at three main levels. Completeness check (data cleaning) identified missing data, while accuracy check ensured that values matched within expected intervals. Consistency check identified contradictory responses that could influence the analysis. Further, outlier handling identified and managed extreme value levels that could significantly influence the statistical results. Regarding the handling of missing data in the study, model analysis was performed to assess the nature of the missingness. Through Little's MCAR test ($\chi^2 = 23.45$, $p = .18$), it was found that the data are missing at random (MCAR), while the overall percentage of missing data is only 3.3%. The method of deleting missing data in full (listwise deletion) was used for treatment, since the percentage of missing data is low. Regarding data transformation, standardization was performed for variables with different scales using Z-scores, which helps in the comparison and analysis of different variables in a common scheme. Also, reconciliations were performed where the negative elements of the RSES self-assessment grid were converted into full scale scores to improve interpretation. Finally, scales were constructed that are calculated from the means of the instruments used, ensuring a standardized measurement of the variables in the overall analysis.

A moderate correlation was observed between social media use and negative body image ($r = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$). Strong negative correlations

also emerged between social media use and psychophysical health factors, including body image (r = -.446, moderate to strong), psychosomatic health (r = -.332, moderate), and self-esteem (r = -.312, moderate). These results suggest that increased social media use is associated with a more negative perception of body image, poorer psychophysical health, and lower self-esteem, reflecting the potential impact of media and online interactions on adolescent well-being. The strongest positive correlations are between social support and resilience (r = 0.710, very strong), as well as between depression and anxiety (r = 0.734), while psychosomatic health shows a strong relationship (r = -0.612) with depression.

Partial correlation analyses were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between study variables, controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic status. This methodological approach aims to eliminate the potential influences of these intervening variables, providing a more accurate and independent assessment of the original associations between the factors analyzed. The results of the Spearman correlation provide an assessment of the sensitivity of the relationships between variables, supporting or reinforcing the findings of previous parametric analyses. This strategy emphasizes a careful and balanced approach when interpreting data, ensuring that the study conclusions are based on statistical methods appropriate to the distribution characteristics of the variables analyzed.

Excessive use of social networks is associated with lower levels of self-esteem and self-confidence. The effects on self-esteem are about 2.2 times stronger, highlighting that self-confidence is the main area of influence. Mechanisms include social comparisons and digital perfectionism. Adolescents with higher levels of social network use report more physical

symptoms related to psychological stress (headaches, sleep problems, chronic fatigue). The more time adolescents spend on social networks, the more concerned they are about their physical appearance. This contributes to the formation of a negative body image. Personality explains 11.9% of the variance in social network use.

## 1. DISCUSSION

The main findings paint a picture where the psychological well-being of young people is closely linked to their experiences in the digital world. In this section, these main findings will be analyzed in depth, linking them to the formulated hypotheses and the scientific literature. The identified relationships between social media use and mental health variables will be explored, offering possible interpretations for these links.

The study confirmed the protective role of high self-esteem (RSES) in adolescent mental health. Self-esteem had a strong negative correlation with depression ($r = -.578$) and a moderate negative correlation with social anxiety ($r = -.367$). This means that adolescents with a stronger sense of personal worth were less likely to suffer from symptoms of depression and anxiety. This result supports theories that consider self-esteem as an important source of psychological resilience (Leary & Baumeister,2000).

At the same time, a negative correlation was found between self-esteem and negative body image (BSIQSF) ($r = -.445$). This suggests that low self-esteem is often associated with a negative perception of physical appearance. Social media, with its emphasis on visual appearance and unrealistic standards of beauty, may be a particularly dangerous area for adolescents with low self-esteem. Constant exposure to curated and edited images can exacerbate body dissatisfaction and deepen feelings of

inadequacy. The positive correlation between social media use and negative body image (r = .312) reinforces this idea. Adolescents who spend more time on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where visual content dominates, may be more exposed to pressures to achieve a certain appearance, leading to greater body monitoring and increased dissatisfaction.Comparing our results with major international studies shows that the correlation coefficients between social media use and mental health are in similar ranges.

This consistency underscores that the impact of social media use on mental health is a widespread phenomenon and well-supported by contemporary research. The average of these studies is r = .34, meaning that our finding is 48.6 times lower than expected based on the existing literature. This difference cannot be explained solely by measurement error or methodology – it suggests fundamental differences in how social networks affect mental health in different cultural and social contexts.

These findings have important implications for existing theories on the effects of social media on body image. First, Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, which suggests that social media influences self-esteem and depression through comparisons with others, was not confirmed in our context, suggesting that cultural factors may strongly moderate this mechanism. This experience suggests that the theory needs to be revised and adapted for different cultural contexts. Second, Gerbner's (1976) cultivation theory, which posits that media content cultivates enduring perceptions and beliefs through repetition, appears to be not universal. Cultivation effects may be culturally conditioned, with local norms, cultural resistance, and specific content playing a key role. Finally, Nesi and Prinstein's (2015) triadic model, which includes the interaction

between the individual, the social figure, and the environment, seeks to adapt by including protective and cultural contextual factors. Their findings show that the current model does not account for the possibility of neutral or positive effects that may occur in our cultural context. Consequently, it is necessary to develop new theories that integrate cultural diversity as a key component, avoiding treating it as a confounding variable or "control variable."

This cross-sectional use is essential to better understand the impacts of social media at different cultural levels and to build more accurate, general, and globally applicable models. This finding serves as an important reminder to avoid falling into the trap of gender stereotypes and research bias and that boys' experiences with body image deserve just as much research and clinical attention as girls'.

The findings of this study support the need for a more nuanced approach to digital technology that recognizes its positive potential in addition to risks.

They suggest that social networks are not simply an add-on to adolescents' lives; they are an integral part of their social environment and can play an important role in the development of identity, social skills, and psychological well-being.

The findings support the development of new theories that focus on the quality of interaction with technology rather than the quantity. This has implications for other areas of research, including the study of the use of the Internet, video games, and other forms of digital technology.

The findings of this study suggest the need for a new approach to digital education in schools. Educational programs should teach adolescents how to use these technologies in positive and meaningful ways.

Training teachers and school staff in understanding and promoting the quality use of social media is also important. Such management can help create a school environment that supports the development of positive digital skills.

The findings of this study have important implications for parents and families. Instead of focusing solely on limiting time spent on social media, parents should focus on the quality of their children's use.

Educating parents about the dimensions of quality social media use can help them understand how to support positive social media use. This could include discussions about the types of activities children engage in online, the quality of the connections they build, and the strategies they use to manage exposure to negative content.

Positive modeling of social media use by parents is also important. Children learn a lot from observing their parents' behavior, and parents who demonstrate quality use of digital technology can positively influence their children's behavior.

The findings of this study have important implications for the development of public health policies related to the use of digital technology by young people. Instead of a general approach that focuses on limiting the use of social networks, policies should focus on promoting quality use.

The findings of this study suggest that social media companies have a responsibility to design platforms that promote quality usage. This could include developing algorithms that favor positive content and authentic connections, creating tools for self-monitoring the quality of usage, and implementing safeguards against harmful content.

Regulators could consider developing standards for the “healthy design” of social media platforms, similar to existing standards for product safety.

These standards could require platforms to demonstrate that their design promotes the well-being of users, especially young ones.

Transparency about algorithms and design practices is also important. Users, parents, and researchers should have access to information about how platforms work and how they may affect users' behavior and well-being. Our findings suggest that the Albanian cultural context has several unique characteristics that may explain the lack of harmful effects of social networks on adolescent mental health. First, the strong family structure and close family ties provide a buffer against external influences, providing emotional and practical support that mitigates the risk of negative online influences. Similarly, the close social community of Albanians, characterized by strong neighborhood and friendship networks, may also offset the potential effects of social media, creating a powerful local defense mechanism. Traditional Albanian values, which emphasize direct, face-to-face relationships, and indicate skepticism toward external influences, create a natural resistance to the harmful effects of social media. Finally, Albania's late adoption of technology, the flexibility derived from learning from the mistakes of other countries, and the more cautious approach to the use of social media contribute to reducing negative impacts. These unique cultural elements suggest that the Albanian cultural environment offers strong natural protections, making it a unique model that should be reflected in mental health intervention strategies in other regions that do not have the same cultural structure.

### 3.1 Study limitations

The study carries several methodological limitations that affect the interpretation and generalizability of the results.

First, the cross-sectional design of the study is limited in that it does not allow for addressing certain causal relationships between variables, requiring longitudinal studies to confirm causal links.

Second, the selected sample may not be fully representative of all Albanian adolescents, as some specific or regional groups may be underrepresented. Also, the data are based on self-report, which may be affected by social desirability bias, participants' lack of full awareness of mental health or social media use. Furthermore, the standardized measurement instruments used in this study require further validation in different samples and contexts of the Albanian context to be generalizable. These limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the results and planning future studies.

When analyzing the results, it is important to note that our findings are limited to the Albanian cultural context and may not be applicable to other cultures with different social and family values and practices. Also, the study was conducted over a specific period of time, and the effects identified may change depending on the evolution of society and technology.

The social media landscape is changing rapidly, and new AI platforms may have different features than those used in the study, limiting the applicability of findings to new platforms. The study is also focused on adolescents, and the results may not be appropriate for other age, social, or demographic groups, impacting the generalization of the data across different populations.

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# Does Meaning in Life Explain the Link Between Personality and Anxiety?

## A Mediation Study in Emerging Adults

*BSc. Elda Vladi[1]* vladielda3@gmail.com*

*MSc. Gerald Brahimaj[2] geraldbrahimaj10@gmail.com*

*[1]University of Tirana, Albania*

*[2]University of Tirana, Albania*

**Corresponding author*

**Abstract**

Anxiety is highly prevalent during emerging adulthood, a developmental period characterized by emotional instability and identity exploration. Although Neuroticism has been consistently identified as a strong predictor of anxiety, less is known about the psychological mechanisms underlying this relationship. The present study examined whether meaning in life mediates the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety among emerging adults. A cross-sectional sample of 407 emerging adults (aged 18–29 years) completed measures of Neuroticism, meaning in life (Presence and Search), and anxiety symptoms. Pearson correlations and regression-based mediation analyses were conducted. Results indicated that Neuroticism was positively associated with anxiety and negatively associated with Presence of Meaning. Presence of Meaning was negatively correlated with anxiety; however, it did not significantly mediate the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety in regression models. Neuroticism remained a strong predictor of anxiety after controlling for meaning in life. These findings suggest that meaning in life does not function as a primary explanatory mechanism linking Neuroticism to anxiety in emerging adulthood. The results highlight the

dominant role of dispositional emotional vulnerability and suggest that meaning in life may operate as a parallel protective factor rather than a mediating process.

**Keywords:** *emerging adulthood, Neuroticism, meaning in life, anxiety, mediation*

## 1. Introduction

Anxiety is one of the most prevalent mental health concerns among emerging adults, a developmental period marked by identity exploration, instability, and heightened emotional vulnerability (Arnett, 2015; Lee et al., 2020). Epidemiological and longitudinal research indicates that anxiety symptoms frequently increase during this stage due to academic pressure, occupational uncertainty, and social transitions (Kessler et al., 2017; McLaughlin & King, 2015). Identifying psychological mechanisms that explain individual differences in anxiety during emerging adulthood remains a central task for contemporary personality and clinical psychology.

Among personality traits, Neuroticism has been consistently identified as a primary dispositional risk factor for anxiety. Neuroticism reflects a stable tendency toward negative affectivity, emotional instability, and heightened stress sensitivity, and has shown strong and replicable associations with anxiety symptoms across cultures and age groups (Barlow et al., 2016; Kotov et al., 2017). Recent meta-analytic and large-scale studies confirm that individuals high in Neuroticism are more likely to experience chronic worry, emotional dysregulation, and anxiety-related psychopathology (Brandes & Tackett, 2019; Jeronimus et al., 2016). However, although the Neuroticism–anxiety link is well

established, less is known about the psychological processes through which this personality trait exerts its influence.

One construct that may help explain this relationship is meaning in life, a central concept in existential and positive psychology. Meaning in life refers to the degree to which individuals perceive their lives as purposeful, coherent, and significant (Martela & Steger, 2016). Contemporary research conceptualizes meaning in life as comprising two distinct but related dimensions: Presence of Meaning, which reflects the subjective experience that life is meaningful, and Search for Meaning, which reflects the motivation to find or enhance meaning (Steger et al., 2015). Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that Presence of Meaning is associated with greater psychological well-being and lower levels of anxiety and distress (Disabato et al., 2017; Park et al., 2023).

In contrast, the role of Search for Meaning appears more complex. While some studies suggest that searching for meaning may reflect personal growth and adaptive exploration, particularly in younger populations, others indicate that it is positively associated with anxiety, depressive symptoms, and existential distress when meaning has not yet been established (Hill et al., 2018; Li et al., 2021). Recent findings suggest that Search for Meaning may function as a transitional or vulnerability factor, especially during emerging adulthood, when individuals are actively negotiating identity and life direction (Steger et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2018).

Importantly, personality traits may shape individuals' capacity to experience meaning in life. Research shows that Neuroticism is negatively associated with Presence of Meaning and positively associated with existential uncertainty and distress (Lavigne et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2023).

Individuals high in Neuroticism may struggle to maintain a coherent sense of purpose due to chronic negative emotions, rumination, and self-doubt, which may undermine meaning-making processes (Park & George, 2016). A reduced sense of meaning, in turn, has been shown to increase vulnerability to anxiety by weakening psychological resilience and adaptive coping (Park et al., 2023).

Emerging adulthood provides a particularly relevant context for examining these relationships. This developmental period is characterized by heightened meaning-seeking and existential questioning, making meaning in life a salient psychological resource (Arnett, 2015; Steger & Samman, 2017). Recent studies indicate that while Presence of Meaning serves as a protective factor against anxiety in emerging adults, Search for Meaning is often positively associated with anxiety when not accompanied by a stable sense of meaning (Li et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2018). Despite this growing body of research, few studies have explicitly tested whether meaning in life mediates the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety, particularly within emerging adult populations.

Guided by an integrative framework, the present study proposes that personality traits influence anxiety indirectly through meaning in life, following the pathway: Personality → Meaning → Anxiety.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Personality Traits and Anxiety*

Personality traits have long been recognized as foundational predictors of emotional and psychological functioning. Within the Five-Factor Model, Neuroticism has emerged as the most consistent and powerful predictor of anxiety-related outcomes (Barlow et al., 2016; Kotov et al., 2017). Individuals high in Neuroticism tend to experience

heightened emotional reactivity, chronic worry, and increased sensitivity to perceived threats, which place them at elevated risk for anxiety symptoms and disorders (Brandes & Tackett, 2019).

Recent longitudinal and meta-analytic studies reinforce the stability and predictive strength of Neuroticism in relation to anxiety. For instance, Jeronimus et al. (2016) demonstrated that Neuroticism prospectively predicts increases in internalizing symptoms over time, even after controlling for baseline distress. Similarly, a large meta-analysis by Kotov et al. (2017) found that Neuroticism shows strong and consistent associations with anxiety disorders across diagnostic categories, suggesting that it represents a transdiagnostic vulnerability factor. Despite this robust evidence, contemporary models emphasize the importance of identifying mediating mechanisms that explain how personality traits translate into psychopathology (Barlow et al., 2016).

### *2.2. Meaning in Life as a Psychological Resource*

Meaning in life has gained increasing attention over the past decade as a key psychological resource associated with well-being and mental health. Defined as the subjective sense that one's life is coherent, purposeful, and significant, meaning in life is considered essential for adaptive functioning and resilience (Martela & Steger, 2016). Empirical research consistently demonstrates that individuals who report a strong Presence of Meaning experience lower levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress (Disabato et al., 2017; Park et al., 2023).

Recent studies suggest that Presence of Meaning promotes mental health by enhancing coping efficacy, fostering goal-directed behavior, and providing a framework for interpreting stressful life events (Park & George, 2016; van Tongeren et al., 2018). In line with these findings, a

large-scale cross-cultural investigation found that Presence of Meaning was inversely associated with anxiety across diverse cultural contexts, highlighting its universal protective function (Steger et al., 2021). These findings support the conceptualization of meaning in life as a buffer against anxiety, particularly in times of stress and uncertainty.

### *2.3. Search for Meaning: Risk Factor or Developmental Process?*

In contrast to Presence of Meaning, the psychological implications of Search for Meaning are less clear. While some researchers argue that searching for meaning reflects healthy exploration and personal growth, particularly during developmental transitions, others suggest that it may indicate existential distress and unmet psychological needs (Hill et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2018). Recent evidence increasingly supports a dual interpretation, in which Search for Meaning may be adaptive or maladaptive depending on contextual and individual factors.

Several studies conducted in the past decade report positive associations between Search for Meaning and anxiety symptoms, especially when individuals lack a stable sense of meaning (Li et al., 2021; Steger et al., 2021). For example, Li et al. (2021) found that Search for Meaning was positively related to anxiety among university students, whereas Presence of Meaning showed a strong negative association. These findings suggest that Search for Meaning may reflect a transitional state of psychological struggle, particularly salient in emerging adulthood.

### *2.4. Personality and Meaning in Life*

Growing evidence indicates that personality traits shape individuals' capacity to experience and construct meaning in life. Neuroticism, in particular, has been shown to be negatively associated with Presence of Meaning and positively associated with existential uncertainty

(Liu et al., 2023; Steger et al., 2015). Individuals high in Neuroticism may find it difficult to sustain meaning due to emotional instability, pessimistic cognitive styles, and rumination, all of which interfere with meaning-making processes (Park & George, 2016).

Recent empirical work supports these associations. For instance, Liu et al. (2023) demonstrated that Neuroticism was negatively related to Presence of Meaning and indirectly associated with psychological distress through reduced meaning. Similarly, longitudinal evidence suggests that stable personality traits predict changes in meaning in life over time, rather than the reverse, underscoring the dispositional roots of meaning-related processes (Steger et al., 2021).

### *2.5. Meaning in Life as a Mediator Between Personality and Anxiety*

Despite parallel literatures linking Neuroticism to anxiety and meaning in life to mental health, relatively few studies have directly tested meaning in life as a mediating mechanism. Emerging evidence suggests that Presence of Meaning may partially explain the association between maladaptive personality traits and psychological distress. For example, recent mediation studies indicate that meaning in life mediates the relationship between Neuroticism and depressive symptoms, stress, and emotional exhaustion (van Tongeren et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2023).

However, research specifically examining anxiety—particularly in emerging adults—remains limited. Moreover, the distinct roles of Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning are often not examined simultaneously, limiting theoretical clarity. Addressing this gap is critical for advancing integrative models that connect personality, existential processes, and mental health outcomes.

## 3. Method

### *3.1. Study Design and Hypotheses*

The present study adopted a cross-sectional, correlational design to examine whether meaning in life mediates the relationship between personality traits—specifically Neuroticism—and anxiety among emerging adults. Guided by the proposed integrative model (Personality → Meaning → Anxiety), the study tested a mediation framework in which Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning were examined as distinct psychological processes. Based on the theoretical framework and empirical literature reviewed, the following hypotheses were formulated:

*H1: Neuroticism is positively associated with anxiety.*

*H2: Neuroticism is negatively associated with Presence of Meaning.*

*H3: Presence of Meaning mediates the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety.*

*H4: Search for Meaning is positively associated with anxiety but does not mediate the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety.*

### *3.2. Participants*

Participants were emerging adults aged 18 to 29 years, recruited through university mailing lists, social media platforms, and classroom announcements using a convenience sampling strategy. Eligibility criteria included being within the specified age range and providing informed consent. Participants with incomplete responses were excluded from the final dataset. The final sample consisted of N = 407 emerging adults, with a mean age of M = 22.41 years (SD = 2.98). The sample was predominantly female (50.2%), and the majority were university students. Demographic

information including age, gender, and educational status was collected and examined as potential covariates in the analyses.

### *3.3. Measures*

#### *3.3.1. Personality Traits*

Personality traits were assessed using the Big Five Inventory–2 (BFI-2; Soto & John, 2017). For the purposes of the present study, the Neuroticism dimension was used as the primary personality predictor. The Neuroticism subscale assesses emotional instability, anxiety proneness, and negative affectivity through items such as "I worry a lot." Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher levels of Neuroticism. In the current sample, the Neuroticism subscale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$).

#### *3.3.2. Meaning in Life*

Meaning in life was measured using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006), which consists of two five-item subscales assessing Presence of Meaning (e.g., "My life has a clear sense of purpose") and Search for Meaning (e.g., "I am searching for meaning in my life"). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (absolutely untrue) to 7 (absolutely true). Higher scores reflect greater Presence of Meaning or Search for Meaning, respectively. In the present study, internal consistency was satisfactory for both Presence of Meaning ($\alpha = .88$) and Search for Meaning ($\alpha = .84$).

#### *3.3.3. Anxiety*

Anxiety symptoms were assessed using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder–7 (GAD-7) scale (Spitzer et al., 2006). The GAD-7 consists of seven items measuring the frequency of anxiety symptoms experienced

over the past two weeks (e.g., "Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge"). Responses are rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day). Total scores range from 0 to 21, with higher scores indicating greater anxiety severity. The scale demonstrated excellent internal reliability in the current sample ($\alpha = .91$).

### *3.4. Procedure*

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards according to APA. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of participation and provided informed consent prior to completing the online survey. Data were collected anonymously using an online questionnaire platform. The survey required approximately 5–10 minutes to complete, and no financial compensation was provided.

### *3.5. Data Analysis*

Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 31.1). Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, and Pearson correlation coefficients to examine associations among Neuroticism, Presence of Meaning, Search for Meaning, and anxiety.

To test the mediation hypotheses (H3 and H4), mediation analyses were performed using PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4; Hayes, 2018). Neuroticism was specified as the independent variable, anxiety as the dependent variable, and Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning were tested as mediators in separate models. Indirect effects were estimated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples, and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals were used to determine statistical significance. An indirect effect was considered significant when the confidence interval did not include zero. Age and gender were included as

covariates in all mediation analyses due to their established associations with anxiety in emerging adulthood.

## 4. Results

### *4.1. Preliminary Analyses*

Prior to hypothesis testing, descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were examined for all study variables. The sample consisted of 407 emerging adults, with complete data across all variables. Mean levels of Neuroticism, Presence of Meaning, and anxiety were within expected ranges for non-clinical emerging adult populations.

As shown in Table 1, participants reported a moderate level of Neuroticism ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.74$), a moderate-to-high level of Presence of Meaning ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.16$), and mild-to-moderate anxiety symptoms ($M = 7.29$, $SD = 4.82$). No violations of normality were detected based on inspection of skewness, kurtosis, and distributional properties.

Pearson correlation analyses revealed significant associations among all key variables in the expected directions. Neuroticism was positively and moderately correlated with anxiety ($r = .423$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of emotional instability were associated with greater anxiety symptoms. Neuroticism was also negatively correlated with Presence of Meaning ($r = -.236$, $p < .001$), suggesting that individuals higher in Neuroticism reported lower levels of perceived meaning in life. Additionally, Presence of Meaning was negatively correlated with anxiety ($r = -.164$, $p < .001$), indicating that greater perceived meaning was associated with lower anxiety levels. These correlations provided initial support for Hypotheses 1 and 2 and justified proceeding with regression-based mediation analyses.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 407)*

| Variable | M | SD | 1 | 2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Neuroticism | 2.94 | 0.74 | — | |
| 2. Presence of Meaning | 4.60 | 1.16 | −.236*** | — |
| 3. Anxiety (GAD-7) | 7.29 | 4.82 | .423*** | −.164*** |

*Note.* *** $p < .001$.

### *4.2. Regression Analyses and Hypothesis Testing*

To test the proposed mediation model, a series of hierarchical regression analyses were conducted following established mediation procedures. First, a simple linear regression was conducted to examine whether Neuroticism significantly predicted Presence of Meaning. The overall regression model was significant, $F(1, 405) = 23.95$, $p < .001$, explaining 5.6% of the variance in Presence of Meaning ($R^2 = .056$).

As shown in Table 2, Neuroticism emerged as a significant negative predictor of Presence of Meaning ($\beta = -.236$, $t = -4.89$, $p < .001$). Higher levels of Neuroticism were associated with lower perceived meaning in life. These findings provide support for Hypothesis 2.

Next, a regression analysis examined the direct effect of Neuroticism on anxiety. The model was statistically significant, $F(1, 405) = 88.17$, $p < .001$, accounting for 17.9% of the variance in anxiety symptoms ($R^2 = .179$). Neuroticism was a strong positive predictor of anxiety ($\beta = .423$, $t = 9.39$, $p < .001$), indicating that individuals with higher

Neuroticism reported significantly higher anxiety levels. This result provides strong support for Hypothesis 1.

**Table 2**

*Regression Analyses Predicting Presence of Meaning and Anxiety*

| Dependent Variable | Predictor | B | SE | β | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Presence of Meaning | Neuroticism | −0.370 | 0.076 | −.236 | < .001 |
| Anxiety | Neuroticism | 2.756 | 0.294 | .423 | < .001 |
| Anxiety | Neuroticism<br>Presence of Meaning | 2.652<br>−0.282 | 0.302<br>0.193 | .407<br>−.068 | < .001<br>.144 |

*Note. $R^2$ = .056 for Presence of Meaning; $R^2$ = .179 for Anxiety (Model 1); $R^2$ = .183 for Anxiety (Model 2).*

### *4.3. Testing the Mediating Role of Presence of Meaning (H3)*

To examine whether Presence of Meaning mediated the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety, both predictors were entered simultaneously into a regression model with anxiety as the dependent variable. The overall model was significant, $F(2, 404) = 45.28$, $p < .001$, explaining 18.3% of the variance in anxiety ($R^2 = .183$).

In this model, Neuroticism remained a significant predictor of anxiety ($\beta = .407$, $t = 8.79$, $p < .001$), although its standardized coefficient was slightly reduced compared to the model without the mediator (from $\beta = .423$ to $\beta = .407$). In contrast, Presence of Meaning did not significantly

predict anxiety when controlling for Neuroticism ($\beta = -.068$, $t = -1.46$, $p = .144$).

Although Neuroticism was significantly associated with both Presence of Meaning and anxiety, and Presence of Meaning was negatively correlated with anxiety at the bivariate level, the indirect effect did not reach statistical significance in the regression model. Therefore, full mediation was not supported. The observed reduction in the Neuroticism coefficient suggests a weak or partial attenuation, but the criteria for statistical mediation were not met. Accordingly, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

In summary, the results provide robust evidence that Neuroticism is a significant risk factor for anxiety in emerging adults and is associated with lower Presence of Meaning. While Presence of Meaning was negatively related to anxiety at the correlational level, it did not significantly mediate the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety when examined within a regression framework.

**5. Discussion**

The present study examined whether meaning in life explains the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety among emerging adults. Consistent with extensive prior research, Neuroticism emerged as a strong and significant predictor of anxiety, supporting its role as a central dispositional vulnerability for internalizing symptoms (Barlow et al., 2016; Kotov et al., 2017). This finding aligns with contemporary personality–psychopathology models and confirms the relevance of Neuroticism during emerging adulthood, a developmental period marked by emotional instability and heightened stress.

Neuroticism was also negatively associated with Presence of Meaning, indicating that individuals higher in emotional instability reported lower perceived meaning in life. This result is consistent with recent studies suggesting that chronic negative affect, rumination, and emotional dysregulation may undermine individuals' ability to sustain a coherent sense of purpose (Martela & Steger, 2016; Liu et al., 2023). Moreover, Presence of Meaning was negatively correlated with anxiety, supporting previous evidence that meaning in life functions as a psychological resource associated with lower distress (Disabato et al., 2017; Park et al., 2023).

Despite these associations, Presence of Meaning did not mediate the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety. When entered simultaneously into the regression model, Presence of Meaning did not significantly predict anxiety, and the effect of Neuroticism remained largely unchanged. This finding suggests that although meaning in life is related to both constructs, it does not function as a primary mechanism through which Neuroticism influences anxiety. Rather, Neuroticism appears to exert a predominantly direct effect on anxiety, consistent with transdiagnostic models emphasizing its pervasive influence on emotional disorders (Kotov et al., 2017).

These results refine integrative models of personality and well-being by indicating that meaning in life may operate as a parallel protective factor rather than an explanatory pathway. Future research using longitudinal designs may help clarify whether meaning-related processes play a stronger role over time or under conditions of heightened stress.

### *5.1. Practical Implications*

The findings of this study carry important implications for clinical practice and mental health interventions targeting emerging adults. First, the dominant role of Neuroticism in predicting anxiety underscores the importance of personality-informed interventions. Cognitive-behavioral and emotion regulation approaches that specifically target the maladaptive cognitive and emotional patterns associated with high Neuroticism—such as rumination, catastrophic thinking, and emotional reactivity—may be particularly effective in reducing anxiety symptoms among emerging adults.

Second, although Presence of Meaning did not mediate the Neuroticism–anxiety relationship, its negative correlation with anxiety suggests that meaning-centered interventions may still serve as valuable adjunctive components of treatment. Meaning therapy, logotherapy, and purpose-based interventions could be integrated into existing therapeutic frameworks to enhance psychological resilience and provide existential grounding, particularly for emerging adults navigating identity and career transitions.

Third, university counseling services and mental health programs should consider screening for both dispositional vulnerability (e.g., high Neuroticism) and existential concerns (e.g., low Presence of Meaning) when assessing anxiety risk in student populations. A dual-focus approach that addresses both trait-level emotional dysregulation and existential resources may optimize intervention outcomes for this developmental group.

**6. Conclusion**

This study contributes to the literature by examining an integrative model linking personality, meaning in life, and anxiety in emerging adults.

Neuroticism was strongly associated with higher anxiety and lower Presence of Meaning, while Presence of Meaning was modestly related to lower anxiety. However, Presence of Meaning did not mediate the relationship between Neuroticism and anxiety, indicating that dispositional emotional vulnerability remains a dominant predictor of anxiety symptoms. These findings suggest that interventions targeting anxiety in emerging adults may benefit from addressing both personality-related emotional regulation processes and existential resources, rather than relying solely on meaning-centered approaches. Overall, the study highlights the complex and non-linear interplay between personality traits and meaning in life in shaping mental health during emerging adulthood.

### *6.1. Limitations*

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences regarding the directionality of relationships among Neuroticism, meaning in life, and anxiety. Longitudinal designs are needed to establish temporal precedence and test whether meaning in life may exert delayed or cumulative effects on anxiety over time. Second, the use of self-report measures introduces the possibility of common method variance and social desirability biases, which may inflate or deflate observed associations. Future studies should incorporate multi-informant or behavioral assessments to strengthen validity.

Third, the sample was predominantly university students, which limits generalizability to non-student emerging adults or clinical populations with more severe anxiety presentations. Fourth, the study focused exclusively on the Neuroticism dimension of the Big Five; future research should examine whether other personality traits (e.g.,

Conscientiousness, Extraversion) interact with meaning in life to predict anxiety outcomes. Finally, the Albanian cultural context may influence how meaning in life is experienced and valued, suggesting the need for cross-cultural replication to determine the generalizability of these findings.

### *6.2. Recommendations for Future Research*

Future research should employ longitudinal and experimental designs to clarify the causal and temporal dynamics among personality, meaning in life, and anxiety. Intervention studies testing whether enhancing Presence of Meaning reduces anxiety symptoms—particularly among individuals high in Neuroticism—would advance both theoretical understanding and clinical application. Additionally, researchers should explore potential moderating variables, such as social support, coping strategies, and cultural factors, that may influence whether meaning in life buffers or amplifies the impact of Neuroticism on anxiety. Mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative assessments with qualitative interviews could provide richer insight into how emerging adults construct, maintain, and lose meaning during periods of transition and stress.

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# FROM TRAINING TO PRACTICE: BUILDING STRONGER PROFESSIONAL CAPACITIES IN COORDINATED RESPONSES TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

***Authors: Prof. Asoc. Dr. Eliona Kulluri Bimbashi[2]; PhD. Marsela Allmuça[3]***

In recent years, coordinated and multi-sectoral responses to gender-based violence (GBV) have become essential for providing effective and integrated support for survivors. However, in many contexts, a gap remains between how these systems are designed and how they function in everyday practice. An important yet often overlooked factor influencing this gap is the capacity of the professionals responsible for carrying out coordination on the ground.

This paper explores how training and professional development influence the effectiveness of coordinated GBV responses, based on survey data from 365 professionals involved in local coordination mechanisms across Albania. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining a survey with interviews to explore both training experiences and how coordination works in practice.

Using SPSS, the analysis employs both descriptive and inferential methods to identify patterns in training exposure, sources of training, and their relationship to knowledge levels and perceptions of system effectiveness.

The findings reveal a mixed picture. Although most professionals report receiving training on coordinated approaches (71.8%) and domestic

[2] University of Tirana, Department of Social Work and Social Policy, Contact E-mail: eliona.kulluri@unitir.edu.al

[3] University of Tirana, Department of Social Work and Social Policy, Contact E-mail:marsela.allmuca@unitir.edu.al

violence services (76.2%), access to this training varies depending on the context and is often influenced by externally funded projects rather than established institutional systems. A significant gap remains in perpetrator rehabilitation training, with more than half of respondents reporting no prior training in this area. The analysis also shows that training is associated with greater legal knowledge and more positive views of coordinated mechanisms, though these benefits are not consistent across sectors and professional roles.

Overall, the paper emphasizes that strengthening coordinated responses to GBV requires moving away from fragmented, project-based training toward more consistent, practice-oriented, and system-supported approaches that enable professionals to translate policy into meaningful, effective support.

*Keywords: Gender-Based Violence, Coordinated Mechanisms, Professional Capacity, Training and Capacity Building*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) continues to represent a major social and public policy challenge worldwide. Beyond its immediate impact on the safety and wellbeing of women and girls, violence affects physical and mental health, social participation, employment opportunities, and broader community development. Over the past two decades, international organizations and policymakers have increasingly emphasized that addressing GBV requires more than isolated interventions. Effective responses depend on collaboration among multiple actors, including social services, law enforcement agencies, healthcare providers, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and the justice system.

This approach is reflected in key international frameworks such as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) and the United Nations Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence. Both frameworks highlight the importance of coordinated and integrated responses, recognizing that no single institution can adequately address the complex needs of survivors or the broader factors that contribute to violence. In practice, the effectiveness of such systems depends not only on legislation and institutional arrangements but also on the professionals responsible for implementing them.

In Albania, considerable efforts have been made to strengthen the response to domestic violence and gender-based violence. The expansion of Coordinated Referral Mechanisms (CRMs), improvements in the legal framework, and increased cooperation among institutions have contributed to a more structured response system. Nevertheless, violence remains a significant concern. According to State Police data, 5,174 cases of domestic violence were reported in 2025, involving 3,559 women and girls. National survey data have also shown that more than half of women have experienced at least one form of violence during their lifetime, underscoring the need for sustained and effective interventions.

Although the institutional framework has developed considerably, implementation continues to vary across municipalities and sectors. Research and monitoring reports have repeatedly pointed to differences in local capacities, resources, and professional preparedness. As a result, coordinated mechanisms that appear similar on paper may function quite differently in practice. These differences are often linked to the knowledge,

experience, and training opportunities available to the professionals involved in managing and coordinating cases.

International research has consistently highlighted the importance of professional capacity in the implementation of coordinated responses. Training can strengthen legal knowledge, improve collaboration among institutions, and increase professionals' confidence in carrying out their responsibilities. At the same time, studies from different contexts have shown that training opportunities are often unevenly distributed and frequently dependent on externally funded initiatives rather than long-term institutional systems. This can create important differences in professional preparedness and ultimately influence the quality of services provided to survivors.

In the Albanian context, most research has focused on the prevalence of violence, legal reforms, victim protection, and service provision. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the professionals who implement coordinated responses and the role that training plays in shaping their knowledge and practice. Questions related to professional preparation, access to training, and the relationship between capacity-building and coordination effectiveness remain relatively underexplored.

This study seeks to contribute to this area by examining how training and professional development influence coordinated responses to gender-based violence in Albania. The analysis draws on survey data collected from 365 professionals involved in local coordination mechanisms across all municipalities of the country, complemented by qualitative interviews with professionals working in service provision and coordination roles. Particular attention is given to training experiences, legal and institutional

knowledge, perceptions of coordination effectiveness, and challenges encountered in practice.

The study starts from the premise that coordinated mechanisms are only as effective as the professionals responsible for implementing them. While laws, policies, and institutional structures provide the framework for action, their effectiveness ultimately depends on the knowledge, skills, and experience of those working within the system. Understanding how professional capacity is developed and how it influences practice is therefore essential for strengthening coordinated responses and improving long-term efforts to prevent and address gender-based violence.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods design to examine the relationship between professional training and coordinated responses to gender-based violence in Albania. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods made it possible to explore both broader patterns across professional groups and the experiences of professionals involved in coordination processes.

The quantitative component provided information on training experiences, levels of knowledge, and perceptions of coordination effectiveness among professionals working within local response mechanisms. The qualitative component offered additional insight into how training is experienced in practice and how professionals perceive the factors that support or hinder effective coordination.

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed separately and were brought together during the interpretation of the findings. This approach allowed the results from both components to be compared and

used to provide a more complete picture of professional capacity-building within coordinated responses to gender-based violence.

### 2.2 Quantitative Component

The quantitative component of the study was based on a structured survey administered to professionals involved in coordinated responses to domestic violence and gender-based violence across Albania.

A total of 365 professionals participated in the survey, representing all 61 municipalities of the country. Participants were members of Coordinated Referral Mechanisms (CRMs) and Interdisciplinary Technical Teams (ITTs) and included social workers, local coordinators against domestic violence, health professionals, police officers, education sector representatives, employment service providers, legal professionals, and representatives of civil society organizations.

The questionnaire explored participants' professional backgrounds, training experiences, knowledge of legal and institutional frameworks, awareness of perpetrator rehabilitation services, and perceptions regarding the effectiveness of coordinated responses. It also examined professionals' experiences with the implementation of coordination mechanisms and the challenges encountered in practice.

The survey included a combination of closed-ended questions and Likert-scale items, allowing for the assessment of training exposure, levels of knowledge, and perceptions related to the functioning of coordinated response systems.

### 2.3 Qualitative Component

To complement the survey data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals involved in coordinated responses to domestic violence and gender-based violence. The interviews focused on

participants' experiences with training, their views on existing capacity-building opportunities, and the challenges they face when applying knowledge and procedures in practice.

The interviews also explored factors that support or hinder coordination among institutions, as well as broader organizational and contextual issues affecting implementation at the local level. This approach made it possible to examine aspects of professional practice that could not be fully captured through the survey.

The qualitative findings were used to provide additional context for the quantitative results and to better understand how professionals experience coordination processes in their daily work. They also helped identify common challenges and differences in implementation across municipalities and institutional settings.

**2.4 Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. The analysis first focused on describing the characteristics of the participants, their professional backgrounds, training experiences, and levels of knowledge related to coordinated responses to gender-based violence. Subsequently, relationships between key variables were explored in order to better understand how training, professional experience, and legal knowledge interact within coordinated response systems. Correlation analysis was used to examine associations among these variables, while logistic regression analysis helped identify factors linked to higher levels of legal knowledge and professional preparedness.

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were read several times to gain familiarity with participants' experiences and perspectives before being coded and organized into

broader themes. Particular attention was given to recurring narratives related to professional training, institutional support, and challenges encountered in implementing coordinated responses in practice. The qualitative findings were then considered alongside the quantitative results, allowing for a richer interpretation of how professional capacity-building shapes the functioning of coordinated mechanisms in different contexts.

### 2.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles for social science research. Participation in both the survey and interviews was voluntary. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the confidential nature of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Informed consent was obtained before participation. All data were anonymized during analysis and reporting to protect participant identities and ensure confidentiality. Interview quotations presented in this paper are reported anonymously and are used solely to illustrate key themes emerging from the analysis.

By combining quantitative and qualitative evidence, the study seeks to provide a robust examination of the relationship between professional capacity-building and the effectiveness of coordinated responses to gender-based violence in Albania.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Professional Training as a Foundation for Coordinated Responses

Training is often considered one of the key elements of effective coordinated responses to gender-based violence, as it helps professionals understand their roles, legal responsibilities, and the procedures required

for interinstitutional cooperation. Given the central role that professionals play in implementing coordinated mechanisms, examining access to training provides an important starting point for understanding how these systems function in practice.

The findings show that most respondents had participated in training activities related to domestic violence and coordinated responses. Overall, 71.8% reported having received training on coordinated approaches to addressing domestic violence and gender-based violence, while 76.2% had participated in training related to domestic violence services more broadly. These results suggest that training opportunities have become a relatively common feature of professional practice among those involved in local coordination mechanisms.

At the same time, participation in training was not equally distributed across all areas of intervention. As discussed below, important differences emerged between training related to victim protection and more specialized areas such as perpetrator rehabilitation, indicating that some aspects of coordinated responses have received greater attention than others within professional development efforts.

**Table 1. Professional training exposure among survey participants**

| **Training Area** | **Yes n (%)** | **No n (%)** |
|---|---|---|
| Training on coordinated approaches to GBV response | 262 (71.8) | 103 (28.2) |
| Training on domestic violence services | 278 (76.2) | 87 (23.8) |
| Training on perpetrator rehabilitation services | 167 (45.8) | 198 (54.2) |

A closer look at the results shows that training opportunities have not developed equally across all areas of coordinated response. While most respondents reported receiving training related to domestic violence services and coordinated approaches, considerably fewer had participated in training focused on perpetrator rehabilitation. Only 45.8% reported having received training in this area, whereas more than half of the respondents had never attended any rehabilitation-related training.

This difference is noteworthy because perpetrator rehabilitation is increasingly recognized as an important component of comprehensive responses to gender-based violence. The findings suggest that professional development efforts in Albania have focused primarily on victim protection, case management, and service provision, while less attention has been given to interventions targeting perpetrators. As a result, some areas of practice appear to be better supported than others in terms of professional preparation.

These results point to an uneven pattern of capacity development. Although training opportunities are available and widely accessed in some areas, professionals working with more specialized components of the response system may have fewer opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills required for their role.

### 3.2 Uneven capacity development: The case of perpetrator rehabilitation

The differences in training exposure become particularly visible when looking at perpetrator rehabilitation. Compared to training on coordinated approaches and domestic violence services, considerably fewer professionals reported receiving preparation in this area. This finding

points to an uneven pattern of professional development within the coordinated response system.

The emphasis on victim protection is understandable given the primary objective of ensuring safety and support for survivors. However, international frameworks increasingly highlight the importance of working with perpetrators as part of broader violence prevention efforts. The Istanbul Convention calls for programs aimed at reducing reoffending and promoting behavioral change, while international practice has increasingly recognized perpetrator interventions as an important component of coordinated responses.

Against this backdrop, the lower levels of training identified in the study are noteworthy. Limited training opportunities may affect professionals' familiarity with referral procedures, program requirements, and the legal framework governing perpetrator rehabilitation services. This is particularly relevant in contexts where coordinated responses are expected to address not only the immediate needs of survivors but also longer-term strategies aimed at preventing repeated violence.

The findings suggest that perpetrator rehabilitation remains a less developed area of practice compared to other components of the response system. While professionals appear to have greater access to training related to victim services and case management, fewer opportunities are available to build expertise in rehabilitation-related interventions. Similar challenges have been reported in other countries, where perpetrator programs often receive less attention and fewer resources than victim support services.

Although the study does not assess the quality or effectiveness of existing rehabilitation programs, the findings indicate a need for greater investment

in professional preparation in this area. Expanding training opportunities and strengthening specialized knowledge could contribute to a more balanced and comprehensive approach to addressing gender-based violence, particularly from a prevention perspective.

### 3.3 Training, Legal Knowledge and Professional Confidence

Training is expected to strengthen not only professional skills but also knowledge of the legal and institutional framework within which coordinated responses operate. For this reason, the study explored how informed professionals felt about key aspects of the system, including the responsibilities of institutions involved in Coordinated Referral Mechanisms (CRMs) and recent legal developments related to domestic violence and gender-based violence.

The results show that most respondents were familiar with the main elements of the coordinated response system. A large majority reported being informed about institutional roles and responsibilities, while many also indicated that they were aware of recent legal changes and procedures relevant to their work. This suggests that professionals working within local coordination structures generally have a solid understanding of the framework that guides their day-to-day practice.

At the same time, the data point to an important distinction between being informed about the system and possessing more specialized knowledge. While general awareness was relatively high, lower levels of knowledge were reported in more specific areas, particularly those related to perpetrator rehabilitation. This finding suggests that professional knowledge is not evenly distributed across all components of the coordinated response system and that some areas may require more targeted training and support.

**Table 2. Knowledge and Awareness of Legal and Institutional Frameworks**

| Indicator | % |
|---|---|
| Informed about roles and responsibilities within CRM | 82.8 |
| Informed about recent legal changes related to domestic violence | 79.7 |
| Informed about the legal basis for perpetrator rehabilitation | 68.8 |
| Highly informed about coordinated approaches to perpetrator rehabilitation | 25.8 |
| Report comprehensive legal knowledge | 9.9 |

Although respondents generally reported being well informed about the legal and institutional framework, a closer look at the data suggests that knowledge is not equally developed across all areas. While most participants were familiar with institutional responsibilities and relevant legal provisions, substantially fewer reported high levels of knowledge regarding coordinated approaches to perpetrator rehabilitation. In addition, only a small proportion of respondents considered their knowledge of the legal framework to be comprehensive.

This finding points to a gap between general familiarity with the system and more specialized professional knowledge. In other words, professionals may know how coordinated mechanisms operate and understand their institutional responsibilities, but feel less confident when dealing with more specific areas of practice. Similar observations have been reported in previous studies, where professionals demonstrated good awareness of legal obligations but identified a need for additional training in areas requiring more specialized skills and knowledge.

Taken together, these findings suggest that providing information alone may not be sufficient to strengthen professional capacity. Ongoing training opportunities, particularly those focused on practical application and specialized areas of intervention, remain important for supporting professionals involved in coordinated responses to gender-based violence.

### 3.4 What makes training effective?

The survey data suggest that training is only one part of the broader process through which professionals develop knowledge and confidence in their work. To better understand these dynamics, the analysis explored the relationships between training experiences, legal knowledge, institutional experience, and perceptions of how coordinated mechanisms function in practice.

The correlation analysis showed that these factors were closely connected. Professionals who reported greater exposure to training also tended to report higher levels of legal knowledge and more positive views of coordination processes. Similarly, respondents with longer experience working within coordinated mechanisms generally felt more confident in their understanding of institutional procedures and responsibilities.

These findings suggest that professional capacity develops through a combination of learning and practice. Training appears to provide an important foundation, but experience gained through participation in coordination structures and case management processes also plays a significant role in strengthening professional knowledge and confidence.

**Figure 1. Pearson Correlation Matrix between Training Exposure, Legal Knowledge, Institutional Experience, and Perceived Effectiveness of Coordinated Responses**

1.0 -1.0

| | Njohurite_ligjore | Njohuri mbi Qasjen e Koordinuar | Njohurite_mbi_programet | Informim mbi pergjegjesite | Informim mbi ofrimin e sherbimeve | Koha si anëtar i ETN | Informim mbi bazen ligjore | Trajnim mbi Qasjen e Koordinuar | Trajnim mbi Rehabilitimin e Dhunuesve | Trajnim mbi Dhunen ne Familje | Koha keni në pozicionin aktual | Referim të Autoreve të Dhunës | Efektiviteti_i_Qasjes_së_Koordinuar | Grupmosha | Vendndodhja | Efektiviteti i Shërbimeve të Rehabilitimit | Rëndësia e Programeve të Rehabilitimit |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Njohurite_ligjore | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Njohuri mbi Qasjen e Koordinuar | 0.549 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Njohurite_mbi_programet | 0.630 | 0.650 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Informim mbi pergjegjesite | 0.638 | 0.655 | 0.480 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Informim mbi ofrimin e sherbimeve | 0.470 | 0.557 | 0.694 | 0.375 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Koha si anëtar i ETN | 0.337 | 0.325 | 0.309 | 0.446 | 0.180 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Informim mbi bazen ligjore | 0.566 | 0.408 | 0.351 | 0.442 | 0.524 | 0.163 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Trajnim mbi Qasjen e Koordinuar | 0.389 | 0.362 | 0.334 | 0.418 | 0.275 | 0.326 | 0.275 | 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| Trajnim mbi Rehabilitimin e Dhunuesve | 0.218 | 0.374 | 0.422 | 0.266 | 0.392 | 0.179 | 0.234 | 0.441 | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| Trajnim mbi Dhunen ne Familje | 0.338 | 0.259 | 0.232 | 0.345 | 0.206 | 0.209 | 0.323 | 0.535 | 0.488 | 1 | | | | | | | |
| Koha keni në pozicionin aktual | 0.154 | 0.123 | 0.127 | 0.248 | 0.036 | 0.723 | 0.087 | 0.178 | 0.061 | 0.102 | 1 | | | | | | |
| Referim të Autoreve të Dhunës | 0.208 | 0.245 | 0.258 | 0.165 | 0.179 | 0.144 | 0.141 | 0.130 | 0.258 | 0.218 | 0.107 | 1 | | | | | |
| Efektiviteti_i_Qasjes_së_Koordinuar | 0.141 | 0.183 | 0.093 | 0.126 | 0.090 | 0.027 | 0.143 | 0.000 | 0.145 | 0.097 | -0.003 | 0.158 | 1 | | | | |
| Grupmosha | 0.022 | 0.051 | 0.028 | 0.071 | -0.073 | 0.350 | -0.014 | 0.039 | 0.080 | 0.053 | 0.433 | -0.019 | -0.033 | 1 | | | |
| Vendndodhja | 0.260 | 0.191 | 0.180 | 0.177 | 0.117 | 0.193 | 0.160 | 0.110 | 0.046 | 0.030 | 0.087 | 0.114 | 0.044 | 0.056 | 1 | | |
| Efektiviteti i Shërbimeve të Rehabilitimit | 0.125 | 0.082 | 0.006 | 0.068 | 0.022 | 0.017 | 0.082 | 0.029 | 0.058 | 0.108 | 0.019 | 0.093 | 0.376 | 0.007 | -0.091 | 1 | |
| Rëndësia e Programeve të Rehabilitimit | 0.150 | 0.099 | 0.056 | 0.095 | -0.019 | 0.069 | 0.065 | 0.063 | -0.059 | 0.037 | 0.020 | 0.121 | 0.132 | 0.022 | 0.015 | 0.255 | 1 |
| Gjinia | -0.032 | -0.017 | 0.065 | -0.076 | 0.053 | -0.044 | 0.022 | -0.026 | 0.106 | 0.001 | 0.077 | 0.056 | 0.019 | 0.053 | -0.067 | -0.031 | -0.061 |
| Niveli arsimor | 0.024 | 0.052 | 0.005 | 0.069 | -0.012 | 0.050 | -0.007 | -0.003 | -0.011 | -0.002 | 0.053 | -0.063 | 0.000 | -0.093 | 0.070 | -0.009 | -0.059 |

*Note. The figure presents Pearson correlation coefficients among the main study variables. Darker and larger circles indicate stronger correlations. Positive coefficients indicate direct relationships between variables, whereas negative coefficients indicate inverse relationships.*

As shown in Figure 1, training, legal knowledge, and institutional experience were closely related. Professionals who reported greater exposure to training generally also reported higher levels of legal knowledge and more positive views of coordination processes. A similar pattern was observed among respondents with longer experience within coordinated mechanisms, who tended to express greater confidence in their understanding of institutional procedures and responsibilities.

To examine these relationships further, a regression analysis was conducted to identify factors associated with higher levels of legal knowledge. The results showed that training on perpetrator rehabilitation,

participation in coordinated-response training, involvement in referral processes, and experience within ETN/CRM structures were all significant predictors of stronger legal knowledge and professional preparedness.

Taken together, these findings suggest that professional competence develops through a combination of learning and practice. Training appears to provide an important foundation, but experience gained through participation in coordination processes and day-to-day case management also plays a key role in strengthening professional knowledge and confidence.

**Table 3. Logistic regression predicting higher levels of legal knowledge**

| Predictor | B | p-value |
|---|---|---|
| Training on perpetrator rehabilitation | 1.2329 | < .001 |
| Training on coordinated approaches | 0.6789 | .006 |
| Experience in referral processes | 0.5434 | .008 |
| Urban municipality | 0.6641 | .002 |
| Experience within ETN/CRM structures | 0.5137 | .014 |

*Note. Only statistically significant predictors are presented. The dependent variable was higher self-reported legal knowledge regarding coordinated responses and perpetrator rehabilitation.*

The regression analysis provides a more detailed picture of the factors associated with stronger legal knowledge among professionals working within coordinated response systems. As shown in Table 3, training on perpetrator rehabilitation was the strongest predictor, followed by participation in training on coordinated approaches. Experience also mattered. Professionals involved in referral processes and those with experience in ETN/CRM structures were more likely to report higher

levels of legal knowledge than those with less direct involvement in coordination activities.

One finding that stands out is the role of rehabilitation-related training. Although this was the area in which respondents reported the lowest levels of training participation, it showed the strongest association with legal knowledge. This suggests that specialized training may play an important role in helping professionals understand the legal and institutional dimensions of coordinated responses.

The results also highlight the value of practical experience. Training appears to be most beneficial when combined with active involvement in coordination processes and day-to-day case management. Together, these findings suggest that professional knowledge develops not only through formal learning opportunities but also through continued engagement with the institutions and procedures that shape coordinated responses in practice.

### 3.5 Institutional Challenges and Opportunities

While the survey findings point to the importance of training in strengthening professional knowledge and confidence, the interviews suggest that training is only one part of the picture. Participants repeatedly emphasized that the ability to apply knowledge in practice depends on broader institutional conditions, including leadership, workload, staff stability, and the level of cooperation among local actors.

A recurring theme across the interviews was the lack of continuity in professional development. Several participants noted that training opportunities often depend on externally funded projects rather than being part of a structured institutional system. As one professional explained:

*"Most of the trainings we attend are linked to specific projects. They are useful, but once the project ends there is often no follow-up, no refresher training, and no mechanism to ensure that new staff receive the same preparation. In many cases, professional development depends on what projects happen to be available at a given time." (Professional interview)*

Participants also highlighted considerable differences in how coordinated mechanisms operate across municipalities. Although the legal framework is the same nationwide, local implementation was described as highly dependent on available resources, staffing levels, and institutional commitment.

One interviewee reflected on this issue by stating: *"Coordination works differently depending on the municipality and the capacities available locally. In some municipalities there are experienced professionals, regular meetings, and strong cooperation among institutions. In others, staff turnover is high and coordination depends largely on the personal commitment of a few individuals." (Professional interview)*

These accounts point to a gap between the formal existence of coordinated mechanisms and their day-to-day functioning. While CRMs and ETNs have been established across the country, the experiences of professionals suggest that implementation remains uneven. Differences in resources, institutional support, and professional capacity continue to shape how coordination takes place in practice.

The interviews also indicate that training alone is unlikely to produce sustainable improvements if it is not accompanied by ongoing support. Participants frequently referred to the need for supervision, mentoring, practical guidance, and opportunities to exchange experiences with colleagues from other municipalities. For many professionals, learning

occurred not only through formal training sessions but also through everyday collaboration and problem-solving within coordination structures.

Taken together, the qualitative findings suggest that strengthening coordinated responses requires more than increasing the number of training opportunities. Long-term investments in institutional capacity, continuous professional development, and supportive organizational environments appear equally important. In this sense, the challenge is not simply to train professionals, but to create the conditions that allow knowledge and skills to be applied consistently in practice.

The findings reinforce a central message emerging throughout the study: coordinated responses depend not only on laws, procedures, and formal mechanisms, but also on the people responsible for implementing them. Strengthening professional capacity therefore remains a key element in improving both the consistency and effectiveness of responses to gender-based violence.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of training and professional development within coordinated responses to gender-based violence in Albania. Using survey data from professionals involved in local coordination mechanisms, together with qualitative interviews, the study explored how training relates to professional knowledge, confidence, and implementation in practice.

The findings show that important progress has been made in strengthening coordinated responses over the last decade. Coordinated Referral Mechanisms are now present across the country and many professionals have participated in training related to domestic violence, gender-based

violence, and interinstitutional coordination. These developments have contributed to a stronger institutional response and greater awareness of professional roles and responsibilities.

At the same time, the study highlights differences in how coordinated responses are experienced and implemented across municipalities. Although the legal and institutional framework is the same, professionals described varying levels of capacity, support, and cooperation. This suggests that the effectiveness of coordination depends not only on formal structures but also on the resources and capacities available at the local level.

A consistent pattern throughout the analysis was the relationship between training and professional knowledge. Respondents who had received training generally reported higher levels of legal knowledge and greater confidence in carrying out their responsibilities. The regression analysis also showed that training, particularly in the area of perpetrator rehabilitation, was associated with stronger legal knowledge. However, the findings indicate that knowledge develops not only through training itself but also through experience gained from participating in referral processes and coordination structures.

The study also draws attention to an area that appears less developed than others. While training related to victim protection and service provision was relatively common, far fewer professionals reported receiving training on perpetrator rehabilitation. Given the growing emphasis on prevention and reducing repeat violence, this gap deserves greater attention in future capacity-building efforts.

Another issue raised by participants was the sustainability of existing training systems. Many professionals described training opportunities as

dependent on externally funded projects rather than on regular institutional programs. Although these initiatives have contributed significantly to professional development, they do not always guarantee continuity, particularly when staff change or project funding ends.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The study relied on self-reported measures of knowledge and training experiences, and the survey design does not allow conclusions about causality. In addition, the qualitative component reflects the experiences of a limited number of professionals and may not capture all local realities.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to a relatively underexplored area of research in Albania. Much of the existing literature has focused on prevalence, legislation, and services for survivors, whereas less attention has been paid to the professionals responsible for implementing coordinated responses. The findings suggest that investments in professional capacity remain an important part of strengthening the overall system.

Future efforts could focus on expanding continuous professional development opportunities, strengthening supervision and mentoring, and increasing attention to specialized areas such as perpetrator rehabilitation. Further research may also help to better understand how professional capacity influences coordination processes and service quality over time.

Ultimately, coordinated responses are implemented by people rather than by policies alone. Laws, procedures, and institutional mechanisms provide the framework for action, but their effectiveness depends largely on the professionals responsible for putting them into practice.

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# FAMILY POLICY AND CHILD PROTECTION IN NORTH MACEDONIA: CHALLENGES AND POLICY RESPONSES IN A TRANSFORMING WELFARE STATE"

**Elisabeta Bajrami Ollogu**, PhD

Social Policy Lecturer at Mother Teresa University in Skopje.

E-mail: elisabeta.bajrami.ollogu@unt.edu.mk

**Hava Rexhep**, PhD

Social Work Lecturer at Mother Teresa University in Skopje.

E-mail: hava.rexhepi@unt.edu.mk

**Daniel Pavlovski**, PhD

Social Work lecturer at Mother Teresa University in Skopje.

E-mail: daniel.pavlovski@unt.edu.mk

**Denis Raufi**, MA

Teaching assistant at Mother Teresa University in Skopje.

E-mail: denis.raufi@unt.edu.mk

**Abstract**

In recent decades, welfare states in post-socialist contexts have undergone substantial transformations shaped by economic transition, demographic shifts, and the emergence of new social facing social risks. Within this evolving landscape, family policy and child protection have become central components of social policy, reflecting the state's role in supporting families and children in social risk. In smaller welfare states, such as North Macedonia, these policies have been facing various challenges, in particular the ones related to constrained resources, fragmented institutional structures, and rising social vulnerabilities.

This research explores the intersections between family policy, child protection, and social protection mechanisms in North Macedonia, with particular focus on how these domains interact within the wider welfare state framework and how social risks, affecting children, are addressed. What are the key policy mechanisms and institutional arrangements? What are the main challenges influencing the wellbeing and protection of children and families?

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative case study approach, drawing on an analysis of relevant legislation, review of strategic documents, and analysis of official statistical data from national and international sources, to provide a contextual analysis into recent policy developments and future needed transformations.

The paper contributes to welfare state and social policy scholarship by demonstrating how family policy and child protection have evolved in response to post-socialist transformation, while highlighting the continuing need for preventive, family-centred, and social investment-oriented approaches to child wellbeing.

**Key words:** welfare state; family policy; child protection; child wellbeing; social protection; North Macedonia

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, welfare states in post-socialist societies have undergone significant transformations shaped by economic transition, demographic change, labour market restructuring, and the emergence of new social risks. Following the collapse of socialist systems, countries in Southeast Europe were required to redesign their social policy frameworks while simultaneously managing economic liberalization, privatization, and

institutional reforms (Deacon, 2000; Cerami & Vanhuysse, 2009). Many political reforms have been implemented at different public policy levels in the transition period. In terms of social policy, major changes through different reforms thoroughly dismantled the socialist legacies, and new principles were presented in social protection, social security, health care, etc. (Bajrami Ollogu, 2023). Within this context, family policy, child protection, and social protection mechanisms have become increasingly important components of welfare state development, reflecting the state's responsibility to support vulnerable populations and promote social wellbeing.

North Macedonia remains a relevant case study for examining these dynamics. After the independence in 1991, as a small post-socialist welfare state, similar to other countries in the region, North Macedonia has experienced the main processes related to transition, such as prolonged socio-economic crises, demographic decline, high rates of unemployment, poverty risks, and increasing pressures on public welfare institutions. Even though many legislative and institutional reforms have been undertaken during the years as a result of the EU integration process as well, still challenges remain regarding the adequacy, accessibility, and effectiveness of social protection for many vulnerable groups, children included. While EU integration[4] has driven legislative modernization, including the landmark Social Protection Law and deinstitutionalization initiatives, systemic challenges persist. An important role in pushing such reforms have the interest groups as well. Civil sector and other organizations have

[4] The country's integration into European structures and the accompanying reforms are shaping policies affecting children directly and indirectly.

pushed policy-making processes, in particular for disabled people, children with special needs and workers' rights (Bajrami Ollogu, 2020).

Social and child protection is a set of policies and programs designed to reduce and prevent poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion throughout the life cycle. In 2019, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy launched a systemic reform that introduced novelties in the Law on Social Protection and the Law on Child Protection.

Therefore, this research examines the relationship between family policy, child protection, and social protection mechanisms in North Macedonia within the broader framework of welfare state transformation. Particular attention is given to institutional arrangements, social policy instruments, and the challenges affecting child wellbeing and family support. The analysis aims to contribute to broader discussions on welfare state development and, more specifically, to examine the role of social policy in addressing social vulnerability and promoting child wellbeing

### 1.1 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach based on document and policy analysis. North Macedonia was selected as a relevant case for examining the challenges and policy responses associated with family policy and child protection in a post-socialist welfare state undergoing ongoing institutional and social transformation.

The research draws on national legislation, strategic policy documents, reports produced by international organizations, and official statistical data published by the State Statistical Office of North Macedonia. Key sources include the Law on Social Protection, the Law on Child Protection,

national strategies related to children and families, UNICEF reports, World Bank publications, and official poverty indicators.

Document analysis was selected as an appropriate method for examining policy developments, institutional arrangements, and welfare state transformations in the national context (Bowen, 2009). The analysis focuses on identifying key policy measures, institutional mechanisms, reform trajectories, and persistent challenges affecting child wellbeing, family support, and social protection. By combining legislative, policy, and statistical sources, the study provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of family policy and child protection in North Macedonia.

## 2. Welfare State Transformation and Social Policy in Post-Socialist Contexts

The transformation of welfare states in post-socialist contexts has been an important topic in contemporary social policy literature. The transition from universalist socialist systems to market-oriented economies fundamentally altered the organization of social protection, employment relations, and public welfare institutions (Cerami & Vanhuysse, 2009). Under socialist regimes, welfare systems in the region have shared common characteristics, such as state-centered social security, universal employment, and extensive public responsibility for education, healthcare, and social services. However, post-socialist transition introduced economic liberalization, privatization, fiscal constraints, and new forms of social inequality (Deacon, 2000).

Scholars have argued that post-socialist welfare states developed hybrid welfare arrangements combining elements of residual, conservative, and fragmented welfare models (Aidukaite, 2009). In many

countries of Southeast Europe, welfare systems became increasingly targeted and means-tested, while social assistance programmes replaced some universal social rights. This process often produced limited welfare capacities, institutional fragmentation, and uneven access to services, particularly for vulnerable social groups such as children, older persons, persons with disabilities, and low-income families.

Within this broader transformation, family policy and child protection emerged as increasingly important domains of social policy. Contemporary welfare state theories emphasize that family-oriented policies represent not only protective mechanisms but also social investment strategies aimed at promoting long-term social inclusion and human development (Esping-Andersen, 1999). Early childhood education, parental support, childcare services, and child protection systems are therefore understood as essential components of modern welfare states. Recent welfare state scholarship has increasingly emphasized the concept of the social investment state, which prioritizes policies that strengthen human capital and prevent social risks rather than merely compensating for them after they occur. Social investment approaches focus particularly on children and families through early childhood education and care, parental support, lifelong learning, and active inclusion policies (Morel et al., 2012; Hemerijck, 2018). From this perspective, child protection and family policy are not only mechanisms for addressing vulnerability but also strategic investments that contribute to long-term social cohesion, economic productivity, and equal opportunities. The extent to which welfare systems successfully balance compensatory and preventive functions has therefore become an important criterion for evaluating contemporary social policy reforms.

These challenges are particularly relevant for North Macedonia, which has experienced significant demographic and socio-economic changes during the past two decades. Declining fertility rates, sustained emigration of young people, population ageing, and regional disparities have placed increasing pressure on welfare institutions and family support systems. At the same time, labour market insecurity and persistent poverty continue to affect many households with children, highlighting the importance of effective social protection and family-oriented policies.

In small post-socialist welfare states such as North Macedonia, the development of comprehensive family and child protection policies is often constrained by limited financial resources, demographic decline, labour migration, and institutional weaknesses. As a result, social policies frequently remain reactive rather than preventive, focusing on poverty alleviation rather than broader social investment and child wellbeing.

## 3. An overview of the Social Protection System in North Macedonia

Social protection as an activity of public interest is realized through measures, activities, programs, and policies for protection from social risks, prevention and overcoming of social problems that adversely affect the well-being of citizens. The activity of social protection is provided through the exercise of rights to financial assistance from social protection and the provision of social services and other measures determined by law. (Law on Social Protection, 2019).

The system has undergone substantial reforms since the country's independence in 1991. The transition from the socialist welfare model toward a market-oriented economy significantly affected social security

arrangements, employment structures, and the provision of social services. Current social protection policies are primarily regulated through the Law on Social Protection (2019), which introduced reforms aimed at decentralization, deinstitutionalization, and the expansion of community-based social services.

The system includes cash benefits, social services, and institutional protection mechanisms targeted toward socially vulnerable groups. One of the central reforms introduced in recent years was the Guaranteed Minimum Assistance (GMA), designed to replace fragmented social assistance schemes and improve support for households living in poverty. The reform aimed to strengthen social inclusion and increase the adequacy of financial support for low-income families (World Bank, 2019).

Despite these reforms, North Macedonia continues to face significant social challenges. Poverty risks remain particularly high among children, unemployed individuals, single-parent households, Roma communities, and persons with disabilities. According to UNICEF reports, child poverty and material deprivation continue to represent major barriers to child wellbeing and equal opportunities (UNICEF, 2020). Furthermore, the social protection system is characterized by limited institutional capacities, insufficient professional staff, fragmented service delivery, and disparities between urban and rural areas.

Another important characteristic of the Macedonian welfare system is the growing emphasis on targeted rather than universal benefits. Although means-tested programmes may improve fiscal efficiency, they often limit broader social coverage and may contribute to social stigma and administrative exclusion. Consequently, scholars and international organizations have emphasized the need for stronger preventive social

policies, expanded social services, and greater investment in family support and child wellbeing.

## 4. Family Policy and Measures for Child and Family Protection in North Macedonia

Family policy in North Macedonia represents an important component of the broader welfare state framework and encompasses measures aimed at supporting families, reducing child poverty, and promoting child wellbeing. Nevertheless, studies show that family policy remains under-developed compared to other social policy domains. Avirovic Bundalevska et al. (2021) have pointed out that there is a remarkable discrepancy in the way families are treated in the policymaking process in North Macedonia compared to other domains such as economy, corruption, Euro-Atlantic integration, etc. Family policy is usually considered a sub-topic under the social policy.

Family policies include financial assistance, parental support, childcare services, early childhood education, and measures related to work-family balance.

Contemporary family policy extends beyond poverty reduction and encompasses broader objectives related to child development, gender equality, labour market participation, and social inclusion. As Daly (2020) argues, family policy has evolved into a distinct field of social policy concerned with the relationship between state, market, and family responsibilities. In this context, measures such as parental leave, childcare provision, flexible work arrangements, and family benefits are increasingly viewed as instruments that simultaneously support child wellbeing and facilitate labour market participation, particularly among

women. The effectiveness of family policy therefore depends not only on the availability of financial transfers but also on the accessibility and quality of services that enable families to reconcile care and employment responsibilities.

One of the central objectives of family policy is to mitigate the socio-economic risks faced by families with children, particularly those living in poverty or social exclusion. The child protection system is governed by two laws, the Law on Child Protection, and the Law on Social Protection. The Law on Child Protection regulates several family-oriented measures, including child allowance, education allowance, special supplements for children with disabilities, and one-time financial assistance for newborns. These measures reflect the protective function of the welfare state, although their effectiveness is often constrained by limited financial resources and administrative barriers.

Early childhood education and care services also play an important role in family policy. Kindergartens and early childhood development centres are increasingly recognized not only as educational institutions but also as social investment mechanisms that contribute to child development, social inclusion, and parental employment. However, limited institutional capacities, insufficient coverage in rural areas, and long waiting lists continue to restrict equal access to preschool services (UNICEF, 2018).

In addition, demographic trends such as declining fertility, population ageing, and migration have intensified policy debates regarding family support and reproductive policies. Despite the existence of several family support measures, North Macedonia continues to face structural challenges related to gender inequality, care responsibilities, and the reconciliation of work and family life. Women continue to bear a disproportionate burden

of unpaid care work, reflecting broader patterns characteristic of *familialistic*[5] welfare arrangements in Southeast Europe. As Leitner (2003) defines familialistic regimes as welfare arrangements in which the family is assigned primary responsibility for providing care, support, and welfare to its members, while the role of the state remains comparatively limited."

The concept of familialism is particularly relevant for understanding welfare developments in Southeast Europe, where families continue to perform substantial welfare functions that are only partially supported by public institutions. Comparative research suggests that welfare systems characterized by strong familialistic features often rely heavily on informal care arrangements and intergenerational support, while public investment in care services remains comparatively limited (Saraceno, 2016).

In the context of North Macedonia, these dynamics are particularly visible in the continued reliance on informal family support networks, especially in childcare and eldercare. While such arrangements may compensate for gaps in public provision, they also risk reproducing social inequalities and limiting women's participation in the labour market.

The relationship between family policy and child protection is particularly important in contemporary welfare states. While family policy seeks to strengthen families through income support, childcare services, and work-family reconciliation measures, child protection intervenes when children's wellbeing or safety is at risk. Effective family policies can therefore serve a preventive function by reducing the social and economic pressures that may contribute to child vulnerability, neglect, or exclusion.

[5] Familialistic welfare describes a welfare model in which responsibility for care and wellbeing is placed primarily on families rather than public institutions, resulting in a strong reliance on informal family support networks.

Consequently, the effectiveness of child protection systems depends not only on specialized interventions but also on the broader capacity of family policies to support families and promote child wellbeing.

## 5. Child Protection Policies and Institutional Framework

Child protection policies in North Macedonia are primarily grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the country in 1993, and further regulated through national legislation such as the Law on Child Protection, the Family Law, the Law on Social Protection, and the Law on Justice for Children[6]. With the reform of the social protection system in 2019, amendments were made to the Child Protection Law in 2019, which introduced the right to an educational allowance for children attending primary and secondary school.

Overall, the above legal instruments establish the normative basis for safeguarding children's rights, preventing neglect and abuse, and promoting child wellbeing. At the same time, the institutional framework for child protection involves multiple actors, including the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth, Centers for Social Work, educational institutions, healthcare services, courts, and civil society organizations. In recent years, reforms have focused on deinstitutionalization and the development of community-based services aimed at reducing reliance on residential care institutions and strengthening family-based support systems.

One of the most significant child protection reforms implemented in North Macedonia during the past decade has been the deinstitutionalization

[6] A recent adoption is the Law on Justice for Children (2024), which aligns international standards to protect children's rights in the justice system.

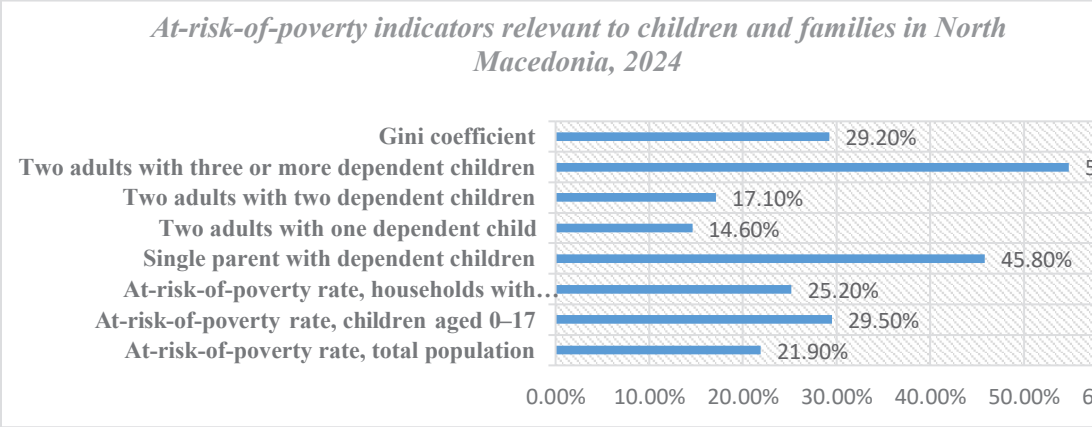
process. This reform sought to reduce reliance on residential institutions and promote family-based and community-based care solutions, including foster care, supported living arrangements, and specialized community services. According to UNICEF (2025), the country has made notable progress in closing large residential institutions for children and expanding alternative care options. Nevertheless, ensuring the sustainability and quality of community-based services remains a major challenge, particularly in municipalities with limited professional and financial capacities.

Contemporary child protection systems are increasingly evaluated through the broader concept of child wellbeing. Rather than focusing exclusively on protection from harm, child wellbeing encompasses children's material conditions, health, education, emotional development, participation, and subjective life satisfaction (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014). This perspective recognizes children not merely as recipients of protection but as rights holders whose development requires coordinated interventions across multiple policy sectors. Consequently, effective child protection policies are closely linked to wider family policies, social protection measures, educational opportunities, and community support services.

The country has developed different policies and measures in the form of strategic documents for children, such as: National Youth Strategy (2023-2027); National Strategy on Prevention of and Protection of Children from Violence (2020-2025); Strategy on Justice for Children (2022-2026); National Action Plan for Roma Women and Girls (2022-2024); Equality and Non-Discrimination Strategy (2022-2026); Parenting Strategy (2022-2030); National Action Plan for Mental Health of Children and Adolescents 2030, etc.

Many of these developments have been influenced by the country's EU accession process, which has encouraged the harmonization of child rights, anti-discrimination, social inclusion, and social protection policies with European standards.

Despite the many reforms, the country lacks specialized mechanisms for systemic assessment and evaluation of the impact of laws, policies, and budgetary decisions on children's rights (UNICEF, 2025). Child poverty remains one of the most pressing challenges affecting child wellbeing in the country. According to UNICEF (2025), approximately 120,000 children live in poverty, while official data indicate that the at-risk-of-poverty rate among children aged 0-17 reached 29.5% in 2024. These findings suggest that children remain disproportionately exposed to economic vulnerability despite recent social policy reforms.




***Source: State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, Laeken Poverty Indicators 2024, definitive data.***[7]

[7] State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia. (2026). *Laeken poverty indicators, 2024: Definitive data*. https://www.stat.mk/en/stat/population-and-living-conditions/standard-of-living/laeken-poverty-indicators/laeken-poverty-indicators-2024-definitive-data

The data indicate that children remain disproportionately affected by poverty in North Macedonia. While the overall at-risk-of-poverty rate was 21.9% in 2024, the rate among children reached 29.5%. Poverty risks are particularly high among single-parent households (45.8%) and households with three or more dependent children (54.8%), highlighting the strong relationship between family structure and economic vulnerability. These findings underscore the need for targeted family and child protection policies aimed at reducing child poverty and strengthening social inclusion.

Despite legislative progress, important challenges remain in the implementation of child protection policies. Reports from international organizations indicate concerns regarding institutional coordination, limited professional capacities, insufficient preventive services, and unequal access to support mechanisms, particularly in rural and marginalized communities (UNICEF, 2023). Children exposed to poverty, domestic violence, social exclusion, and disability remain especially vulnerable within the current system. Roma children remain particularly exposed to multiple forms of disadvantage, including poverty, educational exclusion, and unequal access to social and healthcare services (UNICEF, 2025).

Furthermore, child protection policies increasingly emphasize multidisciplinary approaches involving cooperation between social workers, educators, healthcare professionals, and judicial institutions. However, the effectiveness of such approaches depends largely on institutional capacities, financial resources, and the availability of specialized services.

Social measures for child and family protection in North Macedonia consist of financial benefits, social services, and institutional support mechanisms aimed at reducing social vulnerability and promoting child wellbeing. These measures are implemented through the broader social protection and child protection systems and are targeted particularly toward low-income families and vulnerable children.

Financial support measures include child allowance, education allowance, one-time assistance for newborns, and special supplements for children with disabilities. These benefits are intended to alleviate child poverty, encourage school attendance, and provide additional support for families facing increased social and economic risks. Nevertheless, several studies indicate that the financial value of these benefits often remains insufficient to meet the actual costs of childcare and family support (UNICEF, 2020).

In addition to cash benefits, social protection policies increasingly emphasize the importance of community-based social services, including counselling, foster care, family support services, and inclusive early childhood education. The deinstitutionalization process has further promoted alternative forms of care and social inclusion for children without parental care and children with disabilities.

Despite policy improvements, the effectiveness of social measures remains constrained by limited institutional resources, insufficient professional staffing, regional inequalities, and weak inter-institutional coordination. Consequently, social policies in North Macedonia continue to face the challenge of moving from reactive poverty relief toward more preventive and comprehensive approaches focused on long-term child wellbeing and family resilience.

## 6. Key Challenges of the Welfare State in Protecting Children and Families

North Macedonia has developed a comprehensive legal and institutional framework for social and child protection. Nevertheless, important reforms are still needed to improve the coverage, effectiveness, efficiency, and overall delivery of social benefits and services in a more inclusive manner (Bajrami Ollogu, 2019).

Despite important legislative and institutional reforms, the welfare state in North Macedonia continues to face significant challenges in ensuring effective protection and support for children and families. These challenges are closely connected to broader processes of post-socialist welfare state transformation, economic constraints, demographic changes, and institutional fragmentation.

One of the major challenges is the persistence of child poverty and social exclusion. Children from low-income households, single-parent families, Roma communities, and families living in rural areas remain disproportionately exposed to economic vulnerability. Although social assistance schemes and child-related benefits exist, their financial adequacy often remains insufficient to meet the actual costs of childcare, education, health services, and everyday living expenses. As a result, many families continue to experience material deprivation despite being included in the social protection system.

Another important challenge concerns the limited institutional capacity of the welfare system. Centers for Social Work and other child protection institutions frequently operate with insufficient financial resources, shortages of professional staff, and high administrative workloads. Social

workers are often overburdened, limiting their ability to provide preventive, individualized, and long-term support for vulnerable children and families. These structural limitations weaken the effectiveness of child protection interventions and reduce the quality of social services.

Institutional fragmentation and weak inter-sectoral coordination also represent persistent obstacles. Child and family wellbeing depend on cooperation between social protection institutions, educational services, healthcare systems, and judicial authorities. However, coordination mechanisms between these sectors are often underdeveloped, leading to fragmented interventions and inconsistent support for children at risk. In practice, this reduces the efficiency of early identification, prevention, and multidisciplinary protection measures.

The unequal territorial distribution of services further contributes to social inequalities. Families living in rural and less developed regions often have limited access to kindergartens, early childhood development programs, counselling services, rehabilitation services, and specialized child protection mechanisms. Urban-rural disparities therefore directly affect children's opportunities for development, inclusion, and wellbeing.

Additionally, the welfare state continues to rely heavily on reactive rather than preventive approaches. Social policies are frequently focused on poverty alleviation and emergency interventions instead of long-term investments in family support, early childhood development, and prevention of social risks. This limits the transformative potential of social policy and reduces the capacity of the welfare system to address structural causes of vulnerability.

Demographic trends also create increasing pressure on welfare institutions. Declining fertility rates, migration, population ageing, and

changing family structures have intensified the demand for more comprehensive family policies and sustainable social protection mechanisms. At the same time, traditional gender roles continue to place a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women, limiting opportunities for gender equality and work-family balance.

Taken together, these challenges illustrate the complex nature of welfare state transformation in post-socialist societies. While important reforms have expanded legal protections and social assistance measures, structural constraints continue to limit the capacity of the welfare system to respond effectively to emerging social risks. The persistence of child poverty, service inequalities, and institutional fragmentation suggests that welfare state development requires not only policy reform but also stronger implementation capacities and long-term investment in social infrastructure.

Finally, although North Macedonia has made substantial progress in harmonizing its legal framework with international standards, the gap between formal legislation and practical implementation remains significant. Effective child and family protection requires not only legal reforms but also sustainable public investment, stronger institutional capacities, professional training, and continuous policy evaluation.

## Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper shows that family policy, child protection, and social protection in North Macedonia are deeply interconnected domains within the broader framework of welfare state development. As a post-socialist and relatively small welfare state, North Macedonia has undergone significant social policy transformations shaped

by economic transition, demographic change, institutional reform, and emerging social risks. These processes have influenced both the structure and the effectiveness of policies aimed at protecting children and supporting families.

The findings indicate that the country has established a relatively comprehensive legal and institutional framework aligned with international standards, particularly through the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the reform of social protection legislation. Various policy instruments, including child allowances, education supplements, early childhood services, and social assistance measures, demonstrate the state's commitment to reducing child vulnerability and promoting family wellbeing.

However, the analysis also reveals important structural limitations affecting the practical implementation of these policies. Limited financial resources, insufficient institutional capacities, fragmented service delivery, and weak inter-sectoral coordination continue to constrain the effectiveness of the welfare system. In addition, persistent child poverty, regional inequalities, demographic decline, and unequal access to social services remain major challenges, particularly for vulnerable social groups.

The paper further suggests that social policies in North Macedonia continue to operate largely within a reactive and compensatory framework, focusing primarily on poverty alleviation rather than on long-term preventive and social investment approaches. Although recent reforms have introduced important changes, stronger emphasis is needed on integrated family support, early childhood development, community-based services, and institutional sustainability.

The findings suggest several priorities for future policy development. First, greater investment is needed in preventive and family-centred services that address social risks before they escalate into child protection concerns. Second, expanding access to quality early childhood education and care services would contribute both to child development and parental employment. Third, stronger coordination mechanisms between social protection, education, healthcare, and justice institutions are necessary to ensure integrated support for vulnerable children and families. Finally, the systematic monitoring of child wellbeing indicators and the introduction of child-sensitive budgeting practices could improve the effectiveness and accountability of future social policy interventions.

Overall, the case of North Macedonia illustrates the broader dilemmas faced by post-socialist welfare states attempting to balance limited financial and institutional resources with growing social needs, demographic pressures, and the increasing demands of international policy standards. While the country has made considerable progress in developing a legal and institutional framework for family and child protection, persistent challenges related to child poverty, social exclusion, unequal access to services, and institutional fragmentation continue to undermine policy effectiveness.

The findings suggest that legislative reforms alone are insufficient to ensure meaningful improvements in child wellbeing and family resilience. From a social investment perspective, strengthening child wellbeing and family protection requires not only legislative harmonization, but also sustained public investment, stronger institutional capacities, improved inter-sectoral coordination, and a shift toward more preventive, family-centred, and rights-based policies. Such an approach would contribute to

reducing social inequalities, promoting equal opportunities, and supporting children's development throughout the life course, while enhancing the long-term sustainability and inclusiveness of the welfare state.

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# From Capacity Building to Influence: Civil Society Advocacy and Entry Points for Gender-Responsive Climate Finance in the Western Balkans

**Elona Dhëmbo**
*Department of Social Work and Social Policy*
*Faculty of Social Sciences*
*University of Tirana*
elona.dhembo@unitir.edu.al

**Abstract**

Commitments to gender-responsive climate finance have enhanced, but civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Western Balkans remain constrained in shaping policy and funding priorities. This paper discusses how targeted capacity-building and mentoring can enhance CSO influence in advocating for gender equality within climate finance frameworks. It draws on empirically-grounded, practice-based evidence generated through pre-training needs assessments, structured mentoring sessions with five CSOs in Albania and Kosovo, and a WB regional workshop on entry points for influence. Using a reflexive and thematic analytical approach, the paper identifies key barriers and enabling factors shaping advocacy effectiveness. Findings reveal that CSO influence is hindered form limited technical understanding of climate finance instruments, fragmented engagement, and restricted access to policy- and decision-making processes. At the same time, coalition-building, strategic framing of gender equality within broader development agendas, and engagement with multi-level governance structures emerge as critical

entry points for impact. The paper bridges experiential knowledge with policy analysis and contributes to ongoing debates on inclusive governance and social policy innovation. It offers actionable insights for strengthening civil society's role in advancing equitable and sustainable climate finance, with relevance for broader sustainable human development and democratic participation agendas.
**Keywords:** Gender equality, Climate finance, Civil society advocacy, Western Balkans, Inclusive governance

## I. Introduction

With the rising concerns on climate change, the issue of climate finance has increasingly emerged as a central mechanism for addressing the social and environmental consequences of such changes. International frameworks have emphasized the importance of integrating gender equality into climate governance and financing processes (UN Women, 2015; UNFCCC, 2019). Despite these frameworks and commitments, gender-responsive climate finance remains unevenly implemented, particularly in regions characterized by institutional fragmentation and limited participatory governance structures such as the Western Balkans. In the Western Balkans, climate governance processes are shaped by the interaction of several factors, including donor dependency, European integration dynamics, and uneven institutional capacities (UNDP, 2022). While civil society organizations have become important actors in advancing accountability and social inclusion, their influence over climate finance priorities and allocations is only embryonical and remains constrained. Existing literature on climate governance has largely focused on formal policy frameworks, while limited attention has been paid to

advocacy capacities and pathways for influence. Literature on the WB region is even more scarce.

This paper addresses this gap by examining how capacity-building and mentoring interventions can strengthen CSO advocacy and identify entry points for influence in gender-responsive climate finance governance in the Western Balkans. This short introduction is followed by a theoretical framework which grounded in participatory governance, advocacy coalition theory, and feminist political economy approaches. The paper then outlines the qualitative and practice-based methodology employed in the study, including needs assessments, mentoring processes, and regional workshop discussions. The findings section examines barriers and enabling factors shaping CSOs influence in climate finance governance, with particular attention to multi-level governance dynamics, technical knowledge, coalition-building, informal participation mechanisms, and the role of European integration processes as political opportunity structures. The discussion section situates these findings within broader debates on inclusive governance, democratic participation, and climate justice in the Western Balkans. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key arguments and reflects on implications for policy, civil society advocacy, and future research.

## II. Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in a complex theoretical farmwork, which combines participatory governance, advocacy coalition theory, and feminist political economy approaches. First, the framework it is based on theories of participatory and deliberative democracy, which conceptualize civil society organizations (CSOs) as key actors in

enhancing accountability, representation, and inclusiveness in policymaking and decision-making processes. Drawing on Habermas's notion of the public sphere, CSOs are understood as intermediaries that enable the translation of societal needs into policy discourse and facilitate citizen engagement in governance (Habermas, 1991, 1996).

In the Western Balkans, where governance systems continue to be shaped by uneven participation, institutional mistrust, and structural inequalities, civil society participation remains both politically significant and constrained. As emphasized by Aidan McGarry (2024) in Political Voice: Protest, Democracy, and Marginalised Groups, political voice is not distributed equally across society, and marginalized groups frequently face structural barriers to visibility, representation, and influence within democratic systems. McGarry conceptualizes political voice not merely as participation in formal institutional processes, but as the broader capacity of marginalized actors to make claims, challenge exclusionary structures, and gain recognition within public and political spaces. These dynamics are particularly relevant in contexts where democratic participation remains uneven and where institutional channels alone may not sufficiently enable meaningful representation of marginalized communities (Dhëmbo, 2025).

Within this perspective, CSOs play a critical role in expanding democratic space and enabling marginalized voices—particularly those of women and socially vulnerable groups—to influence decision-making and policy-making processes. This is especially important in policy domains such as climate governance and climate finance, where technical expertise, donor-driven agendas, and bureaucratic procedures often risk excluding community-based perspectives and gender-responsive

priorities. Civil society advocacy therefore functions not only as a mechanism for representation, but also as a process of democratizing governance by contesting exclusionary policy structures, reframing development priorities, and promoting more inclusive forms of participation and accountability.

To explain how CSOs influence climate finance policies, the paper draws also on the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), which emphasizes that policy change occurs through coalitions of actors who share beliefs and coordinate strategies over time (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Sabatier, 2007). CSO networks and partnerships are thus conceptualized as advocacy coalitions that mobilize knowledge, resources, and narratives to access decision-making arenas. This aligns with broader insights on transnational advocacy networks and their role in shaping policy agendas (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

The analysis in this paper is further informed by feminist political economy approaches, which highlight how power relations, institutional structures, and macroeconomic governance shape gender inequalities in resource allocation and policy-making (Elson, 1995, 2025; UN Women, 2015). In particular, Elson (2021) emphasizes that gender budgeting and gender-responsive governance require the examination of not only how resources are distributed, but also how policy priorities, institutional practices, and economic assumptions reproduce gendered inequalities. Climate finance is therefore approached as a contested governance space where gender priorities are often marginalized, requiring deliberate advocacy and institutional mechanisms to integrate gender-responsive

approaches into budgeting, planning, and implementation processes (Schalatek, 2021).

Further, the concept of policy windows is used to interpret the "entry points for influence" identified in the study. According to Kingdon (2014), policy change becomes possible when there is a convergence of problem recognition, policy solutions, and political conditions. CSOs, particularly through capacity-building and mentoring processes, can act as policy entrepreneurs, strategically leveraging these windows to advance gender-responsive climate finance agendas.

Finally, the paper adopts a practice-based and reflexive perspective, recognizing that CSOs are also producers of situated knowledge. By integrating experiential evidence from training, mentoring, and regional dialogue processes, the study contributes to bridging the gap between research, policy, and practice (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Van de Ven, 2007). This is particularly relevant in the Western Balkans, where strengthening civil society engagement remains essential for advancing inclusive and sustainable development (Börzel & Buzogány, 2010; UNDP, 2022).

While each of these theoretical perspectives offers distinct analytical insights, their intersection provides a more comprehensive framework – a multi-level feminist governance framework for understanding civil society influence in climate finance governance. Participatory and deliberative democracy theories explain the normative importance of civil society engagement in policymaking processes, while the Advocacy Coalition Framework and Multiple Streams Framework help explain how influence is strategically negotiated within complex governance systems. Feminist political economy approaches add a critical perspective by

highlighting how power relations, institutional arrangements, and resource distribution shape gendered inequalities within climate governance. Finally, practice-based and reflexive approaches bridge these macro-level governance dynamics with the situated experiences and knowledge generated through advocacy practice, mentoring, and regional exchange processes. Together, these perspectives conceptualize gender-responsive climate finance governance as a multi-level, contested, and relational process shaped by institutional structures, advocacy coalitions, political opportunities, and unequal distributions of knowledge and power.

# A Multi-level Feminist Governance Framework
## for Understanding Civil Society Influence in Climate Finance Governance

**Theoretical Perspectives**

**Participatory & Deliberative Democracy Theories**
Explain the normative importance of civil society engagement in policymaking processes and democratic legitimacy through participation and deliberation.

**Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)**
Explains how civil society actors build coalitions, share beliefs, and engage in long-term advocacy to influence policy subsystems.

**Multiple Streams Framework (MSF)**
Explains how problems, policies, and politics converge to create windows of opportunity for civil society influence on the policy agenda and decisions.

**Feminist Political Economy Approaches**
Highlight how power relations, institutional arrangements, and resource distribution produce gendered inequalities within climate governance.

**Practice-based & Reflexive Approaches**
Bridge macro-level governance dynamics with situated experiences and knowledge generated through advocacy practice, mentoring, and regional exchange.

**Analytical Contribution**

Normative legitimacy of participation and inclusive deliberation + Strategic coalition-building and belief-driven advocacy over time + Policy change through agenda-setting and windows of opportunity + Power, inequality, and gendered structures in governance + Situated knowledge, learning, and adaptive advocacy practice

**Integrated Framework**

**Intersection of Perspectives:**
**A multi-level feminist governance framework**
understanding civil society influence in climate finance governance as a complex, relational, and power-sensitive process.

**Key Dimensions of the Framework**

**Multi-level Governance**
Local, national, regional and international levels interact and influence each other.

**Contested Processes**
Policy processes are contested arenas shaped by competing interests and ideas.

**Relational Dynamics**
Influence emerges through networks, coalitions, and relationships among diverse actors.

**Power & Inequality**
Gendered power relations and unequal access to resources and decision-making shape outcomes.

**Knowledge & Learning**
Knowledge is co-produced through practice, reflection, mentoring, and exchange, informing adaptive advocacy.

**Overall Focus of the Framework**

**Gender-responsive climate finance governance**
as a multi-level, contested, and relational process shaped by institutional structures, advocacy coalitions, political opportunities, and unequal distributions of knowledge and power.

*Figure 1. A multi-level feminist governance framework for understanding civil society influence in gender-responsive climate finance governance.*

## III. Methods

This study adopts a practice-based qualitative design, drawing on data generated through a structured capacity-building and mentoring intervention with civil society organizations (CSOs) in Albania and Kosovo, complemented by a broader regional-level insights form the Western Balkans countries.

- **Research Design and Approach**

The research was grounded in a reflexive, practice-oriented methodology, where the researcher is directly engaged in the design and delivery of capacity-building and mentoring activities. This approach enables the systematic collection and analysis of experiential and process-based data, contributing to the co-production of knowledge between researcher and participants.

- **Data Collection**

Data were collected through three interrelated components:

1. *Pre-training needs assessment*: A structured online questionnaire (Google Forms) was administered to five CSOs (three in Albania and two in Kosovo) prior to the intervention. The assessment captured organizational capacities, prior experience in advocacy and climate finance, perceived barriers to engagement, and training needs related to gender equality and climate finance.
2. *Mentoring sessions:* A total of 12 tailored mentoring sessions (at least two per CSO) were conducted over the course of the intervention (winter 2025 – spring 2026), with more than 20 participants. These sessions combined capacity-building with

hands-on support, including: development and refinement of advocacy strategies; revision of policy briefs and position papers; and strengthening of research and evidence-production approaches. Detailed notes and reflective records from each session were used as qualitative data sources.

3. *Regional workshop:* A regional workshop was facilitated with 10 participants from six Western Balkan countries (Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and North Macedonia). The workshop focused on identifying "entry points for influence" in gender-responsive climate finance. Data were collected through group discussions, facilitated exercises, and documented outputs from participants.

- **Data Analysis**

The data were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns related to barriers, enabling factors, and strategies for influence. The coding process was conducted iteratively across the three data sources, enabling triangulation between needs assessment findings, mentoring processes, and regional-level insights.

- **Ethical Considerations**

All data were treated confidentially and organizational information was anonymized where necessary. Given the embedded nature of the research, particular attention was paid to reflexivity and the researcher's dual role in the process, as facilitator and analyst.

## IV. Findings

***Multi-Level Governance and Uneven Access to Climate Finance Processes***

The findings reveal that climate finance governance in the Western Balkans operates across multiple governance levels, each of them characterized by varying degrees of accessibility and influence for civil society organizations (CSOs). Participants identified international actors, including European Union institutions, United Nations agencies, and international foundations, as major agenda-setting actors. They are portrayed as very important actors in shaping climate finance priorities in the region. These institutions influence national policymaking indirectly through funding conditionalities, thematic priorities, and reporting requirements.

When it comes to the national level, it was ministries responsible for agriculture, environment, infrastructure, energy, and finance that were identified as key gatekeepers of the climate finance allocation processes. Most participants consistently described these structures as highly centralized, procedural, bureaucratic, and difficult to access. More specifically, the national climate finance mechanisms were perceived as dominated by technocratic processes with limited transparency and few meaningful opportunities for the CSOs to engage and make an impact. By contrast, local governance structures emerged as comparatively more accessible spaces for advocacy and participation.

> *"At the municipality level, it is quite a different story. There, at least, we know who to speak to and how to approach them. At the national level, the process feels closed and inaccessible and decisions seem to have been made before we even enter the room."* (Regional Workshop – CSO representative, Montenegro)

In such a context, participants identified municipalities, local implementation units, and local public consultation mechanisms as important entry points where CSOs could engage more effectively with climate-related priorities, with a more tangible and direct impact on communities. Participants also emphasized that local governments often provide more immediate opportunities for communication, relationship-building, and practical advocacy influence. This level of flexibility and openness makes a noticeable difference.

***Formal and Informal Entry Points for Influencing Climate Finance***

Participants identified a range of formal and informal mechanisms through which CSOs can engage in gender-responsive climate governance and finance. Formal opportunities included participatory budgeting processes, public hearings, local resilience and development planning, gender action plans, thematic consultations, and specialized municipal task forces dealing with emergencies or disaster risk reduction. At the same time, informal mechanisms were described as equally important. Long-term relationships with local officials, sustained community presence, and informal networking were perceived as critical factors facilitating access to decision-making spaces. These findings suggest that influence is often negotiated not only through formal institutional procedures but also through relational and trust-based dynamics.

> *"In many cases, access depends less on official procedures and more on whether there is already trust and communication with local officials. It is somehow easier to set and maintain trustful relations at the local level as compared to the national level."*
> (Regional Workshop – CSO representative, Kosovo)

The findings further indicate that local-level governance processes are more conducive to participatory engagement than national-level climate finance mechanisms. National budgeting processes, climate fund applications, and project approval procedures were widely perceived as opaque and insufficiently participatory. These together contribute to an environment which limits opportunities for structured input form the civil society actors.

***Technical Knowledge, Power, and Advocacy Capacity***

A recurring theme from participants across all countries participating in the regional workshop concerned the role of technical expertise as a determinant of influence. This was a key theme identified also in the needs assessment and mentoring components. Participants repeatedly emphasized that climate finance governance is characterized by highly specialized terminology, bureaucratic procedures, and donor-driven reporting requirements that create significant barriers for many CSOs. This is particularly challenging for small and grassroot CSOs, closely connected to most vulnerable communities, which cannot afford high-level / specialised expertise.

Indeed, limited technical understanding of climate finance instruments was identified as a major limitation which directly contributed in reducing advocacy effectiveness. Participants noted that many organizations possess strong expertise in gender equality and community engagement, yet, they lack the technical knowledge necessary to engage effectively with climate finance frameworks, funding mechanisms, and policy language.

> *"It is now many years that we work on gender equality and we know gender equality very well, but climate finance language*

*feels like a completely different world. Not fully owning technical expertise put a high risk on CSOs to be pictured as irrelevant actors on the table."* (Regional Workshop – CSO representative, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Mentoring sessions with CSOs in Albania and Kosovo revealed that targeted capacity-building were crucial in contributing not only to the improvement of the technical understanding but also to building greater confidence in engaging with policymakers and institutions. The support provided in relation to policy revision, evidence-production strategies, and advocacy framing enabled participating organizations to strengthen their strategic positioning within climate governance processes. For example, one CSO was inspired and started to work on the revision of its general strategic document to mainstream gender, be more explicit on issues such as climate justice, and be more systematic in terms of monitoring and evaluation, even though their main area of intervention was democratisation and rule of law.

***Coalition-Building and Strategic Framing***

Exploring on the topic of an enabling environment for the advancement of gender-responsive climate finance, coalition-building clearly emerged as a central enabling factor for strengthening influence of CSOs in the area. Participants highlighted the importance of regional networking, partnership building among CSOs, and collaboration across thematic sectors as essential in strengthening their position in the decision-making and policy-making processes.

Fragmentation within civil society was repeatedly identified as a barrier weakening collective advocacy capacity, particularly at the national level and when new issues and challenges are at stake.

> *"When organizations work alone, it is easy for them to be ignored. After so many years of experience – of failure and success, there is no doubt that it is only when we work together that our voices become harder to dismiss. This is particularly true when it comes to the national level, and to new topics or areas of interventions."* (Regional Workshop – CSO representative, Albania)

The findings further demonstrate that strategic framing plays an important role in advancing gender-responsive climate finance agendas. Participants noted that gender equality arguments are more likely to gain institutional traction when linked to broader development concerns such as social inclusion, vulnerability reduction, resilience, and community well-being (partly because these framings align more closely with existing policy priorities, donor agendas, and institutional mandates within governance and development programming).

Institutions and actors with explicit gender equality mandates—including gender equality officers, social inclusion units, and sectoral staff working on vulnerability reduction—were perceived as more receptive to gender-responsive climate arguments. These actors were identified as important strategic allies capable of facilitating policy dialogue and institutional access.

Participants also identified European integration processes as an important enabling factor for advancing gender-responsive climate finance advocacy. EU accession requirements, alignment with Green Deal priorities, and increasing emphasis on participatory governance and gender mainstreaming were perceived as creating additional pressure on national institutions to engage with civil society and adopt more inclusive

policy approaches. Participants noted that EU-related funding mechanisms and reporting obligations often open spaces for consultation and provide legitimacy to advocacy efforts focused on gender equality, climate resilience, and social inclusion.

> *"When an issue is linked to EU priorities, they like to work with us or not, institutions become much more willing to listen."*
> (Regional Workshop – CSO representative, Albania)

In this sense, European integration processes function not only as regulatory drivers, but also as political opportunity structures that can expand advocacy space for civil society organizations.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective advocacy in climate finance governance depends not only on formal participation opportunities, but also on technical knowledge, coalition-building capacities, strategic framing, the ability to navigate multi-level governance structures, and the political opportunity spaces created through European integration processes. EU accession dynamics, alignment with Green Deal priorities, and donor-driven governance reforms appear to create additional incentives for institutional engagement with gender equality and participatory climate governance agendas.

## V. Discussion

The findings presented in this paper highlight the importance of participatory governance structures in shaping opportunities for civil society influence, including influence on climate finance processes. Consistent with theories of deliberative democracy, the study demonstrates that access to policymaking spaces remains uneven and highly dependent on institutional openness, governance scale, and

existing power relations (Habermas, 1989, 1996). The stronger accessibility of local governance structures compared to national institutions reflects the broader governance dynamics in the Western Balkans, where centralized policymaking and limited institutional transparency continue to constrain participatory engagement (Dhëmbo 2025).

These findings resonate with Gaventa's (2006) conceptualization of "spaces for change", particularly the distinction between invited and closed spaces of participation. While local-level participatory mechanisms such as public hearings, resilience planning, and municipal consultations create more accessible entry points for CSOs, national-level climate finance processes remain largely closed, selective, and procedural. Participants' experiences of tokenistic consultation further demonstrate that formal participation does not necessarily translate into substantive influence.

The findings also align with broader regional analyses emphasizing the uneven institutionalization of participatory governance and environmental policymaking in the Western Balkans (Börzel & Buzogány, 2010). Similar patterns have been observed in processes of Europeanization, where formal policy alignment often coexists with limited civic influence over implementation and resource allocation. In this context, CSOs frequently operate within constrained political and institutional environments, relying on informal networks, donor-supported mechanisms, and strategic coalition-building to gain access to decision-making spaces.

The study further demonstrates that technical expertise functions as a form of power within climate governance systems. Climate finance

governance is embedded within highly specialized bureaucratic, financial, and donor-driven procedures that privilege actors possessing technical knowledge and institutional resources. Participants repeatedly emphasized that many organizations possess strong expertise in gender equality, social inclusion, and community engagement, yet lack familiarity with climate finance terminology, funding mechanisms, and reporting frameworks. This reinforces Elson's (1995 and 2025) argument that institutional and policy structures are often shaped by unequal distributions of power and knowledge, reproducing exclusionary practices within governance systems.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate the importance of mentoring and capacity-building as mechanisms for strengthening both technical and political agency. In line with participatory and engaged scholarship approaches (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Van de Ven, 2007), the study suggests that experiential and practice-based learning can contribute to more meaningful forms of participation by enhancing advocacy confidence, policy literacy, and strategic positioning. Mentoring processes not only supported the development of technical skills, but also facilitated reflexive learning, strategic framing, and coalition-building among participating organizations.

Coalition-building emerged as a particularly important strategy for overcoming institutional fragmentation and limited advocacy influence. These findings strongly align with the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Sabatier, 2007), which emphasizes that policy influence is strengthened through coordinated action, shared narratives, and long-term collaboration among actors with common policy beliefs. Participants repeatedly highlighted that fragmented civil

society engagement weakens advocacy effectiveness, while regional networking and collaborative approaches enhance visibility, legitimacy, and access to policy spaces.

The findings also resonate with scholarship on transnational advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), particularly regarding the role of cross-border learning and regional exchange in diffusing advocacy strategies and policy ideas. The workshop discussions demonstrated that CSOs across the Western Balkans experience similar structural barriers related to institutional opacity, centralized governance, and limited participatory opportunities. At the same time, participants identified transferable advocacy practices and common entry points for influence, suggesting the emergence of regionally shared strategies for gender-responsive climate advocacy.

Importantly, the findings underscore the political nature of gender-responsive climate finance. Climate finance is not merely a technical policy domain, but a contested governance space where priorities, resources, and definitions of vulnerability are negotiated (Schalatek, 2021). Participants noted that gender-responsive climate arguments gain greater institutional traction when framed within broader agendas of social inclusion, resilience, vulnerability reduction, and community well-being. This aligns with feminist political economy approaches and broader calls for integrating gender equality into climate governance as both a social justice and sustainable development issue (UN Women, 2015; UNFCCC, 2019).

The findings are also particularly relevant in the broader socio-economic and governance context of the Western Balkans, where climate transition processes intersect with persistent inequalities, democratic deficits, and

uneven institutional capacities (Regional Cooperation Council, 2023; UNDP, 2022; World Bank, 2021). Recent regional analyses have highlighted the disproportionate impact of socio-economic insecurity and weak institutional protections on women and marginalized groups (Dhëmbo & Vrbaški, 2024). In this context, strengthening gender-responsive climate finance requires not only technical policy reforms, but also more inclusive governance arrangements capable of enabling meaningful civil society participation and democratic accountability.

## VI. Conclusion

This paper examined how capacity-building, mentoring, and regional exchange processes can strengthen civil society advocacy for gender-responsive climate finance in the Western Balkans. Drawing on practice-based evidence from Albania, Kosovo, and regional-level dialogue processes, the study identified both structural barriers and strategic opportunities shaping CSO influence within climate governance systems. The findings demonstrate that while national climate finance processes remain highly centralized and difficult to access, local governance structures provide comparatively more participatory and accessible entry points for influence. At the same time, technical knowledge gaps, fragmented civil society engagement, and limited transparency continue to constrain advocacy effectiveness across the region.

The study further demonstrates that coalition-building, strategic framing, and targeted mentoring interventions can strengthen CSO capacities to engage more effectively in climate finance governance. In particular, framing gender-responsive climate finance within broader social justice,

vulnerability, and resilience agendas appears to increase institutional receptiveness and advocacy relevance.

By bridging experiential knowledge with theoretical debates on participatory governance, advocacy coalitions, and feminist political economy, the paper contributes to broader discussions on inclusive governance and democratic participation in climate policy processes. The findings suggest that strengthening gender-responsive climate finance in the Western Balkans requires not only technical reforms and funding mechanisms, but also more inclusive governance arrangements that enable meaningful civil society participation.

Future research could further explore the long-term impact of advocacy mentoring interventions, comparative governance dynamics across the region, and the evolving role of civil society within emerging climate governance frameworks.

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# Children as Rights-Holders in Environmental Justice: International Standards and Future Perspectives in the Albanian Context

**Elsa Toska, PhD**

Senior Lecturer in Environmental and Human Rights Law

POLIS University

Email: elsa_toska@universitetipolis.edu.al

**Abstract**

Environmental justice has evolved from a concept concerned primarily with the fair distribution of environmental burdens and benefits into a broader rights-based framework that also requires participation, recognition, accountability, and access to remedies. Within this framework, children occupy a distinct legal and moral position. They are disproportionately affected by air pollution, toxic exposure, heatwaves, floods, biodiversity loss, and climate-related disruption, while at the same time they are frequently excluded from the environmental decisions that shape their present health and future development. This article examines the legal status of children as autonomous rights-holders in environmental justice by analysing international human rights standards, the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), and the constitutional and legislative framework of Albania. The study applies a doctrinal legal methodology, supported by qualitative comparative analysis, and draws on international treaties, soft-law instruments, domestic legislation, judicial decisions, policy documents, and academic literature. Particular attention is given to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 26 (2023), the Aarhus Convention, the United Nations recognition of the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, and recent ECtHR climate jurisprudence. The article argues

that Albania has formally incorporated important international environmental and children's rights standards, but that implementation remains fragmented and adult-centred. The principal gaps concern child-sensitive access to information, meaningful participation in environmental decision-making, child-rights impact assessment, institutional coordination, and access to justice. The article concludes that a child-centred model of environmental governance is necessary to translate Albania's international obligations into effective administrative, judicial, and policy practice.

**Keywords:** children; environmental justice; children's rights; climate justice; participation; environmental governance; Albania

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Environmental justice has traditionally been associated with the unequal distribution of environmental risks and benefits across social groups, particularly communities exposed to pollution, unsafe land use, industrial hazards, and inadequate public services (Bullard, 1990). Over time, however, the concept has expanded beyond distributive fairness. Contemporary environmental justice scholarship emphasises that justice also requires recognition of affected groups, fair procedures, access to information, participation in decision-making, and effective remedies when environmental harm occurs (Boyle & Anderson, 1996; Boyle, 2012; Shelton, 2015). Comparative scholarship has also shown that environmental rights are increasingly constitutionalised and framed as enforceable human rights claims (Boyd, 2012, 2021). This broader understanding is especially relevant for children, whose exposure to

environmental harm is shaped not only by physical vulnerability but also by their limited access to political and legal processes.

Children are not simply future adults or passive beneficiaries of environmental protection. They are present rights-holders whose rights to life, health, development, education, play, family life, participation, and access to justice may be directly impaired by environmental degradation. Their physiological development makes them more vulnerable to polluted air, contaminated water, extreme heat, and toxic substances. Their longer life expectancy also means that they will experience the long-term consequences of climate change more intensely than most adults. These features make environmental justice for children both an immediate human rights issue and an intergenerational justice issue (Robinson, 2018; Sands & Peel, 2018).

Recent developments in international human rights law have strengthened this normative relationship. The United Nations General Assembly recognised the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment in 2022 (United Nations General Assembly, 2022). In the field of children's rights, General Comment No. 26 clarified that environmental harm and climate change affect the full enjoyment of children's rights and that States must adopt child-sensitive measures to prevent, mitigate, and remedy environmental damage (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023). The Aarhus Convention also gives procedural form to environmental democracy by requiring access to environmental information, public participation, and access to justice in environmental matters (Aarhus Convention, 1998). These standards increasingly require legal systems to treat children as participants in environmental governance, not merely as objects of protection.

The Albanian context is particularly significant because the country has ratified the principal international human rights and environmental instruments, recognises environmental protection within its Constitution, and is progressively aligning its legal order with European standards as part of the European integration process. At the same time, Albania faces recurrent environmental and climate-related challenges, including urban air pollution, flooding, heatwaves, waste-management concerns, water and sanitation inequalities, and climate-sensitive risks to education, health, and social protection (Republic of Albania & United Nations Development Programme, 2022; UNICEF Albania, n.d.). These risks have direct implications for children's rights and for the capacity of public institutions to implement international standards effectively.

## 1.2 Research Problem, Objectives, and Contribution

Despite important normative developments, implementation remains uneven. Albanian law formally recognises environmental protection and children's rights, yet environmental decision-making remains largely adult-centred. Children are seldom consulted in environmental impact assessment procedures, public consultations, municipal planning, climate adaptation policies, or litigation strategies, even when decisions directly affect their health, safety, education, and future quality of life. The central research problem is therefore the gap between Albania's formal legal commitments and the practical recognition of children as autonomous environmental rights-holders.

This article argues that Albania has incorporated many international environmental and children's rights standards into its constitutional and legislative framework, but has not yet translated those standards into a coherent child-centred model of environmental governance. The article has

three objectives. First, it identifies the international legal standards governing children's environmental rights. Secondly, it examines the contribution of the ECtHR to environmental and climate justice, with particular emphasis on the positive and procedural obligations that may support child-centred claims. Thirdly, it assesses the extent to which Albanian law and institutional practice comply with these evolving standards.

The contribution of the article is twofold. Conceptually, it places children at the centre of environmental justice by combining the substantive dimension of environmental rights with the procedural guarantees of environmental democracy. Contextually, it applies these standards to Albania and demonstrates that the legal framework contains significant potential for progressive interpretation, but that implementation requires clearer institutional mechanisms, child-friendly procedures, and stronger links between environmental governance and children's rights policy.

## 2. Methodology

This research adopts a doctrinal legal methodology combined with qualitative comparative legal analysis. Doctrinal legal research is appropriate because the article examines the content, interpretation, and interaction of legal norms across international, regional, and domestic legal systems. The study analyses primary legal sources, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Convention on Human Rights, the Aarhus Convention, the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, and key Albanian legislation on environmental protection, environmental impact assessment, public consultation, and children's rights.

The analysis also considers leading decisions of the ECtHR, including Lopez Ostra v. Spain (1994), Oneryildiz v. Turkey (2004), Tatar v. Romania (2009), Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland (2024), Duarte Agostinho and Others v. Portugal and 32 Others (2024), and Greenpeace Nordic and Others v. Norway (2025). These cases are selected because they illustrate the development of environmental protection through Convention rights and because recent climate cases clarify the scope of States' positive and procedural obligations.

Secondary sources include academic literature on environmental justice, climate litigation, environmental human rights, and children's rights, as well as policy and institutional documents concerning Albania. These include UNICEF Albania publications, reports of the People's Advocate, the National Agenda on the Rights of the Child, the Fourth National Communication of Albania on Climate Change, and civil society reports on children's environmental perceptions and participation (People's Advocate of Albania & UNICEF Albania, 2022; Republic of Albania & United Nations Development Programme, 2022; UNICEF Albania, 2021a, 2021b, n.d.; World Vision Albania, 2023).

The comparative component is used to place Albania within broader European developments. It considers how courts and institutions in Europe have approached climate obligations, intergenerational equity, and access to justice. The purpose of comparison is not to transplant foreign models mechanically, but to identify interpretative and institutional lessons that may assist Albanian courts, administrative bodies, municipalities, and child protection institutions in applying international standards more effectively.

The study is limited to legal and policy analysis. It does not conduct empirical fieldwork with children, judges, public authorities, or civil society organisations. Nevertheless, the article uses existing institutional and civil society materials to identify implementation gaps and to assess the degree to which Albania's formal legal framework is reflected in practice.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

The findings demonstrate a clear tension between normative incorporation and practical implementation. At the international level, children are increasingly recognised as rights-holders in environmental matters. At the Albanian level, constitutional and legislative provisions provide a basis for environmental protection, access to information, consultation, and child protection. However, these norms have not yet produced a systematic administrative or judicial practice that recognises children as active participants in environmental governance. The discussion below develops this finding through five interrelated dimensions: international standards, ECtHR jurisprudence, the Albanian constitutional and legislative framework, implementation gaps, and future reform scenarios.

### 3.1 International Standards on Children, Environmental Justice, and Climate Governance

International law increasingly treats environmental protection as a condition for the enjoyment of human rights. The right to life, the right to health, the right to private and family life, the right to education, and the right to participate in public affairs can all be affected by pollution, climate change, environmental degradation, and disaster risks. The recognition of the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment by the United

Nations General Assembly gives further normative support to this integrated approach (United Nations General Assembly, 2022).

For children, the most important point of departure is the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention requires States to ensure the best interests of the child as a primary consideration, to respect the child's right to express views in matters affecting them, and to protect children's rights to life, survival, development, health, education, and an adequate standard of living (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Environmental harm may interfere with all these rights. It can damage children's health, restrict access to safe schools and public spaces, increase disaster-related displacement, and impair the conditions necessary for development.

General Comment No. 26 is particularly significant because it connects children's rights directly with environmental governance and climate change. It clarifies that States must prevent foreseeable environmental harm to children, regulate private actors, ensure access to child-friendly environmental information, provide meaningful participation opportunities, and make remedies accessible to children (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023). The General Comment also emphasises the principle of evolving capacities. This means that children's participation must be adapted to age, maturity, information needs, and social context, rather than being reduced to symbolic consultation.

The Aarhus Convention complements these obligations by operationalising environmental democracy. Its three pillars - access to information, public participation, and access to justice - are essential for environmental justice because they determine whether affected persons can understand environmental risks, influence decisions, and challenge unlawful or inadequate administrative action (Aarhus Convention, 1998).

Although the Convention speaks broadly of the public and the public concerned, its objectives should be interpreted consistently with children's rights standards. A child-sensitive reading of Aarhus requires information that children can understand, participation formats that children can actually use, and remedies that are not practically inaccessible because of age, cost, standing, or procedural complexity.

The combined effect of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 26, the Aarhus Convention, and the emerging recognition of the right to a healthy environment is the development of a stronger child-centred environmental justice framework. This framework has both substantive and procedural dimensions. Substantively, it requires the State to protect children from environmental harm. Procedurally, it requires the State to enable children to take part in environmental decision-making and to obtain effective remedies when their rights are affected.

### 3.2 The Evolution of Environmental Protection in ECtHR Jurisprudence

The European Convention on Human Rights does not expressly contain a substantive right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. Nevertheless, the ECtHR has progressively developed an environmental human rights doctrine through the interpretation of existing Convention rights, especially Articles 2, 6, 8, and 13. This jurisprudence is highly relevant for Albania because the European Convention is part of the domestic legal order and because Albanian courts are required to interpret rights consistently with the Convention and ECtHR case-law.

In Lopez Ostra v. Spain (1994), the Court held that severe pollution from a waste-treatment plant could interfere with private and family life under Article 8, even where the environmental harm did not directly threaten life. The importance of the judgment lies in its recognition that environmental

degradation may violate Convention rights when it seriously affects well-being, home life, or quality of life. This reasoning is particularly important for children, whose home, school, and neighbourhood environments are central to health and development.

The Court developed the positive-obligations dimension further in Oneryildiz v. Turkey (2004), where a methane explosion at a municipal landfill caused loss of life. The Grand Chamber held that public authorities had failed to take preventive measures despite knowledge of the risk. The judgment established that States must maintain regulatory and administrative frameworks capable of preventing foreseeable environmental harm, particularly where dangerous activities pose serious risks. For children's environmental justice, this reasoning supports the view that public authorities must identify and prevent risks in places where children live, study, and play.

In Tatar v. Romania (2009), the Court reinforced the procedural and precautionary dimensions of environmental protection. The case concerned cyanide pollution from mining activities and highlighted the relevance of environmental information, transparency, and scientific uncertainty. The Court's approach confirms that environmental governance cannot wait for complete scientific certainty where serious harm is plausible. This is consistent with child-centred environmental protection because children may suffer irreversible consequences from exposures that are underestimated or poorly monitored.

The ECtHR's climate jurisprudence represents a further step. In Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland (2024), the Grand Chamber recognised that inadequate climate action may engage Article 8 and that States must adopt and effectively implement regulatory

frameworks capable of mitigating serious adverse climate effects. The Court emphasised the need for coherent targets, implementation mechanisms, and domestic procedural safeguards. The judgment is important for children because it links climate governance with intergenerational burden-sharing and confirms that climate policy is not entirely outside judicial scrutiny.

Duarte Agostinho and Others v. Portugal and 32 Others (2024) was brought by Portuguese children and young adults who argued that insufficient climate action threatened their rights. The application was declared inadmissible because domestic remedies had not been exhausted and because the Court rejected the broader extraterritorial claim against the respondent States. However, the decision remains relevant because it recognised that climate change may affect rights under Articles 2 and 8. The case also illustrates a key procedural lesson for future child-centred climate litigation: applicants must carefully establish jurisdiction, standing, and exhaustion of domestic remedies.

Greenpeace Nordic and Others v. Norway (2025) further clarifies the procedural obligations of States in climate-related environmental decision-making. The case concerned petroleum exploration licensing. The Court applied principles developed in previous environmental and climate case-law and examined whether the decision-making process included an adequate and sufficiently comprehensive environmental assessment. The judgment confirms that environmental impact assessment and public participation are not merely technical requirements; they are components of the State's Convention obligations when decisions may have serious climate-related implications.

Although the ECtHR has not yet created a separate doctrine of children's environmental rights, its case-law provides a strong foundation for future child-centred claims. The positive obligations under Articles 2 and 8, combined with the procedural guarantees under Articles 6 and 13, can be interpreted in light of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and General Comment No. 26. This integrated interpretation would allow courts to give special weight to children's vulnerability, evolving capacities, and long-term exposure to environmental harm.

### 3.3 Constitutional and Legislative Foundations in Albania

The Constitution of the Republic of Albania provides an important basis for recognising children's environmental rights, even though it does not expressly formulate those rights as a separate constitutional category. Article 56 guarantees every person the right to be informed about the state of the environment and its protection. This provision corresponds to the first pillar of the Aarhus Convention and should be interpreted in a child-sensitive manner. For children, the right to environmental information requires more than publication of technical reports. It requires accessible language, age-appropriate formats, school-based communication, digital channels, and opportunities for questions and feedback.

Article 59 identifies the protection of a healthy and ecologically appropriate environment for present and future generations as a social objective of the State. Although social objectives are not always directly enforceable as individual rights, they guide legislative interpretation, public policy, and constitutional balancing. The reference to future generations is especially relevant to climate justice because it connects environmental protection with long-term responsibility and intergenerational equity. When interpreted together with children's rights,

Article 59 supports the argument that public authorities must consider the long-term consequences of environmental decisions for children and future generations.

Article 42 guarantees access to a fair hearing before an independent tribunal when legal or constitutional rights are affected. In environmental matters, access to justice often determines whether substantive rights can be protected in practice. Read together with Article 56 and Albania's international obligations, Article 42 may support children's access to judicial or administrative remedies where pollution, environmental degradation, or climate-related risks affect their health, education, development, or private life. The challenge is to translate this potential into child-sensitive rules on standing, representation, evidence, costs, and remedies.

Articles 116 and 122 strengthen the domestic relevance of international law. They recognise ratified international agreements as part of Albania's legal order and provide that ratified treaties prevail over conflicting domestic legislation. Consequently, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Aarhus Convention are not external references only; they have interpretative and normative significance within Albanian law. This constitutional openness gives Albanian courts and administrative authorities a strong basis to apply international standards directly when environmental decisions affect children.

Ordinary legislation also provides important entry points. Law No. 10431/2011 on Environmental Protection establishes prevention, precaution, sustainable development, access to information, and public participation as principles of environmental governance (Law No. 10431,

2011). Law No. 10440/2011 on Environmental Impact Assessment aims to prevent, minimise, and compensate environmental harm before projects are implemented and requires an open decision-making process (Law No. 10440, 2011). Law No. 146/2014 on Notification and Public Consultation regulates consultation for draft laws, strategic documents, and public policies of high interest (Law No. 146, 2014). Law No. 18/2017 on the Rights and Protection of the Child provides the general framework for ensuring children's rights, protection, participation, and best interests (Law No. 18, 2017).

Taken together, these instruments create a legal architecture capable of supporting child-centred environmental governance. Yet their interaction remains underdeveloped. Environmental law generally addresses the public or the affected public, while child protection law is not systematically integrated into environmental decision-making. The result is a fragmented framework in which children are formally protected by several legal regimes but rarely recognised as autonomous participants in environmental decisions.

### 3.4 Implementation Gaps in the Albanian Context

The central finding of this article is that Albania's principal challenge is no longer the complete absence of legal norms, but the lack of effective implementation mechanisms that connect environmental governance with children's rights. The gap can be seen in four areas: participation, access to information, access to justice, and institutional coordination.

First, participation remains predominantly adult-centred. Public consultations, environmental impact assessment procedures, territorial planning processes, and municipal discussions are usually designed for adults, professional stakeholders, civil society organisations, project

developers, and public authorities. Children may be indirectly affected by the outcome of these decisions, but they are rarely provided with dedicated participation channels. This creates a mismatch with Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and General Comment No. 26, both of which require meaningful participation in matters affecting children (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023; Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

Secondly, access to environmental information is insufficiently child-friendly. Environmental information is often technical, fragmented, and difficult to understand without specialist knowledge. Even where information is formally available, it may not be accessible to children in terms of language, format, timing, or distribution. A child-sensitive interpretation of Article 56 of the Constitution and the Aarhus Convention would require public authorities to produce age-appropriate environmental information, particularly on air quality, water safety, waste management, heatwaves, flooding, and school-related risks.

Thirdly, access to justice remains weak. Environmental litigation involving children is limited, and there is little domestic jurisprudence recognising children as direct victims of environmental harm. Practical barriers include standing, the need for legal representation, evidentiary complexity, costs, delay, and the limited availability of child-sensitive remedies. These barriers are significant because international standards increasingly require accessible and effective remedies for children whose rights are affected by environmental harm (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023; Knox, 2018).

Fourthly, institutional coordination is fragmented. Environmental institutions, municipalities, child protection units, schools, health

authorities, disaster-risk institutions, and the People's Advocate may each address separate aspects of environmental risk, but coordination between environmental policy and children's rights policy remains limited. This fragmentation is particularly problematic in climate adaptation, where risks to children often cross institutional boundaries: heat affects health and education; floods affect housing, schools, and social protection; air pollution affects health, mobility, and urban planning.

Recent Albanian policy materials confirm these concerns. UNICEF Albania's Climate Landscape Analysis for Children indicates that Albania's climate, environment, energy, and disaster-risk policies are not consistently sensitive to children's needs and rights, and that children and young people have generally not been sufficiently involved in climate-related decision-making (UNICEF Albania, n.d.). World Vision Albania (2023) similarly identifies increased environmental awareness among children and young people but limited opportunities for meaningful participation. These findings show that the problem is not simply legal recognition; it is the absence of routine institutional practice that converts rights into participation, prevention, and remedy.

The Albanian context also demonstrates the importance of linking domestic law to international standards more explicitly. General Comment No. 26 requires child-rights impact assessment, child-sensitive environmental information, and access to remedies. The Aarhus Convention requires public participation and access to justice. ECtHR jurisprudence requires effective regulatory frameworks, adequate environmental assessment, and procedural safeguards. Albanian law contains entry points for all these requirements, but they must be made

operational through administrative guidelines, judicial interpretation, municipal procedures, and child-friendly institutional design.

### 3.5 Comparative European Perspectives and Lessons for Albania

European climate and environmental litigation offers useful lessons for Albania. Climate litigation has increasingly been analysed as a regulatory pathway through which courts can require public authorities to justify the adequacy of climate and environmental measures (Peel & Osofsky, 2015). In the Netherlands, the Urgenda litigation established that States may have positive obligations under Articles 2 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights to adopt effective climate mitigation measures. The case was not brought by children, but its reasoning is relevant to younger generations because it confirms that courts may review whether the State has taken minimum protective measures against foreseeable climate risks (Urgenda Foundation v. State of the Netherlands, 2019).

French and Norwegian experiences also demonstrate that environmental and climate disputes increasingly involve judicial review of governmental decision-making. Strategic litigation, including L'Affaire du Siecle (2021), has pushed courts to examine whether public authorities have complied with climate targets, environmental assessment duties, and procedural guarantees. Greenpeace Nordic and Others v. Norway (2025) is particularly relevant because it focuses on the adequacy of environmental assessment and the procedural obligations of public authorities when authorising activities with climate implications.

These developments do not mean that Albanian courts should replace legislative or administrative decision-making. Rather, they suggest that courts have an important role in ensuring that environmental decisions are reasoned, evidence-based, procedurally fair, and consistent with human

rights obligations. For Albania, the comparative lesson is that child-centred environmental litigation may develop gradually through administrative disputes, environmental impact assessment challenges, constitutional review, or complaints supported by the People's Advocate and civil society organisations.

A second lesson is that participation must be institutionalised before litigation becomes necessary. Courts can correct legal failures, but meaningful environmental democracy requires routine procedures that allow children to be heard before decisions are made. Albania could therefore draw from European experiences by combining judicial openness with preventive administrative reforms, including child-friendly consultation mechanisms, climate education, environmental data transparency, and systematic child-rights impact assessment.

### 3.6 Future Scenarios and Reform Priorities for Children's Environmental Justice in Albania

The development of children's environmental justice in Albania may follow several complementary paths over the next decade. The first path is judicial interpretation. Albanian courts may increasingly rely on the Constitution, ratified treaties, and ECtHR case-law to recognise children's procedural rights in environmental disputes. Articles 42, 56, 59, 116, and 122 of the Constitution provide sufficient interpretative space for recognising that children have a legitimate interest in environmental information, participation, and remedies where environmental degradation affects their rights.

The second path is legislative and administrative reform. Environmental impact assessment, strategic environmental assessment, territorial planning, disaster-risk management, and climate adaptation procedures

should include explicit child-sensitive provisions. Such provisions could require authorities to identify potential impacts on children, consult children through age-appropriate methods, explain how children's views were considered, and provide child-friendly summaries of final decisions. These requirements would align Albanian practice with General Comment No. 26 and the Aarhus Convention.

The third path is municipal innovation. Local governments are closest to many environmental decisions affecting children, including waste management, air quality, parks, school surroundings, transport, flood preparedness, and urban development. Municipalities could establish child and youth environmental councils, conduct school-based consultations on local environmental plans, and publish simplified environmental information for children. Such mechanisms would strengthen democratic legitimacy and help children develop environmental citizenship.

The fourth path is access to justice. Children should be able to rely on parents, guardians, child-rights organisations, environmental non-governmental organisations, the People's Advocate, and other representative mechanisms to bring environmental claims. Procedures should reduce barriers related to age, cost, standing, and technical evidence. Courts and administrative bodies should also consider remedies that are meaningful for children, including preventive measures, access to information, review of environmental permits, school-related protective measures, and obligations to conduct child-rights impact assessments.

The fifth path is education and data. Environmental education should be integrated more systematically into curricula, not only as scientific knowledge but also as rights education. Children should learn about climate change, biodiversity, pollution, disaster preparedness, and

participation rights. At the same time, Albania needs better data on child exposure to environmental harm, including air pollution near schools, heat risks, flood exposure, water quality, and unequal vulnerability among children with disabilities, children in poverty, Roma and Egyptian children, and children in rural or informal settlements.

Finally, Albania's European Union accession process offers an opportunity to strengthen environmental governance. Alignment with the EU environmental acquis, especially in areas such as environmental impact assessment, strategic environmental assessment, access to environmental information, public participation, air quality, waste management, water, and climate policy, can reinforce the procedural standards required by international human rights law. To be effective, however, alignment should not remain a technical exercise. It should be connected to children's rights and to the practical capacity of institutions to protect children from environmental harm.

## 4. Conclusion

The recognition of children as autonomous rights-holders is one of the most important developments in contemporary environmental justice. International law now increasingly requires States not only to protect children from environmental harm but also to guarantee their access to environmental information, participation in environmental decision-making, and access to effective remedies. General Comment No. 26, the Aarhus Convention, the recognition of the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, and ECtHR climate jurisprudence collectively reinforce this child-centred understanding of environmental justice.

The Albanian legal framework contains significant potential. The Constitution recognises environmental information, access to justice,

social objectives related to a healthy environment and future generations, and the domestic relevance of ratified international treaties. Albanian constitutional scholarship has also identified environmental protection as an important basis for future rights-based interpretation in the domestic legal order (Toska, 2026). Albanian legislation on environmental protection, environmental impact assessment, public consultation, and children's rights creates additional entry points for participation, prevention, and protection. However, these norms remain insufficiently connected in practice.

The main implementation gaps concern child participation, child-friendly access to environmental information, access to justice, institutional coordination, and the absence of systematic child-rights impact assessment in environmental governance. These gaps prevent children from being recognised as active participants in decisions that affect their health, education, development, and future quality of life.

Closing these gaps requires a transition from a predominantly protection-based model to a genuinely child-centred governance model. Such a model should integrate children's rights into environmental assessment procedures, public consultations, municipal planning, climate adaptation, education, and litigation. It should also enable Albanian courts and administrative authorities to interpret domestic law consistently with international standards. Recognising children as environmental rights-holders would strengthen Albania's compliance with international obligations and contribute to sustainable development, environmental democracy, and intergenerational equity.

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# The Silent Acceptance of Workplace Bullying: A Qualitative Study of Employee Perceptions and Leadership Influence

**Prof. Assoc. Dr. Emanuela Ismaili & Prof. Dr Edmond Dragoti**

Faculty of Social Science, University of Tirana, Albania
E-mail: emanuela.ismaili@unitir.edu.al
E-mail: edmond.dragoti@unitir.edu.al

## Abstract

Workplace bullying is an increasingly recognized organizational issue that negatively affects employees' well-being, job satisfaction, and interpersonal relationships in professional settings. This study explores the nature and causes of workplace bullying, employees' perceptions of this phenomenon, and the role of leadership in preventing bullying behaviours. A qualitative methodology was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with 30 employees from different organizations in Tirana, Albania. The findings revealed that workplace bullying is present across various organizational settings and is frequently normalized or silently tolerated by employees. Key contributing factors included hierarchical power differences, poor communication, envy, unfair competition, and negative organizational climates. The study further found that authoritarian leadership styles and weak organizational support systems increase the likelihood of bullying behaviours in the workplace. The findings highlight the importance of effective leadership, clear organizational policies, and supportive workplace cultures in preventing workplace bullying and

promoting employee well-being. The study contributes to the limited research on workplace bullying in the Albanian context and offers practical implications for organizations seeking to create safer and healthier working environments.

Keywords: *workplace bullying; employee perceptions; leadership; organizational climate; qualitative research*

## Introduction

Workplace bullying has emerged as one of the most significant psychosocial hazards affecting employees and organizations worldwide. Over the past three decades, increasing attention has been devoted to understanding the nature, causes, and consequences of workplace bullying because of its profound implications for employee well-being, organizational performance, and sustainable human resource management. Unlike isolated interpersonal conflicts, workplace bullying refers to repeated, persistent, and systematic exposure to negative acts directed toward an individual who finds it difficult to defend themselves due to an imbalance of power (Einarsen et al., 2020). These behaviors may include verbal abuse, intimidation, humiliation, excessive criticism, social exclusion, the withholding of information, unreasonable work demands, or deliberate actions intended to undermine an employee's professional reputation or work performance (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

Research consistently demonstrates that workplace bullying represents a serious occupational health issue. Employees exposed to bullying frequently experience psychological distress, anxiety, depression, burnout, emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbances, and reduced self-esteem (Nielsen et al., 2020). Longitudinal studies have further shown that prolonged exposure increases the risk of stress-related illnesses, sickness absence, and even symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). The negative consequences extend beyond individual employees and significantly affect organizational functioning. Organizations characterized by high levels of workplace bullying often report lower productivity, decreased job satisfaction, increased absenteeism, higher employee turnover, diminished organizational commitment, and substantial economic costs associated with recruitment, healthcare expenditures, and lost productivity (Hoel et al., 2020; Salin & Notelaers, 2020).

Contemporary research increasingly conceptualizes workplace bullying as an organizational rather than merely interpersonal phenomenon. Early studies frequently emphasized individual characteristics of victims or perpetrators; however, more recent theoretical perspectives argue that bullying develops within organizational environments that facilitate or tolerate inappropriate behavior (Einarsen et al., 2020). Organizational factors such as excessive workload, role ambiguity, poor communication, organizational restructuring, job insecurity, competitive climates, and ineffective conflict management have all been identified as important antecedents of workplace bullying (Salin & Hoel, 2020). According to the work environment hypothesis, bullying is more likely to emerge in

organizations where structural problems remain unresolved and where employees experience chronic stress, unclear expectations, or inadequate managerial support (Baillien et al., 2017).

Among organizational determinants, leadership has consistently been identified as one of the strongest predictors of workplace bullying. Leaders play a critical role in shaping organizational culture, establishing behavioral norms, allocating resources, and responding to interpersonal conflicts. Leadership styles characterized by authoritarian decision-making, excessive control, public criticism, favoritism, and limited employee participation have repeatedly been associated with increased bullying behaviors (Nielsen, 2013). In contrast, transformational and ethical leadership styles foster organizational climates characterized by trust, fairness, open communication, employee participation, and psychological safety, thereby reducing the likelihood of bullying (Arnold, 2017; Salin & Notelaers, 2020). Employees often interpret leaders' responses—or lack thereof—to bullying incidents as indicators of organizational acceptance or intolerance of abusive behavior.

An additional factor contributing to the persistence of workplace bullying is employee silence. Many employees choose not to report bullying because they fear retaliation, loss of employment, damage to professional relationships, or skepticism regarding the effectiveness of organizational reporting mechanisms (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). The concept of psychological safety, introduced by Edmondson (1999), suggests that employees are more willing to report concerns and speak openly only when they believe they can do so without fear of negative consequences. In

organizational environments where psychological safety is low, bullying behaviors often remain hidden, become normalized, and continue unchecked.

Although workplace bullying has been extensively investigated across Northern and Western Europe, North America, and Australia, empirical evidence from post-transition societies remains relatively scarce. Countries undergoing political and economic transformation frequently exhibit organizational cultures characterized by centralized authority, rigid hierarchical structures, and evolving human resource management practices. These contextual characteristics may influence both the occurrence of workplace bullying and employees' willingness to recognize and report it (Salin & Hoel, 2020). Albania represents a particularly relevant context for examining these issues due to its ongoing institutional reforms and organizational modernization. Despite substantial changes in governance and labor relations over recent decades, many organizations continue to operate within hierarchical management systems where decision-making is highly centralized and formal mechanisms for addressing psychosocial risks remain insufficiently developed.

Existing research in Albania has primarily focused on bullying among school-aged children and adolescents, while workplace bullying has received comparatively little scholarly attention. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how Albanian employees perceive workplace bullying, which organizational factors contribute to its persistence, and how leadership influences employees' experiences of bullying within organizational settings. Addressing this knowledge gap is important

because employees' perceptions directly shape reporting behaviors, organizational responses, and the effectiveness of prevention initiatives.

The present study seeks to contribute to the growing literature by exploring employees' perceptions of workplace bullying within Albanian organizations through a qualitative research approach. Specifically, the study aims to examine how employees understand workplace bullying, identify organizational conditions that facilitate or inhibit bullying behaviors, investigate the role of leadership in shaping workplace climate, and explore employees' experiences regarding reporting practices and organizational responses. By providing context-specific evidence from Albania, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of workplace bullying in post-transition societies and offers practical recommendations for developing healthier, more respectful, and psychologically safe organizational environments.

This study is informed by the Work Environment Hypothesis (Einarsen et al., 2020), which conceptualizes workplace bullying as a consequence of organizational conditions rather than solely individual characteristics. Additionally, Psychological Safety Theory (Edmondson, 1999) provides a useful framework for understanding why employees remain silent in environments characterized by fear, low trust, and limited managerial support.

## Methodology

*Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative research design to obtain a comprehensive understanding of employees' experiences and perceptions regarding workplace bullying. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for investigating complex social phenomena that involve subjective experiences, interpersonal relationships, and organizational dynamics. Rather than measuring the prevalence of bullying, the study sought to explore how employees interpret bullying behaviors, how they understand organizational responses, and how leadership influences workplace interactions.

A phenomenological perspective informed the research design, emphasizing participants' lived experiences and personal interpretations of workplace relationships. This approach enabled participants to describe workplace bullying in their own words while allowing unexpected themes to emerge during data analysis.

*Participants*

Thirty employees participated in the study. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to maximize variation across organizational settings and professional backgrounds. Employees represented both public and private organizations operating in Tirana and included professionals from education, healthcare, public administration, finance, business, and service sectors.

Participants differed regarding age, gender, years of professional experience, educational background, and organizational position. This diversity enhanced the richness of the data by capturing a broad range of workplace experiences and organizational contexts. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no financial incentives were provided.

*Data Collection*

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews conducted over a three-month period. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in confidential settings chosen by participants.

The interview guide included open-ended questions addressing several domains:

- participants' understanding of workplace bullying;
- personal observations and experiences;
- organizational climate;
- leadership styles;
- communication patterns;
- reporting mechanisms;
- organizational responses;
- recommendations for prevention.

The semi-structured format allowed the interviewer to ask follow-up questions while maintaining consistency across interviews.

*Data Analysis*

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework. Analysis involved repeated reading of transcripts, initial coding, identification of recurring patterns, development of candidate themes, refinement of themes, and interpretation of findings.
To enhance credibility, coding decisions were discussed among members of the research team until consensus was reached. Reflexive memo writing was used throughout the analysis to document emerging interpretations and minimize researcher bias.

*Ethical Considerations*

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Participants received written information regarding the objectives of the study, confidentiality procedures, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. All identifying information was removed from transcripts, pseudonyms were assigned, and electronic files were securely stored. Particular attention was given to protecting participants who discussed sensitive workplace experiences involving supervisors or organizational leaders.

## Findings

*Theme 1: The Normalization of Workplace Bullying*

One of the strongest themes emerging from the interviews was the widespread normalization of workplace bullying. Participants frequently described hostile behaviors as "part of everyday work" rather than as unacceptable organizational practices.

Many employees indicated that verbal humiliation, public criticism, excessive monitoring, and disrespectful communication had become routine aspects of workplace interactions. Several participants reported that newly employed staff quickly learned to accept these behaviors as normal organizational expectations.

Some participants explained that employees often interpreted bullying as a necessary component of professional discipline rather than psychological violence. This perception reduced the likelihood of recognizing abusive behaviors and contributed to organizational tolerance.

The normalization of bullying was reinforced through organizational silence. Employees observed that inappropriate behaviors rarely resulted in disciplinary action, leading many to conclude that management accepted such practices.

*Theme 2: Organizational Conditions Facilitating Bullying*

Participants consistently emphasized that workplace bullying was closely linked to organizational structures rather than individual personalities alone.

Several organizational characteristics were repeatedly identified:

- rigid hierarchical structures;
- centralized decision-making;
- lack of transparency;
- unclear job descriptions;
- excessive workload;
- favoritism;
- poor communication;
- competitive organizational climates.

Participants explained that unequal power relationships enabled supervisors to exercise authority without accountability. Decisions were often perceived as arbitrary, contributing to feelings of injustice and frustration.

Poor communication further intensified organizational tensions. Employees described situations in which important information was deliberately withheld, responsibilities changed without consultation, or expectations remained unclear.
Such organizational uncertainty created opportunities for interpersonal conflict and facilitated bullying behaviors.

*Theme 3: Leadership as a Determinant of Organizational Climate*

Leadership emerged as perhaps the most influential factor shaping workplace experiences. Participants distinguished clearly between supportive and authoritarian leadership styles.

Authoritarian leaders were described as relying heavily on intimidation, public criticism, strict control, favoritism, and fear-based management. Employees working under such leaders reported lower morale, reduced motivation, and increased psychological stress.

Conversely, supportive leaders encouraged dialogue, listened to employees' concerns, provided constructive feedback, and addressed interpersonal conflicts fairly. Many participants emphasized that leaders establish behavioral norms within organizations. When leaders themselves engaged in disrespectful communication, employees perceived bullying as acceptable organizational behavior. Several participants stated that respectful leadership created psychologically safer workplaces in which employees felt valued and protected.

*Theme 4: Employee Silence and Underreporting*

A recurring finding concerned employees' reluctance to report workplace bullying.

Participants described multiple reasons for remaining silent:

- fear of retaliation;
- concern about losing employment;
- damaged professional reputation;

- distrust in reporting systems;
- belief that management would protect supervisors rather than employees.

Many participants reported previous experiences in which complaints had been ignored or minimized. Others explained that colleagues discouraged reporting because it was perceived as professionally risky. This silence contributed to a cycle in which bullying remained invisible despite being widely experienced. Participants frequently expressed feelings of helplessness, indicating that organizational responses rarely resulted in meaningful change.

**Discussion**

The present study explored employees' perceptions of workplace bullying and the role of leadership in shaping organizational responses within Albanian workplaces. The findings reinforce the growing body of literature suggesting that workplace bullying should not be understood solely as the result of problematic interpersonal relationships but rather as a complex organizational phenomenon influenced by leadership practices, organizational culture, and structural characteristics (Einarsen et al., 2020; Salin & Hoel, 2020).

One of the most prominent findings was the normalization of workplace bullying. Participants frequently described bullying behaviours—including public criticism, intimidation, excessive monitoring, and disrespectful communication—as routine aspects of organizational life rather than unacceptable workplace conduct. This finding supports previous research suggesting that bullying often becomes embedded within organizational cultures where aggressive management practices are tolerated or even perceived as legitimate forms of supervision (Salin, 2003). According to the Work Environment Hypothesis (Einarsen et al., 2020), bullying emerges when organizational conditions create opportunities for repeated negative acts. The participants' accounts indicate that, within some Albanian organizations, hierarchical organizational structures and the absence of effective accountability mechanisms may unintentionally reinforce such conditions.

The organizational factors identified by participants further support existing theoretical perspectives emphasizing the importance of the psychosocial work environment. Employees consistently associated bullying with centralized decision-making, poor communication, ambiguous job responsibilities, favoritism, and unequal power relationships. Similar findings have been reported in international studies demonstrating that organizational climates characterized by role ambiguity, excessive workload, low organizational justice, and ineffective communication increase the likelihood of workplace bullying (Baillien et al., 2017; Salin & Hoel, 2020). Rather than viewing bullying as isolated misconduct by individual employees, these findings suggest that organizational structures may either constrain or facilitate negative workplace behaviours. Consequently, organizational interventions should focus not only on individual behaviour but also on improving management systems, communication processes, and organizational transparency.

Leadership emerged as the most influential organizational factor in the present study. Participants consistently distinguished between authoritarian leadership styles, which were associated with increased bullying behaviours, and supportive leadership styles, which promoted respectful communication and collaborative working relationships. These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that leadership behaviour substantially influences organizational climate and employee well-being (Nielsen, 2013). Leaders establish behavioural norms through both formal policies and everyday interpersonal interactions. When leaders publicly criticize employees, tolerate disrespectful behaviour, or demonstrate favoritism, employees may perceive these actions as acceptable organizational practices. Conversely, leaders who demonstrate fairness, empathy, and open communication contribute to organizational cultures characterized by trust and mutual respect. The findings therefore support research emphasizing transformational and ethical leadership as protective factors against workplace bullying (Arnold, 2017).

Another important finding concerns employees' reluctance to report bullying behaviours. Most participants described a workplace climate characterized by fear of retaliation, limited confidence in organizational reporting mechanisms, and concerns regarding job security. These findings can be interpreted through the concept of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), which refers to employees' shared belief that they can express concerns without fear of punishment or humiliation. When psychological safety is absent, employees often remain silent despite experiencing inappropriate behaviour. This silence allows bullying to persist and become increasingly institutionalized. The findings are also consistent with the work of Detert and Edmondson (2011), who argue that employees frequently engage in self-censorship when they perceive organizational risks associated with speaking up.

The Albanian organizational context provides an important perspective for interpreting these findings. As a post-transition society, Albania continues to experience organizational changes associated with administrative reforms, evolving human resource management practices, and modernization of public and private institutions. Nevertheless, many organizations retain relatively centralized management structures in which authority is concentrated at higher organizational levels. Such hierarchical arrangements may unintentionally discourage employee participation and reduce opportunities for constructive upward communication. Although workplace bullying has been extensively studied in Northern and Western European countries, considerably less evidence exists from Southeast European and post-transition contexts. The present findings therefore contribute important qualitative evidence demonstrating that organizational hierarchy and leadership practices remain central mechanisms through which workplace bullying is either reinforced or prevented in Albania.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that preventing workplace bullying requires organizational interventions extending beyond formal anti-bullying policies. While written procedures remain essential, organizational culture is largely shaped by daily leadership practices. Leadership development programmes emphasizing ethical leadership, emotional intelligence, conflict management, and effective communication may therefore represent one of the most effective strategies for reducing workplace bullying. Similarly, organizations should strengthen confidential reporting systems, promote organizational justice, encourage employee participation in decision-making, and regularly assess psychosocial working conditions. Such measures may enhance psychological safety, increase employee trust, and reduce the organizational conditions that facilitate bullying behaviours.

Overall, the findings support ecological perspectives on workplace bullying by demonstrating that bullying is sustained through the interaction of organizational structures, leadership practices, and employee responses rather than through individual characteristics alone. Addressing workplace bullying therefore requires a systemic organizational approach that combines supportive leadership, transparent governance, effective communication, and organizational cultures grounded in respect, fairness, and psychological safety.

**Conclusion**

The present study provides qualitative evidence that workplace bullying represents a significant organizational challenge within Albanian workplaces. Employees described bullying as a normalized aspect of organizational life, reinforced by hierarchical structures, ineffective communication, and insufficient organizational accountability.

Leadership emerged as the most influential organizational factor affecting workplace climate. While authoritarian leadership styles contributed to the persistence of bullying, supportive leadership promoted respectful communication, employee participation, and psychological safety.

The study highlights the importance of addressing organizational culture rather than focusing exclusively on individual perpetrators. Sustainable prevention requires institutional commitment, ethical leadership, transparent communication, and accessible reporting mechanisms.
Although the qualitative design limits statistical generalization, the findings provide valuable insights into employees' lived experiences and establish a foundation for future quantitative and comparative research across different organizational sectors.

**Practical Implications**

The findings suggest several practical recommendations for organizations seeking to prevent workplace bullying:

- Develop comprehensive anti-bullying policies that clearly define unacceptable behaviors, reporting procedures, and organizational responsibilities.

- Provide regular leadership development programs emphasizing ethical leadership, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and respectful communication.
- Establish confidential, independent, and trustworthy reporting mechanisms that protect employees from retaliation.
- Promote organizational cultures that value transparency, inclusion, fairness, and psychological safety through continuous communication and employee participation.
- Conduct periodic organizational climate assessments using anonymous employee surveys, focus groups, and well-being indicators to identify emerging psychosocial risks before they become institutionalized.
- These measures may substantially improve employee well-being, strengthen organizational trust, reduce turnover, and enhance overall organizational effectiveness.

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# THE TRANSFORMATION OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN ARTISTIC EDUCATION THROUGH GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

**ENED KUKA**
**University of Arts, Tirana, Albania**
enkuka@live.com

**Abstract**

The increasing integration of generative artificial intelligence into artistic education is reshaping how artistic knowledge is produced, transmitted, and evaluated. While these technologies are rapidly adopted within creative and educational contexts, their epistemological and pedagogical implications remain insufficiently theorized. This paper addresses the problem of how generative artificial intelligence transforms established models of knowledge production in artistic education, raising critical questions about authorship, creative agency, and the role of the educator. The study is guided by the central research question: how does generative artificial intelligence reconfigure the production and transmission of knowledge within contemporary artistic education? Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative and critical research approach, combining conceptual analysis with the examination of selected educational and artistic practices in which generative AI is actively employed. The analysis demonstrates that generative artificial intelligence functions not merely as a technical tool but as a mediating system that restructures learning processes, pedagogical authority, and creative decision-making. The paper argues that artistic knowledge increasingly emerges through hybrid

human–algorithmic processes, requiring a reconsideration of educational frameworks and research paradigms. This contribution is situated within current debates on education and knowledge transformation, aligning directly with discussions on research and pedagogical change.

**Keywords:** generative artificial intelligence, artistic education, knowledge production, pedagogy, educational transformation.

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN ARTISTIC EDUCATION THROUGH GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

### 1. Introduction

The integration of generative artificial intelligence into creative practice has placed artistic education at a turning point. Tools such as Midjourney, DALL-E, and Stable Diffusion have moved within a few years from peripheral curiosities to instruments routinely employed by students across visual arts, design, and performance-related disciplines. This rapid adoption has outpaced the development of pedagogical frameworks capable of addressing what these technologies do to the very fabric of artistic learning. Generative AI introduces a qualitatively different challenge from earlier digital tools: it does not merely support artistic production, it participates in it.

Earlier software, from Photoshop to 3D modelling, extended the artist's hand without replacing the act of conception. Generative AI, by contrast, intervenes at the level of ideation itself. It proposes compositions, suggests stylistic directions, and produces fully formed visual outputs in response to linguistic prompts. As Manovich (2018) has noted, AI systems do not simply automate execution; they reshape the cultural categories through which images are imagined and evaluated.

The problem this paper addresses is the widening gap between technological practice and pedagogical theory in artistic education. Students engage with generative systems daily, often before educators have developed coherent frameworks to interpret what this engagement means for authorship, creative agency, and the formation of artistic judgment. Existing curricula remain structured around traditional conceptions of individual creativity that generative AI quietly destabilises.

This paper is guided by a single central question: ***how does generative artificial intelligence reconfigure the production and transmission of knowledge within contemporary artistic education?***

Drawing on teaching experience in scenography and costume design at the University of Arts in Tirana, the analysis combines conceptual reflection with observations from direct pedagogical practice. The paper identifies three interrelated transformations, in authorship, in teaching, and in learning, and advances a pedagogical proposal grounded in the principle that generative AI must remain situated within, rather than at the origin of, the creative process.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The discussion that follows is situated within three interconnected fields of debate: the nature of creativity in algorithmic systems, the question of authorship in human–machine collaboration, and the philosophical foundations of contemporary art pedagogy.

### 2.1 Creativity, Authorship, and the Algorithmic Turn

The question of whether generative AI is genuinely creative is, in important respects, a misleading one. A more productive question concerns what kind of creativity it produces. Boden (2010) offers a helpful distinction here, separating combinatorial creativity, the recombination of existing elements, from transformational creativity, which restructures the rules of a domain itself. Contemporary generative systems, as Manovich (2018) has argued, operate almost entirely within the combinatorial register. They recombine patterns extracted from vast training datasets; they do not restructure the conventions of image-making.

This is more than a technical observation. It carries direct consequences for how artistic learning is understood. If students mistake combinatorial sophistication for genuine artistic invention, the very criteria through which artistic education has traditionally been organised, originality, conceptual depth, formal investigation, lose their orienting function. McCormack et al. (2019) reach a similar conclusion from a different angle: what is often called "machine creativity" is in fact a collaborative arrangement in which human intention remains decisive, even when it becomes harder to see. The question of authorship follows from this. When the image arrives already finished, it becomes difficult to locate where, exactly, the student's authorship begins and ends. Zylinska (2020) captures this difficulty by describing AI-generated imagery as belonging to a liminal category, neither wholly human nor wholly machinic. For artistic

education, the difficulty is not abstract; it appears in every student submission whose origin is unclear.

### 2.2 Art Pedagogy Beyond Skill Transmission

The educational stakes of this situation become clearer when set against the philosophy of contemporary art pedagogy. Atkinson (2011) argues that artistic learning cannot be reduced to the incremental transmission of established skills.

Genuine learning, in his account, involves a rupture, an event in which existing frameworks of perception are disturbed and reconfigured. Biesta (2017) similarly insists that art teaches by interrupting habitual ways of relating to the world, rather than by delivering pre-formed competences. This orientation provides a productive lens for thinking about generative AI in the classroom. If artistic education is fundamentally about cultivating the capacity to encounter the world differently, then the relevant question is not whether AI tools should be admitted but whether their use enables or forecloses such encounters. The risk is concrete: when generative AI is introduced prematurely in the creative process, it replaces the productive disorientation of artistic inquiry with the immediate satisfaction of a finished-looking image.

## 3. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative and reflective research approach, combining conceptual analysis with observations from sustained pedagogical practice. The aim is not to produce a quantitative measurement of AI's impact on student performance, but to develop an interpretive understanding of how generative systems reconfigure the conditions of artistic learning in a specific context.

The empirical grounding consists of teaching experience in scenography and costume design at the University of Arts in Tirana, with systematic observation of generative AI use beginning around 2023. Class cohorts typically consist of 8 to 10 students, working at both bachelor and master levels. Over this period, the integration of tools such as Midjourney, DALL-E, and Stable Diffusion into student practice has shifted from occasional experimentation to routine engagement. This is a form of practitioner inquiry, in which the educator is positioned not as an external observer but as a participant whose teaching practice itself constitutes the site of investigation.

Several methodological caveats must be acknowledged. The study does not draw on formal interviews, surveys, or coded data; the observations are reflective rather than systematically empirical. The focus on scenography and costume design means that the findings cannot be directly generalised to all artistic disciplines, since these fields possess specific characteristics, an emphasis on visual conceptualisation, historical reference, and dramaturgical interpretation, that shape how generative AI is encountered. The analysis is also necessarily situated within a particular institutional and cultural context.

These limitations are also methodological strengths, since practitioner-based reflection allows for the identification of small, daily patterns that more formalised methods can overlook.

## 4. Findings: Three Transformations

Three interrelated transformations have emerged from this pedagogical observation. They concern, in turn, the conditions of authorship, the role of the educator, and the structure of learning itself.

### 4.1 The Transformation of Authorship

In traditional models of artistic education, authorship has been understood as the gradual consolidation of a personal creative voice through sustained engagement with material, technique, and conceptual development. The student's work has been read as the visible trace of an internal process. Generative AI disrupts this reading: when a student submits an image produced through algorithmic generation, the visible artefact no longer corresponds in any direct way to the cognitive and physical labour traditionally associated with its production.

A telling instance can be drawn from recent teaching practice. In a master's-level scenography assignment for a production of the musical Blues Brothers, a student returned within a single week with a fully finished design proposal, without having undertaken any of the preliminary analytical work the project required. The accelerated timeline itself was a first sign that the conceptual stages had been bypassed. A second sign was visible in the images themselves, which were rendered in a perfectly square format, 1:1, rather than the 3:4 ratio that a conventional scenographic drawing or rendering would produce. The square format is a default output of several text-to-image systems. What the student presented as personal work carried the formal signature of the algorithm.

The pedagogical significance of this episode lies less in the question of dishonesty than in what the student believed they had authored. Prompting

an AI system, evaluating its outputs, and selecting among them are not negligible operations; they constitute a genuine, if partial, form of creative agency. But they are not the operations traditionally cultivated in scenography and costume design: the analysis of a dramaturgical text, the development of conceptual frameworks, the iterative search for form, the negotiation of colour relations, the translation from sketch to maquette.
What is concealed when the algorithmic output is presented as the student's own is not merely the use of a tool but the absence of the formative process that artistic education is designed to cultivate.

### 4.2 The Transformation of Teaching

In a pedagogical environment in which students arrive with access to image-generation systems more powerful than any single educator's technical repertoire, the teacher can no longer credibly occupy the position of principal source of visual knowledge. This shift should not be misread as a diminishment of pedagogical authority but as its relocation to a different register: the educator becomes a critical mediator.
This role involves attending to the specific failures of generative systems, recognising when an output is anatomically implausible, historically anachronistic, dramaturgically incoherent, or technically unrealisable on a real stage. In scenography, AI-generated images frequently display proportions that cannot be constructed at scale; in costume design, they often produce historical pastiche, mixing visual elements from incompatible periods. The educator's task is to make these limitations visible to students who, accustomed to evaluating images on screens, may not yet have developed the trained eye required to detect them. The shift is

from the evaluation of products to the evaluation of processes, and from the transmission of techniques to the cultivation of judgment.

### 4.3 The Transformation of Learning

Traditionally, learning in scenography and costume design has followed a sequence rooted in the discipline's logic: the dramaturgical work is read and analysed; preliminary sketches are produced; a sustained search for concept, form, and colour relations is undertaken; the result is rendered on canvas or in maquette form. Each stage prepares the next, and the cognitive and perceptual capacities of the student are built incrementally through this sequence.

Generative AI, when introduced without methodological caution, collapses this sequence. A fully rendered visual proposal can be obtained within seconds of formulating a prompt, before any analytical or conceptual work has taken place. The temptation to begin with the image, rather than to arrive at it, is structurally embedded in the technology. The result is what may be described as the burning of stages: the elimination of the intermediate processes through which artistic understanding is formed. The concern here is not nostalgia but epistemology. The intermediate stages are not merely procedural steps; they are the operations through which the student learns to think scenographically. When they are bypassed, what is lost is the development of the cognitive structures that allow students to understand scenography as a coherent practice at all.

## 5. Discussion: The Sequence Problem and a Pedagogical Proposal

The three transformations converge on a single underlying issue, which can be termed the sequence problem. The question is not whether generative AI should be present in artistic education, but where in the creative process it can legitimately enter. The pedagogical viability of generative AI depends almost entirely on its placement within the sequence of artistic work.

### 5.1 The Inverted Sequence

When generative AI is positioned at the beginning, when the student opens a prompting interface before the dramaturgical text has been analysed, before preliminary sketches have been attempted, before the conceptual problem has been formulated, the artefact produced by the algorithm precedes the formation of the student's own intention. The image arrives without having been thought toward. What follows is not creation but selection from a set of pre-formed options. The student becomes a curator of algorithmic outputs rather than the originator of a conceptual proposal. Atkinson's (2011) insistence that artistic learning involves a rupture in habitual modes of perception is directly relevant here: the inverted sequence forecloses precisely this rupture, replacing it with the smooth retrieval of pre-existing visual conventions.

### 5.2 The Restored Sequence

The alternative is not the prohibition of generative AI but its repositioning. Artistic education in scenography and costume design should be organised around a restored sequence in which the student, the dramaturgical work, the conceptual investigation, and the imaginative search precede any

algorithmic intervention. Generative AI enters at a later stage, after the conceptual ground has been established, as one tool among others in the iterative refinement of a vision the student has already begun to form.

This proposal can be summarised in two contrasting orderings. In the problematic ordering, the sequence begins with the algorithmic product, continues with the student's selection, and ends with the image presented as personal work. In the restored ordering, the sequence begins with the student, proceeds through dramaturgical analysis, the formation of concept and imaginative direction, and only then admits generative AI as an instrument of refinement, with the final outcome understood as a process in which human conceptualisation remains primary.

This is not a return to pre-digital pedagogy. It is a structured negotiation with a technology that, left unregulated, tends toward the inverted sequence by default.

### 5.3 Pedagogical Implications and Stance

This repositioning carries practical implications. The use of AI tools should not be taught as a separate competence but integrated as a stage within a sequenced creative methodology. Evaluation criteria should attend not only to the finished image but to the documented trajectory of its formation: the analytical notes, the preliminary sketches, the conceptual statements, the colour and material studies. The visible process becomes the principal site of pedagogical assessment, with the algorithmic contribution rendered transparent rather than concealed.

In practice, the role of the educator is not to impose this sequence but to make its rationale visible through argument. When the limitations of

generative AI are demonstrated concretely, through the identification of historical inaccuracies, dramaturgical incoherences, and technical impossibilities in algorithmic outputs, students are placed in a position to decide for themselves. Some accept the restored sequence immediately and develop accordingly; others persist with the inverted ordering and arrive at the same conclusion later, through the limitations of their own results. Both trajectories are forms of learning. The pedagogical task is to provide the argument; the formative outcome lies in the student's encounter with it.

The position thus arrived at is neither technophobic nor technophilic. Generative AI is acknowledged as a significant presence in contemporary artistic practice; what is contested is its claim to occupy the originating position in the creative process. The proposal is to admit the tool while preserving the sequence.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has examined how generative artificial intelligence is reshaping the production of knowledge in artistic education, with particular attention to scenography and costume design. Generative AI cannot be adequately understood as a neutral instrument added to an unchanged pedagogical environment. It is a mediating system that reconfigures the conditions under which artistic knowledge is produced, transmitted, and assessed.

Three transformations have been identified: of authorship, in which the boundary between personal creative work and algorithmic output becomes increasingly difficult to locate; of teaching, in which the educator's role shifts from the transmission of visual technique to the cultivation of critical

judgment; and of learning, in which the structured sequence through which artistic understanding has historically been formed risks being collapsed by technologies that deliver finished-looking results before any conceptual work has taken place.

The discussion has advanced a pedagogical proposal grounded in the sequence problem. When the algorithmic intervention precedes conceptual formation, the intermediate stages through which scenographic and costume-related thinking is acquired are eroded. When generative AI is admitted only after dramaturgical analysis, preliminary sketches, and conceptual search have taken place, it functions as a productive instrument within a coherent learning trajectory. The pedagogical task is not to prohibit the tool but to preserve the sequence, and to do so through argument rather than prohibition, leaving the student in the position of an active subject of learning rather than a passive recipient of method.

What is ultimately at stake is not the future of any particular technology but the conditions under which artistic education continues to be possible as a formative practice. The pressing question is whether artistic education will succeed in shaping the terms of AI's presence in the classroom, rather than being shaped by them.

**Knowledge is no longer created alone, it is co-produced between human and AI.**

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# Assessment and behavioural change in male perpetrators: Evidence from counselling programmes in northern Albania

**Author: Dr. Fatjon Taipi (Office for men and boys)**

fatjontaipi@gmail.com

This study aims to assess behavioural change among male perpetrators participating in structured counselling programmes implemented by ZDB (Office for Men and Boys) in Northern Albania during 2025. The research is guided by an ecological and perpetrator-focused intervention framework aligned with Work with Perpetrators European Network (WWP EN) standards.

The study is based on data from 78 male perpetrators engaged in counselling programmes across several municipalities. Standardised instruments from the WWP EN Impact Monitoring Toolkit were used, with data collected at multiple time points (T0–T3) from both perpetrators and their partners or ex-partners. A descriptive longitudinal approach was applied to analyse changes in behavioural indicators over time.

Findings indicate that approximately 70–75% of participants demonstrated improvements in emotional regulation, accountability, and non-violent communication. Partner-reported data suggest reduced or ceased violent behaviour and increased perceived safety. Emotional violence was the most prevalent form at baseline, while participation declined in later stages, indicating retention challenges.

The study highlights the effectiveness of structured counselling programmes in promoting behavioural change, while emphasising the need to strengthen referral systems, inter-institutional coordination,

and implementation of legal provisions to ensure sustainability and long-term impact.

**Keywords:** ***gender-based violence, perpetrators, psychological assessment, behavioural change, counselling***

## 1. Introduction

Gender-based violence remains one of the most serious violations of human rights and one of the most persistent barriers to gender equality. It affects victim-survivors, children, families, institutions, and communities, and it requires responses that go beyond crisis management.

International standards and European practice increasingly emphasise that effective responses must combine protection and support for women and children with structured work with men who use violence. This does not shift responsibility away from perpetrators. Rather, it places accountability at the centre of violence prevention and links individual behaviour change with institutional responsibility and wider social transformation (Ajdukovic & Pauncz, 2015; WWP EN, 2017).

Domestic violence is not limited to isolated incidents of physical aggression. It includes patterns of coercive control, emotional abuse, isolation, intimidation, economic abuse, sexual violence, threats, and behaviours that restrict the autonomy and safety of women and children (Ajdukovic

& Pauncz, 2015). This broader understanding is especially important for perpetrator programmes because men may minimise abusive behaviour, frame violence as a conflict, or recognise only physical acts as problematic. Consequently, effective intervention requires a structured process that helps participants identify the full range of abusive behaviours, recognise their consequences, and develop alternatives based on respect, equality, emotional regulation, and non-violent communication.

Perpetrator programmes have developed across Europe as one pillar of coordinated community responses to domestic and gender-based violence. Their primary purpose is to stop violence and increase the safety of women and children. European standards emphasise that programmes should be linked to victim support services, child protection mechanisms, courts, police, probation services, social services, and wider community structures (Ajdukovic & Pauncz, 2015). This inter-institutional orientation is crucial because work with perpetrators cannot be effective as a stand-alone service. The safety of partners and ex-partners must remain central, and the programme must not rely only on the participant's own account of change.

The evidence base for domestic violence perpetrator programmes has been debated for many years. Systematic reviews have pointed to differences in programme models, evaluation designs, outcome measures, and data sources, making it difficult to draw simple conclusions about what works and under what conditions (Akoensi et al., 2013; Hester et al., 2014). At the same time, European practice has moved towards more standardised monitoring frameworks that assess behavioural change over time and include the voices of

partners or ex-partners. The IMPACT project and the WWP EN Impact Monitoring Toolkit were developed in response to this methodological challenge, aiming to harmonise outcome assessment and strengthen the evidence base for perpetrator interventions (Jones, 2015; WWP EN, 2017).

A central premise of this approach is that behaviour change cannot be measured only through programme attendance or through perpetrators' self-reports. Numbers alone do not show whether violence has stopped or whether victim-survivors feel safer (WWP EN, 2017). Men may attend sessions, understand the language of accountability in the programme setting, and still fail to apply change in daily relationships. For this reason, the WWP EN approach places strong emphasis on partner or ex-partner data, the impact of violence, police call-outs, fear, wellbeing, and children's circumstances. If the goal is the safety of women and children, evaluation must ask

not only what men say has changed, but also what partners and ex-partners report about safety and behaviour.

Albania has made important progress in the legal and institutional response to domestic and gender-based violence, including the development of protection mechanisms, referral systems, and specialised services. However, empirical evidence on perpetrator counselling programmes remains limited, particularly evidence that uses longitudinal assessment and partner-reported outcomes. Much of the available knowledge is practice-based and project-based, while academic publications from Albania and the wider Western Balkan region remain scarce. This creates a gap between the practical work being implemented by specialised organisations and the research evidence needed to inform policy, institutional practice, and sustainable service development.

The Counselling Centre for Men and Boys, known as ZDB, has developed structured counselling programmes for men referred by courts, probation services, police structures, child protection units, municipal social services, partner organisations, and voluntary pathways. The programme is implemented in Northern Albania and is aligned with European principles for work with perpetrators, including accountability, behavioural change, partner safety, risk awareness, emotional regulation, and coordinated institutional response. Its intervention model includes individual counselling and monitoring processes that are sensitive to the local context while remaining connected to European standards.

The present study assesses behavioural change among 78 male perpetrators participating in ZDB counselling programmes during 2025.

The study uses standardised instruments from the WWP EN Impact Monitoring Toolkit and applies a descriptive longitudinal approach across multiple assessment points. It focuses on changes in violent behaviour, emotional regulation, accountability, partner-reported safety, police call-outs, anxiety, depression, and programme retention. The study also examines referral pathways and participant motivation, as these factors are important for understanding how men enter and remain engaged in perpetrator programmes.

The significance of this study is threefold. First, it contributes to the limited empirical evidence on perpetrator programmes in Albania and the Western Balkans. Second, it demonstrates how a European monitoring framework can be applied in a local counselling context. Third, it offers practice-relevant findings for courts, probation services, municipalities, police structures, psychosocial professionals, and civil society organisations working to strengthen coordinated

responses to gender-based violence. By combining client and partner or ex-partner data, the study provides a more robust account of behavioural change than would be possible through administrative reporting alone.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research design and approach

This study used a descriptive longitudinal design to assess behavioural and psychosocial changes among men participating in structured counselling programmes for domestic and gender-based violence during 2025. The design was practice-based rather than experimental. It did not include a control group and does not claim causal inference. Instead, it examined patterns of change over time among programme participants and compared these changes with partner or ex-partner reports where data were available.

The study was guided by an ecological and perpetrator-focused intervention framework. The ecological model is appropriate for perpetrator work because it recognises the interaction between individual factors, relationship patterns, social norms, institutional responses, and cultural expectations around masculinity and gender roles (Ajdukovic & Pauncz, 2015; Heise, 1998). In this framework, counselling is not understood only as individual psychological support. It is part of a wider coordinated response that aims to interrupt violence, promote accountability, and increase safety for women and children.

The longitudinal structure followed the WWP EN Impact Monitoring Toolkit model. This model collects information at four points: T0 at intake or first contact, T1 at programme start, T2 at the middle of the

programme, and T3 at programme completion or termination (Jones, 2015; WWP EN, 2017). This structure makes it possible to observe whether behavioural indicators change during programme participation and whether partner or ex-partner safety indicators improve over time.

Impact Monitoring Toolkit assessment structure

Figure 1. Impact Monitoring Toolkit assessment structure

### 2.2 Participants and data sources

The study was based on monitoring data from 78 men enrolled in ZDB counselling programmes across several municipalities in Northern Albania during 2025. Participants were adults referred through a combination of mandatory and voluntary pathways. Mandatory referral mechanisms included civil courts, probation services, police structures, child protection mechanisms, and municipal social services. Voluntary routes included self-referral, partner or family encouragement, and referral from health, counselling, or community-based services. Available sociodemographic data show that a substantial proportion of participants were between 31 and 50 years old. Many were employed full time, although a considerable share reported low or mid-low income levels. Most participants were in ongoing or recently disrupted intimate relationships, and many had children. These characteristics are important because perpetrator programmes often work with men whose violence is embedded in complex family, legal, economic, and parenting dynamics.

Data were also collected from partners or ex-partners wherever possible. Their participation was essential for assessing safety and wellbeing outcomes, because perpetrator self-report may underestimate the frequency, severity, and impact of violence. Previous research has documented discrepancies between men's and women's reports of intimate partner violence, including underreporting by men participating in perpetrator programmes

(Dobash et al., 1992; Heckert & Gondolf, 2000; Jones, 2015). Therefore, the inclusion of partner or ex-partner data strengthens the validity of the assessment.

Table 1. Participant profile and selected baseline characteristics

| Indicator | Value |
|---|---|
| Total programme participants | 78 |
| Age 31-40 | 20 (40.82%) |
| Age 41-50 | 14 (28.57%) |
| Full-time employed | 28 (58.33%) |
| Unemployed | 12 (25.00%) |
| Low or mid-low income | 31 (63.27%) |
| Participants with children | 37 (75.50%) |

**Note. Percentages are based on available responses for the relevant item and may vary due to missing data.**

Table 2. Completed questionnaires by assessment point

| Assessment point | Participant questionnaires | Partner / ex-partner questionnaires |
|---|---|---|
| T0 - intake / before programme | 38 | 38 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| T1 - beginning of programme | 49 | 41 |
| T2 - middle of programme | 16 | 13 |
| T3 - end of programme | 3 | 3 |

### 2.3 Instruments and data collection methods

Data were collected using standardised questionnaires from the WWP EN Impact Monitoring Toolkit. The Toolkit was developed to harmonise evaluation methods across European perpetrator programmes and to support programmes in monitoring their impact on clients, partners or ex-partners, and children (Jones, 2015; WWP EN, 2017). It includes separate but corresponding questionnaires for clients and partners or ex-partners at each assessment point.

The client questionnaires include demographic information and sections on referral route, motivation, relationship behaviours, impacts of violence, reasons for violence, police call-outs, children, relationship status, hopes for the relationship, and reflections on change. The partner or ex-partner questionnaires assess hopes for the programme, the participant's emotional, physical, and sexual abusive behaviours, the impact of those behaviours, police call-outs, children, wellbeing, fear, relationship status, and open-ended reflections (Jones, 2015).

The behavioural indicators are grouped into emotional, physical, and sexual abusive behaviours. The emotional behaviour section includes controlling, humiliating, isolating, threatening, and jealousy-related behaviours. The physical behaviour section includes acts or threats of

physical harm. The sexual behaviour section captures sexually abusive or coercive behaviours. For ethical

and safety reasons, this paper reports these categories at an aggregate level without reproducing detailed item-level descriptions. Questionnaires were administered as part of routine programme monitoring. Depending on the context and safety considerations, questionnaires could be completed in self-administered or interview format. Partner or ex-partner participation required particular attention to safety, confidentiality, and timing, especially when contact with the programme could create risk. The Toolkit guidance emphasises that partner or ex-partner data should be collected only in a safe and confidential way (Jones, 2015).

### 2.4 Analytical procedures

The analysis combined descriptive and longitudinal procedures. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe referral pathways, participant characteristics, motivation, and police call-outs. Medians were used for behavioural and wellbeing indicators because the monitoring data consist largely of ordinal responses and because the number of complete responses varies across time points. Changes in emotional, physical, and sexual abusive behaviours were examined across T0, T1, and T2, with particular caution around T3 because of the very small number of completed questionnaires at the end of the programme. Client and partner or ex-partner reports were compared to identify discrepancies and convergence over time. Where available from the monitoring report, statistical significance is reported for key changes, including emotional violence, physical violence, partner fear, anxiety, depression, and police call-outs.

Given the field-based nature of the study and the decline in later-stage responses, the findings are interpreted as practice-based evidence rather than definitive proof of programme effectiveness.
The analysis focuses on patterns of change, consistency across data sources, and implications for programme development, institutional coordination, and future research.

### 2.5 Ethical considerations

The study used anonymised monitoring data collected during programme implementation. All findings are presented in aggregated form, and no identifying information about participants, partners, ex-partners, or children is included. Unique codes were used for data tracking across time points, consistent with the Impact Toolkit guidance on confidentiality and linked client-partner data (Jones, 2015).

Because the topic concerns domestic and gender-based violence, ethical considerations were central to data collection and interpretation. Partner and ex-partner safety was prioritised. Participation in monitoring was voluntary, and contact with partners or ex-partners was handled in a way intended to avoid increasing risk. The analysis also avoids language that blames victim-survivors and uses inclusive, non-discriminatory terminology. The term 'male perpetrators' is retained in the title and abstract to remain consistent with the accepted conference abstract and legal-service terminology, while the body of the paper also uses the phrase 'men who use violence' to emphasise behaviour and accountability.

## 1. Findings and Discussion

### 1.1 Referral pathways and participant motivation

The first finding concerns the way participants entered the programme. Most participants were referred through mandatory institutional pathways. Mandatory referrals represented 79.59% of recorded referral routes, while voluntary referrals represented 20.41%. This pattern demonstrates that courts, probation services, police structures, child protection mechanisms, and social services remain crucial entry points for perpetrator intervention in Northern Albania.

This finding is consistent with the wider European understanding that perpetrator programmes function most effectively when embedded within coordinated institutional responses. Ajdukovic and Pauncz (2015) argue that mandatory access requires strong links with police, courts, and social services, as well as clear referral protocols and realistic expectations among referring institutions. In the Albanian context, the dominance of

mandatory referrals suggests that ZDB is increasingly recognised as part of the local response to domestic violence, but it also underlines the need for more systematic and consistent referral practices across institutions.

Table 3. Referral pathways to the programme

| Referral pathway | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Mandatory institutional referral | 39 | 79.59% |
| Voluntary referral | 10 | 20.41% |

***Note.*** **Mandatory pathways include courts, probation, police, child protection, and other institutional referral mechanisms.**

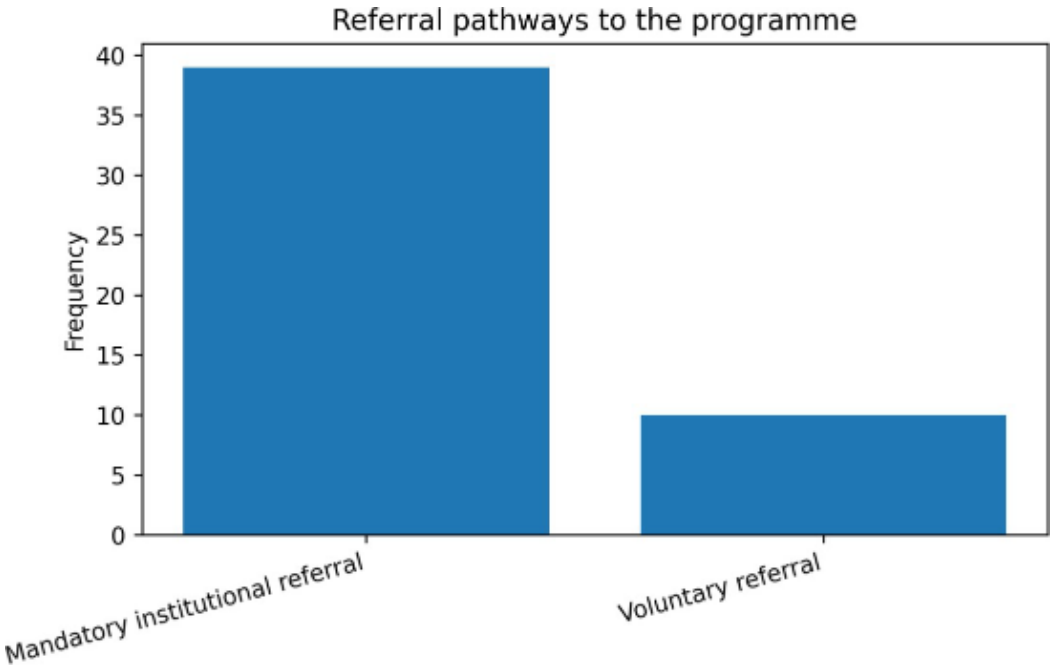



Figure 2. Referral pathways to the programme

Participant motivation changed during the intervention. In the initial phase, external reasons were more frequent than internal reasons. These included criminal court requirements, family court decisions, child protection involvement, and legal obligations. By the middle of the programme, internal reasons became more visible, including the wish to stop abusive behaviour, stop using violence, improve the relationship, be a better parent, and help the partner or ex-partner feel safer.

This transition is clinically and theoretically important. Men may initially attend perpetrator programmes because of external pressure, fear of legal consequences, or relationship crisis. However, sustainable change requires a movement towards internal responsibility, recognition of harm, and motivation to behave differently (Ajdukovic & Pauncz, 2015). The increase in internal motivation at T2 may indicate that counselling helped

some participants move from compliance to reflection. At the same time, the continued presence of external motivation shows that legal and institutional pressure remains relevant and should not be dismissed.

Table 4. Participant motivation at initial and middle assessment phases

| Motivation type | Before programme (T0/T1) | Middle of programme (T2) |
|---|---|---|
| Internal reasons | 15 (30.00%) | 8 (47.06%) |
| External reasons | 28 (56.00%) | 6 (35.29%) |
| Both internal and external | 7 (14.00%) | 3 (17.65%) |

*Note.* Initial motivation is based on early programme data, while T2 reflects reasons for remaining in the programme.

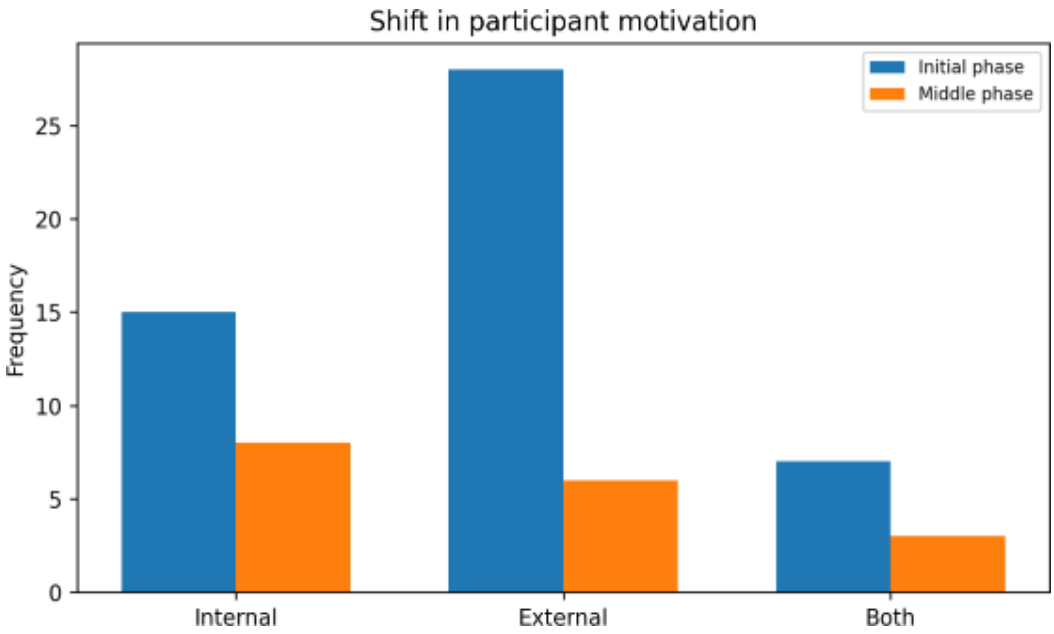


Figure 3. Shift in participant motivation

### 1.2 Changes in violent behaviour

The most important outcome area concerns changes in violent behaviour across the programme. At baseline, emotional violence was the most prevalent form of abuse reported by both clients and partners or ex-partners. This finding is consistent with the conceptualisation of domestic violence as a pattern of coercive control that includes emotional, psychological, and controlling behaviours, not only physical acts (Ajdukovic & Pauncz, 2015; Heise, 1998).

Partner or ex-partner reports were consistently higher than client reports at baseline. This discrepancy is expected in perpetrator programme evaluation and reflects a well-documented challenge. Men who use violence may minimise, deny, or fail to recognise behaviours that partners experience as abusive or frightening (Dobash et al., 1992; Heckert & Gondolf, 2000;

Jones, 2015). For this reason, partner or ex-partner reports are not supplementary data. They are central to evaluating whether change is meaningful in the real context of the relationship.

Median frequency scores show that emotional violence declined from T0 to T2 in both client and partner or ex-partner reports. According to the monitoring analysis, reductions in emotional behaviour were statistically significant for both groups. This is one of the strongest findings of the study. It suggests that structured counselling may contribute to reductions in controlling, humiliating, threatening, and emotionally abusive behaviours, especially when intervention focuses on accountability, emotional regulation, and recognition of harm.

Table 5. Median frequency of violent behaviour across assessment phases

| **Behaviour type and source** | **T0** | **T1** | **T2** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Emotional - clients | 1.54 | 1.62 | 1.15 |
| Emotional - partners | 2.23 | 2.19 | 1.35 |
| Physical - clients | 1.07 | 1.14 | 1.0 |
| Physical - partners | 1.5 | 1.57 | 1.0 |
| Sexual - clients | 1.0 | 1.0 | 1.0 |
| Sexual - partners | 1.75 | 1.88 | 1.12 |

*Note.* Higher values indicate more frequent behaviours. T3 is not included because of the very small number of completed questionnaires.

Figure 4. Evolution of emotional violence

Physical violence also decreased over time. Partner-reported physical violence declined from a median frequency of 1.50 at T0 to 1.00 at T2. The monitoring analysis indicated that this decrease was statistically significant for partners or ex-partners, while the change in client reports was less pronounced because client baseline levels were already low. This again suggests that self-reports alone may understate the extent of violence, particularly at intake.

The number of reported violent behaviours also decreased. For emotional behaviours, partner or ex-partner reports declined from a median of 11 behaviours at T0 and T1 to 4 at T2, while client reports declined from 6 at T0 to 2 at T2. Physical behaviour counts showed a reduction to 0 at T2 for both clients and partners or ex-partners. Sexual behaviour was rarely acknowledged by clients across all assessment phases, but partner or ex-partner reports decreased from a

median of 5 at T0 to 0.5 at T2. Due to the sensitivity of this category and the known likelihood of underreporting, these findings should be interpreted cautiously.

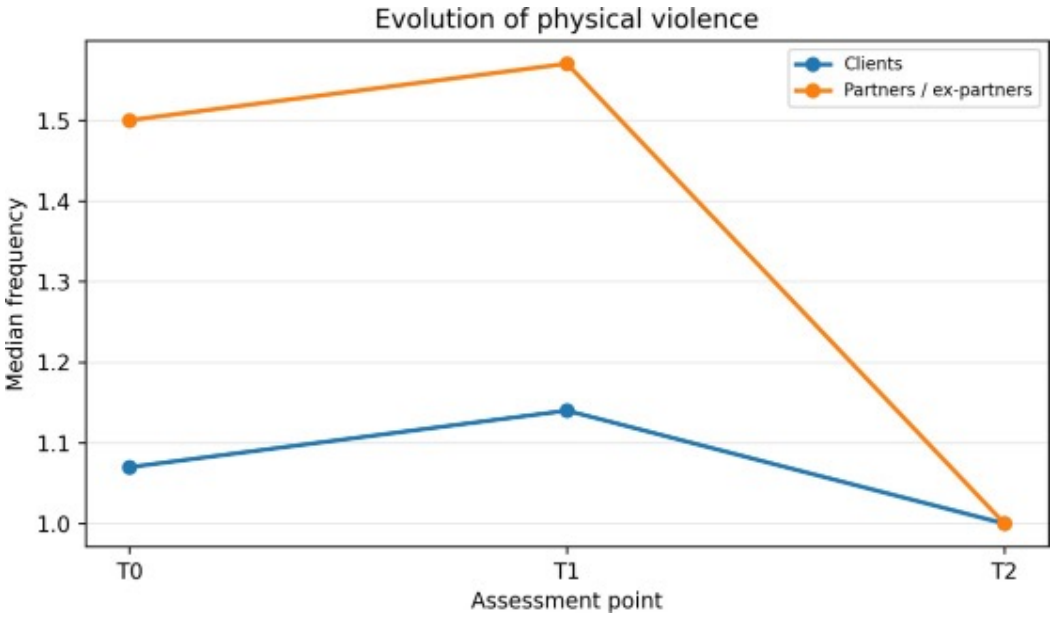
A key interpretive point is the convergence between client and partner or ex-partner reports. At baseline, partner reports indicated higher frequency and a greater number of abusive behaviours. By T2, the distance between the two perspectives had decreased, especially for physical behaviour. This convergence may reflect a combination of reduced violence, improved accountability, and greater recognition of abusive conduct by participants. From a counselling

perspective, this is significant because one of the central goals of perpetrator work is to move men away from denial and minimisation towards responsibility and behavioural change.

Table 6. Median number of violent behaviours reported across assessment phases

| **Behaviour type and source** | **T0** | **T1** | **T2** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Emotional - clients | 6 | 7.0 | 2.0 |
| Emotional - partners | 11 | 11.0 | 4.0 |
| Physical - clients | 1 | 2.0 | 0.0 |
| Physical - partners | 5 | 6.0 | 0.0 |
| Sexual - clients | 0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Sexual - partners | 5 | 5.5 | 0.5 |

**Note. The table presents the median number of different behaviours reported within each category.**


Evolution of physical violence
Clients
Partners / ex-partners
Median frequency
1.5
1.4
1.3
1.2
1.1
1.0
T0
T1
T2
Assessment point

### 1.3 Partner-reported safety and wellbeing

The programme's primary goal is not only change in the participant's self-understanding, but increased safety for partners, ex-partners, and children. Partner or ex-partner wellbeing indicators therefore provide a crucial measure of programme relevance. Across the assessment period, fear, anxiety, and depression decreased. Partner fear declined from a median of 3 at T0 and T1 to 1 at T2. Anxiety declined from 4 at T0 to 2 at T2. Depression declined from 2 at T0 to 1 at T2.

These findings are highly relevant because they connect behavioural change to victim-survivor safety and wellbeing. WWP EN guidance emphasises that perpetrator programmes should be evaluated in terms of outcomes for those harmed, not only in terms of attendance or client-reported insight (WWP EN, 2017). The reduction in partner fear and anxiety suggests that change was experienced outside the counselling room and may have contributed to improved perceived safety.

Police call-outs also decreased over time. At T0, five participants reported 2-5 police call-outs, while by T2 no participants reported 2-5 call-outs. Although police call-out data are an imperfect measure, they provide an important safety-related indicator. Reduced police involvement may indicate fewer acute violent incidents requiring external intervention. However, it may also reflect changes in reporting patterns, fear of reporting, or relationship separation. For this reason, police call-outs should be interpreted alongside partner wellbeing and behavioural data rather than as a stand-alone indicator.

Table 7. Partner / ex-partner safety and wellbeing indicators

| Indicator | T0 | T1 | T2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Partner fear of the participant | 3 | 3.0 | 1 |
| Partner anxiety | 4 | 3.5 | 2 |
| Partner depression | 2 | 1.0 | 1 |

**Note. Scores are medians. Lower scores indicate lower reported fear, anxiety, or depression**.

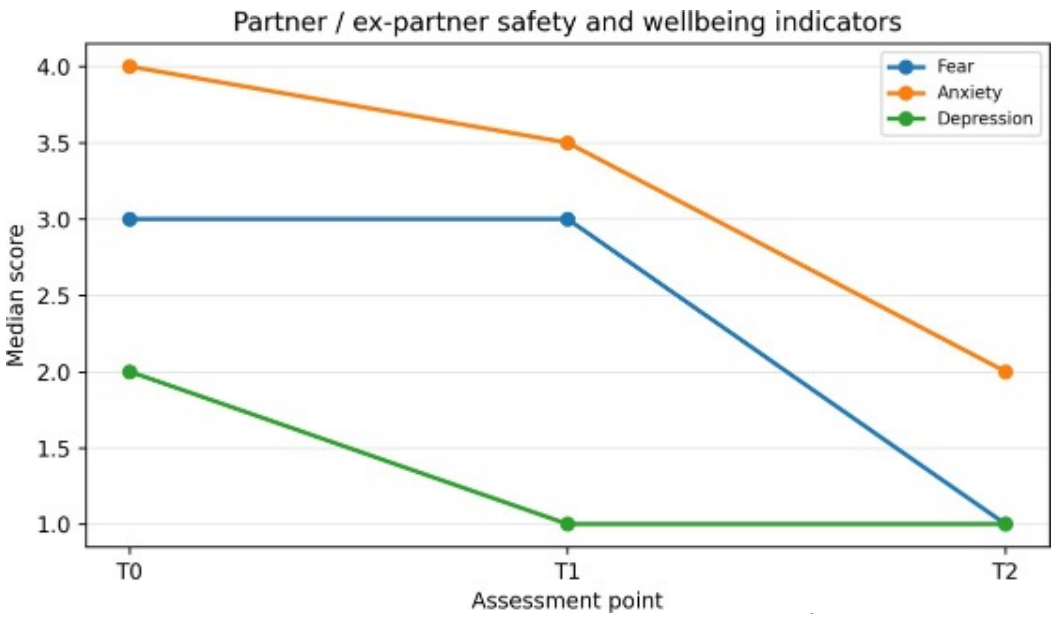



Figure 6. Partner / ex-partner safety and wellbeing indicators

**Table 8. Police call-outs reported by clients across assessment phases**

| Police call-outs reported by clients | T0 | T1 | T2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Not at all | 26 | 32 | 14 |
| Once | 8 | 13 | 3 |
| 2-5 times | 5 | 5 | 0 |

**Note. The table shows the number of clients reporting each category of police call-outs.**

The partner-reported results strengthen the credibility of the overall findings. If only client data were available, the study would risk overestimating change or missing continuing fear and harm. The inclusion of partners or ex-partners is therefore not only a methodological strength but also an ethical requirement in perpetrator programme evaluation. It keeps the focus on safety rather than on the participant's subjective sense of improvement.

### **1.4** Accountability, awareness, and emotional regulation

The findings also suggest improvements in accountability and awareness. During the initial phases, many participants minimised the impact of their behaviour or reported limited

consequences for their partners. By the middle phase, participants acknowledged a greater range of impacts, including sadness, loss of trust, emotional distress, fear, anxiety, and relational instability. This shift is clinically meaningful because accountability is not limited to admitting that an incident occurred. It also involves recognising the effects of behaviour on the partner, children, and the wider family system.

The reasons participants gave for violence included jealousy, possessiveness, insecurity, alcohol or drug use, wanting to stop the partner from doing something, and wanting to make the partner do something. These reasons reflect a mixture of emotional dysregulation, entitlement, control, and gendered relationship expectations. They are consistent with ecological and gender-based understandings of domestic violence, in which individual emotional factors interact with relationship patterns and wider social norms around masculinity, power, and control (Ajdukovic & Pauncz, 2015; Heise, 1998).

Approximately 70-75% of participants demonstrated improvements in emotional regulation, accountability, and non-violent communication according to programme assessment and counselling observations. This result should be interpreted as practice-based evidence rather than as a controlled outcome. Nevertheless, it is consistent with the direction of the quantitative indicators, including reductions in emotional violence, increased recognition of impact, and improved partner-reported safety. The convergence between clinical observation and monitoring data strengthens the conclusion that meaningful change occurred for a substantial group of participants.

### 1.5 Retention challenges and implementation issues

Despite positive trends, retention remains a significant challenge. The number of completed questionnaires declined across assessment points, especially at T3. This limits the strength of conclusions about programme completion and long-term sustainability of change. Such attrition is not unique to this study. WWP EN materials note that perpetrator programmes often face difficulties engaging and retaining men, particularly when attendance is not supported by consistent sanctions or follow-up mechanisms (WWP EN, 2017). The decline in later-stage data may be related to employment pressures, migration or seasonal work, legal motivation decreasing over time, relationship disruption, shame, denial, or practical barriers to attendance. In the Albanian context, these challenges may be intensified by

geographical distance between municipalities and services, limited institutional follow-up, and the still-developing nature of referral mechanisms. Retention should therefore be understood not only as an individual motivation issue but also as a systemic implementation issue. Implementation literature emphasises that perpetrator programmes require clear protocols, community collaboration, staff competencies, data systems, supervision, and coordinated reporting procedures (Ajdukovic & Pauncz, 2015). The findings from ZDB point in the same direction. Strengthening court referrals, probation follow-up, municipal cooperation, and partner safety mechanisms would likely improve both attendance and data quality. It would also support a more consistent institutional message that violence is unacceptable and that change requires accountability over time. Another implementation issue concerns the distinction between programme attendance and actual behaviour change. Completion alone cannot be treated as evidence of safety. Some participants may attend because of legal pressure without internalising responsibility, while others may show meaningful change even before completion. For this reason, the combination of behavioural data, partner or ex-partner reports, police call-outs, and wellbeing indicators is essential. It allows a more nuanced understanding of change than attendance statistics alone.

### 1.6 Implications for research, practice, and social policy

The findings have several implications. For practice, they support the continued development of structured counselling programmes for men who use violence, with strong emphasis on accountability, emotional regulation, non-violent communication, parenting

responsibility, and recognition of harm. The data suggest that emotional violence should remain a central focus of intervention because it was the most prevalent form at baseline and because reductions in emotional violence were among the clearest outcomes.

For institutional coordination, the findings show that mandatory referral pathways are essential but not sufficient. Courts, probation services, police, municipalities, and child protection structures should not only refer participants but also maintain coordinated follow-up. Referral without monitoring may reduce programme impact. A coordinated community response can strengthen attendance, increase accountability, and improve safety for partners and children.

For policy, the study supports the integration of perpetrator programmes into local and national responses to gender-based violence. Perpetrator work should not replace victim support services

or compete for resources with them. Instead, it should function as an additional pillar of the response, funded and regulated in ways that prioritise victim-survivor safety and institutional accountability (Ajdukovic & Pauncz, 2015).

For research, the study demonstrates the value of applying the WWP EN Impact Monitoring Toolkit in Albania. Future research should use larger samples, improve completion rates at T3 and follow-up, and explore qualitative accounts from participants, partners, counsellors, and referral institutions. A mixed-methods design would help explain why some participants change, why others drop out, and which institutional conditions best support sustainable behavioural change.

## 2. Conclusion

This study assessed behavioural change among 78 men participating in structured counselling programmes implemented by ZDB in Northern Albania during 2025. Using the WWP EN Impact Monitoring Toolkit, the study examined changes across multiple assessment points and included data from both participants and partners or ex-partners. The findings indicate reductions in emotional and physical violence, improvements in partner-reported fear and wellbeing, reduced police call-outs, and increased participant awareness of the impact of violence.

The strongest evidence of change concerns emotional violence and partner-reported safety. Emotional violence was the most prevalent form of abuse at baseline and declined substantially by the middle phase of the programme. Partner or ex-partner reports showed reductions in fear, anxiety, and depression, suggesting that change was experienced beyond the counselling setting. The gradual convergence between participant and

partner reports also suggests increased accountability and awareness among some men.

The study contributes to knowledge and practice in several ways. It provides rare empirical evidence from Albania on perpetrator counselling programmes. It shows that a European monitoring framework can be applied in a local Balkan context. It also demonstrates the value of partner or ex-partner data in evaluating behavioural change and safety outcomes. This is especially important because perpetrator self-report alone may underestimate violence and overstate change.

The study has limitations. It is descriptive and practice-based, without a control group. The number of completed questionnaires declined across assessment phases, especially at programme

end. This limits the generalisability of findings and prevents strong conclusions about long-term sustainability. Some outcomes are based on available monitoring data and should be interpreted cautiously. Nevertheless, the consistency between behavioural indicators, partner-reported outcomes, and counselling observations suggests that the programme contributed to meaningful change for many participants. Future work should strengthen longitudinal data collection, improve retention at later assessment points, include follow-up after programme completion, and deepen qualitative understanding of change processes. At policy level, Albania should continue strengthening referral mechanisms, court and probation cooperation, municipal involvement, and partner safety systems. Perpetrator programmes should be recognised as an essential component of a coordinated response to gender-based violence, always in connection with victim support services and child protection mechanisms. The findings support the conclusion that structured counselling programmes can contribute to behavioural change, but their sustainability depends on institutional coordination, adequate resources, and long-term monitoring.

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# The Nation as an Oasis of State–Citizen Relations: A Philosophical Perspective

Ferit BAÇA
Department of Philosophy,
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Tirana, Albania
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4442-7108
Email: ferit.baca@unitir.edu.al

## Abstract

The nation constitutes the vital element through which trust, legitimacy, and mutual responsibility are built. Its existence is closely tied to its capacity for self-governance and its formation as a sovereign entity, while political independence and international recognition serve as essential elements for its consolidation within the international order. Certain key elements, including diplomatic recognition by other states and the exchange of diplomatic representatives, represent legitimate expressions of state sovereignty. The Republic of Kosovo offers a contemporary example of this process, in which recognition by a considerable number of states increasingly contributes to the affirmation of its international subjectivity. The citizen is bound to the state not only through law, but also through belonging, identity, and moral responsibility. In the absence of this bond, relations between them risk becoming mechanical and fragile. This study seeks to examine the role of the nation not only as a cultural identity, but also as a philosophical foundation of the political relationship between the individual and the state. The work aims to clarify the theoretical

understanding of the relationships among the nation, the state, and the freedom of the citizen in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Nation, state, individual, society, morality, sovereignty.

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## 1. Introduction

The word *nation* has been in use since the thirteenth century and derives from the Latin word *nasci*, meaning "to be born," "to emerge," or "to originate." The term *nasci* encompasses several meanings, including tribe, nationality, race, class, and caste, among others. In its early usages, the notion of nation denoted a community of people formed on the basis of territory, language, customs, economic life, and self-consciousness. In the English language, the concepts of nation and state are often used interchangeably. In Albanian, however, as in many other languages, a distinction is drawn between the concepts of nation and nationality, with the latter conveying a narrower meaning. It primarily refers to the ethno-cultural characteristics of people who do not live within the national territory.

The notion of nation constitutes a fundamental concept in political and social philosophy which, although closely related to the concept of the state, remains less direct in its definition. Unlike the state, which is grounded in an institutionalized, legal, and territorial existence, the nation is not a tangible entity, but rather a human community built upon a sense of common belonging. It is shaped by elements such as history, culture, language, origin, and shared experience, together with, in most cases, a connection to a particular territory. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen affirmed sovereignty as a fundamental attribute of the nation, establishing it as the legitimate foundation upon which the modern

state is built. In this sense, the nation is understood as a cohesive factor that secures loyalty and social solidarity, elements indispensable for the functioning of the state.

Political reality shows that the relationship between nation and state is complex: there are states that encompass several nations, as well as nations that do not possess a state of their own. In the present era, these concepts have acquired particular importance, especially in light of liberation wars and anti-colonial processes. Debates concerning whether the nation or the state emerges first remain open both in international forums and in academic discourse. Some approaches hold that nations precede states, whereas others stress the active role of the state in creating and homogenizing the nation through processes of political, legal, and cultural centralization, as illustrated by examples such as France, the United States, and Spain.

Within this framework, the study seeks to illuminate the dynamics of the relationship between nation and state, focusing on the ways in which these structures influence the shaping of political order, the safeguarding of sovereignty, and the realization of citizens' freedom. In line with the approach of this paper, the nation is conceived as the mediating element that gives life and cohesion to the relationship between the state and the citizen. An examination of this relationship remains essential for understanding the contemporary challenges faced by democratic states, particularly in societies characterized by cultural pluralism and by demands for self-determination.

## 2. Research Methodology

The core of this study rests on an interdisciplinary theoretical approach that combines the explanatory method with the analytical-philosophical

method in examining the relationships among the nation, the state, and the freedom of the citizen within the framework of democratic governance. The study is theoretical in nature and draws on a systematic analysis of philosophical, political, and legal literature, as well as relevant academic and legal sources. This methodological approach allows for the description, analysis, and critical interpretation of the fundamental concepts related to the formation and functioning of the nation and the state, together with the role of individual freedom within the political and social order.

## 1. Discussion of the Study

The study confirms that the nation constitutes a fundamental element in shaping and sustaining the relationship between the state and the citizen. The theoretical discussion suggests that this relationship extends beyond legal and institutional arrangements and is also influenced by identity, historical continuity, cultural values, and moral foundations that generate a sense of belonging and reciprocal responsibility. The analysis indicates that the nation functions as a cohesive force that contributes to the legitimacy of state authority and strengthens citizens' trust in public institutions. Where a consolidated national identity exists, interactions between the state and citizens tend to become more stable, participatory, and institutionally effective.

The study further demonstrates that the historical development of the relationship between the nation and the state has not followed a uniform pattern. Two principal trajectories emerge from the theoretical examination. In one model, the nation precedes the formation of the state and serves as the basis for political organization. In the other, the state itself

plays an active role in constructing and consolidating national identity through institutional development and political integration.

The discussion also highlights that, although closely interconnected, the concepts of state and nation remain analytically distinct. The state is primarily associated with legal order, political authority, and territorial governance, whereas the nation is linked to collective identity, historical memory, and shared belonging. An additional point emerging from the analysis is that the effective functioning of a democratic state depends not only on the existence of formal institutions but also on the extent to which citizens recognize and accept their legitimacy. In this regard, the nation provides the social and symbolic foundation through which sovereignty acquires practical meaning and supports the exercise of political freedom. Therefore the study emphasizes that sustainable relations between the state and the citizen depend on maintaining a balanced interaction among national identity, institutional legitimacy, democratic participation, and the protection of citizens' rights and freedoms.

## 2. Historical–Philosophical Concepts of the Nation

The concept of the nation emerged in a particular historical period, around the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, replacing the term "community." Throughout history and across different periods, it has acquired various meanings and definitions. For most peoples, the concept of the nation has been understood as a community of individuals sharing a common language and inhabiting a specific geographical territory. Above all, the nation is built upon natural historical and cultural foundations, inheriting from the past the myths, memories, and symbols that belong to it. The scholar Jacques Maritain emphasizes: "The nation is a community of people grounded in birth and origin and encompassing moral and cultural aspects: the development of life and civilization, the inheritance of family traditions, social and legal organization, as well as a common reservoir of historical memories, experiences, sufferings, aspirations, and shared attitudes." (Maritain, 2008, p. 28). The nation is not only a territory; it is also the place where the life of its population is born and develops. Mellor states that: "A nation may be described simply as comprising people sharing the same historical experience, a high level of cultural and linguistic unity, and living in a territory they perceive as their homeland by right". (Mellor, 2016, p. 4)

The nation is one of the most significant communities created by civilized life. As philosopher John Stuart Mill states: "The members of a nationality desire to live under the same government, and this should preferably be government by themselves or by a portion of themselves." (Mill, 1910, p. 360). In all definitions, the notion of the nation includes a territory and a population that shares language, traditions, and a common history. Jacques Maritain further emphasizes: "A community is a natural

creation and is linked to the biological aspects of human life, whereas a society is a creation of reason and is connected to the intellectual and spiritual characteristics of human beings." (Maritain, 2008, p. 25). Community is the product of instinct and inheritance, whereas society is the product of reason and emerges from human freedom.

The distinction between community and society forms part of the emergence of a broader understanding. In a community, it arises from cultivated and inherited patterns of behavior, whereas in society it arises from law and the rules of reason, which shape individual freedom and consciousness. Consequently, society produces communities such as the nation and ethnic, linguistic, or regional groups, but a community does not necessarily develop into a society. The nation may also be viewed as a political construct aimed at securing social cohesion and the functioning of the state. The notion of the nation is broader in scope. There are multilingual nations such as Switzerland, or nations with diverse religious compositions such as Germany and Albania. There are also nations without a unified territory, or nations living across several different states, such as the Kurds and the Albanians.

Anthony D. Smith, in *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (2009), identifies three principal approaches to nationalism: the essentialist, the modernist, and the ethno-symbolist.

1. The essentialist approach holds that nations are stable entities deeply rooted in history and culture. It has been extensively developed by philosophers such as Johann Gottfried Herder, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Immanuel Kant, who emphasized the importance of language, culture, and national spirit in the structuring of the nation.

2. The modernist approach regards the nation as a product of modernity. It holds that nations emerge as a result of industrialization and the development of the modern state. In this sense, the nation is a historical and political product, rather than a permanent reality.
3. The ethno-symbolist approach draws on and builds upon the two previous concepts. It acknowledges the modern character of nations while emphasizing their historical and cultural roots. The Albanian nation, for example, may be interpreted within this framework through elements such as Illyrian heritage, the Albanian language, the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini, and the figure of Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg. These approaches offer different interpretations regarding the origin, nature, and development of the nation, emphasizing various elements such as heritage, historical processes, and the role of symbolic culture.

A nation must necessarily possess some form of organization for its population. The absence of such organization gives rise to conditions of anarchy and, as a consequence, its territory may undergo fragmentation over time or be absorbed by other nations. Governments-in-exile, or so-called "shadow governments", struggle to expel occupiers or puppet regimes from their territories. A historical example is the government of General Charles de Gaulle, who refused to recognize the German occupation of France and proclaimed the existence of Free France in resistance to the German occupiers.

## 4. Elements of Nations

The first step in defining nationality usually begins with identifying its basic characteristics, such as territory, population, and governance. These

elements form the foundational structure through which a nation develops its identity, social cohesion, and political organization. Although different theoretical perspectives offer varying interpretations of nationhood, these core components are generally recognized as essential for understanding the formation and continuity of national communities. (Roskin et al, 2008, p. 37-42).

### 4..1. Territory

Every nation occupies a specific geographical territory. It provides the physical and symbolic environment where social, cultural, economic, and political interactions occur. Territory not only establishes spatial boundaries but also contributes to collective identity by creating a shared sense of belonging and historical continuity among members of the nation. Control over territory is often associated with political sovereignty and the institutional capacity to exercise authority. The only exception found in religious tradition, such as the Bible, is the idea of a nation without territory, as illustrated by the nearly two-thousand-year history of the Jewish people, who survived primarily in the collective consciousness of Jews until their aspiration was realized in 1948 with the establishment of the State of Israel. The fate of the territories of different nations and states has largely been determined by wars over the control of land. The Alsace–Lorraine region, for example, has for centuries been a source of conflict between France and Germany. From a cultural and linguistic perspective, the inhabitants of Alsace might be regarded as of German origin; however, the fact that they speak fluent French leads them to identify as belonging to the French nation.

### 4..2. Population

According to the classical definition, every nation within a given territory must have a clearly defined population. A key feature of a homogeneous nation is the presence of a shared language. When states contain populations with different languages and cultures, they are referred to as multinational states. Throughout history, there have been cases in which distinct groups within a population, differing in language, traditions, and customs from the majority, have not been assimilated and have separated either by force or by peaceful agreement. Through a peaceful process, the Slovak population rejected coexistence with the Czechs and, in 1993, formed the independent State of Slovakia. The artificial constructs of Versailles also led to the dissolution of the Federation of Yugoslavia, although this process was accompanied by war and significant loss of life. The Albanian population of Kosovo was the last to secure independence from Serbian rule through armed struggle and NATO intervention.

### 4..3. Independence

The existence of a nation also presupposes its independence; that is, it must be self-governing and sovereign. Countries that gain independence become nations only once they are formally recognized as such by the international community. This is the process experienced by the Republic of Kosovo, which is at present recognized by more than 100 countries worldwide.

Support for independence and sovereignty is expressed through diplomatic recognition by other states, particularly the major powers, followed by the exchange of ambassadors and the establishment of embassies. When the most important nations recognize a new state, this simultaneously confirms its legitimacy. If no other state recognizes its independence, the very existence of that state is called into question.

### 4..4. Governance

Every nation must possess some form of organization over its population. The absence of such organization leads to anarchy. In such cases, there is a strong likelihood that its territory will undergo fragmentation or be occupied or absorbed by other nations. However, **g**overnance refers to the institutional and organizational structures through which collective decisions are made and public authority is exercised. Effective governance enables the maintenance of social order, protection of rights and freedoms, implementation of laws, and promotion of the common good. Through governance mechanisms, the nation transforms from a cultural and social community into a politically organized entity capable of expressing collective interests and maintaining institutional legitimacy.

## 5. Nation: the Coexistence of State and Citizen

The formation of human communities and associations has been shaped by historical and social circumstances. These conditions have also determined the frameworks through which collective life is regulated, and without which coexistence in modern society cannot be understood. In this ongoing process of transformation, alongside community and society, the nation emerges as a broader and more stable human association, founded on shared elements such as language, culture, traditions, and national identity. Unlike the community, which may be limited in space and in direct interpersonal relations, the nation represents a higher level of spiritual and cultural organization within society.

During this developmental process, the state also emerged as a political and legal organization aimed at regulating the life of society and the nation itself within a given territory. The state is conceived as an instrument of

social development, both a product and a necessary condition of the nation. The dialectic of state and societal development, together with their relationship with the nation, has been the subject of analysis by various philosophers. In some interpretations, the state is presented as the outcome of social advancement, while the nation is regarded as a fundamental element that lends meaning and identity to this social and political organization.

John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham emphasize that: "the forms of government of a state should not be evaluated solely on the principle of utility, but on their capacity to allow individuals to freely develop their happiness." (Mill & Bentham, 2006. p. 15). Mill and Bentham suggests that the legitimacy and quality of political institutions should also be assessed according to their ability to create conditions in which individuals can exercise freedom, pursue personal development, and realize their own conception of well-being. According to them, the state is not viewed merely as an instrument for maintaining order or maximizing material outcomes for the majority. Instead, government acquires value when it protects individual liberty and supports the conditions necessary for human flourishing. The principle of utility therefore becomes connected to a broader conception of social progress in which personal autonomy and the opportunity for self-development are essential dimensions of public welfare.

Alongside these interpretations, there also exists the view that the nation is equivalent to the people and the state, a position often expressed through the notion of the nation-state symbiosis. The identification of nation–state–people, in the form of a sovereign people, directly links the nation to territory. This idea has its origins in the Declaration of the French

Revolution of 1795, which proclaimed: "Every people is sovereign and independent, regardless of the number of individuals that compose it and the extent of the territory it inhabits. This sovereignty is inalienable." (Hobsbaum. 2012. P. 19).

Population and territory are also prerequisites for the existence of the state, since, in their absence, there can be no state. The state is a social organization created by human beings for the common good, protection, and advancement of society. In the second half of the twentieth century, the French philosopher Adhémar Esmein stated: "The state is by its nature eternal, and its legal existence has no interruption. Embodying the nation, it is destined to exist as long as the nation itself exists." (Omari, 2007, p. 14) Esmein's view represents a classical legal perspective that not only stresses the continuous existence of the nation but also emphasizes its connection with the state. When the state embodies the will, identity, and interests of the nation, it acquires deeper legitimacy and meaning. In this sense, the state is regarded as the political expression of a broader cultural community.

However, in practice, this relationship is not always absolute, since states may change or cease to exist, while nations may continue to exist without a state. Of particular relevance to the present analysis are Aristotle's concepts regarding the state. In his work *Politics*, he identifies people as the primary element of the state, followed by territory. This community, in its historical development, takes the form of the nation, which constitutes a community with a shared cultural and social identity. Even in contemporary terminology, population and territory are recognized as the primary components of the state. According to Aristotle, "Every state is a form of association, and every association is established

for the sake of some good; for human beings always act in order to achieve what they consider to be good." (Aristotle, 2003, p. 9). By prioritizing people over territory, Aristotle suggests that the foundation of every political organization is the human community. Thus, his idea of the people as the basis of the state may be seen as a precursor to the concept of the nation, while the state appears as the political organization of this community.

Although Aristotle does not use the term "nation" in its modern sense, his idea of a human community with shared goals may be linked to the concept of the nation. What he observes in the polis, as a community of citizens, may in modern times be understood as an early form of organization that later evolves into the nation itself, while the state remains the political structure that organizes it. Aristotle further enriches his theoretical view of the state by emphasizing that: "The state, which stands above all others and includes them all, aims at the highest good more than any other association, as well as the greatest good." ((Aristotle, 2003, p. 9).

Aristotle closely links the existence of the state to the necessity of achieving a better life. He views the emergence of the state as connected to the need to preserve the lives of families, which are not sufficiently capable of ensuring this on their own over a long period. In Aristotle's conception, every state is a union of diverse individuals and, like any union, it contains different aims and purposes. All elements that constitute this union strive towards the common good. The functions of the state closely mirror those of the family, the basic unit of society. The state serves to realize the collective interests of society, and it carries out its functions through power.

Max Weber defined the state as: *"*a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." (Fukuyama. 2010. P. 30). For Weber, the state is an expression of society's need for an organized authority equipped with the necessary means of coercion and capable of governing society. Political power exercised through the state is not an end in itself, but rather a means to implement a particular policy. In contemporary historical, political, social, and cultural developments, there is a clear need for the continuous improvement of democratic society.

The essence of the democratic state lies in establishing a reciprocal relationship between citizens and the state itself. On the one hand, these relations are marked by a democratic spirit and climate that responds to society's need for democratic laws and norms, a need best fulfilled by a rule-of-law state that represents and serves the interests of the people. On the other hand, the relationship between citizens and the state is also defined by the state's right to enact laws and the citizens' obligation to respect them. A genuine democracy exists only when the laws governing it are created by its citizens. Ralf Dahrendorf emphasizes: *"*Citizenship is a set of rights and duties... Citizenship is a concrete social role." (Dahrendorf, 1997. p. 48). Citizens form the core of social relations and, consequently, are also the creators of various social organizations. Establishing a balanced relationship between rights and duties is one of the principal responsibilities of the state. In his work *Politics*, Aristotle states: *"*The aim of the state is the good life." (Aristotle, 2003, p. 77). It exists to fulfill the moral and intellectual purposes of human beings and to enable a good life. In the best state, the citizen is capable of and willing to both govern and be governed, guided by a virtuous life. The good person, in

turn, is one who is capable of making laws, laws that must not lose their purpose in the course of their adoption.

## 6. The Difference Between State and Nation

The state and the nation are two interconnected concepts that are nevertheless fundamentally different. Various formulations have, at different times, competed with and enriched theories about these two notions. Scholars and philosophers of the late eighteenth century, in the context of the development of modern political theories and the rise of nationalism, placed the nation at the center of political action. In this context, conflicts that arose for economic, religious, or hegemonic reasons were increasingly justified in the name of the nation itself. The concept of nationalism began to take on political connotations only towards the end of the eighteenth century. This was during the time when certain individuals and groups came to be classified as nationalists. The term *nationalism* was first used in the press by the French priest Augustin Barruel, who used it in the context of broader debates concerning political order, collective identity, and the transformation of European society. Eventhouth, early references to nationalism did not reflect the modern understanding of the concept, Barruel's usage contributed to the gradual emergence of nationalism as a recognizable political and intellectual category. During this early period, nationalism was not yet formulated as a systematic doctrine but rather appeared within discussions concerning social cohesion, sovereignty, and the changing relationship between political authority and communities.

By the mid-nineteenth century, nationalism had become widely recognised as a political doctrine and movement. This transformation was closely associated with major political and historical developments in

Europe, including the decline of dynastic and imperial structures, the spread of liberal political thought, and the growing influence of ideas related to popular sovereignty and collective self-determination. Nationalism increasingly promoted the idea that political legitimacy should derive not only from ruling elites or hereditary authority but also from a shared national community connected through common language, historical memory, culture, and collective identity.

The emergence of nationalism encouraged populations to perceive themselves as members of a broader political community whose interests and identity should be represented through state institutions. Thus, the concept of the nation became closely linked to ideas of citizenship, democratic participation, and state legitimacy. From a conceptual perspective, the state is a political and legal entity composed of institutions that exercise sovereign power over a specific territory and within clearly defined borders. Max Weber's classical definition presents the state as a structure that maintains the legitimate monopoly on the use of force within a given territory. The nation is defined as a community of people sharing common elements such as language, culture, history, traditions, and often ethnic origin, together with a strong sense of belonging.

Whereas the state is a geopolitical and legal structure, the nation is an ethno-cultural and identity-based entity. Conceptually, it can be said that the state is the totality of institutions that exercise power within a given space, whereas the nation is a human community connected by shared experience and identity. The principal pillar of a functional state remains the law. The law is the "filter" that prevents the state from becoming merely an apparatus of power. The legitimacy of the state is derived from the legal system and its equal application. Therefore, everyone is equal

before the law. Within the framework of the law, the functioning of the state fosters civic awareness of its importance and strengthens trust in public institutions.

A further fundamental difference lies in the manner in which they are formed. A state may be created in a relatively short period through political and legal processes, whereas a nation is formed gradually over long historical periods. Moreover, the state has clearly defined territorial borders, whereas the nation is not necessarily limited by administrative boundaries, since its members may live outside the state territory, as in the case of diasporas or national minorities (a typical example is the spread of the Albanian nation).

In addition, the existence of a state does not necessarily require cultural or ethnic homogeneity, whereas national identity is closely linked to these elements. In practice, many states comprise more than one nation, while some nations do not have a state of their own. Examples such as Vatican City, San Marino, and Monaco demonstrate that a state can exist even without a broad national base. In conclusion, although the state and the nation are often intertwined in the concept of the nation-state, they remain distinct analytical categories: the state is associated with power, law, and territory, whereas the nation is associated with identity, history, and social belonging.

## 7. Conclusions

The analysis of the relationship between the nation and the state shows that these two notions, although closely interconnected, constitute different subjects of political and social organization. The nation appears as an identity-based community founded on shared historical, cultural, and spiritual belonging, whereas the state represents the legal and institutional

structure through which sovereignty is realized and political power is exercised. In this sense, the state cannot be understood apart from its social foundation, just as the nation cannot function politically without a form of state organization. It is precisely in this interaction that the role of the nation emerges as a cohesive element mediating the relationship between the individual and power, making it possible to transform sovereignty from an abstract concept into a daily reality for citizens.

The study highlights the point that the nation–state relationship does not follow a single historical model: in some cases, the nation has preceded the state, whereas in others, the state has been a decisive factor in building and homogenizing national identity. This dynamic becomes particularly complex in multinational states, in which maintaining stability requires functional institutions, democratic legitimacy, and respect for cultural pluralism. In this context, national sovereignty is realized through state institutions and gains concrete meaning in guaranteeing citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms. Without this mediation, the state risks becoming a mere formal mechanism of power, while the nation is reduced to an abstract notion without real political influence.

Consequently, it may be concluded that the nation constitutes the cohesive force in the relationship between the state and the citizen: it is the element that gives life, meaning, and legitimacy to this relationship, connecting institutional structures with social and identity-based belonging. A proper understanding of this relationship remains essential for the functioning and stability of contemporary democracies, especially in a world marked by globalization, pluralism, and ongoing challenges to sovereignty.

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# Learning through play: using tabletop games to enhance teaching and learning in teacher education

Gerda Sula
University of Tirana, Faculty of Social Studies
Gerda.sula@unitir.edu.al

**Abstract:** This paper reports on an action research project exploring how tabletop games can serve as catalysts for improving teaching and learning within teacher education. The study aligns with the educational aims of the COST Action Computational Techniques for Tabletop Games Heritage (GameTable), focusing on how game-based approaches can inspire innovative and culturally aware pedagogy. Conducted with master's students in Educational Technology—future teachers preparing to integrate technology and active learning in schools—the project followed iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. Participants engaged with both traditional and modern tabletop games, analysing their mechanics, educational potential, and adaptability to specific school subjects. Through guided design sessions, they modified selected games to align with curriculum goals, implemented them in peer microteaching sessions, and reflected on student engagement, collaboration, and conceptual understanding.

Findings suggest that tabletop games, when purposefully integrated into pedagogical design, promote motivation, strategic thinking, and deep learning. They provide authentic contexts for cooperation, assessment for learning, and inclusive classroom participation. Moreover, the process of adapting games supports metacognitive awareness and professional growth, helping future teachers move from theoretical understanding to creative classroom application. The paper concludes that play is not

merely a pedagogical technique but a reflective practice that reshapes how teachers understand teaching itself—connecting cultural heritage, collaboration, and critical thinking in meaningful ways.

**Keywords:** Game-based learning, Teacher education, Tabletop games, Action research, Learning theories, Educational innovation

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, educational innovation has increasingly emphasized the importance of active and participatory learning (Mikrouli, Tzafilkou, & Protogeros, 2024). Across disciplines, educators seek methods that connect theoretical concepts to authentic experiences and promote deeper understanding (Adipat, et al., 2021). Among these methods, *game-based learning* has gained significant attention (Thi, 2025). Games, by their nature, embody systems of rules, strategies, and social interaction—qualities that mirror learning processes themselves (Bakhsh, et al, 2022). This paper presents a practice-oriented study on how tabletop games can be used to enhance teaching and learning within a teacher education context. The study is part of a broader pedagogical interest connected to the COST Action *Computational Techniques for Tabletop Games Heritage (GameTable)*[8], which explores the cultural, mathematical, and educational dimensions of games. While the GameTable network focuses on computational reconstruction and heritage preservation, this project translates those ideas into teacher education practice—using games not as technological artefacts but as living pedagogical tools.

The setting is the *Learning Theories* course, a transversal subject taught to all students in the Master's in Teacher Education program at the University of Tirana. The course aims to help future teachers understand

[8] https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA22145/

how people learn, how different theories interpret learning, and how these can be applied in classrooms. The challenge, however, is moving from abstract theory to meaningful classroom practice. Tabletop games offered a creative medium through which students could explore, interpret, and apply these theories in an interactive and reflective way.

## 2. Theoretical background

The relationship between play and learning has long been recognized (Zubair, et al., 2024). Learning through play involves engagement, experimentation, social negotiation, and feedback—elements that mirror the key dimensions of effective teaching (Hsbollah & Rosli, 2022). Tabletop games, in particular, offer tangible, social, and cognitive experiences. Unlike digital games, they rely on physical materials, face-to-face interaction, and shared interpretation of rules, making them ideal tools for collaborative learning (Pacheco-Velázquez, Rodés, & Salinas-Navarro, 2024).

In teacher education, play can serve three complementary purposes:

1. Conceptual understanding – transforming abstract theories into dynamic models (Moreno-Guerrero, et al., 2020);
2. Professional formation – allowing teachers to experience learning as learners (Luthuli, Phewa, & Mkhize-Mthembu, 2025);
3. Pedagogical creativity – helping teachers design engaging learning experiences for future classrooms (Nesbitt, et al., 2025).

Tabletop games also hold cultural significance. Many traditional games embody values, problem-solving approaches, and social norms that are part of the intangible cultural heritage of education. Reintroducing these into teacher education contributes not only to pedagogical innovation but also to cultural continuity (Fu, et al., 2022).

The pedagogical premise of this project is that games are not just tools for fun or engagement, but structured environments where learners actively construct meaning. The act of playing and redesigning a game requires reflection, decision-making, collaboration, and application of theory—all essential skills for teaching (Calavia, Blanco, & Casas, 2021).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research design

The study adopted an action research approach, emphasizing improvement through cyclical processes of planning, action, observation, and reflection. This approach was chosen because it allows teachers to research their own practice while involving students as co-constructors of knowledge. The process unfolded over a single semester during the *Learning Theories* course (15 weeks), combining lectures, workshops, and collaborative projects.

### 3.2 Participants and context

Participants were 100 master's students enrolled in the *Teacher Education* program at the University of Tirana. They came from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds—languages, sciences, social sciences, and arts—but shared the same foundational course on *Learning Theories*. The diversity of the group allowed for rich interdisciplinary collaboration.

### 3.3 Procedure

The project unfolded in **three main phases**:

1. **Exploration phase – understanding learning theories through play**

Students were first introduced to the principles of major learning theories—behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism, social learning, humanism, and connectivism. Each theory was linked to a different form of play or game mechanism. For example, behaviorism was associated with reward systems and reinforcement, constructivism with problem-solving and discovery, and social learning with cooperative play. During seminars, students played several tabletop games—such as *Dixit*, *Pandemic*, *Codenames*, and traditional games like *Dominoes* and *Mikado*. Each session included guided discussions connecting gameplay to learning processes: motivation, feedback, collaboration, and metacognition.

2. **Design phase – adapting or creating educational games**

Working in small groups, students selected one learning theory and designed a tabletop game that would help secondary students understand or apply its principles. They were encouraged to use low-cost materials and to modify existing games or create new ones. Each design required a short pedagogical explanation linking game mechanics to learning objectives and classroom outcomes.

3. **Implementation and reflection phase**

Students presented and played their games during peer sessions, simulating classroom environments. After each session, they reflected on what learning processes were activated, what challenges arose, and how the game might function in a real classroom. The reflections were collected in learning journals and shared in final presentations.

### 3.4 Data collection and analysis

The main sources of data were observation notes, student reflections, group presentations, and informal feedback discussions. Analysis

followed thematic coding to identify recurring ideas and outcomes related to engagement, understanding, and professional development. The focus was not on measurement but on insight—how participation in game design and play influenced students' perception of teaching and learning.

## 4. Findings

The action research generated a range of insights into how tabletop games can improve teaching and learning within teacher education. The main themes that emerged are discussed below.

### 4.1 Increased engagement and motivation

Students consistently reported that using games made learning theories more accessible and memorable. The combination of play and discussion fostered a sense of curiosity and ownership over the learning process. Playing games activated intrinsic motivation—students wanted to understand the underlying mechanics and link them to theoretical concepts. For instance, when analyzing *Pandemic*, groups related cooperative gameplay to Vygotsky's social constructivism, realizing how shared goals and dialogue promote collective problem-solving.

The social and emotional engagement created a positive atmosphere. Many students mentioned that playing together broke down barriers between disciplines and allowed them to connect as learners rather than as future specialists.

### 4.2 Deepened conceptual understanding

Transforming theory into a game required students to translate abstract ideas into concrete mechanics. To design a game representing constructivist learning, for example, groups developed scenarios where players build knowledge step by step, drawing on prior experiences and feedback. Others adapted quiz-style games to illustrate behaviorist

principles of reinforcement, or memory games to explore cognitive processing.

Through this translation process, students engaged in *higher-order thinking*—they had to analyze, synthesize, and apply theoretical principles. The act of explaining how their game represented a learning theory became a powerful demonstration of understanding.

**4.3 Collaboration and communication**

Because tabletop games rely on interaction, teamwork became both a method and a learning outcome. Students learned to negotiate rules, design roles, and coordinate strategies. These interactions mirrored classroom dynamics, helping future teachers to experience first-hand the challenges of managing group activities and fostering inclusion.

Some students reported that the collaborative design process taught them more about communication and empathy than traditional group projects. They observed that designing fair and engaging games required consideration of every participant's role and voice—a valuable parallel to inclusive teaching practices.

**4.4 Reflection on teaching identity**

An unexpected outcome was the way the project influenced students' perception of themselves as teachers. By playing and designing games, many rediscovered the joy of learning and recognized the importance of creativity in teaching. The process encouraged them to see themselves as facilitators of experiences rather than transmitters of information.

In final reflections, several students described play as a metaphor for lifelong learning: "When we play, we take risks, make mistakes, and learn together. That's what teaching should feel like." Others noted that designing games helped them appreciate the complexity of educational

design—balancing rules, content, and motivation just as teachers balance curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

### 4.5 Cultural and inclusive dimensions

The project also revived interest in traditional games as sources of cultural learning. Students reflected on how simple games like *Dominoes*, *Mühle*, or *Nine Men's Morris* embody social reasoning, probability, and planning skills, and can be reinterpreted in classrooms to teach logic or collaboration. Some groups chose to adapt traditional Albanian games, linking them to topics such as cooperation, patience, and community values.

This exploration reinforced the idea that games are not only pedagogical tools but also cultural artefacts—part of the collective memory that shapes how people learn and relate. Including traditional games in teacher education encouraged reflection on how to connect modern teaching with local culture and heritage.

## 5. Discussion

The findings confirm that tabletop games can serve as a powerful bridge between theory and practice in teacher education. They turn abstract concepts into living experiences, enabling future teachers to experiment with learning dynamics in a safe and engaging environment.

### 5.1 Play as a pedagogical lens

Play offers a model for how teachers can structure classroom experiences that are interactive, reflective, and adaptive. In the project, students realized that each learning theory could be *played out* through different forms of interaction:

- Behaviorism through rule-based progression and feedback;

- Constructivism through discovery, problem-solving, and evolving challenges;
- Cognitivism through information processing and memory tasks;
- Social learning through collaboration and peer modeling;
- Humanism through choice, self-expression, and reflection;
- Connectivism through networks and shared knowledge.

Recognizing these parallels helped students connect abstract theoretical language to concrete teaching practice. They began to speak of lessons as "games of learning," where students explore, fail, and try again within structured systems—just like in play.

**5.2 From passive to reflective learners**

Another significant outcome was the shift in student posture. Rather than passively receiving knowledge about learning theories, they became researchers of learning itself. Designing a game required observing how people learn in action, predicting responses, and adjusting rules—exactly the reflective process teachers need in their professional life.

This reflection extended beyond the project: students began to apply the same logic to their lesson plans, thinking of classroom management, motivation, and feedback in game-like terms of strategy, adaptation, and flow.

**5.3 Integrating tradition and innovation**

By connecting traditional games to modern pedagogy, the project aligned with the GameTable Action's goal of preserving games as part of intangible cultural heritage while using them for contemporary education. This integration of tradition and innovation demonstrates that educational technology is not limited to digital tools. Technology, in its broad sense, includes all designed systems that facilitate learning—and tabletop games

are among the oldest and most effective technologies of learning ever invented.

### 5.4 Challenges and Limitations

Despite the positive outcomes, several challenges emerged. Designing games requires time, creativity, and an understanding of classroom dynamics. Some groups struggled to balance playfulness with learning objectives, producing games that were enjoyable but pedagogically weak. Others found it difficult to simplify complex theories into playable formats without losing depth.

These challenges, however, were themselves valuable learning experiences, reinforcing the importance of planning, reflection, and iteration in teaching design. The facilitator's role was crucial in guiding discussions, linking theory with practice, and maintaining academic rigor.

## 6. Implications for teaching and learning

The project offers several implications for teacher education and for broader educational practice:

**Reconceptualizing learning theories**

Teaching learning theories through play transforms them from abstract frameworks into lived experiences. It helps future teachers internalize not only *what* the theories say but *how* they feel in action.

**Developing pedagogical creativity**

Encouraging teachers to design their own learning games cultivates creativity and ownership. It empowers them to see curriculum as adaptable, flexible, and responsive to student needs.

**Enhancing collaboration and communication**

Game-based approaches naturally foster teamwork and empathy—competencies essential for effective classroom environments.

**Supporting inclusion and cultural awareness**

Using both modern and traditional games allows teachers to address diverse learning styles and connect students with cultural heritage, promoting inclusion and identity within education.

**Building reflective professional identity**

When teachers experience themselves as learners in playful situations, they develop humility, resilience, and curiosity—key attributes of reflective practitioners.

## 7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that tabletop games can play a significant role in improving teaching and learning within teacher education. Through action research in the *Learning Theories* course at the University of Tirana, future teachers experienced learning as a process of experimentation, collaboration, and reflection. They not only deepened their understanding of pedagogical theories but also developed creative and inclusive mindsets for their future classrooms.

Beyond their immediate pedagogical value, games carry cultural meaning. Integrating them into teacher education contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage while renewing teaching practices for the 21st century. In this sense, the project echoes the broader aims of the *GameTable COST Action*: to connect computational, cultural, and educational perspectives around the common human practice of play.

Ultimately, learning through play invites teachers and students alike to rediscover the joy of inquiry. It reminds us that education, at its core, is not the transfer of information but the co-construction of meaning

through interaction, imagination, and shared experience. Tabletop games offer a simple yet profound way to make that philosophy tangible—one turn, one reflection, and one discovery at a time.

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# Creative Productions in Public Spaces
## "Learning by Playing"

MSc. Iris Canaj
University of Arts / Polis University, Albania
c.iris925@gmail.com

**Abstract**

This study explores the role of creative productions in public spaces and their impact on social interaction and informal learning, particularly among children. It aims to examine how artistic interventions in urban environments contribute to community engagement and civic awareness. The research is grounded in the conceptual framework of public space as a social construct, drawing on Jan Gehl's theory of "life between buildings," which emphasizes the relationship between spatial quality and human activity. A qualitative, reflective methodology is employed, combining theoretical analysis with practical examples from creative projects and cultural events in Tirana. The findings indicate that well-designed public spaces encourage diverse forms of participation and interaction, while creative productions enhance their social and educational value. Special attention is given to children as a key audience, highlighting the importance of appropriate content, sensory elements, and inclusive programming. The concept of "learning by playing" is identified as a powerful tool for fostering creativity, social skills, and civic responsibility. The study contributes to discussions on art in public spaces by emphasizing its potential to support community development and experiential learning.

**Keywords:** creative productions; public space; children; learning by playing; social interaction

## 1. Introduction

Creativity is often discussed as an artistic skill, an economic resource, or a source of innovation. However, creativity can also be understood as a social necessity. Contemporary societies increasingly seek solutions for community engagement, civic participation, education, and social cohesion. In this context, creative productions have the potential to contribute far beyond artistic expression.

The reflections presented in this paper originate from practical experience in cultural and creative production, particularly in public spaces. These experiences have also informed the development of a broader conceptual framework referred to as the Creativity Convention. Rather than functioning as a legal document, the Convention serves as a conceptual proposal that emphasizes creativity as a driver of participation, lifelong learning, social cohesion, and community development. The framework emerging from this research is presented in Appendix A.

This perspective is closely connected to informal education and the methodology of "learning by playing". Learning does not occur exclusively in schools or formal educational institutions. It also takes place in parks, streets, festivals, workshops, playgrounds, and public spaces where individuals encounter one another and participate in shared experiences.

Public spaces therefore become important environments for creative productions. They provide opportunities for interaction, experimentation, participation, and community engagement. Through artistic interventions, festivals, educational activities, and participatory projects, public spaces can become places where creativity supports social interaction and informal learning.

This paper explores the relationship between creative productions, public spaces, and "learning by playing" methodology. It investigates how creative interventions can activate public environments, encourage community participation, and contribute to educational experiences, particularly for children. Through theoretical reflection and practical examples implemented in Tirana, the study argues that creative productions can transform public spaces into environments that support creativity, citizenship, and social development.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Creative Productions and Public Space

The concept of creative production has gained increasing attention during recent decades due to the development of creative industries and the growing role of innovation within cultural and economic life. While cultural productions are generally associated with heritage preservation,

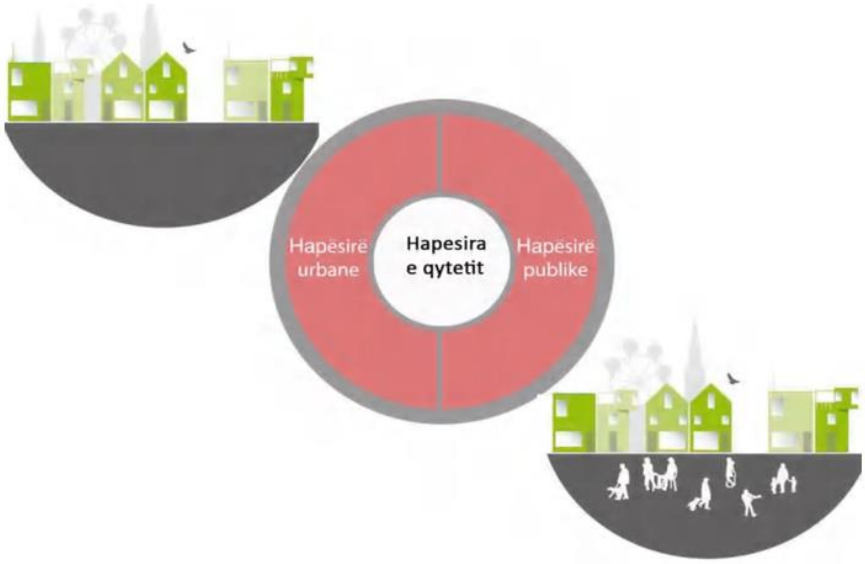
traditional arts, and the transmission of cultural memory, creative productions combine culture with innovation, technology, participation, and intellectual property.

Creative productions are therefore not limited to artistic presentation. They involve processes that generate interaction, stimulate imagination, encourage participation, and create new forms of social engagement. Their value is measured not only through economic impact but also through their capacity to influence communities, inspire individuals, and activate public life.

The relationship between creative productions and public space is particularly significant. Creative interventions often require environments where people can meet, interact, and participate collectively. Public spaces provide such opportunities by creating conditions for encounters between individuals, communities, and creative experiences.

To better understand this relationship, it is important to distinguish between urban space and public space. Urban space generally refers to the physical environment composed of buildings, infrastructure, and the spaces between them. Public space, however, includes an additional dimension: social interaction.

**Figure 1**: *"Urban vs Public Space"*




*Note.* "Urban vs Public Space" by Klaud Manehasa's PhD thesis: "Cilësia e hapësirës publike: prezantimi i një metodologjie vlerësimi"

Public space is not simply a physical location. It emerges through the relationship between the built environment, the surrounding space, and the people who use it. Consequently, a public square, a park, a street, or a playground becomes meaningful only when citizens actively participate in it.

This perspective is reflected in the work of Jan Gehl, whose studies on public life emphasize the importance of human-centered urban environments. According to Gehl, outdoor activities can be divided into three categories: necessary activities, optional activities, and social activities. Necessary activities occur regardless of environmental quality. Optional activities occur when physical conditions are attractive and

comfortable. Social activities emerge when people encounter one another, communicate, observe, participate, and share experiences.[9]

The quality of public space therefore directly influences the quality of social interaction. When public environments are neglected or unattractive, citizens limit their activities to what is strictly necessary. When spaces become welcoming and engaging, opportunities for participation, communication, and community life increase significantly.

Creative productions contribute to this transformation by introducing artistic, cultural, and educational experiences into everyday environments. Through creative interventions, public spaces become more than transit areas; they become places of encounter, learning, and collective experience.

### 2.1.1 Audience and Public

An important distinction in public-space creative productions concerns the difference between audience and public. While the audience generally refers to spectators attending a specific artistic event or cultural activity, the concept of the public is broader and includes all users of the space, whether they intentionally participate in the event or encounter it incidentally.[10]

This distinction becomes particularly relevant in public-space productions. Unlike cultural institutions, where attendance is usually intentional and audiences are clearly defined, public environments attract a diverse and

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[9] Gehl, J. (2011). "Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space". Island Press.

[2] Abercrombie, N. & Longhurst, B. (1998). Audiences: A sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination. Sage.

Kwon, M. (2004). One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity. MIT Press.

often unpredictable group of users. Passers-by, residents, tourists, families, children, older adults, and other community members may become part of the experience without prior planning.

As a result, the role of the creative producer extends beyond serving a predefined audience. Through the design of participatory activities and inclusive environments, public-space productions can encourage interaction between artistic works and broader communities. In such contexts, spectators may gradually become participants, while the public itself becomes an active contributor to the creative process.

This transformation reflects one of the key characteristics of creative productions in public spaces: the shift from passive observation toward active engagement, participation, and co-creation.

## 2.2 Learning by Playing and Informal Education

Learning has traditionally been associated with formal educational institutions such as schools and universities. However, educational research increasingly recognizes that learning also occurs through experience, participation, and everyday interaction.

The methodology known as “learning by playing” is closely related to theories of experiential learning and learning by doing. It assumes that individuals acquire knowledge more effectively when they actively engage in experiences rather than passively receiving information.

Play is one of the earliest forms of learning. Through play, children explore their surroundings, test ideas, negotiate social relationships, solve problems, and develop creativity. Unlike formal instruction, play encourages experimentation without fear of failure. It creates opportunities

for discovery and allows learning to emerge naturally through participation.

Although frequently associated with childhood, learning by playing is not limited to children. Adults also learn through participation, experimentation, observation, and interaction. Public-space creative productions provide environments where these processes occur collectively.

Festivals, artistic interventions, workshops, games, and participatory activities create opportunities for informal education. Individuals may not consciously perceive themselves as learners, yet they acquire knowledge, skills, values, and social competencies through their experiences.

For this reason, public-space creative productions can be understood as educational environments. They complement formal education by offering experiences that encourage creativity, communication, critical thinking, and civic engagement.

**Figure 2:** *"Bodies in Urban Spaces"*

*Note.* “Bodies in Urban Spaces” performance, a project by Willi Dorner, produced by DoART NGO, in Tirana, October 2023

**2.3 Children as a Key Audience**

While creative productions in public spaces are accessible to diverse audiences, children represent a particularly important group.

Children experience public spaces differently from adults. They engage with environments through curiosity, movement, exploration, and play. Public spaces therefore offer valuable opportunities for learning and development.

At the same time, the presence of children introduces additional responsibilities for cultural producers. Unlike controlled indoor venues, public spaces remain open and accessible. Artistic interventions may

therefore be encountered by individuals of different ages, backgrounds, and sensitivities.

This raises important questions regarding content, accessibility, and inclusion. When creative productions take place in public environments, should children be considered during the planning process? Should artistic freedom be balanced with social responsibility? How should producers approach issues related to sound levels, lighting systems, visual content, and educational value?

These questions become increasingly relevant as cities invest in cultural programming and public-space activities. If children are among the primary users of public environments, their needs should be considered during the design and implementation of creative productions.

The discussion is not intended to limit artistic expression. Rather, it encourages a broader understanding of public space as a shared environment where multiple generations coexist and participate.

Furthermore, while participation within cultural institutions and indoor venues can generally be managed and controlled, activities taking place in public spaces are not always fully predictable in terms of audience composition. Public-space creative productions remain accessible to a broad spectrum of users, including children, adolescents, families, older adults, and individuals who may encounter the activity without having intentionally planned to participate.

For this reason, particular attention should be given to content, language, and technical elements such as sound levels, smoke effects, lighting and laser systems, and visual imagery. These aspects should be appropriate not only for the intended audience but also for children under the age of eighteen and older adults who may be present in the public environment.

Accessibility and safety considerations are equally important. Public-space productions should take into account the needs of parents with strollers, older adults using walking aids, and individuals with reduced mobility. Infrastructure, circulation routes, ramps, seating arrangements, and visibility should be carefully considered to ensure inclusive participation.

In this regard, the work of architect Abhinav Bhardwaj [11]offers an interesting perspective through his approach to child-friendly urban environments. His reflections extend beyond the provision of playgrounds and consider elements such as the height of benches, sightlines within public spaces, and spatial organization that allows parents to supervise children while maintaining opportunities for independent exploration. Such approaches demonstrate how urban design and creative production can work together to create more inclusive and accessible public environments for all generations.

If Public Space is Urban Space + Human,

Educational Space can be: Public Space + Child

Beyond programming and content, the physical design of public spaces plays an important role in determining who can participate and how comfortable participation becomes. Recent human-centered urban design approaches emphasize that public spaces should be planned not only for the average adult user but also for children, older adults, and people with reduced mobility. Architect Abhinav Bhardwaj, building upon the work of Jan Gehl, William H. Whyte, Christopher Alexander and Enrique Peñalosa, highlights how seemingly simple design decisions such as bench heights, visibility lines, lighting conditions, accessibility ramps, acoustic

[11] Bhardwaj A., (2026, June 7). The Child's City [Instagram Post]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/DZR9w27CKC5/

comfort, and seating distribution can significantly influence the way people experience public environments. [12]His approach suggests that designing for an eight-year-old child and an eighty-year-old adult often results in more inclusive public spaces for everyone. These considerations are particularly relevant for creative productions, where participation depends not only on artistic content but also on the accessibility, safety, and comfort of the surrounding environment.

## 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and reflective methodology that combines theoretical analysis with practical experience in the field of creative production.

The research is informed by the author's professional involvement in cultural projects, festivals, artistic interventions, and educational activities implemented in Albania. The selected examples originate from projects developed in public spaces and involve different forms of participation, community engagement, and informal learning.

The methodological approach draws upon reflective practice, allowing professional experience to function as a source of knowledge and analysis. Rather than focusing exclusively on quantitative indicators, the study examines the social, educational, and participatory dimensions of creative productions.

Case studies were selected because they illustrate different ways in which public-space interventions can generate interaction, encourage creativity, and support learning by playing. The projects vary in scale and format, yet

[12] Bhardwaj A., (2026, May 26). The Public Space Manual [Instagram Post]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/DYy9wtdiMPK/

they share a common objective: activating public space through participation and creativity.

The study also forms part of a broader doctoral research project examining creative productions and their relation with tourism and economy. Within this context, the selected examples provide insight into the relationship between creative practice, public space, and community development.

## 4. Creative Productions in Public Spaces: Practical Examples

The practical examples presented in this paper demonstrate how creative productions can activate public spaces and transform them into environments of interaction, participation, and learning.

**Figure 3 - 4**, *"Visual Park"*

*Note.* Canaj I., Dinaj F., (2019, September) The Visual Park, in Tirana

One of the most significant examples is "Visual Park", implemented as part of the project "No Parking, Please!". [13]Beyond the aesthetic transformation of a neglected neighborhood pocket space, the intervention

[13] Canaj I., Dinaj F., (2019, September) The Visual Park [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkqR3_ElDyY

sought to create new forms of interaction between children, families, and the surrounding community.

The visual concept combined artistic elements with functional design. Large-scale illustrations of inclusive swings were painted vertically on surrounding walls, representing children from different communities and backgrounds. Alongside these images, a real wooden plank was installed and used as a bench, creating the illusion of a swing while simultaneously functioning as urban furniture. This combination of visual art and practical use encouraged both observation and participation.

At ground level, the intervention introduced a reinterpretation of a traditional children's game played with hopping patterns. The design featured a series of fish-shaped figures inspired by games that many adults remembered from their own childhood but that had become unfamiliar to younger generations. To strengthen the connection between generations while also acknowledging contemporary realities, the graphic composition was intentionally designed to resemble a smartphone screenshot. In this way, the project created a bridge between traditional play and digital culture.

The intervention sought to address a growing challenge faced by contemporary communities: the gradual replacement of interactive outdoor games with screen-based entertainment. Rather than positioning technology as an opponent, the project used a visual language familiar to children in order to attract them back into the physical environment. Through movement, interaction, and shared participation, children rediscovered forms of play that encouraged socialization, communication, and creativity.

Visual Park therefore functioned not only as a public art intervention but also as a learning environment. It demonstrated how creative productions can reactivate underused public spaces while simultaneously strengthening community connections and encouraging intergenerational interaction through the methodology of learning by playing.

The intervention was not intended solely as an aesthetic improvement. It also functioned as an opportunity for intergenerational communication. Older generations shared memories of childhood games, while younger participants encountered forms of play that differed from contemporary digital entertainment. As a result, the project created both educational and social value.

**Figure 5**, *"Revitalization of Neighborhoods"*

*Note.* "Revitalization of Neighborhoods" project, implemented by DoART in Tirana on Halloween's day, October 31, 2022, produced by DoART NGO

A similar approach was applied through artistic interventions associated with seasonal celebrations. In one example, pedestrian crossings near

educational institutions were transformed using visual references inspired by "Halloween", because it happened on 31st of October. Beyond their decorative function, these interventions encouraged attention to road safety and demonstrated how artistic elements can communicate messages within everyday environments.

**Figure 6**, *"Stolibër"*

*Note.* A child at "Stolibër"; benches as open books, the project was implemented by DoART in Tirana, December 2024.

Another example is "Stolibër", a project consisting of public benches designed as open books. The intervention combined literature, public space, and technology. Citizens could sit, rest, and simultaneously access literary content through digital tools integrated into the installation (QR code scan). The project illustrates how public furniture can become a cultural resource that supports both leisure and learning.

These examples suggest that creative productions can generate educational experiences without relying on formal teaching methods. Instead, they encourage learning through participation, observation, curiosity, and interaction.

**Figure 7 - 8,** *"Pop Up Family Festival"*

*Note.* "Pop Up Family Festival" implemented by Creative Industries Agency, in Tirana, December 14, 2025

"Pop Up Family Fest" represents another example of how creative productions can transform learning into an engaging and participatory experience. Conceived as a gathering space for children and families, the event combined artistic activities, creative workshops, technology, games, and educational experiences within a single environment. Rather than

separating entertainment from education, the festival attempted to integrate them.

Children participated in activities related to arts and crafts, digital technologies, creativity, and practical skills. These experiences introduced them to new possibilities, interests, and potential future professions. At the same time, families were encouraged to participate actively rather than remaining passive spectators. The event demonstrated how creative productions can generate opportunities for informal learning while strengthening family and community interaction.

**Figure 9**, *"Pop Up Family Festival"*

*Note.* Road Safety Department (DPSHTRR) organized at "Pop Up Family Fest", Tirana, December 14, 2025

A similar educational approach was adopted through activities organized in collaboration with road safety institutions. Children were invited to drive miniature vehicles and participate in simulations that introduced them to traffic rules, road signs, and safety procedures. Instead of receiving information through conventional instruction, participants learned through direct experience.

Such activities illustrate the potential of learning by playing as a practical methodology. Concepts that might otherwise appear abstract become understandable through participation. Children acquire knowledge while simultaneously developing communication skills, decision-making abilities, responsibility, and social awareness.

**Figure 10**, *"Let's build the city"*

*Note.* Implemented by Alba Canaj architect, produced by DoART NGO, in Pogradec, July 2024

Another significant example is the activity "Let's build the city," developed together with architect Alba Canaj. This participatory project invites children to imagine and design their own cities. Through the process, participants explore questions related to urban planning, public institutions, accessibility, transportation, culture, and social inclusion.

Children are encouraged to consider the needs of different groups within society, including older adults, people with disabilities, families with young children, and marginalized communities. In doing so, they learn not only how cities function, but also how public spaces can become more inclusive and accessible.

Perhaps more importantly, the activity demonstrates that learning is not a one-directional process. Adults frequently discover new perspectives through children's observations and proposals. The solutions suggested by children often reveal a remarkable capacity for empathy and collective thinking. Consequently, the project becomes a platform for mutual learning where both children and adults contribute to the creation of knowledge.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that creative productions can transform public spaces into environments where education, participation, creativity, and social interaction occur simultaneously. Learning emerges naturally through engagement, curiosity, and shared experience rather than through formal instruction alone.

## 5. Discussion

The examples presented in this paper raise broader questions regarding the role of creative productions within contemporary society. Although

creative activities are often associated with culture and entertainment, their impact frequently extends beyond artistic expression.

One of the central challenges concerns the relationship between education and entertainment. Many creative productions seek to generate meaningful educational experiences, yet funding mechanisms often prioritize measurable indicators such as attendance numbers, media visibility, audience reach, and economic impact. As a result, cultural producers may experience pressure to create activities that attract larger audiences rather than activities that generate deeper educational outcomes.

This tension raises an important question: are creative productions intended primarily to educate or to entertain?

While entertainment remains an important component of public engagement, educational value should not be overlooked. The impact of a creative production cannot always be measured immediately. A child who participates in an artistic workshop today may develop confidence, empathy, communication skills, creativity, or civic awareness that become visible only years later. Such outcomes are difficult to quantify but may represent some of the most significant contributions of creative participation.

The discussion becomes particularly relevant when considering activities designed for children and young people. Contemporary childhood is increasingly influenced by digital technologies, structured routines, and limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction. At the same time, public spaces available for play, socialization, and informal learning have become increasingly restricted.

This situation creates new responsibilities for creative producers. If children represent an important audience, then questions related to content,

accessibility, and sensory experience must be considered carefully. Public-space productions differ from ticketed events because participation cannot be controlled or restricted according to age groups. Consequently, issues such as language, representations of violence, hate speech, nudity, excessive sound levels, and intense lighting effects require thoughtful consideration.

The objective is not to limit artistic freedom but to acknowledge that public space is a shared environment. Creative productions designed for public audiences should balance artistic expression with social responsibility, particularly when children are among the participants.

Another important challenge concerns the growing influence of digital technologies. Mobile devices, tablets, social media platforms, and digital entertainment increasingly shape the experiences of younger generations. This phenomenon raises an important question: can creative productions in public spaces compete with digital environments?

The issue is not technology itself. Digital tools provide valuable opportunities for communication, learning, and creativity. However, screen-based experiences often replace forms of interaction that traditionally occurred through direct contact with people and environments.

Public spaces offer a different type of experience. They expose individuals to unpredictability, movement, sensory stimulation, and social encounters. Children interacting with nature, observing their surroundings, meeting new people, or participating in collective activities experience forms of learning that cannot be fully replicated through digital platforms.

For this reason, outdoor activities remain particularly important. In many contemporary cities, shopping centers and enclosed entertainment venues

increasingly function as spaces of leisure and socialization. While such environments provide comfort and convenience, they cannot fully replace the educational value of public parks, playgrounds, streets, and community spaces.

Outdoor environments expose children to challenges, discoveries, and interactions that contribute to their development. They encourage observation, curiosity, resilience, and adaptability. The distractions present in outdoor settings often represent opportunities for exploration rather than obstacles to learning.

Consequently, the quality of public space may also be understood as an indicator of quality of life. Communities that actively use parks, streets, squares, and neighborhood spaces tend to demonstrate stronger levels of social interaction and civic participation. Creative productions contribute to this process by encouraging people to engage with their surroundings and with one another.

Beyond their cultural value, creative productions may also contribute to individual and collective well-being. Experiences based on participation, creativity, play, and social interaction strengthen a sense of belonging, trust, and community engagement. These outcomes correspond with the emerging concept of Economy of Happiness, which recognizes that social well-being, cultural participation, and quality of life represent important dimensions of sustainable development alongside economic growth.

The findings of this study also align with broader international sustainability objectives. By encouraging informal education, inclusive public spaces, community participation, and child-friendly urban environments, creative productions may contribute to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education;

supports learning through, informal education, creativity and lifelong learning), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities; promotes inclusive public spaces, urban culture, placemaking and community engagement), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being; contributes to well-being, social interaction, mental health, and active outdoor participation), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities; encourages accessibility, inclusion, and equal opportunities for children, older adults, and people with disabilities) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals; strengthens collaboration among public institutions. Educational organizations, NGOs, creative professionals, local communities, and the private sector). In this context, placemaking[14] refers to the collaborative transformation of public spaces into meaningful places that foster social interaction, cultural identity, community participation for the quality of life. This broader perspective highlights the relevance of creative production not only within the cultural sector but also as a contributor to sustainable urban development.

Creative productions implemented in public spaces may also strengthen cultural tourism by creating distinctive urban experiences, increasing the attractiveness of destinations, encouraging longer visitor stays, and fostering stronger interactions between visitors and local communities.

### 5.1 From research findings to The Creativity Convention: A conceptual Framework

The findings suggest that creativity should be understood not only as an individual capacity, but also as a social value that contributes to

[14] Wyckoff, M.A. (2014). Definition of Placemaking: Four Different Types. Planning and Zoning News

participation and community development. A society that values creativity, values human potential.

It helps us imagine new possibilities, solve problems, build connections, and express who we are. Through creativity, children and adults alike learn to communicate, collaborate, and contribute to their communities.

Art and culture create spaces where people can meet, share experiences, and understand one another beyond differences of language, age, background, or belief. They strengthen our sense of belonging and encourage active participation in society.

Creative thinking is also essential for the future. In a rapidly changing world, innovation, adaptability, and imagination are among the most valuable skills we can develop. By nurturing creativity from an early age, we invest not only in individual well-being but also in sustainable communities and inclusive development.

This study indicates recurring challenges related to participation, accessibility, sustainability, informal education, and community engagement within creative productions in public spaces.

Based on these findings, the author proposes the Creativity Convention, a conceptual framework intended to support future cultural policies and creative practices.

The Convention is not conceived as a legal instrument but as a normative framework that encourages creativity as a social value connected with participation, lifelong learning, accessibility, sustainability, cultural heritage, innovation, and civic responsibility.

Rather than prescribing mandatory regulations, the framework provides guiding principles for policymakers, cultural institutions, educational

organizations, creative professionals, local communities, and other stakeholders involved in creative production.

The complete draft of the Creativity Convention [15]is presented in Appendix A.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper explored the relationship between creative productions, public spaces, and learning by playing. Through theoretical reflection and practical examples, it demonstrated how creative interventions can transform public environments into spaces of participation, interaction, and informal education.

The findings suggest that creative productions contribute to the activation of public spaces by encouraging social interaction, community engagement, and civic participation. Through festivals, artistic interventions, educational workshops, and participatory activities, public environments become places where learning occurs naturally through experience and play.

The study also highlights the importance of considering children as a key audience within public-space productions. Issues related to content, accessibility, sensory experience, and educational value require particular attention when designing activities intended for diverse audiences.

Furthermore, the paper argues that the impact of creative productions should not be measured exclusively through quantitative indicators. Their contribution to creativity, social development, informal education, and

[15] Canaj I., Creative Industries Agency. (2026, June 3). Konventa e Kreativitetit [Instagram Post]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/DZIKMXPDej2/

community well-being represents an equally important dimension of cultural value.

Ultimately, creative productions in public spaces demonstrate that learning can occur beyond formal educational institutions. By encouraging participation, imagination, and interaction, they help create environments where individuals learn not only about art and culture but also about citizenship, responsibility, and community life.

In this sense, learning by playing becomes more than an educational methodology. It becomes a way of understanding how creativity can contribute to stronger communities, more active public spaces, and more meaningful human connections.

Future research could further evaluate the proposed Creativity Convention through comparative studies, policy implementation, and applications in different cultural and urban contexts. Such research would contribute to assessing the practical value of the framework beyond the cases examined in this study.

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## Appendix A

**Draft "The Creativity Convention"**

**Figure 11**, *"The Creativity Convention"*

*Note.* Written by Iris Canaj, implemented at "Kolë Jakova" School, Tirana, produced by the Creative Industries Agency, June 1, 2026.

**Article 1. Purpose**

The Creativity Convention provides a conceptual framework that promotes creativity as a driver of cultural participation, lifelong learning, sustainability, accessibility, innovation, and community development. It is intended for public institutions, educational organizations, cultural institutions, creative professionals, local communities, and all stakeholders involved in creative production.

**Article 2. Sense of Belonging**

Creativity flourishes where people experience a sense of belonging. The Convention encourages individuals and institutions to strengthen their relationship with communities, public spaces, culture, heritage, and the environment through active participation, shared responsibility, and civic engagement.

**Article 3. Creativity and Children's Rights**

The Convention recognizes the principles established in Articles 29 and 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Every child has the right to education, creativity, play, participation in cultural life, and

artistic expression. Creative productions should contribute to these rights through inclusive, safe, and educational environments.

**Article 4. Creativity and Human Rights**

The Convention also reflects the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by recognizing freedom of expression, participation in cultural life, equal opportunities, and access to creativity as essential components of democratic societies.

**Article 5. Guiding Principles**

Creative productions should strive to promote:

- creativity and innovation;
- participation and community engagement;
- accessibility and inclusion;
- sustainability;
- child protection;
- lifelong learning;
- cultural heritage;
- artistic freedom accompanied by social responsibility.

# Exploring the Role of School Principals in Encouraging Teachers' Participation in Professional Development Programs: Evidence from Albania – A Literature Review

**PhD Candidate. Iris Mançi**

Department of Pedagogy-Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana, Tirana, Albania

iris.manci@hotmail.com

**Abstract.**

Understanding the role of school leadership in shaping teachers' professional development (PD) is critical for enhancing educational quality in Albania. This literature review explores how school principals influence teachers' participation in PD programs and identifies leadership practices that foster engagement and continuous learning.

The analysis is guided by transformational and instructional leadership theories, emphasizing how principals' behaviors, resource allocation, and support strategies create effective professional learning opportunities for teachers in Albanian schools.

Peer-reviewed articles, reports, and policy documents from national and international sources published over the last 10 years were systematically reviewed. A thematic synthesis was applied to identify patterns, leadership strategies, and context-specific factors affecting teachers' participation in PD.

Principals who provide clear guidance, recognize teachers' achievements, encourage collaboration, and demonstrate personal commitment to professional learning positively influence teacher engagement in PD programs. However, gaps remain regarding context-specific

implementation practices in Albanian schools and the alignment of policy frameworks with leadership strategies in practice.

The findings offer valuable insights for school leaders aiming to strengthen professional development initiatives and cultivate a professional learning culture, contributing to improved educational outcomes in Albania.

**Keywords:** *school leadership, teacher professional development, transformational leadership, literature review, Albania, educational management*

## 1. Introduction

Teacher professional development (TPD) is widely recognized as a key determinant of educational quality and student achievement. Contemporary educational systems require teachers not only to possess strong subject knowledge but also to continuously update their pedagogical competencies in response to technological, social, and curricular changes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). While research confirms that effective professional development enhances instructional quality and student learning outcomes (Timperley et al., 2020), its impact largely depends on how it is supported and implemented within school contexts.

In recent decades, the role of school principals has shifted from administrative management toward instructional leadership. Principals are increasingly expected to support teaching quality, foster collaboration among teachers, and promote continuous professional learning within schools (Hallinger, 2018). International evidence suggests that leadership practices play a crucial role in shaping teachers' motivation and willingness to engage in professional development activities (Liu & Hallinger, 2018; OECD, 2020). However, the effectiveness of these leadership practices is strongly influenced by institutional conditions and school-level capacities.

The importance of school leadership is particularly evident in transitional educational systems such as Albania. Since the 1990s, Albania has implemented a series of educational reforms aimed at improving teaching quality and aligning its education system with European standards (European Commission, 2022). These reforms include curriculum modernization, competency-based teaching

approaches, and frameworks for teacher qualification and development. Despite these initiatives, the implementation of teacher professional development remains uneven and often limited in practice.

Existing research indicates that Albanian school principals frequently operate within centralized governance structures that restrict their decision-making autonomy and leadership capacity (OECD, 2020). In addition, many principals lack systematic preparation in instructional leadership and educational management, which limits their ability to effectively support teacher learning (Vampa, 2022). As a result, teacher participation in professional development is shaped not only by policy frameworks but also by the quality and effectiveness of school leadership.

Despite growing international evidence on the importance of leadership in teacher professional development, there is limited context-specific research examining how school leadership influences teacher learning in Albania, particularly in relation to everyday leadership practices and institutional constraints. This gap highlights the need for further investigation into how leadership styles and school conditions interact to shape teachers' engagement in professional development.

Against this background, this paper critically examines the role of school principals in promoting teachers' participation in professional development programs, with a specific focus on the Albanian context. It seeks to explore not only how leadership influences teacher engagement, but also how institutional and cultural factors shape leadership effectiveness in practice. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do leadership styles influence teachers' participation in professional development?
2. What institutional and cultural factors shape principals' effectiveness in Albania?
3. What barriers limit teachers' engagement in professional development programs?
4. What strategies may strengthen school leadership and promote sustainable professional learning?

## Literature Review

### 2.1.Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is one of the most influential leadership models in educational research. This approach emphasizes the principal's role in improving teaching and learning processes through direct engagement with instructional practices (Hallinger, 2018). Instructional leaders define school goals, supervise teaching, provide feedback, and encourage professional learning among teachers.

Hallinger (2018) argues that instructional leadership significantly influences school effectiveness because it directly connects leadership practices to classroom instruction. Similarly, Liu and Hallinger (2018) found that principals who actively support instructional improvement positively affect teachers' self-efficacy and participation in professional learning activities.

Instructional leadership also contributes to creating a professional culture focused on continuous improvement. Teachers are more likely to engage in professional development when principals demonstrate commitment to pedagogical quality and provide constructive feedback (OECD, 2020).

#### 2.1.1. Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership focuses on motivating teachers through vision, inspiration, and emotional support (Leithwood et al., 2020). Transformational leaders encourage innovation, build trust, and foster collective responsibility within schools.

According to Leithwood et al. (2020), transformational leadership strengthens teachers' intrinsic motivation by helping them feel valued and professionally empowered. Teachers working under transformational leaders are more likely to perceive professional development as meaningful rather than merely obligatory.

Furthermore, transformational leadership contributes to positive school climates characterized by collaboration and mutual respect. Such environments increase teachers' willingness to participate in professional learning activities (Harris, 2020a).

### 2.1.2. Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership emphasizes shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making within schools (Spillane & Healey, 2019). Instead of concentrating leadership authority solely in the principal's role, distributed leadership encourages teachers and staff members to contribute actively to school improvement.

Research suggests that distributed leadership promotes professional learning communities, peer mentoring, and collaborative problem-solving (Harris, 2020b). Teachers in collaborative environments tend to participate more actively in professional development because they experience greater professional autonomy and support.

## 2.2.School Leadership and Teacher Professional Development

Teacher professional development is most effective when it is collaborative, practice-oriented, and sustained over time (Darling-

Hammond et al., 2017). However, achieving these conditions depends heavily on school leadership.

Principals influence teacher participation in professional development through both direct and indirect mechanisms. Directly, principals organize training opportunities, allocate resources, and encourage teacher participation. Indirectly, they shape school culture, teacher motivation, and professional collaboration (Liu & Hallinger, 2018).

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) identified several characteristics of effective professional development:

* focus on content,
* active learning,
* collaboration,
* coaching and feedback,
* sustained duration,
* and alignment with school goals.

These characteristics require strong leadership support. Without leadership engagement, professional development often becomes fragmented and disconnected from classroom realities.

OECD TALIS reports indicate that teachers are more likely to participate in professional development when principals actively promote collaboration and innovation (OECD, 2020; OECD, 2023). Similarly, Cordingley et al. (2018) argue that sustainable teacher learning depends on supportive school cultures where professional dialogue and reflection are encouraged.

Timperley et al. (2020) further emphasize that teachers engage more effectively in professional learning when they perceive it as directly relevant to their teaching challenges. Principals therefore play a crucial

role in ensuring that training programs respond to teachers' practical needs.

### 2.3. The Albanian Context

#### 2.3.1. Educational Reforms in Albania

Since the collapse of the communist regime in the early 1990s, Albania has undertaken extensive educational reforms aimed at transforming a highly centralized educational system into one that reflects democratic values, market-oriented principles, and European educational standards (European Commission, 2022). The reform process has been closely linked to the country's aspirations for European integration and has focused on improving the quality, equity, and effectiveness of education at all levels. These reforms have sought to address structural weaknesses inherited from the previous system while responding to the demands of globalization, technological advancement, and labor market changes.

One of the most significant reforms has been the introduction of competency-based curricula. This approach represents a shift from traditional knowledge transmission models toward student-centered learning, emphasizing critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, creativity, and lifelong learning skills (European Commission, 2022). Through competency-based education, students are encouraged to actively participate in the learning process and develop competencies that are essential for personal, social, and professional success in the twenty-first century.

Another important area of reform has involved strengthening teacher quality through the establishment of professional standards and qualification frameworks. The Albanian education system has introduced policies that require teachers to engage in continuous professional

development throughout their careers. According to the Ministry of Education and Sports (2021), professional development programs aim to enhance pedagogical competencies, improve instructional practices, and support teachers in adapting to curriculum changes and technological innovations. These initiatives reflect international evidence suggesting that teacher quality is one of the most influential factors affecting student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

In addition, educational reforms have promoted greater decentralization and school autonomy. Schools have gradually been granted increased responsibility for managing resources, implementing development plans, and responding to local educational needs. Decentralization is based on the assumption that schools are better positioned to make decisions that reflect the specific characteristics of their communities and students (OECD, 2020). Consequently, school leaders have acquired a more strategic role in educational planning and organizational development.

The integration of digital technologies has also become a major component of educational reform in Albania. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated efforts to modernize educational infrastructure and expand the use of digital learning platforms. However, the pandemic also revealed significant inequalities in access to technology and internet connectivity, particularly between urban and rural areas (UNESCO, 2021). As a result, policymakers have increasingly emphasized digital transformation as a priority for future educational development.

Despite these positive developments, the implementation of reforms continues to face considerable challenges. According to the OECD (2020), many Albanian schools still experience limitations related to infrastructure, financial resources, teaching materials, and institutional

capacity. Schools located in remote and rural regions often encounter difficulties in recruiting qualified staff, maintaining facilities, and providing students with adequate learning resources. These disparities contribute to unequal educational opportunities and may limit the overall impact of national reform initiatives.

Furthermore, successful educational reform requires more than policy adoption; it depends heavily on effective implementation at the school level. Fullan (2016) argues that sustainable educational change occurs when reforms are supported by strong leadership, teacher commitment, and organizational learning. In Albania, however, schools frequently struggle to translate national policy objectives into effective classroom practices due to resource constraints and limited institutional support. Consequently, the effectiveness of educational reforms remains closely linked to the leadership capacity of school principals and the professional competence of teachers.

### 2.3.2. Leadership Challenges

School leadership has become increasingly important within the Albanian education system as schools face growing expectations for accountability, quality improvement, and student achievement. Contemporary educational leadership extends beyond administrative management and includes responsibilities related to instructional supervision, organizational development, staff motivation, and school improvement (Bush, 2020). Consequently, effective school leadership is widely recognized as a key factor in determining educational success.

One of the major challenges in Albania concerns the preparation and professional development of school principals. Vampa (2022) argues that leadership training opportunities remain fragmented and inconsistent,

limiting the development of leadership competencies among school administrators. While principals are expected to lead complex educational organizations, many assume leadership positions without receiving comprehensive preparation in educational management, strategic planning, or instructional leadership.

Traditionally, principal appointments have often been influenced by teaching experience and professional seniority rather than formal leadership qualifications. Although teaching experience provides valuable insights into educational processes, research demonstrates that effective leadership requires a distinct set of competencies that extend beyond classroom instruction (Leithwood et al., 2020). These competencies include communication skills, organizational management, conflict resolution, decision-making, strategic planning, and the ability to promote professional learning among teachers.

A further challenge relates to the excessive administrative workload carried by school principals. OECD (2020) findings indicate that Albanian principals spend a significant proportion of their working time completing bureaucratic procedures, preparing reports, ensuring regulatory compliance, and managing operational matters. As a result, less time is available for instructional leadership activities such as classroom observation, teacher mentoring, curriculum monitoring, and professional development support.

Research consistently shows that instructional leadership has a positive impact on teacher effectiveness and student outcomes (Hallinger, 2018). Principals who actively support teaching and learning processes contribute to higher levels of teacher motivation, stronger professional collaboration, and improved academic performance. However, when

administrative responsibilities dominate daily practice, opportunities for instructional improvement become limited.

Another significant challenge involves the development of collaborative school cultures. Contemporary leadership theories emphasize distributed leadership, whereby leadership responsibilities are shared among teachers and other stakeholders rather than concentrated exclusively in the principal's role (Harris, 2020). Distributed leadership promotes professional collaboration, collective decision-making, and organizational learning. Nevertheless, many Albanian schools continue to operate within relatively hierarchical structures that may restrict teacher participation in decision-making processes and reduce opportunities for collaborative leadership.

The rapid pace of educational change also places additional demands on school leaders. Principals are increasingly expected to lead digital transformation initiatives, manage organizational change, respond to diverse student needs, and ensure educational quality under conditions of uncertainty. According to Bush (2020), successful educational leaders must be capable of balancing managerial responsibilities with instructional priorities while maintaining a clear vision for school improvement. Developing these capacities requires systematic leadership preparation and continuous professional learning opportunities.

Moreover, international evidence suggests that leadership effectiveness directly influences teacher satisfaction, organizational climate, and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2020). Therefore, strengthening leadership capacity should be considered a strategic priority for educational development in Albania. Investments in leadership training programs, mentoring systems, and professional learning networks can

contribute significantly to improving school effectiveness and supporting the successful implementation of educational reforms.

Overall, while Albania has made considerable progress in modernizing its education system, leadership challenges continue to represent a significant barrier to sustainable improvement. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts from policymakers, educational institutions, and professional organizations to ensure that school leaders possess the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to lead educational change effectively.

### 2.3.3. Centralization and School Culture

Albania's educational system remains influenced by centralized governance structures inherited from the communist period (Sina & Qafa, 2023). Albania's educational system has traditionally been characterized by a highly centralized governance structure, although recent reforms have aimed to increase decentralization and school autonomy. Despite these efforts, schools continue to face limitations in decision-making authority, particularly regarding financial management and school improvement processes (Maghnouj et al., 2020). School leaders often operate within a framework of centrally defined policies and regulations, which may constrain opportunities for distributed leadership and teacher participation in decision-making. As noted by the OECD, weaknesses in school leadership and limited school autonomy remain significant challenges for school development in Albania (Maghnouj et al., 2020). This governance context can influence school culture and teachers' professional engagement. When professional learning priorities are determined primarily through external requirements rather than teacher-led initiatives, educators may perceive professional development as a

compliance-oriented activity rather than a meaningful opportunity for growth. Furthermore, the OECD review highlights the need to strengthen collaborative professional learning networks and develop more formative approaches to teacher appraisal in order to support teachers' continuous professional development (Maghnouj et al., 2020).

Research suggests that collaborative school cultures and participatory leadership practices are associated with higher levels of teacher motivation, professional learning, and school improvement. Therefore, strengthening teacher involvement in decision-making processes and fostering collaborative professional communities may contribute to more effective implementation of educational reforms in Albania (Maghnouj et al., 2020).

**2.4. Factors Influencing Teachers' Participation**

Several interrelated factors influence teachers' willingness, motivation, and sustained engagement in professional development programs. Research emphasizes that participation is not determined only by the availability of training opportunities, but also by organizational culture, leadership practices, personal motivation, and the perceived usefulness of learning activities. Effective professional development occurs when teachers feel supported, respected, and professionally empowered within their school environment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

School leadership plays a particularly important role in shaping teachers' engagement in professional learning. Supportive leaders who encourage collaboration, provide constructive feedback, and allocate time and resources for professional development create conditions that foster continuous learning and professional growth. Conversely, limited administrative support and excessive workload may reduce teachers'

motivation to participate in professional development activities (OECD, 2019).

Another important factor is the relevance of professional development to teachers' daily classroom practice. Teachers are more likely to engage in learning opportunities when the content addresses authentic instructional challenges and provides practical strategies that can be directly applied in their work. Professional development that is disconnected from classroom realities is often perceived as less valuable and therefore generates lower levels of participation and commitment (Desimone & Garet, 2015).

Collaboration among colleagues also contributes significantly to teachers' professional learning. Professional learning communities, peer mentoring, and collaborative inquiry encourage knowledge sharing and reflective practice, strengthening teachers' sense of professional efficacy and commitment to continuous improvement (Vangrieken et al., 2017). Such collaborative environments promote collective responsibility for student learning and help sustain professional development over time.

Individual factors, including teachers' self-efficacy, career aspirations, prior experiences, and beliefs about teaching and learning, further influence participation. Teachers who perceive professional development as beneficial for their instructional effectiveness and career advancement are generally more motivated to engage actively in learning opportunities (Richter et al., 2011). Therefore, successful professional development initiatives should address both organizational and individual factors in order to promote meaningful and sustained teacher participation.

### 2.4.1. Leadership Support

Teachers are more motivated to engage in professional learning when principals provide encouragement, recognition, and constructive feedback (Liu & Hallinger, 2018). School leaders play a critical role in creating conditions that promote continuous learning by allocating time for collaboration, providing access to resources, and encouraging reflective practice. Supportive leadership also helps teachers feel valued and confident in experimenting with innovative teaching strategies. Furthermore, principals who actively participate in professional learning communities often inspire greater teacher commitment and foster a culture of collective improvement. According to Harris (2020), distributed leadership strengthens teacher engagement because it allows educators to participate in decision-making processes and professional collaboration. Similarly, Hallinger (2018) argues that leadership practices are strongly influenced by school context and organizational culture, which shape teachers' professional behaviors and attitudes toward learning.

Research has also shown that instructional leadership positively influences teachers' professional development by establishing clear educational goals and supporting continuous improvement in teaching practices. School leaders who focus on teaching and learning create environments in which professional development is viewed as an integral part of school improvement rather than an isolated activity (Robinson et al., 2008). In addition, trust between teachers and school leaders is an important predictor of teacher participation in professional learning initiatives. When teachers perceive leadership as fair, supportive, and transparent, they are more willing to engage in collaborative learning and school-wide development efforts (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

Moreover, effective leaders encourage the development of professional learning communities where teachers can share experiences, discuss instructional challenges, and collectively reflect on their practice. Such collaborative environments contribute to greater professional efficacy and sustained engagement in professional development activities (Stoll et al., 2006). Leadership support is therefore not limited to administrative functions but extends to fostering a positive school culture that values learning, innovation, and continuous professional growth.

### 2.4.2. School Climate

Positive school climates characterized by trust, collaboration, and open communication significantly increase teacher participation in professional development (OECD, 2020). A collaborative environment encourages teachers to share experiences, discuss classroom challenges, and learn from one another without fear of criticism. Schools with supportive professional cultures often promote teamwork, peer observation, and mentoring relationships, which strengthen teachers' sense of belonging and professional identity. In contrast, negative school climates marked by conflict, excessive workload, or lack of trust may discourage teachers from actively participating in learning opportunities. The European Commission (2022) highlights that teacher well-being and institutional support are essential components for sustaining teacher engagement and professional growth. Additionally, studies show that schools with strong collegial relationships and collaborative cultures tend to achieve higher levels of instructional improvement and teacher satisfaction.

### 2.4.3. Relevance of Training

Teachers are more likely to value professional development when training content is directly connected to classroom realities and practical teaching challenges (Opfer, V. Darleen & Pedder, 2019). Professional learning activities that address real instructional needs, student diversity, assessment strategies, and curriculum implementation are generally perceived as more meaningful and effective. Teachers often prefer interactive and practice-oriented approaches rather than theoretical sessions disconnected from everyday teaching experiences. In addition, professional development becomes more impactful when teachers can immediately apply new knowledge and observe positive changes in student learning. Timperley, Helen et al. (2020) emphasize that effective professional learning should involve inquiry, reflection, and continuous support over time rather than isolated workshops. Likewise, Cordingley, Philippa et al. (2018) found that sustained and collaborative professional development has a stronger impact on teaching quality and student achievement than short-term training sessions.

**2.4.4.Teacher Autonomy**

Professional autonomy positively influences teachers' motivation and engagement in continuous learning (Leithwood, Kenneth et al., 2020). Teachers who have greater freedom in instructional decision-making are more likely to take initiative in developing their professional competencies. Autonomy encourages teachers to identify their own learning needs, select relevant professional development opportunities, and experiment with innovative pedagogical methods. Moreover, when teachers feel trusted as professionals, they tend to demonstrate stronger commitment to school improvement and lifelong learning. Educational research further suggests that autonomy enhances intrinsic motivation,

professional satisfaction, and creativity, all of which contribute to more meaningful participation in professional development activities. According to OECD (2023), teachers who perceive higher levels of professional agency are generally more engaged in collaborative learning and innovation within schools.

### 2.5. Barriers to Professional Development

Despite the recognized importance of TPD, several barriers continue to limit participation.

The most frequently identified barriers include:

* workload and lack of time (OECD, 2020),
* insufficient funding (European Commission, 2022),
* limited access to quality training,
* lack of institutional support,
* and weak leadership capacity (Harris, 2020).

In Albania, these barriers are intensified by centralized governance and limited school autonomy (Sina & Qafa, 2023). Additionally, professional development is sometimes perceived as a formal requirement for certification rather than a meaningful learning opportunity.

## 3. Methodology

This study employs a critical literature review methodology. A critical literature review does not simply summarize previous studies but also evaluates, compares, and synthesizes existing knowledge to identify patterns, contradictions, and research gaps (Grant & Booth, 2009).

The literature included in this review was selected according to several criteria:

* publication between 2016 and 2025,
* peer-reviewed academic journals,

* international reports from organizations such as OECD, UNESCO, the European Commission, and the World Bank,
* studies related to instructional leadership, teacher professional development, and educational reform,
* and literature specifically addressing Albania or comparable educational contexts.

The analysis is organized into four major themes:

1. Theoretical perspectives on school leadership,
2. The relationship between leadership and teacher professional development,
3. The Albanian educational context,
4. Barriers and recommendations for improving teacher participation.

## 1. Findings / Discussion

The literature consistently identifies school leadership as a significant factor influencing teachers' participation in professional development (PD). However, the reviewed studies suggest that the relationship between leadership and teacher learning is neither direct nor uniform. Rather, leadership influences professional development through its impact on school culture, teacher motivation, organizational support, and opportunities for collaboration. The findings further reveal that while international research provides strong evidence regarding effective leadership practices, their implementation within the Albanian educational context remains constrained by structural and institutional challenges.

### 4.1. Leadership and Teacher Professional Development: Consensus and Divergence in the Literature

A major finding emerging from the reviewed literature is the broad consensus that effective leadership positively influences teachers'

engagement in professional development (Hallinger, 2018; Liu & Hallinger, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020). Instructional leadership is frequently associated with improved teacher learning because it directly links leadership practices to teaching quality, classroom improvement, and professional feedback. Similarly, transformational leadership is viewed as a mechanism for increasing teachers' intrinsic motivation through trust, vision, and professional recognition.

However, the literature also reveals important differences regarding which leadership approach is most effective. While some studies emphasize the direct impact of instructional leadership on teaching and learning outcomes (Hallinger, 2018), others argue that transformational leadership may have a stronger influence on teacher commitment and willingness to engage in change processes (Leithwood et al., 2020). This divergence suggests that no single leadership model can fully address the complex demands of teacher professional development. Instead, effective school leadership appears to require a combination of instructional guidance, motivational support, and collaborative practices.

Furthermore, much of the available evidence originates from educational systems characterized by greater school autonomy and stronger institutional support than those found in Albania. Consequently, assumptions regarding the effectiveness of particular leadership models cannot be transferred uncritically to contexts where principals operate under different governance conditions and resource constraints.

### 4.2. The Albanian Context: A Gap Between Policy Expectations and School Reality

The review highlights a persistent gap between educational policy objectives and their implementation at the school level. Albanian

educational reforms have increasingly emphasized teacher quality, continuous professional development, and school improvement (European Commission, 2022). Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that school leaders often lack the autonomy, preparation, and organizational capacity required to fulfill these expectations effectively (OECD, 2020; Vampa, 2022).

A recurring theme in the literature is the tension between centralized governance and contemporary leadership expectations. Although principals are expected to function as instructional leaders, they frequently remain occupied with administrative and bureaucratic responsibilities. This situation limits their capacity to provide mentoring, classroom support, and professional guidance for teachers. As a result, leadership roles often remain focused on compliance and administration rather than instructional improvement.

The findings therefore indicate a mismatch between the leadership roles promoted in educational policy documents and the realities experienced by school leaders in practice. Without addressing this discrepancy, reforms aimed at strengthening teacher professional development may have limited impact regardless of their policy design.

### 4.3. Barriers Limiting Teachers' Participation in Professional Development

The literature identifies several barriers that continue to restrict meaningful participation in professional development. Time constraints, workload, limited funding, and unequal access to quality training opportunities are consistently reported across studies (OECD, 2020; European Commission, 2022). However, the review suggests that these barriers should not be understood solely as logistical problems.

A critical issue concerns teachers' perceptions of professional development itself. In several contexts, including Albania, participation is sometimes driven by certification requirements and formal obligations rather than by professional learning needs. This raises questions about the actual effectiveness of existing professional development policies. If teachers engage primarily to meet administrative requirements, participation rates may increase without necessarily producing meaningful changes in classroom practice.

Moreover, the literature indicates that professional development is most effective when it is closely connected to teachers' daily instructional challenges (Timperley et al., 2020; Cordingley et al., 2018). Yet many training programs continue to rely on standardized approaches that may not adequately address local school needs. This suggests that the challenge is not only increasing access to professional development but also improving its relevance and practical value.

### 4.4. Implications and Research Gaps

One of the most significant findings of this review is the limited availability of empirical research focusing specifically on the relationship between school leadership and teacher professional development in Albania. While international studies provide valuable theoretical and practical insights, there remains insufficient evidence regarding how leadership practices operate within Albanian schools and how teachers perceive leadership support for professional learning.

This gap has important implications for both policy and future research. Policymakers often rely on international models of leadership and professional development, yet the effectiveness of such models depends heavily on contextual factors. Future studies should therefore

examine how leadership practices are enacted in Albanian schools and identify the conditions that facilitate or hinder teacher engagement in professional learning.

The findings also suggest that strengthening leadership capacity alone may not be sufficient. Sustainable improvement requires a broader strategy that combines leadership development, increased school autonomy, supportive professional cultures, and professional development programs that respond to teachers' actual needs. Without addressing these interconnected factors, efforts to improve teacher professional development are likely to produce only limited and short-term outcomes.

## 2. Conclusion

School principals are key actors in promoting teachers' participation in professional development programs. Instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership practices all contribute to creating supportive learning environments and motivating teachers to engage in continuous professional learning.

In Albania, however, leadership effectiveness is affected by centralized governance, insufficient leadership preparation, and institutional constraints. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms focused on leadership development, increased school autonomy, and collaborative professional cultures.

Improving school leadership is essential not only for enhancing teacher professional development but also for strengthening educational quality and student outcomes in Albania. Effective leadership contributes to the development of positive school climates where teachers feel supported, valued, and encouraged to pursue continuous learning. Research suggests that schools characterized by strong leadership are more likely to foster

collaboration, innovation, and shared responsibility for educational improvement (Hallinger, 2018).

Furthermore, school leaders play a critical role in translating educational policies into meaningful school-level practices. Their ability to support teacher learning, facilitate professional collaboration, and promote reflective practice can significantly influence the success of professional development initiatives (Robinson et al., 2008). When leadership practices are aligned with teachers' professional needs, participation in professional development is more likely to result in sustainable changes in instructional practice.

Therefore, strengthening leadership capacity should be considered a strategic priority within educational reform efforts. Investing in leadership preparation, ongoing professional development for principals, and structures that support distributed leadership may enhance teacher engagement and contribute to long-term school improvement. Ultimately, effective school leadership serves as a catalyst for creating learning-oriented school cultures that benefit teachers, students, and the broader educational system.

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# The Role of the Social Fund in Developing Child- and Family-Centred Social Protection Services in Albania

**Prof. Assoc. Dr. Izela Tahsini**

Department of Social Work and Social Policy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana

Email: izela.tahsini@unitir.edu.al

**MSc. Anduela Valle (PhD Candidate)**

National Association Education for Life (SHKEJ); Department of Social Work and Social Policy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana

Email: anduela_valle@yahoo.it

**Abstract**

Social protection services for children and families in Albania continue to face major challenges related to uneven local capacities, fragmented coordination, limited service coverage, and the long-term sustainability of interventions. In this context, the Social Fund has emerged as a key mechanism for supporting municipalities in the development of social care services and in the transition towards more integrated and community-based approaches. This paper examines the role of the Social Fund in promoting child- and family-centered social protection services in Albania. The study adopts a qualitative desk-review methodology based on secondary data, including legal and policy documents, strategic frameworks, administrative reports, and monitoring evidence. The analysis is guided by three analytical dimensions: service integration, institutional coordination, and sustainability. The paper argues that the Social Fund has made an important contribution to the expansion and consolidation of local social services by creating incentives for municipalities to establish new services, strengthen existing structures, and move closer to a preventive

and community-based model of care. At the same time, its effectiveness remains constrained by financial dependency, role overlap, gaps in local planning and monitoring, and unequal institutional capacities across municipalities. The paper concludes that the Social Fund should be understood not only as a financing mechanism, but also as a policy instrument whose long-term impact depends on stronger governance, better coordination, and more sustainable local service systems.

**Keywords:** Social Fund; social protection services; child- and family-centred approach; local governance; service integration; Albania

## 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, Albania has undergone an important reform process in the field of social protection and social care services. This process has been closely linked to decentralization, the redefinition of institutional responsibilities between central and local government, and a gradual shift away from residual and institution-centered responses toward more community-based, integrated, and rights-oriented services (Law No. 121/2016; Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2024).

Within this broader transformation, services for children and families have acquired particular relevance. Children exposed to neglect, violence, poverty, disability, lack of parental care, and other forms of vulnerability require more than isolated interventions. They need coordinated responses that connect social care, health, education, justice, and employment-related support, while also recognizing the central role of the family and the community in child well-being.

In practice, however, moving from a formal policy commitment to an operational child- and family-centered system remains difficult. Albania has made progress in expanding the legal basis for social care services and

in defining a broader architecture for local service provision. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain, including uneven service coverage across municipalities, limited professional capacities, and difficulties in ensuring the quality, accessibility, and continuity of services. These implementation gaps continue to affect the effectiveness of social care interventions and the ability of local structures to respond consistently to the needs of children and families (State Social Service, 2024).

These include unequal municipal capacities, insufficient service coverage in some territories, and fragmented coordination among institutions, overlapping staff roles, and uncertainty regarding the sustainability of newly established services. These include unequal municipal capacities, insufficient service coverage in some territories, and fragmented coordination among institutions, overlapping staff roles, and uncertainty regarding the sustainability of newly established services. The challenge is therefore not only to create services, but to build local systems that are preventive, accessible, integrated, and durable (State Social Service, 2024; Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2024; World Bank, 2022).

This is precisely the context in which the Social Fund has become increasingly important. Established within the legal and sub-legal framework of social care services, the Social Fund was designed to support municipalities in improving existing social services, creating new ones, and strengthening local social policy development (Council of Ministers of Albania, 2018; Law No. 121/2016; Council of Europe, 2020). Its significance lies in the fact that it connects financing with local service development. Rather than acting as a passive budget line, it has the potential to function as a policy lever that encourages municipalities to

identify needs, plan services, build partnerships, and respond to groups in vulnerable situations through more structured interventions.

For children and families, the relevance of the Social Fund is particularly strong. A child- and family-centred approach requires early intervention, coordination among institutions, community-based alternatives, support to parents and caregivers, and the prevention of unnecessary separation of children from their families. Such an approach also requires that local institutions move beyond a purely reactive logic. Municipalities need the capacity to finance services that address needs before they escalate, that reduce pressure on residential care, and that connect child protection with broader family support and social inclusion mechanisms. In this respect, the Social Fund can be seen as one of the practical mechanisms through which national reform ambitions are translated into local action (Law No. 121/2016; Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2024; UNICEF Albania, 2016).

At the same time, the existence of a financing mechanism does not automatically produce transformation. Public policy implementation in Albania has consistently highlighted that outcomes depend not only on legislation and budgets, but also on institutional capacity, governance arrangements, inter-organizational coordination, administrative clarity, and accountability (State Social Service, 2024; World Bank, 2022). In decentralized systems, these factors become even more decisive because local authorities differ significantly in their ability to assess needs, prepare projects, manage services, coordinate actors, and ensure continuity over time. Financing can therefore create opportunities, but those opportunities remain uneven when the institutional environment is weak.

The present paper is situated at the intersection of these concerns. It explores whether and how the Social Fund has contributed to the development of social protection services for children and families in Albania, and what this reveals about the possibilities and limits of current social policy reform.

The central argument is that the Social Fund has played a meaningful role in supporting the expansion and consolidation of local services, especially by encouraging municipalities to establish and maintain community-based interventions. However, its transformative effect remains partial because service development is still constrained by local capacity gaps, uneven planning, insufficient coordination, and persistent questions of sustainability (State Social Service, 2024; Council of Ministers of Albania, 2024; Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2024).

The paper is organized around three analytical dimensions: service integration, institutional coordination, and sustainability. These dimensions are reflected in national policy priorities and implementation guidelines for social care services and decentralized governance (Law No. 121/2016; Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2024; Council of Ministers of Albania, 2024). Service integration refers to the extent to which services are linked, accessible, and responsive to complex needs rather than delivered in isolation. Institutional coordination refers to the capacity of local and central actors to work across sectors and roles in a coherent manner. Sustainability refers not only to the continuation of financing, but also to the administrative, professional, and organisational conditions necessary for services to remain functional over time.

The study has three main objectives. First, it analyses the Social Fund as a policy and financing mechanism within Albania's social care reform.

Second, it examines its contribution to the development of local services for children and families, with attention to integration and community orientation. Third, it identifies the main constraints that affect its implementation and long-term impact.

Through this analysis, the paper contributes to a broader discussion on how public financing instruments can either support or limit the development of more inclusive and preventive social protection systems. From a policy perspective, it offers a critical reading of one of the main national instruments used to support local social services (Council of Ministers of Albania, 2018; State Social Service, 2025). From a practice perspective, it highlights issues that directly affect municipalities, service providers, and professionals working with children and families. From a governance perspective, it reflects the broader reform trajectory in Albania's decentralized social care system.

## 2. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative methodology, based on the collection of the secondary data, where the desk review literature is combined with the analysis of the legal and policy documents and reports. The choice of method reflects both the aim of the study and the nature of the available evidence. Because the paper seeks to understand the role of the Social Fund within the institutional architecture of social protection in Albania, it is appropriate to analyses the legal, policy, and administrative documents through which this mechanism has been defined, implemented, monitored, and interpreted. A desk review allows for a systematic examination of how the Social Fund is framed in the national policy environment and how its effects are discussed in official monitoring and reporting documents.

The study relies on four main categories of sources. The first category includes the legal and regulatory framework governing social care services and the Social Fund, especially Law No. 121/2016 on Social Care Services and the relevant decisions of the Council of Ministers concerning the establishment, functioning, and financing methodology of the Social Fund (Law No. 121/2016; Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2018; Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2024). These documents are essential because they define the legal status of the Fund, its purposes, the responsibilities of municipalities, and the principles that should guide the distribution and use of public resources.

The second category includes national strategic and policy documents, most importantly the National Social Protection Strategy 2024–2030 and its action plan (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2024; Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2024). These materials provide the broader policy direction within which the Social Fund should be understood. They also show how Albania frames current priorities such as decentralization, integrated service provision, deinstitutionalization, geographical coverage, improved monitoring, and stronger inter-sectoral coordination.

The third category includes administrative and monitoring evidence, especially annual and monitoring reports produced by the State Social Service. These documents are particularly useful because they move beyond policy intent and offer insight into practical implementation. They contain observations on service functionality, local capacities, staffing issues, registry use, service standards, municipal performance, and specific implementation challenges affecting services supported by the Social Fund (State Social Service, 2024; State Social Service, 2025).

The fourth category includes selected institutional guidance materials and official communications related to Social Fund implementation (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2018; Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2024). Although these are not analytical studies in themselves, they provide additional information on operational expectations, priority areas, and the practical translation of central policy goals into local applications.

The analytical approach is interpretive and thematic. Rather than attempting a quantitative measurement of Social Fund outcomes, the paper examines how the Fund functions across three interconnected dimensions: service integration, institutional coordination, and sustainability (Law No. 121/2016; Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2024). These dimensions are not treated as separate variables but as interdependent aspects of service development.

Service integration refers to the extent to which the Social Fund supports the development of services that respond holistically to the needs of children and families. In this paper, integration is understood broadly. It includes the relationship between preventive and remedial services, the links among sectors such as social care, health, education, and justice, and the organizational ability to offer coordinated responses at the local level. A child- and family-centered approach requires such integration because vulnerability is rarely one-dimensional.

Institutional coordination refers to the interaction between levels of government and among local actors. This dimension examines whether the Social Fund has encouraged a more coherent relationship between the ministry, the State Social Service, municipalities, and service providers. It also considers coordination within municipalities and between municipal

structures and external partners, including non-public service providers. In a decentralized system, funding alone is insufficient unless responsibilities are understood, roles are clear, and institutions can work together effectively.

The use of secondary data has both strengths and limitations. Its main strength is that it enables the paper to draw directly on the official documents that shape and monitor the Social Fund, thus keeping the analysis closely tied to policy reality. It also allows the paper to cover a broad institutional field within a limited timeframe. However, the study does not include interviews with municipal staff, service providers, or beneficiaries, nor does it undertake comparative case studies of specific municipalities. As a result, the analysis cannot claim to capture the full range of local experiences or the perspectives of service users. Instead, it offers a policy- and implementation-focused interpretation based on documented evidence.

The study does not involve human participants or personal data. Ethical considerations are therefore limited to the responsible use of publicly available institutional documents, transparency in interpretation, and caution against overstating what the evidence can support. Because monitoring and administrative reports are themselves shaped by institutional perspectives, the paper treats them as valuable but not neutral sources. Their claims are therefore read critically and in relation to the legal and strategic framework.

Despite its limitations, the desk-review approach is appropriate for the present purpose. The paper is not intended as a final evaluation of the Social Fund's social impact. Rather, it is a structured analysis of how the mechanism operates within Albania's current social protection reform and

what kinds of opportunities and constraints emerge when it is examined through the lens of child- and family-centered service development.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1. The Social Fund as a financing and governance mechanism

The Social Fund occupies an important place in Albania's social care architecture because it links financing with local responsibility. Law No. 121/2016 defines social care services as part of an integrated system intended to respond to the needs of individuals, families, and groups in vulnerable situations. Within this framework, the law establishes the Social Fund as a mechanism through which financial support is secured for local government units in order to improve the standards and administrative capacities of existing services, create new services, and support the development of social policies (Law No. 121/2016; Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2018). This legal design is important because it positions the Fund as more than a technical budgetary tool. It connects local needs, public financing, and service development in a single policy mechanism.

A first implication of this design is that the Social Fund reflects a decentralized governance model. Municipalities are not treated only as implementers of centrally defined services, but as actors expected to identify local needs, prepare proposals, administer services, and gradually strengthen local service systems. This approach is consistent with broader reform trends in Albania, where the local level has increasingly been assigned responsibility for planning and delivering social care services (Council of Europe, 2020; UNDP, 2022).

A second implication is that the Social Fund embodies a selective and strategic allocation logic. The legal and regulatory framework links the

transfer of funds to criteria such as need and local priorities (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2018; Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2024). This means that the Fund is expected to channel public resources toward areas where service gaps are more pronounced and where intervention is more urgent. In theory, this gives the mechanism considerable policy value, aligning it with international guidance on equity-oriented social protection systems (World Bank, 2022; UNDP, 2022).

At the same time, this logic makes the effectiveness of the Fund highly dependent on planning quality and municipal readiness. A decentralized financing mechanism can only perform well if institutions are able to conduct needs assessments, define priorities, and implement services effectively (State Social Service, 2024; World Bank, 2022). This reflects broader findings from social protection reform processes in transitioning systems, where capacity constraints at the local level significantly shape outcomes (UNDP, 2022).

The National Social Protection Strategy 2024–2030 reinforces this understanding. The strategy places strong emphasis on integrated social care, expansion of community-based services, improved geographical coverage, and strengthened coordination and monitoring mechanisms (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2024; Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2024). In line with international child protection frameworks, it supports a shift from institutional care toward preventive and family-based services (UNICEF Albania, 2016; UNICEF, 2021).

This broader policy environment is especially relevant for children and families. Child- and family-centered services require sustained investment in preventive and supportive measures, not only crisis response.

International evidence highlights that effective child protection systems rely on integrated services, early intervention, and strong local coordination mechanisms (UNICEF, 2021; UNICEF Albania, 2016). In this sense, the Social Fund has the potential to act as an enabling mechanism for services that prevent institutionalization, support parenting, and strengthen family resilience.

However, the governance significance of the Social Fund also reveals a structural tension. While the Fund encourages local initiative, it still operates within a highly centralized policy environment in which ministries and national agencies retain major responsibilities for standards, eligibility rules, and oversight (Law No. 121/2016; Council of Europe, 2020). This dual structure reflects a common challenge in decentralized social protection systems, where policy responsibility is shared but capacity and authority remain unevenly distributed (UNDP, 2022).

For this reason, the Social Fund should be understood as both a financing instrument and a governance instrument. It redistributes resources but also structures relationships between central and local authorities, and between policy design and service delivery. Its effectiveness depends not only on financial allocation but also on institutional coordination, administrative capacity, and the broader governance environment.

### 3.2. Contribution to the development of community-based and integrated services

One of the strongest arguments in favor of the Social Fund is that it has created real opportunities for the development and consolidation of community-based services. Official monitoring evidence suggests that the mechanism has supported a diverse set of services and has encouraged municipalities to establish or maintain local responses that might otherwise

have remained weak or absent (State Social Service, 2024). This is particularly important in a context where community-based and preventive services have historically been less developed than residential and crisis-oriented responses.

The child- and family-centered relevance of this development is clear. Community-based services are essential because they make support more accessible, reduce reliance on institutional solutions, and create space for interventions that address children's needs within their family and social environment. International child protection standards emphasize that effective systems should prioritize family-based care, early intervention, and community-level support structures (UNICEF, 2021; UNICEF Albania, 2016). In this sense, the Social Fund contributes not only to service expansion, but also to a gradual shift in service philosophy.

The policy framework of the National Social Protection Strategy 2024–2030 supports this interpretation. The strategy explicitly links social care reform with decentralization, integrated services, community provision, and the transformation of residential care (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2024; Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2024). It also aligns with international guidance on deinstitutionalization and community-based care models (UNICEF, 2021; Council of Europe, 2020). This alignment is important because it positions Social Fund–financed services within a broader systemic transition rather than as isolated local initiatives.

Monitoring evidence from the State Social Service indicates that services financed through the Social Fund have, in several cases, become functional and consolidated over time (State Social Service, 2024). This suggests that the mechanism has contributed to operational continuity rather than only

short-term or pilot interventions. In several instances, services supported through the Fund have remained active across reporting cycles, indicating a degree of institutional stabilization at the local level.

The Social Fund also appears to have encouraged a wider interpretation of local social service provision. Rather than limiting municipalities to residual or emergency-oriented responses, the mechanism supports the development of broader local social policy functions. This includes the creation of new services tailored to specific local needs, particularly for children and families in vulnerable situations. From a governance perspective, this reflects a shift toward more proactive and preventive local welfare approaches, consistent with decentralized service delivery principles (World Bank, 2022; UNDP, 2022).

Another positive contribution lies in the way the Fund can support local service integration. Although integration remains uneven in practice, the financing structure creates opportunities for coordination among municipal departments, education services, health actors, child protection structures, and non-public providers. International evidence highlights that integrated service delivery is a key requirement for effective child and family welfare systems, particularly in decentralized contexts (UNDP, 2022; UNICEF, 2021). In this sense, the Fund may be seen as supporting more interconnected forms of social intervention at the local level.

The strategic targets set at national level also illustrate the direction of reform. The National Social Protection Strategy includes objectives related to expanding geographical coverage, strengthening case management systems, improving service coordination, and advancing deinstitutionalization (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2024). These targets reflect a systemic approach to service development, where

financing instruments such as the Social Fund are expected to enable structural change rather than fragmented interventions.

Still, it is important not to overstate these gains. Community-based service development does not necessarily imply uniform quality, equal accessibility, or consistent professional capacity across municipalities. International experience in decentralized social protection systems shows that disparities in local capacity often translate into uneven service outcomes (World Bank, 2022; UNDP, 2022). Nevertheless, the available evidence supports the conclusion that the Social Fund has made a meaningful contribution to expanding and consolidating community-based services for children and families in Albania.

### 3.3. Institutional coordination and implementation gaps

The Social Fund occupies an important place in Albania's social care architecture because it links financing with local responsibility. Law No. 121/2016 defines social care services as part of an integrated system intended to respond to the needs of individuals, families, and groups in vulnerable situations. Within this framework, the law establishes the Social Fund as a mechanism through which financial support is secured for local government units in order to improve the standards and administrative capacities of existing services, create new services, and support the development of social policies (Law No. 121/2016; Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2018). This legal design is important because it positions the Fund as more than a technical budgetary tool. It connects local needs, public financing, and service development in a single policy mechanism.

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implementers of centrally defined services, but as actors expected to identify local needs, prepare proposals, administer services, and gradually strengthen local service systems. This approach is consistent with broader reform trends in Albania, where the local level has increasingly been assigned responsibility for planning and delivering social care services (Council of Europe, 2020; UNDP, 2022).

A second implication is that the Social Fund embodies a selective and strategic allocation logic. The legal and regulatory framework links the transfer of funds to criteria such as need and local priorities (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2018; Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2024). This means that the Fund is expected to channel public resources toward areas where service gaps are more pronounced and where intervention is more urgent. In theory, this gives the mechanism considerable policy value, aligning it with international guidance on equity-oriented social protection systems (World Bank, 2022; UNDP, 2022).

At the same time, this logic makes the effectiveness of the Fund highly dependent on planning quality and municipal readiness. A decentralized financing mechanism can only perform well if institutions are able to conduct needs assessments, define priorities, and implement services effectively (State Social Service, 2024; World Bank, 2022). This reflects broader findings from social protection reform processes in transitioning systems, where capacity constraints at the local level significantly shape outcomes (UNDP, 2022).

The National Social Protection Strategy 2024–2030 reinforces this understanding. The strategy places strong emphasis on integrated social care, expansion of community-based services, improved geographical

coverage, and strengthened coordination and monitoring mechanisms (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2024; Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2024). In line with international child protection frameworks, it supports a shift from institutional care toward preventive and family-based services (UNICEF Albania, 2016; UNICEF, 2021).

This broader policy environment is especially relevant for children and families. Child- and family-centred services require sustained investment in preventive and supportive measures, not only crisis response. International evidence highlights that effective child protection systems rely on integrated services, early intervention, and strong local coordination mechanisms (UNICEF, 2021; UNICEF Albania, 2016). In this sense, the Social Fund has the potential to act as an enabling mechanism for services that prevent institutionalization, support parenting, and strengthen family resilience.

However, the governance significance of the Social Fund also reveals a structural tension. While the Fund encourages local initiative, it still operates within a highly centralized policy environment in which ministries and national agencies retain major responsibilities for standards, eligibility rules, and oversight (Law No. 121/2016; Council of Europe, 2020). This dual structure reflects a common challenge in decentralized social protection systems, where policy responsibility is shared but capacity and authority remain unevenly distributed (UNDP, 2022).

For this reason, the Social Fund should be understood as both a financing instrument and a governance instrument. It redistributes resources but also structures relationships between central and local authorities, and between policy design and service delivery. Its effectiveness depends not only on

financial allocation but also on institutional coordination, administrative capacity, and the broader governance environment.

### 3.4. Sustainability, unequal local capacity, and the limits of project-based development

Sustainability is perhaps the most important test of whether the Social Fund can produce lasting change. The monitoring evidence offers a mixed but instructive picture. On the positive side, services supported over several years appear in many cases to have remained operational and functionally consolidated. This suggests that the Social Fund has helped municipalities move beyond purely temporary interventions. Continuity matters greatly in social care because relationships, routines, and service trust are built over time (State Social Service, 2024).

At the same time, sustainability cannot be reduced to the fact that a service still exists. A service may remain open while still facing staffing shortages, procedural weaknesses, unclear eligibility criteria, or inadequate integration with other local structures. True sustainability includes financial continuity, professional stability, administrative clarity, and the ability to adapt to changing needs (World Bank, 2022; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022).

A central issue is financial dependency. If services rely too heavily on initial project-based or earmarked support without being progressively anchored in municipal planning and budget commitments, their long-term future remains uncertain. This does not mean that the Social Fund is ineffective. On the contrary, it has often played a catalytic role by making service creation possible. However, catalytic financing is not the same as a fully institutionalized financing model. The transition from funded initiative to sustainable local service is one of the main policy challenges

identified in the Albanian context (Council of Europe, 2020; World Bank, 2022).

This challenge becomes more visible when considered in relation to child- and family-centered work. Services for children and families often require continuity because needs do not disappear within a short project cycle. Parenting support, family strengthening, psychosocial counselling, disability-related support, day services, emergency accommodation, and case coordination all require stable structures. Children's development and family functioning unfold over time, and interruptions in service availability can have serious consequences (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2021; UNICEF Albania, 2016).

Unequal local capacity further complicates sustainability. Municipalities differ in their ability to absorb funds, retain staff, and coordinate institutions, and mainstream services after initial support. In stronger municipalities, Social Fund financing may help deepen an already developing service system. In weaker municipalities, it may produce services that exist formally but remain vulnerable to staff turnover, administrative overload, and weak institutional embedding. This capacity gap raises important equity questions. A national mechanism intended to support social service development may inadvertently reproduce territorial inequality if local capacity is not strengthened alongside financing (World Bank, 2022; UNDP, 2022).

The strategic framework itself acknowledges the importance of capacity, monitoring, and implementation structures. The National Social Protection Strategy 2024–2030 highlights the need to strengthen human resources, improve data systems, broaden the use of the social services registry, and expand assessment and referral mechanisms across municipalities

(Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2024; Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2024).

Sustainability also depends on the relationship between municipal political commitment and service development. Social services often compete with other local priorities, especially in municipalities facing limited fiscal space and broader development pressures. Without sustained political support at local level, services for children and families may remain vulnerable even when they are legally grounded and professionally justified (Council of Europe, 2020).

A further dimension of sustainability concerns standards and accountability. Where services operate without formally approved local criteria, incomplete data reporting, or insufficient staff training, their continuity may mask underlying fragility. In other words, continuity without institutional strengthening is not enough. A child- and family-centered service system must be sustainable in both quantitative and qualitative terms (UNDP, 2022).

These findings suggest that the Social Fund should not be interpreted as a self-sufficient solution. Its contribution is substantial, but its longer-term impact depends on complementary investments in local capacity, workforce development, digital and administrative systems, and municipal ownership. If these supporting conditions are not strengthened, the mechanism may remain highly valuable but only partially transformative.

### 3.5. Policy implications: from funding services to building local child- and family-centered systems

The Albanian experience with the Social Fund offers several wider lessons for social policy. The first is that financing mechanisms matter not only because they provide money, but because they shape incentives and

institutional behavior. The Social Fund has helped place local social service development on the municipal agenda and has supported the emergence of a broader service landscape. This is a significant achievement in a policy area where local service provision has historically been uneven.

The second lesson is that service development should be understood systemically. For children and families, the effectiveness of a service depends not only on what happens within the service itself, but also on how that service connects to other institutions and to the wider local support environment. A child- and family-centered approach therefore requires policymakers to think beyond funding individual services and toward building coordinated local systems of support.

The third lesson concerns the relationship between reform and implementation. Albania's current strategic and legal framework clearly signals a commitment to integrated, community-based, and deinstitutionalizing approaches. Yet implementation evidence shows that the translation of these goals into local practice remains uneven. The Social Fund is one of the main instruments through which this translation occurs, which makes its design and implementation especially important.

From a policy perspective, at least four implications emerge. First, financing through the Social Fund should continue to priorities services that prevent institutionalization and strengthen family and community responses. Second, greater attention should be given to municipal capacity-building, especially in planning, data management, service standards, and case coordination. Third, clearer accountability and role definition are needed so that funded services are not weakened by organizational overlap or ambiguous responsibilities. Fourth, sustainability strategies should be

built into service financing from the outset, including expectations regarding municipal ownership, co-financing, staffing continuity, and integration into local planning frameworks.

Ultimately, the Social Fund has opened a practical pathway toward more localized and responsive social protection. The next step is to ensure that this pathway leads not only to the presence of services, but to the consolidation of child- and family-centered local systems capable of addressing vulnerability in a preventive, coordinated, and sustainable manner.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper examined the role of the Social Fund in the development of child- and family-centered social protection services in Albania. Using a qualitative desk-review methodology and secondary data from legal, policy, and monitoring sources, the analysis focused on three dimensions: service integration, institutional coordination, and sustainability.

The paper found that the Social Fund has played an important enabling role in the expansion and consolidation of local social care services. By supporting municipalities in improving existing services and creating new ones, it has contributed to a broader shift toward community-based and more integrated forms of intervention. This is especially relevant for children and families, whose needs often require preventive, multidisciplinary, and locally accessible responses. In this sense, the Social Fund has helped translate national reform priorities into practical service development at the local level.

At the same time, the paper found that the Fund's effectiveness remains constrained by several persistent challenges. These include overlapping staff roles, incomplete use of the electronic social services registry, gaps

in formal service criteria and local approval procedures, training needs, and unequal municipal capacity. Although monitoring evidence shows that many Social Fund-supported services have remained operational and consolidated, continuity alone does not guarantee full sustainability. Services are more likely to generate long-term impact when financing is accompanied by clear governance arrangements, professional development, reliable data systems, and strong municipal ownership.

The paper contributes to current debates by arguing that the Social Fund should be understood not only as a financing mechanism, but as a governance instrument within Albania's decentralized social protection reform. Its value lies in the way it can connect resources, policy priorities, and local action. However, its transformative potential depends on whether the wider institutional environment is able to support integrated and sustainable service systems.

The main limitation of the study is that it is based on secondary sources and does not include interviews, case studies, or direct beneficiary perspectives. As a result, it cannot fully capture how children, families, or local professionals experience the services supported by the Social Fund in practice. Future research could address this gap through comparative municipal case studies, interviews with frontline professionals, and research focused on service users' perspectives.

For policy and practice, the findings suggest that Albania should continue to strengthen the Social Fund while moving beyond a narrow understanding of funding as an end in itself. Future efforts should focus on reinforcing municipal planning capacities, clarifying service roles and accountability, strengthening inter-institutional coordination, expanding the use of data and monitoring systems, and embedding sustainability

requirements into the design of funded services. Only through such measures can the Social Fund more fully support a social protection system that places children and families at the center of public intervention.

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# Beyond Institutional Closure: An Ecosystemic Reading of Institutionalisation as the Default Emergency Response in Albania's Child Protection System

*Prof.Asoc.Dr. Izela Tahsini*

*Department of Social Work and Social Policy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana*

*izela.tahsini@unitir.edu.al; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3177-9585*

*Msc. Julinda Vokopola (PHD candidate)- Nisma për Ndryshim Shoqëror ARSIS;*

*Department of Social Work and Social Policy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana*

*julivokopola@gmail.com*

**Abstract**

This paper examines child institutionalisation in Albania beyond the closure or transformation of residential institutions, focusing on why institutional placement continues to function as the most readily available emergency response, and in some cases the only immediately available protection mechanism, within the child protection system. Guided by an ecosystemic perspective, the study analyses institutionalisation as the outcome of interactions across policy, service, institutional, family, and community levels. Methodologically, the paper draws on documentary and administrative evidence from the emergency child protection service of NISMA ARSIS for the period 2021 - 2025, including service records, case documentation, and database data on accommodated children. It examines children's pathways following emergency placement, with particular attention to return to family or/and placement in residential care services.

The paper contributes to debates on deinstitutionalisation in Albania by exploring why, despite reform efforts, institutionalisation remains the default or most immediately available response in many emergency cases. It highlights implications for prevention, family support, alternative care, intersectoral coordination, and the strengthening of community-based child protection responses.

***Keywords:*** *deinstitutionalisation; child protection; institutionalisation; emergency response; ecosystemic perspective; Albania*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background and context

Deinstitutionalisation has become one of the central orientations of contemporary reforms in the field of child protection. In its broader sense, it is not limited to the closure or transformation of residential institutions but involves the development of forms of care that rely more strongly on family, community, and integrated locally based services. This approach is grounded in international child rights standards and in the Guidelines for Alternative Care, which emphasise that the separation of a child from the family should be a measure of last resort and that states should strengthen family and community-based alternatives (United Nations, 1989; United Nations General Assembly, 2010). In the same vein, the international literature treats deinstitutionalisation as a process of shifting from institutional care to solutions that support children's development and well-being in more family-like and sustainable environments (van IJzendoorn et al., 2020; Goldman et al., 2020; Harlow, 2022).

In Albania, child protection has developed within the broader framework of social service reforms and efforts to strengthen institutional response mechanisms for children in need of protection. Law No. 18/2017 "On the

Rights and Protection of the Child" has consolidated the basis for the protection of children's rights and the functioning of protection mechanisms, while UNICEF analyses highlight both the progress made and the continuing need to strengthen services and coordination in practice (Albania, 2017; UNICEF Albania, 2021; Albania, 2021). Nevertheless, even within this reform-oriented context, an important question remains: whether children in emergency situations genuinely have access to immediate and safe family or community-based alternatives. This is the starting point of the present paper, which examines deinstitutionalisation not only as a question of the existence of residential institutions, but also as a question of the concrete pathways offered to children when they require emergency protection (Goldman et al., 2020; Harlow, 2022).

**1.2 Research problem and objectives**

The central problem addressed in this paper lies in the fact that reforms oriented towards deinstitutionalisation do not automatically create alternative forms of protection for children in crisis. Even within a reform-oriented context, emergency practice may continue to rely on residential solutions, particularly when family and community-based alternatives are limited or cannot be mobilised in a timely manner (Goldman et al., 2020; Harlow, 2022). In this sense, institutionalisation appears not only as a legacy of earlier care models, but also as a pattern that may be reproduced in practice through the way the system responds to emergency situations.

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to analyse emergency accommodation pathways for children in Albania during the period 2021-2025, in order to examine whether and how residential care continues to function as one of the most readily available responses beyond the formal process of closing or transforming institutions. More specifically, the paper

seeks to analyse data from the emergency service on children accommodated without their parents presents, to examine the pathways offered after emergency accommodation, to interpret these pathways through an ecosystemic perspective, and to discuss what they reveal about deinstitutionalisation and the functioning of the child protection system in Albania.

To address this aim, the study is guided by three research questions:

(1) What patterns emerge in children's emergency accommodation and in the alternatives offered to them after accommodation during the period 2021-2025?

(2) To what extent does residential care remain present in comparison with family-based alternatives and other post-accommodation outcomes?

(3) What do these patterns reveal, from an ecosystemic perspective, about the strengths and gaps of the child protection system in Albania?

**1.3 Significance of the study**

The significance of this paper lies in its shift of attention from deinstitutionalisation as a formal reform of residential institutions to its analysis as a concrete child protection practice. In this sense, the study contributes to theoretical debates on institutionalisation by proposing that deinstitutionalisation should be understood through the actual pathways made available to children following emergency intervention, rather than only through the transformation of institutional structures. It therefore treats institutionalisation not merely as a matter of care arrangements, but also as the outcome of interactions among policy, services, family, and community (van IJzendoorn et al., 2020; Goldman et al., 2020).

At the same time, the paper has practical and policy relevance, as it helps explain why emergency mechanisms may continue to direct children

towards residential care even within a reform context formally oriented towards deinstitutionalisation. In doing so, it provides a basis for reflection on the need to strengthen prevention, family support, family- and community-based alternatives, and inter-institutional coordination. Methodologically, the paper also supports the value of practice-based research by showing how evidence generated through service practice can make analysis more useful for both professional practice and policymaking (Green, 2008; Kelly et al., 2020).

### 1.4 Theoretical relevance and policy/practice importance

This paper is grounded in two main conceptual pillars. First, it understands deinstitutionalisation as going beyond the closure of institutions, and instead as a process that requires the development of a continuum of care capable of preventing unnecessary separation of children from their families and creating appropriate family and community-based alternatives (United Nations General Assembly, 2010; Goldman et al., 2020; Harlow, 2022). Second, it draws on an ecosystemic perspective, according to which decisions and outcomes related to child protection are shaped by the interaction of factors operating simultaneously at several levels, including policy, service organisation, responsible institutions, family, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theoretical lens enables the paper to move beyond the description of data towards a deeper interpretation of the systemic conditions shaping the pathways followed by children after emergency accommodation.

This theoretical relevance is directly linked to the paper's policy and practice significance. If residential care repeatedly emerges as one of the most readily available responses after the emergency phase, this may indicate not only the nature of the cases themselves, but also gaps in

prevention, family support, care alternatives, and inter-institutional coordination. This is particularly important in the Albanian context, where the legal framework treats any child identified without parental presence and in a situation of risk as a child in need of protection, yet important challenges remain in practice in ensuring sustainable protection pathways (Albania, 2017). In this sense, the study contributes to reflection on how the child protection system can become more coordinated, more preventive, and more oriented towards non-residential alternatives.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Study design and research approach

This paper is based on a practice-based empirical approach that combines the descriptive analysis of administrative data with their analytical interpretation through an ecosystemic perspective. This approach is appropriate for the present study because the research question is concerned not only with what reforms or policies prescribe at the normative level, but also with how the emergency response functions in child protection practice and with the concrete pathways followed by cases after accommodation. In this sense, the paper does not seek merely to describe the outcomes of children accommodated in the emergency service, but also to understand what these data reveal about the functioning of child protection mechanisms in Albania.

This approach makes it possible to build the analysis on evidence generated by the service itself and by everyday practice. Green (2008) argues that research becomes more relevant to practice when it relies not only on the logic of "evidence-based practice," but also on "practice-based evidence," that is, evidence emerging from practice itself. Similarly, Kelly et al. (2020) emphasise that practice-oriented and stakeholder-informed

research has particular value in the field of social work because it can contribute simultaneously to knowledge development, practice improvement, and policy orientation. In this respect, the choice of this approach gives the paper both empirical validity and direct relevance to debates on deinstitutionalisation, child protection system reform, and the need for non-residential alternatives following emergency intervention.

The study is non-experimental in nature and is based on existing data generated through the service's everyday practice. For this reason, it lies at the intersection of administrative data analysis and an analytical reading informed by the theoretical framework of deinstitutionalisation and the ecosystemic perspective. This methodological choice allows the authors to examine institutionalisation not only as the outcome of a particular case, but also as a phenomenon shaped by the interaction of factors operating at different levels of the child protection system.

**2.2 Data sources**

The main sources of data for this paper are the documents and administrative records of the emergency child protection service operated by NISMA ARSIS for the period 2021-2025, including service registers, case documentation, and the administrative database used to record, monitor, and document accommodated cases. These sources provide information on case admission to the service, length of stay, and the pathways followed after emergency accommodation.

Within the framework of this study, the analysis focuses on children accommodated in the emergency service without their parents present during their stay, according to the service's operational definition. This category may also include cases of unaccompanied foreign minors, who are identifiable in the database and may be used as an analytical

subcategory where this supports the interpretation of the data. However, the paper does not aim to analyse unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) as a distinct category; rather, it examines the pathways of children accommodated without parental presence in relation to the emergency response and their subsequent placement. This distinction is particularly important because a UNICEF Albania report highlights that UASC face specific legal and practical gaps in their protection pathways (Fullani & Alimehmeti, 2023), while Law No. 18/2017 "On the Rights and Protection of the Child" establishes the basis for the protection of every child in need of protection and for the functioning of the relevant mechanisms.

An important institutional limitation is that the Safe Emergency Shelter Service (SHSES) (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2022). at NISMA ARSIS does not accommodate children aged 0-3 without their parents present, due to the specific care needs of this age group. Consequently, the unit of analysis in this study includes only cases of children accommodated without parental presence who meet the service's criteria and capacity, primarily those aged 3-18. In this way, the data sources serve not only to document the volume of accommodated cases, but also to analyse the pathways children follow after emergency intervention, particularly whether they return to family, are placed in residential care, or move to other arrangements after leaving the service. This links evidence generated through everyday practice to the paper's central question of institutionalisation as one of the most readily available responses in emergency child protection practice.

### 2.3 Data collection and organisation

The process of data collection and organisation was based on the identification and systematisation of cases involving children

accommodated in the emergency service without parental presence during the period 2021-2025, using service registers, case documentation, and the administrative database. For the purposes of analysis, indicators were selected that made it possible to trace case trajectories following emergency accommodation, including the year of accommodation, the number of accommodated children, the referring authority, the outcome after accommodation, return to family or relatives, placement in residential care, and other outcomes that did not fall within these two main pathways. The referring authority was included as an indicator in order to understand which structures most frequently activate emergency intervention; in practice, referrals come primarily from local child protection structures, such as Child Protection Workers and Child Protection Units, but also from State Police structures (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2022).The category "other" refers to outcomes that do not constitute either family reunification or residential placement, such as accompaniment to court, police stations, or other structures that continue the handling of the case, as well as unstable exits from the service, including unauthorised departures; in some cases, this category is also linked to the procedural specificities of UASC, in line with UNICEF Albania's findings on protection gaps affecting this category in Albania (Fullani & Alimehmeti, 2023). An important analytical consideration is that, with the exception of unauthorised departures, a child's exit from the service is based on the decision of the referring authority, particularly child protection structures, indicating that post-accommodation pathways depend not only on the internal dynamics of the service but also on how responsible institutions assess and guide the subsequent management of the case. The database also allows for the identification of certain subgroups, including

unaccompanied foreign minors, which are used as analytical subcategories where this supports data interpretation, without constituting the main focus of the analysis.

**2.4 Analytical procedures**

Data analysis was conducted at two interrelated levels: descriptive and interpretive. At the descriptive level, administrative data for the period 2021-2025 were analysed in order to identify the number of accommodated children, referring authorities, and the main post-accommodation outcomes, by comparing patterns across years and the relative weight of return to family or relatives, placement in residential care, and other exit pathways. In this framework, post-accommodation outcomes were not treated simply as administrative exits from the service, but as part of a broader institutional decision-making process, since a child's departure from the service, except in cases of unauthorised exit depends on the decision of the referring authority, particularly child protection structures. At the interpretive level, the findings were read through an ecosystemic perspective, understanding post-accommodation alternatives not only as the result of the child's individual needs, but also as an expression of the interaction between structural, institutional, familial, and community factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This approach made it possible to examine residential care as one of the most readily available responses in emergency practice, in relation to gaps in prevention, family support, care alternatives, and inter-institutional coordination, while the use of identifiable subgroups, including UASC, served as a supporting element for understanding the heterogeneity of cases and the complexity of post-accommodation pathways.

## 2.5 Ethical considerations

As the study is based on data relating to children in need of protection, the analysis was guided by the principle of the child's best interests, in line with international child rights standards and the Albanian national framework for child protection (United Nations, 1989; Albania, 2017, Albania, 2021). The data were treated in aggregated form, without including identifying elements such as names, initials, detailed locations, or other sensitive information, and the service documentation was used solely for research purposes. The analysis does not aim to assess individual cases, professionals, or specific institutions, but rather to understand broader patterns and mechanisms affecting case pathways after emergency intervention, while avoiding absolute, stigmatising, or overgeneralised conclusions. Overall, the ethical approach seeks to balance the use of practice-based evidence with the responsibility to protect the dignity, safety, and rights of children, and the use of the data for research purposes was undertaken with the knowledge and institutional approval of the responsible structure within NISMA ARSIS.

## 2.6 Methodological limitations

This study is subject to several methodological limitations related to the scope of the service, the nature of administrative data, the heterogeneity of accommodated cases, and the boundaries of the unit of analysis. These limitations are taken into account in interpreting the findings and are discussed more fully in the concluding section.

# 3. Findings and Discussion

## 3.1 Emergency accommodation patterns, 2021-2025

The analysis of data for the period 2021-2025 shows that the emergency service continued to play an important role in providing immediate protection for children accommodated without parental presence. The number of accommodated cases fluctuated across the years: 40 cases in 2021, 76 in 2022, 33 in 2023, 45 in 2024, and 8 in 2025. These data indicate that the need for emergency intervention remained present throughout the study period, although with varying intensity from year to year.

A comparative reading of the data shows that 2022 represents the peak of emergency accommodations, while 2023 marks a significant decline, followed by an increase in 2024. These fluctuations should not be read simply as changes in case flow, but also as indicators of the dynamic nature of emergency practice itself, which is shaped by institutional, social, and organisational factors. In this sense, emergency accommodation does not appear as a sporadic intervention, but rather as a continuing component of the child protection mechanism.

The figures for 2025 should be interpreted with caution, as the lower number of cases does not necessarily reflect a decline in the need for emergency accommodation, but also the financial constraints that affected the service's capacity during that period. Overall, these trends show that the emergency service remained an important protective response throughout 2021-2025 and provide the empirical basis for analysing the pathways followed by children after emergency accommodation.

| Year | Number of accommodated children |
|---|---|
| 2021 | 40 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 2022 | 76 |
| 2023 | 33 |
| 2024 | 45 |
| 2025 | 8 |

**Table 1. Number of children accommodated in the emergency service, 2021-2025**

### 3.2 Post-placement pathways of accommodated children

The analysis of the pathways followed by children after emergency accommodation shows that departure from the service is distributed across three main categories: return to family or relatives, placement in residential care, and other exit pathways. During the period 2021-2025, these outcomes appear with different weights from year to year, indicating that case management after the emergency phase does not follow a single pattern.

In 2021, of the 40 accommodated children, 24 cases resulted in return to family or relatives, 13 were directed to residential care, and 3 fell into other categories. In 2022, of the 76 cases, 22 resulted in return to family or relatives, 19 in residential care, and 35 in other categories. In 2023, of the

33 cases, 13 returned to family or relatives, 16 were placed in residential care, and 4 were classified as “other.” In 2024, of the 45 cases, 14 returned to family or relatives, 23 were placed in residential care, and 8 fell into other categories. In 2025, of the 8 cases, 2 resulted in return to family or relatives, 5 in residential care, and 1 in another category.

Comparison across the years shows that the distribution of exit pathways is not balanced. In 2021, family-based pathways outweighed residential care, but this pattern did not continue in subsequent years. In 2023 and 2024, placement in residential care exceeded return to family, while in 2025, despite the smaller number of cases, residential care remained the most frequent outcome. This suggests that residential care continues to carry significant weight in the pathways followed after the immediate protection phase.

Particular attention should be paid to the high weight of the “other” category in 2022. This category is not homogeneous, as it includes situations that are classified neither as family reunification nor as placement in residential care. In that year, its weight was mainly linked to the number of UASC who left the emergency service without authorisation, indicating that not all exits from the service represent a stable protection solution. The “other” category also includes cases involving accompaniment to court, police stations, or other structures that continue case handling, as well as other unstable exits from the service. This makes more visible the complexity of emergency practice and the gaps in continuity of care, especially for UASC (Fullani & Alimehmeti, 2023).

Overall, the data show that children’s post-accommodation pathways are not evenly distributed, and that residential care remains a significant

outcome throughout the study period. This makes it necessary to examine more closely residential placement as one of the most readily available responses after emergency accommodation.

**Table 2. Pathways followed by children after emergency accommodation, 2021-2025**

| Year | Family / relatives | Residential care | Other |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2021 | 24 | 13 | 3 |
| 2022 | 22 | 19 | 35 |
| 2023 | 13 | 16 | 4 |
| 2024 | 14 | 23 | 8 |
| 2025 | 2 | 5 | 1 |

### 3.3 Institutional placement as a highly available emergency response

The data indicate that placement in residential care remains one of the most significant post accomodation pathways. Although post-accommodation outcomes vary from year to year, the weight of residential care in relation to family-based pathways remains considerable throughout the study period. This is evident not only in the number of cases directed towards residential care, but also in the fact that, in some years, this pathway appears more frequently than return to family or relatives.

In 2021, family-based pathways remained stronger than placement in residential care, which may suggest a relatively greater capacity to direct cases towards family solutions. However, this pattern does not continue in

the same way in the following years. In 2023, the number of cases directed towards residential care exceeded the number of cases returning to family or relatives, while in 2024 this difference became even more pronounced. Even in 2025, despite the lower number of cases, residential care remained the most frequent pathway after emergency accommodation. These data suggest that, for a considerable proportion of cases, residential placement continues to function as one of the most readily available responses in emergency child protection practice.

This does not mean that residential care is, in every case, the only or an inappropriate alternative. In some situations, it may constitute a necessary response due to the level of risk, the immediate absence of a safe family environment, or the inability to secure another alternative in time. Nevertheless, the weight that this pathway carries in the analysed data suggests that residential care does not appear only as an exceptional solution, but as one of the most usable and feasible options in practice, especially when family- and community-based alternatives are limited or cannot be activated in a timely manner (Goldman et al., 2020; Harlow, 2022).

In interpreting this pattern, it is also important to bear in mind that a child's departure from the emergency service, except in cases of unauthorised exit, takes place on the basis of the decision of the referring authority, particularly child protection structures. Consequently, the orientation of cases towards residential care should not be read only as a result of the conditions of the emergency service itself, but as part of a broader institutional process in which the decision is shaped by the system's actual capacity to offer other solutions. In this sense, the weight of residential

care reflects not only the needs of the case, but also the limits of the system in producing alternative forms of protection.

For this reason, residential placement in this paper is not treated simply as an administrative outcome following accommodation, but as an indicator of how the child protection system functions in practice. If a considerable number of cases continue to be directed towards residential care even within a reform context oriented towards deinstitutionalisation, this suggests that formal changes in policy or structures do not automatically translate into real and immediate alternatives for children in crisis. In this sense, the analysis of residential care as one of the most readily available responses after emergency accommodation constitutes a central element of the paper's overall argument.

### 3.4 Ecosystemic interpretation of institutional pathways

An ecosystemic reading of the findings shows that the pathways followed by children after emergency accommodation are not simply the result of the individual needs of each case, but reflect the interaction of factors at several levels of the child protection system. In this sense, the significant weight of residential care, as well as the presence of other unstable exit pathways, should not be understood solely as a consequence of the nature of the cases, but also as an indication of the extent to which the system succeeds, or fails, in producing immediate and appropriate protection alternatives. This is consistent with the ecosystemic approach, according to which institutionalisation should be understood as the product of interaction among policy, services, institutions, family, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

At the system and service levels, the findings suggest that weaknesses in preventive mechanisms and early intervention shape the way cases reach

and are handled within the emergency service. When intervention takes place under crisis conditions and with limited alternatives, the system tends to rely on the most readily available responses, making residential care one of the most accessible options. At the family and community levels, the absence of a safe family environment, a close support network, or sufficient professional, social, and economic support limits the possibility of directing cases towards family-based solutions. At the same time, at the level of care alternatives, the findings raise the question of whether the system actually a sufficient range of options between the emergency phase and residential placement has, which relates directly to the paper's central question concerning the real alternatives the system produces for children in crisis (United Nations General Assembly, 2010; Goldman et al., 2020). Another important element concerns inter-institutional coordination. Since a child's departure from the emergency service, except in cases of unauthorised exit, is based on the decision of the referring authority, post-accommodation pathways depend not only on the service's own capacity, but also on the way responsible institutions coordinate assessment, planning, and decision-making in relation to the case. In this sense, the presence of residential care as one of the most readily available responses may also be read as the result of gaps in coordination, continuity of intervention, and the activation of alternative responses. Thus, the ecosystemic interpretation shifts the analysis away from the question of whether a particular case "should" have gone into residential care, towards the broader question of what these orientations reveal about the way the child protection system functions in practice.

### 3.5 What do these findings mean for deinstitutionalisation in Albania?

The findings of this paper suggest that deinstitutionalisation in Albania cannot be assessed solely through the closure or transformation of residential institutions but must also be understood in terms of the real alternatives the system offers children when they are in need of emergency protection. In this sense, analysing the pathways followed by children after emergency accommodation shifts the focus from the formal structure of the system to the way it functions in practice (United Nations General Assembly, 2010; Goldman et al., 2020).

The considerable weight of residential care in post-accommodation pathways indicates that, despite the reform orientation towards deinstitutionalisation, the system continues to generate responses based on residential solutions in a significant number of cases. This does not mean that residential care is unnecessary in certain situations; however, when it repeatedly appears as one of the most readily available responses after the emergency phase, it becomes an indicator of the extent to which the system does or does not build other alternatives (Goldman et al., 2020; Harlow, 2022). At the same time, the weight of the "other" category—especially when linked to unstable exits or interruptions in continuity of care—shows that the challenge of deinstitutionalisation is not limited to reducing reliance on residential care, but also involves ensuring stable and coordinated pathways after the emergency phase.

Overall, the findings suggest that deinstitutionalisation in Albania remains a partial process when viewed from the perspective of emergency practice. Progress should not be measured only by structural changes, but by what the system is actually able to provide in practice as protection pathways for children in crisis. In this sense, the key question is not only how many

institutions are closed, but whether children genuinely have alternatives other than pathways that direct them towards institutional care.

### 3.6 Implications for policy and practice

The findings of this study have direct implications for both child protection policy and the practice of emergency services and care alternatives in Albania. If residential care continues to appear as one of the most readily available pathways after emergency accommodation, this suggests that the challenge of deinstitutionalisation is not limited to transforming existing institutions, but also concerns the system's capacity to produce real and immediate alternatives for children in crisis. In this sense, the findings point to the need to understand deinstitutionalisation not simply as a structural reform, but as a process that requires a functional continuum of protection, from prevention to emergency intervention and to sustainable solutions after leaving the service.

At the policy level, this implies strengthening preventive services, family support, and family- and community-based alternatives, so that the system does not rely disproportionately on residential care (Albania, 2017; UNICEF Albania, 2021). At the practice level, the findings highlight the need for stronger inter-institutional coordination, as well as more sustainable follow-up and monitoring mechanisms after children leave the service, especially in cases marked by unstable exits or interruptions in continuity of care. Overall, the key implication is that progress in deinstitutionalisation should not be measured only by the formal reduction of residential institutions, but by the system's actual capacity to provide immediate, coordinated, safe, and sustainable protection pathways for children in crisis.

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1 Summary of main findings

This paper examined the pathways followed by children accommodated without parental presence in the emergency service of NISMA ARSIS during the period 2021-2025, with the aim of understanding whether and how residential care continues to function as one of the most readily available responses in emergency child protection practice. The analysis showed that emergency accommodation remains an important component of the child protection system, even though the number of cases varies from year to year. It also showed that post-accommodation pathways are not distributed evenly and that residential care carries considerable weight among post-exit outcomes, exceeding family-based pathways in some years. The presence of the "other" category showed that not all exits from the service translate into stable protection solutions, particularly when they are linked to other institutional processes or to interruptions in continuity of care. Overall, the findings suggest that emergency intervention does not automatically produce sustainable family or community-based alternatives and that, in a significant number of cases, the system continues to direct children either towards residential care or towards other pathways that are not fully stabilised. In this sense, the analysis supports the paper's central argument that deinstitutionalisation should be assessed not only through the formal transformation of institutions, but also through the real alternatives the system is able to offer children in crisis after the emergency phase.

### 4.2 Contributions to knowledge and practice

The main contribution of this paper lies in shifting the analysis of deinstitutionalisation from the formal level of institutional closure or transformation to the level of everyday child protection practice. At the theoretical level, it offers an ecosystemic reading of institutionalisation, treating residential care not only as the outcome of the needs of a particular case, but also as the product of interactions among policy, services, institutions, family, and community. At the practical and policy levels, the study helps explain why emergency mechanisms may continue to reproduce institutional pathways even within a reform context formally oriented towards deinstitutionalisation, highlighting the need to strengthen prevention, family support, family- and community-based alternatives, and inter-institutional coordination. The use of data generated through the everyday practice of an emergency service also gives the paper direct value for professional practice and institutional reflection on improving child protection mechanisms in Albania.

### 4.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, it is based on data from a single service, which means that the results cannot be automatically generalised to the entire child protection system, even though the service represents a critical point of emergency intervention at national level. Second, the administrative nature of the data does not always allow for a full reconstruction of the complexity of each case, particularly in relation to contextual factors, decision-making processes, and the longer-term continuity of intervention. Third, the category of children accommodated without parental presence is not fully homogeneous, as it may include subgroups with different profiles and protection needs, including

unaccompanied foreign minors. Fourth, the study does not always allow for a full reconstruction of post-exit trajectories, especially in repeated cases, where re-entry into the service may indicate gaps in the continuity or adequacy of protection responses. Fifth, the 2025 data should be interpreted with caution, as the lower number of recorded cases reflects not only demand patterns but also financial constraints affecting the service's capacity during that period. Finally, the unit of analysis is shaped by the service's own eligibility criteria, as it does not accommodate children aged 0–3 without parental presence due to the specific care needs of this age group. Despite these limitations, the study provides an important basis for understanding the relationship between emergency child protection practice, children's post-accommodation pathways.

### 4.4 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the main recommendations relate to:

- further strengthening preventive services and family support so that the system can intervene earlier and avoid directing cases towards solutions that are more readily available but not the most appropriate in the long term;
- expanding family- and community-based alternatives that can be activated in a timely manner after emergency intervention;
- strengthening inter-institutional coordination, particularly between the emergency service, child protection structures, the police, and other actors responsible for ongoing case management;
- strengthening follow-up and monitoring mechanisms after children leave the emergency service;

- continuing scientific research, particularly comparative studies, in order to analyse not only other emergency services or other geographical areas, but also the longer-term continuity of cases after leaving the service. In particular, repeated cases, unstable exit pathways, and differences between case subgroups, including UASC, deserve further attention, as they may provide deeper insight into the limits of the system in offering sustainable protection solutions.

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# *A Philosophical-Analytical Examination of Heteronomy and Free Will*

***Dr. Jetmira Fekolli***

***Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana***

***jetmira.fekolli@unitir.edu.al***

***ABSTRACT***

From a philosophical standpoint, free will is a condition of morality. This paper seeks to analyse precisely this approach, according to which morality constitutes a demonstration of freedom. A will governed by the moral law is capable of acting in accordance with that law. The purpose of this study is to substantiate the recognition of free will from a practical perspective. Acting in conformity with morality serves as evidence that the human being possesses freedom.

The paper will address several central issues, including: the argument for free will; the good defined as good will; and free will as a postulate of practical reason.

The methodology employed will consist fundamentally of a philosophical-analytical examination of what free will represents within the contemporary philosophical tradition of thought. This study aims to develop a theoretical-practical framework within which reflections are articulated in order to argue for the predominant role of the will in morality.

***Keywords: free will, good will, practical reason, categorical imperative, duty, dignity.***

## Introduction

Freedom: what is it in itself, how is it constructed, how is it expressed, how is it realised? How are human principles, inspiration, and the choices a person makes in social action combined with the meaning of freedom? How does a person express and act with reason, through free will and in accordance with universal moral laws? Kantian ethics raised these questions and provided answers to issues that educate human beings with an inner immanence, in the form of the relationship between morality and law.

The first martyr in the struggle for a moral society was Socrates. He accepted death but did not abandon his moral principles or his mission to educate future generations in virtue. His free will was expressed in the following way: "I am free even to the point of self-sacrifice for my freedom!" He was not afraid when he declared before the judges of the court: "I am a hero who has fought for decades to save the souls of the Athenians, for a controlled and virtuous life." Socrates explicitly stated: "As long as I have life and strength, I will never cease practising and teaching philosophy."

Free will, according to Socrates, is a deep ethical conviction that saves a person from falling into vice and a life of excess, guiding both the individual and society towards behaviour aligned with philosophical reason.

Thomas Hobbes suggested that freedom consists in the absence of external obstacles preventing an agent from doing what they wish to do: "A free agent is one who can do as they wish and endure as they wish, and freedom is the absence of external impediments."

In *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume argued that free will (or "liberty", as he calls it) is simply "the power of acting or

not acting according to the determinations of the will: that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we can; if we choose to move, we likewise can... This hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to everyone who is not a prisoner and bound in chains."Such reasoning suggests that freedom is merely the ability to choose a course of action, and an agent is free if they are not prevented by external obstacles from completing that course of action.

**Methodology**

This study adopts a **philosophical-analytical and hermeneutic methodology** to investigate the relationship between free will and morality within the framework of Kantian moral philosophy. The research is qualitative and theoretical in nature, relying on conceptual clarification, critical analysis, and systematic interpretation rather than empirical observation or experimental methods. Its primary objective is to examine the philosophical foundations of the claim that free will constitutes a necessary condition for morality and that moral agency provides practical evidence of human freedom.

The methodological approach is based on a close reading and interpretation of primary philosophical texts, with particular emphasis on Kant's account of freedom, good will, practical reason, duty, and the categorical imperative. These texts are analyzed in dialogue with contemporary scholarly literature in moral philosophy to assess the coherence, significance, and continuing relevance of Kant's arguments. The study also incorporates comparative analysis where appropriate, highlighting convergences and divergences between Kant's conception of freedom and selected contemporary philosophical interpretations.

Conceptual analysis serves as the principal methodological tool, enabling the clarification of key notions such as free will, autonomy, moral law, good will, duty, dignity, and practical reason. By examining the logical structure and interdependence of these concepts, the paper seeks to demonstrate that moral obligation presupposes the possibility of free choice and that the experience of duty reveals the practical reality of human freedom.

In addition, the study employs normative philosophical reasoning to evaluate the ethical implications of free will for moral responsibility and human dignity. Rather than merely describing existing theories, it critically reconstructs Kant's argument that the moral law is meaningful only if individuals are capable of acting autonomously. This approach allows the research to move beyond historical exposition toward a reasoned philosophical defense of the thesis that morality provides practical justification for affirming free will.

Finally, the methodology integrates descriptive, analytical, interpretative, and argumentative dimensions into a coherent theoretical framework. Through this integrated approach, the study aims to contribute to contemporary debates in moral philosophy by demonstrating that the concepts of freedom and morality are mutually dependent and that the autonomy of the will remains an indispensable foundation for ethical responsibility, human dignity, and rational moral action.

1. **The Concept of freedom and its connection with the good will as a postulate of practical reason**

The Kantian argument for free will can be presented in two fundamental steps: first, morality implies rationality, and second, rationality implies free will. To understand this connection, we must begin with Kantian

metaphysics, which explains the possibility of knowledge through the distinction between the phenomenal world and the noumenal world.

The phenomenal world is the world of empirical experience, where objects appear to us as they are perceived through our senses. It is related to the appearance of things. In contrast, the noumenal world concerns things as they are in themselves, independent of the way they appear to us (Kant I., 2012).

These can be understood as two ontologically distinct spheres of reality. The faculty through which we acquire knowledge is reason, which is divided into pure reason and practical reason (Kant, 1997: 147). Pure reason deals primarily with theoretical and speculative questions, whereas practical reason is oriented towards action and moral requirements.

If we wish to understand free will, we must turn to practical reason. For Kant, freedom is a postulate of practical reason and, as such, belongs to the noumenal realm. As a transcendental idea, the postulate of freedom provides us with a way of thinking about the noumenal world, even though we cannot know it directly through experience. Freedom is considered a property of the will. An action is rational insofar as it originates from the will, while the will is meaningful only if it has the capacity to be free. Freedom and will are transcendentally free when they are able to give themselves the laws according to which they act (Singer, 2009: 57).

However, unlike morality, which can be grounded in practical intuition, freedom cannot be known directly nor grasped through intuition. It appears as a necessary premise of reason for a being that considers itself capable of acting according to laws it gives itself (Kant, [1798] 2006: 87). For this very reason, morality implies rationality, while rationality implies free will. In other words, morality depends on rationality, whereas rationality

presupposes the freedom of the will. Therefore, accepting morality requires accepting free will as well.

Morality is characterized by the existence of a moral law that addresses every rational being and commands it to act in a certain way. This law is universal and applies to everyone without exception. According to Kant, it is based on the autonomy of the will, meaning the will's capacity to give itself universal laws and to obey them. For this reason, morality appears as an imperative that addresses all individuals and, in particular, each person's will.

Kant argues that the moral law is a categorical imperative and not a hypothetical imperative. A hypothetical imperative applies only if an individual wishes to achieve a certain goal, whereas a categorical imperative is an unconditional command that applies to every rational being, regardless of its subjective desires or interests. This shows that morality constrains the will independently of individual inclinations. The categorical imperative takes the form: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

The moral law can exert authority over the will only because it originates from reason, while the will is the capacity to act in accordance with reason. For Kant, to reason and to live morally are two aspects of the same thing. A will that rejects the universal moral law is, in this sense, irrational. Both rationality and morality involve the will as the capacity to act according to the demands of reason (Kant, 2006: 92).

Among the different formulations of the categorical imperative, the one most closely related to the concept of freedom is the formula of autonomy. According to it, a rational being must act as if it were at the same time both

the legislator and the subject of the laws it gives itself. This autonomy of the will is identical with freedom. Therefore, an autonomous will is a free will.

The moral law, therefore, presupposes and at the same time determines a free will. From the perspective of practical reason, the concept of freedom appears as the condition that makes morality possible (Kant, 1997, pp. 119–128). Human beings, as rational beings, belong to the intelligible world and are capable of acting according to laws derived from reason. Meanwhile, as empirical beings, they belong to the phenomenal world and are subject to the laws of nature.

For Kant, there is no contradiction between natural determinism and moral freedom because they belong to different perspectives. As phenomena, human beings are subject to natural causality; as noumena, they are free. Human actions can be explained scientifically as phenomena, but their ultimate moral source belongs to the intelligible world. For this reason, freedom is not a phenomenon that can be observed or empirically proven. It is an idea of practical reason, a necessary condition for the autonomy of the will and for the possibility of morality (Sarkar, 2024, pp. 132–141).

In conclusion, the Kantian argument shows that morality presupposes rationality, rationality presupposes free will, and free will is understood as autonomy. Therefore, freedom is not an object of experience, but a transcendental idea that makes moral responsibility and rational action possible.

1. **Goodwill in the relationship between reason and nature**

According to Kant, morality requires that persons are always treated as ends in themselves and never merely as means for achieving the ends of others. This idea is expressed in the second formulation of the categorical

imperative, according to which rational nature is distinguished from all other kinds of nature because it is capable of setting ends for itself. It is precisely this capacity that makes the rational being a bearer of intrinsic value. Things have value only in relation to human purposes, whereas persons have dignity because they are free and rational beings, capable of self-determination through reason (Kant, 2012, pp. 119–128).

For Kant, freedom and moral responsibility are inseparable. We become aware of our freedom through the consciousness of responsibility. Wherever moral responsibility exists, freedom must also exist, since responsibility presupposes the possibility of acting otherwise than one has acted. Therefore, within the consciousness of responsibility there is also indirectly contained the consciousness of freedom (Kant, 1996).

A rational being is capable of setting its own ends and of guiding its actions through reason. For this reason, Kant formulates the principle according to which every rational being must be treated as an end in itself. This principle corresponds to the requirement that the maxim of our action must at the same time be able to serve as a universal law for all rational beings (Kant, 1997: 240). Thus, respect for the dignity of the person and the universality of moral law turn out to be two expressions of the same fundamental idea. Moral goodness is possible only when the rational being acts from a good will. Good will does not consist in the outcomes it produces, but in the motive from which it acts (Kant, 1997). An action has moral worth when it is performed from duty and for the sake of duty. To do what one ought simply because it is duty, without being guided by personal interests or inclinations, constitutes the essence of good will. In this sense, good will is independent of the consequences of action and of the benefits that may result from it.

Kant also argues that good will is a necessary condition for a being to be worthy of happiness. However, experience shows that in the empirical world there is no necessary connection between virtue and happiness (Kant, 2006). Often virtuous people are not happy, while immoral people may enjoy well-being. For this reason, practical reason postulates the possibility of a harmony between morality and happiness in the concept of the highest good (summum bonum). This requires the assumption of a cause beyond nature that can guarantee harmony between virtue and happiness.

In this context, the postulate of the existence of God appears. According to Kant, the concept of God is derived from the idea of moral perfection. The existence of God is not theoretically proven but is postulated by practical reason as a condition for the realisation of the highest good. The aim of this postulate is to give the moral subject the assurance that their effort to act morally is not in vain and that morality will not be rendered meaningless in the face of unfavourable conditions in the empirical world (Kant [1785] 1997). However, God is not the foundation of morality nor the authority that creates it. The moral law originates in practical reason itself and would retain its validity even without this guarantee. In Kantian philosophy, God appears as a guarantor of the correspondence between virtue and happiness, not as the source of moral obligation (O'Neill, 1997).

On the other hand, if we were only natural beings, instinct would be sufficient to guide our behaviour. However, the human being is not only a natural being; it is also a rational being. For this reason, moral action cannot be reduced to instinct or natural inclination. Instinct merely realises its own nature, whereas moral action requires rational self-determination.

A being becomes practically free only when it acts according to laws that reason gives to itself (Kant, 1996).

In this sense, the will is the practical expression of reason and can be understood as noumenal reason in action. Practical reason must be regarded as the author of its own principles, independent of external influences and empirical conditioning. Consequently, the will of a rational being must be regarded as free in itself. Only such a will is truly autonomous and, therefore, moral (Kant, 1996).

In conclusion, the rational being possesses dignity because it is capable of acting according to laws it gives to itself. This autonomy constitutes the essence of freedom and the foundation of morality. Good will, as an expression of this autonomy, acts from duty and not from interest, producing morally worthy actions without making their value dependent on their outcomes. Through this conception, Kant constructs an ethics grounded in the freedom, rationality, and dignity of the human being.

2. **The good defined as good will**

Kant begins the first section of his work *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* with a claim that is widely regarded as one of the most important postulates of his moral philosophy: "Nothing in the world, indeed nothing even beyond it, can be conceived which could be called good without qualification, except a good will." Because of the importance of this claim, most scholars consider the concept of good will to be the foundation of Kantian ethics as a whole. However, although Kant repeatedly returns to this notion throughout the development of his moral theory, he does not provide a direct and complete definition of it (Kant, 1996).

In his analysis, Kant argues that good will is the only thing that can be called unconditionally good (Kant, 1997). He acknowledges the existence

of many other goods, such as intelligence, courage, talent, or happiness, but emphasizes that their value is always conditional on how they are used. If these qualities fall into the hands of a person with a bad character, they can become instruments of evil. Unlike them, good will remains good in itself and does not lose its moral value, regardless of the circumstances or consequences it produces.

For Kant, the value of good will does not depend on the success of the goals it seeks to achieve. A good will may fail in its efforts to bring about positive results, but this failure does not diminish its moral worth (Kant, 2006: 87–95). Even when an action produces no benefit or is accompanied by unfavourable consequences, good will continues to retain its moral dignity. As Kant himself puts it, it "shines like a jewel in itself," maintaining its value independent of any external outcome.From this starting point, Kant shifts attention to concrete cases in which good will is manifested through moral action. In particular, he focuses on situations in which the individual is confronted with inclinations, desires, or interests that conflict with moral duty. It is precisely in these cases, he argues, that the true value of good will becomes most apparent, because the individual chooses to act not according to inclinations, but according to what he or she recognises as moral duty.

This connection between good will and duty constitutes one of the central pillars of Kantian ethics. Although interpretations differ, many scholars agree that acting from duty is the fundamental condition of good will. In this sense, moral action is not evaluated by its consequences but by its guiding motive. An action has moral worth only when it is performed out of respect for the moral law and not merely out of self-interest, happiness, sympathy, or other possible advantages.Good will is expressed through the

adoption of maxims that are consistent with the moral law. An individual possesses good will to the extent that the principles according to which they act can be reconciled with the requirements of morality. Conversely, when their maxims conflict with moral duty, their moral character is considered deficient. Since human beings are imperfect beings, their will is rarely entirely good or entirely evil; it usually contains a mixture of moral, non-moral, and morally neutral elements.

Kant argues that all other goods derive their value only if they are accompanied by a good will. Intelligence, talent, power, or happiness are not absolute values; they are valuable only insofar as they do not require the abandonment of moral principles. In this sense, good will is not merely one good among others, but the condition that gives value to all other goods. For this reason, it cannot be sacrificed in favour of any other end, however desirable it may appear.

Finally, Kant links the concept of good will to the idea of the moral law. As rational beings, humans are aware of moral obligations, which present themselves in the form of imperatives. Because personal desires and interests often conflict with these obligations, the moral law is experienced as a constraint on the will. However, it is precisely the willingness to act out of respect for this law, even when it conflicts with personal inclinations, that constitutes the most authentic expression of good will. Therefore, for Kant, an action gains moral worth only when it arises from duty and reflects the individual's commitment to obey the moral law in all circumstances.In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant attributes to metaphysics a fundamental role in grounding morality, seeking a priori principles upon which moral action is based. However, in *Critique of Practical Reason*, he grants ethics a special priority that cannot

be reduced or derived from any other discipline. In this sense, Kantian philosophy marks an important turning point in the history of Western metaphysical thought, as the problem of being appears in a privileged way as a moral problem. Metaphysics no longer aims only to explain the structure of reality, but also to illuminate the position of human beings within it and how they ought to act.

For Kant, an understanding of the ontological status of the human being is not achieved through speculative metaphysics about the nature of the world, but through the analysis of freedom and moral action. Human beings are not understood only as part of the natural order, but also as beings endowed with free will. Everything in nature acts according to laws that arise from its internal structure; its actions are determined by necessary causes. Human beings, however, cannot be entirely reduced to this phenomenal level. They also belong to the noumenal order, the world of rational beings, where action is determined not only by natural causality but also by moral autonomy. For this reason, the human being must be treated as a person and not as a thing.An important dimension of this conception appears in the essay *Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, where Kant formulates the motto of Enlightenment with the Latin expression *Sapere aude*—"dare to think." This call represents the ideal of the autonomous person who has the courage to use their own reason without the guidance of others. According to Kant, the state of intellectual immaturity is not the result of a lack of ability, but of a lack of courage to use one's reason independently. The exit from this state represents a process of emancipation through which the individual moves from passive use of reason to its free and critical exercise.

In this context, Kant distinguishes between the public and private use of reason. The public use of reason allows the individual to express themselves as a rational and autonomous being, contributing to free discussion on matters of general interest. Through this use, freedom of thought is realised and it becomes possible to overcome the state of immaturity. Freedom, in this sense, initially appears as an idea of reason, but one that guides action and can take concrete form in the moral and political life of the individual.The link between freedom and morality becomes even clearer in Kant's concept of duty. According to Kant, practical reason presents the individual with moral obligations that do not depend on subjective interests or inclinations. Moral action is not performed for the sake of personal gain but for the sake of duty itself. This means that the individual regards the moral law as a sufficient reason for action. However, such action presupposes the freedom of the subject, since without freedom there can be no moral responsibility. Although freedom cannot be theoretically proven by speculative reason, it must be assumed as a necessary condition of moral action.

The transition from theoretical reason to practical reason enables human beings to realise their highest moral interests. In this process appears the concept of good will, which arises from the rational nature of human beings. For Kant, will is nothing other than practical reason in action. It determines the ends of action and directs behaviour according to moral principles. For this very reason, the existence of the categorical imperative presupposes the existence of an absolute value that cannot be reduced to individual interests or desires.

The person, in Kantian philosophy, is defined as an autonomous being capable of giving itself the moral law. Autonomy constitutes the

fundamental characteristic of moral personality and distinguishes human beings from every object in the natural world. Through autonomy, the subject does not submit to an external law, but acts according to the law that reason gives itself. This capacity makes the person the source of moral universality and the foundation of a normative order that does not depend on empirical conditions. In this sense, humanity represents a distinct dimension of reality, organised according to moral law rather than the mechanisms of nature.Likewise, freedom is not presented as an empirically observable fact, but as a necessary requirement of moral law. Awareness of moral obligation leads the subject towards the acceptance of freedom as a condition for the possibility of ethical action. For this reason, moral law and freedom are inseparable concepts in the Kantian system. By considering metaphysics as a "natural tendency of reason", Kant places at the centre of philosophical reflection the question of human beings and the conditions of their moral existence. However, some contemporary interpretations have argued that his orientation towards the subject and the moral will shifts attention away from the traditional metaphysical question of being as such. From this perspective, Kantian metaphysics does not abandon the problem of being, but reformulates it through the concept of the autonomous subject and moral will. Being is no longer presented as an object of ontological speculation, but as a horizon revealed through freedom, duty, and the moral self-determination of the person.

### 3. Heteronomy and the Limits of Moral Agency

Kant's conception of freedom becomes clearer when contrasted with **heteronomy**, which represents the opposite of autonomy. Whereas autonomy refers to the will's capacity to legislate the moral law for itself through reason, heteronomy describes a will whose principles of action are

determined by external influences or empirical motives, such as desires, inclinations, emotions, social conventions, authority, or the pursuit of happiness. In a heteronomous will, the source of obligation lies outside reason itself, preventing the individual from acting as a genuinely self-legislating moral agent.

According to Kant, actions performed from heteronomous motives may conform to the moral law but lack genuine moral worth because they are not undertaken **from duty**. A person who tells the truth solely to preserve a good reputation or to avoid punishment acts in accordance with duty, yet the determining ground of the action is self-interest rather than respect for the moral law. By contrast, an autonomous will acts from the recognition that the moral law is rationally binding, independently of any anticipated consequences or personal advantages.

The distinction between autonomy and heteronomy is therefore fundamental to Kant's account of moral freedom. If the will is governed by empirical desires or external authorities, it is determined by factors beyond itself and cannot be regarded as genuinely free in the moral sense. Freedom is realised only when the will determines itself according to universal principles that reason gives to itself. In this respect, autonomy is not merely one characteristic of the will but the defining condition of moral agency.

Moreover, the rejection of heteronomy explains why Kant insists that morality cannot be grounded in happiness, utility, emotion, or divine command. Although such considerations may influence human behaviour, they cannot provide universally valid moral principles because they depend upon contingent circumstances or subjective preferences. Only the autonomous exercise of practical reason can generate unconditional obligations expressed by the categorical imperative. Consequently, moral

responsibility presupposes that rational agents possess the capacity to act autonomously rather than heteronomously.

The contrast between autonomy and heteronomy therefore reinforces the central thesis of this paper. Free will should not be understood as the unrestricted ability to choose among alternatives but as the rational capacity for self-legislation. A will governed by heteronomous motives remains subject to empirical causation, whereas an autonomous will expresses genuine freedom through obedience to the moral law that reason prescribes to itself. In this way, Kant identifies autonomy as the foundation of morality and regards heteronomy as the principal obstacle to authentic moral agency.

**CONCLUSION**

The study of the concept of free will in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant highlights the central importance that this notion holds in the construction of his ethical and metaphysical system. For Kant, freedom is not merely a capacity to choose between different alternatives or the ability to act according to individual desires. Such an understanding would reduce human beings to the level of natural inclinations and empirical impulses. Instead, Kant conceives freedom as the autonomy of the will, that is, the subject's capacity to give itself the moral law and to act in accordance with it. This autonomy forms the foundation of human dignity and moral responsibility, distinguishing human beings from every other entity in the natural world.

Throughout the analysis of Kant's main works, it becomes evident that the concept of free will cannot be understood in isolation from the notions of duty, moral law, the categorical imperative, and the good will. These concepts form an inseparable theoretical whole, within which freedom

appears as the condition for the possibility of morality. For Kant, moral action is not assessed by its consequences, but by the principle according to which it is performed. An action acquires moral worth only when it is carried out out of respect for duty and from the conviction that it accords with moral law. It is precisely here that the direct connection between free will and morality lies: a human being is free not when they follow their desires, but when they are able to subordinate them to the universal demands of reason.

One of the most important aspects of Kantian philosophy is the way in which it succeeds in reconciling freedom with moral obligation. At first glance, obligation may appear to restrict freedom, but for Kant the opposite is the case. Moral law does not represent an external imposition on the subject, but rather the expression of their own reason. For this reason, obedience to moral law does not constitute a loss of freedom, but rather its highest realisation. The moral subject is both the legislator and the executor of moral law, which makes autonomy the fundamental characteristic of the person.

Equally important is Kant's connection between freedom and the ontological status of human beings. He argues that human beings belong simultaneously to two realms: the phenomenal world, where everything is subject to the laws of nature and causality, and the noumenal world, where the subject can be thought of as free and autonomous. It is precisely this dualism that allows Kant to defend the idea of moral responsibility without denying the existence of determinism in nature. Human beings, as rational beings, are not merely products of natural causes, but also authors of their own moral actions.

Within this framework, the concept of the good will acquires special importance. Kant considers the good will to be the only thing that is good without limitation or condition. All other qualities, such as intelligence, talent, courage, or happiness, can acquire moral value only when directed by a good will. For this reason, the good will does not depend on the outcomes it achieves, but on its orientation towards moral law. Even when an action fails to achieve its intended goal, the moral value of the will remains intact. This makes Kantian ethics an ethics of moral intention rather than consequences.

Another important element highlighted in this discussion is the relationship between freedom and the Enlightenment. Through the famous motto *Sapere aude* – "dare to think" – Kant presents intellectual emancipation as a condition of moral emancipation. The emergence from a state of immaturity implies the ability to use reason independently and to take responsibility for one's own judgements and actions. In this sense, freedom is not only a moral category, but also a cultural and political ideal aimed at the development of the individual as an autonomous being.

The influence of Kant's theory of free will has been enormous in modern and contemporary philosophy. The concepts of autonomy, human dignity, moral responsibility, and the universality of ethical norms have had a direct impact on modern theories of human rights, political philosophy, and legal ethics. The idea that every person must always be treated as an end in themselves and never merely as a means continues to be one of the fundamental principles of democratic societies and the contemporary human rights order.

However, Kantian philosophy has also been the subject of numerous criticisms. Some authors have argued that the formalism of Kant's ethics

does not sufficiently take into account the concrete circumstances of moral action and the complexity of human life. Others have questioned the distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds, considering it difficult to justify theoretically. Despite these criticisms, the influence of Kantian thought remains unparalleled, as it offered one of the most powerful formulations of freedom as moral self-determination and as the basis of human responsibility.

In light of the analysis developed in this study, it can be concluded that free will constitutes the central axis around which Kant's entire practical philosophy is constructed. Freedom, autonomy, duty, moral law, and good will are concepts that complement and condition one another. Through them, Kant constructs a vision of the human being as a rational and moral agent, capable of transcending the constraints of nature and acting according to principles derived from reason. It is precisely this vision of the human being as an autonomous moral legislator that constitutes one of the most important legacies of modern philosophy.

In conclusion, the Kantian concept of free will remains today one of the most important references for philosophical reflection on morality, freedom, and human dignity. In a time when modern societies face numerous ethical, political, and technological challenges, Kant's idea that human beings must act according to universal principles of reason and respect every person as an end in themselves continues to offer valuable theoretical and practical guidance. For this reason, Kant's philosophy is not merely a historical moment in the development of philosophical thought, but an ongoing source of reflection on the meaning of freedom, responsibility, and human existence.

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# Healthy behaviors among teens in the city of Tirana

Dr. Jonida Haxhiu

Institute of Public Health

The Office of National System of Drugs Data

Tirana, Albania

Email: jonida.haxhiu@ishp.gov.al

**Abstract**

Adolescence represents a critical developmental stage during which lifelong health-related behaviors and habits are established. This study aims to examine healthy behaviors among teens in the city of Tirana by identifying the social, psychological, and environmental factors influencing lifestyle choices, nutrition, physical activity, mental health, and risk behaviors. The study is grounded in the Biopsychosocial Model and the Theory of Planned Behavior, which provide a conceptual framework for understanding the interaction between individual and social determinants of health behaviors.

A mixed-methods research design was employed, including structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with teens aged 13–18 years from public and private schools in Tirana. Findings indicate that family support, school climate, and health education positively influence healthy behaviors, whereas excessive technology use, sedentary lifestyles, and peer pressure contribute to unhealthy practices. The study highlights the importance of preventive interventions and evidence-based health promotion strategies targeting teens. The findings contribute to public health knowledge and provide recommendations for educational institutions, policymakers, and community-based programs focused on adolescent well-being.

**Keywords:** adolescence, healthy behaviors, public health, health education, well-being, Tirana

## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is widely recognized as one of the most formative and dynamic stages of human development, typically ranging from early adolescence (approximately 10–14 years) to late adolescence (15–19 years). During this period, individuals undergo profound biological, cognitive, emotional, and social transformations that shape their identity, autonomy, and long-term behavioral patterns.

Healthy behaviors during adolescence include regular physical activity, balanced nutrition, adequate sleep, effective stress management, positive social relationships, and avoidance of harmful substances such as tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. These behaviors are strongly associated with improved physical health outcomes, better mental health, enhanced cognitive performance, and higher overall quality of life.

In Albania, and particularly in the capital city of Tirana, teens are growing up in a context characterized by social transition, economic development, and cultural hybridization. Traditional family values coexist with modern individualistic influences, creating a complex environment that shapes youth behavior. At the same time, academic pressure, competition for educational success, and evolving labor market expectations place additional stress on teens. These conditions make it particularly important to study how young people in Tirana adopt and

The aim of this study is to explore healthy behaviors among teens in the city of Tirana and identify the key factors that influence these behaviors. Specifically, the study investigates physical activity levels, dietary habits,

technology use, sleep patterns, mental health status, family influence, peer relationships, and risk behaviors. By doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of adolescent well-being in an urban Albanian context and provides evidence to inform future health promotion strategies and educational policies.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Adolescent development and health behavior formation

Health behaviors established during adolescence tend to persist into adulthood, making this period crucial for preventive health interventions. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly two-thirds of premature deaths in adults are associated with behaviors initiated during adolescence, including tobacco use, poor diet, physical inactivity, and alcohol consumption. This highlights the importance of early intervention strategies aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles during this developmental stage.

### 2.2 The Biopsychosocial Model of Health

The Biopsychosocial Model, introduced by Engel (1977), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding health behaviors by integrating biological, psychological, and social determinants. Unlike purely biomedical models, the biopsychosocial approach recognizes that health outcomes are not solely determined by physical factors but are also shaped by emotional states, cognitive processes, and environmental conditions.

### 2.3. Theory of Planned Behavior and Adolescent Decision-Making

In adolescence, attitudes toward health behaviors are shaped by knowledge, beliefs, and personal experiences. Subjective norms refer to

perceived social pressure from peers, family, and society, which plays a particularly strong role during adolescence due to the importance of social belonging.

### 2.4. Physical activity and sedentary lifestyle

Physical activity is a fundamental component of adolescent health, contributing to cardiovascular fitness, musculoskeletal development, mental well-being, and cognitive performance. The WHO recommends at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day for teens. However, global evidence indicates a steady decline in physical activity levels, particularly in urban populations.

### 2.5. Nutrition and dietary patterns

Global studies indicate a shift toward unhealthy dietary patterns among teens, driven by fast food availability, aggressive marketing, peer influence, and lifestyle convenience. Skipping meals, particularly breakfast, is associated with reduced cognitive performance and increased fatigue.

In transitional societies, including Albania, dietary patterns are influenced by both traditional food culture and modern fast-food consumption trends, creating mixed nutritional behaviors among teens.

### 2.6. Mental health and emotional well-being

Research shows that mental health is closely linked to physical health behaviors. Teens experiencing emotional distress are more likely to engage in unhealthy eating, physical inactivity, substance use, and excessive screen time as coping mechanisms.

Social media use has also been associated with mental health outcomes, particularly through mechanisms of social comparison, cyberbullying, and fear of missing out (FOMO).

### 2.7. Peer influence and risky behaviours

Peer influence is one of the strongest determinants of adolescent behavior. Teens often prioritize peer acceptance, which can lead to both positive behaviors (e.g., sports participation) and negative behaviors (e.g., smoking, alcohol use).

Risk behaviors typically emerge during adolescence due to curiosity, sensation-seeking tendencies, and social pressure. Substance use, unsafe behaviors, and experimentation are often influenced by group dynamics rather than individual decision-making alone.

Preventive strategies focusing on peer education and social norm interventions have been shown to reduce risk behaviors among teens.

### 2.8. Family and school environment

Family support plays a crucial protective role in adolescent development. Open communication, emotional support, and parental involvement are associated with healthier behaviors and better psychological outcomes.

### 2.9. Research gap

Although international literature on adolescent health behaviors is extensive, there is limited comprehensive research in the Albanian context, particularly in urban centers such as Tirana. Most existing studies focus on isolated health issues rather than integrated behavioral analysis. This study addresses this gap by providing a multidimensional assessment of

adolescent health behaviors and their determinants in an urban Albanian setting.

## 3. Methodology

### Research design

This study employed a comprehensive mixed-methods research design in order to gain an in-depth and holistic understanding of healthy behaviors among teens in the city of Tirana. The mixed-methods approach was selected because it allows the integration of quantitative and qualitative data, enabling both measurement of behavioral patterns and exploration of underlying meanings, perceptions, and contextual influences.

The quantitative component provided structured and measurable data regarding adolescent health behaviors, including physical activity, dietary habits, sleep patterns, technology use, and risk behaviors. The qualitative component complemented these findings by exploring teens' subjective experiences, perceptions, motivations, and barriers related to healthy or unhealthy behaviors.

### Study population and sample

The target population of the study consisted of teens aged 13 to 18 years attending public and private secondary schools in the city of Tirana. This age group was selected because it represents a critical developmental period during which health-related behaviors are formed and consolidated. A total sample of 350 teens participated in the study. Participants were selected using a random sampling technique in order to ensure representativeness across different schools, socioeconomic backgrounds, and gender groups. Schools were selected to reflect a mix of urban districts within Tirana, ensuring diversity in environmental and social conditions.

The sample included both male and female teens, as well as students from different grade levels within secondary education. This allowed for the analysis of potential differences in health behaviors according to age, gender, and educational context.

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from both students and their parents or guardians prior to data collection. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and used solely for research purposes.

## Data collection methods

Data were collected using multiple methods in order to ensure methodological triangulation and improve the validity and reliability of findings. Three main instruments were used: structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and observational notes.

**Structured questionnaires**

The structured questionnaire was the primary quantitative instrument used in the study. It was designed specifically for the purposes of this research and included closed-ended questions covering several domains:

- Physical activity and exercise frequency
- Dietary habits and food consumption patterns
- Daily screen time and technology use
- Sleep duration and sleep quality
- Emotional well-being and perceived stress levels
- Exposure to and engagement in risk behaviors (smoking, alcohol use, etc.)

The questionnaire used a combination of multiple-choice questions and Likert-scale items in order to measure attitudes and behaviors. Likert-scale responses allowed participants to indicate levels of agreement or frequency regarding specific statements.

Before full implementation, the questionnaire was piloted with a small group of teens to ensure clarity, readability, and relevance. Minor adjustments were made based on feedback to improve comprehension and reduce ambiguity.

**Semi-structured interviews**

To complement the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a selected subgroup of participants. The interviews aimed to explore teens' personal experiences, motivations, and perceptions regarding health-related behaviors.

The interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on:

- Perceived importance of health and well-being
- Barriers to physical activity and healthy eating
- Influence of family and peers
- Experiences with stress and emotional challenges
- Role of social media and technology in daily life
- Attitudes toward risk behaviors

Interviews were conducted in a quiet and private setting within schools to ensure comfort and openness. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Notes were also taken during and immediately after interviews to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

**Observational data**

In addition to self-reported data, informal observational notes were collected within school environments. These observations focused on student behavior during breaks, social interactions, physical activity levels, and general engagement in school settings.

## Data collection procedure

Data collection was conducted in several stages. Initially, permission was obtained from relevant educational authorities and school administrations. After receiving institutional approval, schools were contacted and scheduled for data collection sessions.

On the day of data collection, researchers introduced the purpose of the study to participants and explained ethical considerations, including confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Students who agreed to participate completed the structured questionnaires during classroom sessions under researcher supervision.

Following questionnaire completion, selected participants were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Interviews were scheduled based on student availability and conducted in designated private spaces within schools.

The entire data collection process was carried out in a standardized manner to minimize bias and ensure consistency across different schools and participant groups.

## Data analysis

**Quantitative analysis**

Quantitative data obtained from questionnaires were coded and entered into a statistical software package for analysis. Data analysis included both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize key variables, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. These measures provided an overview of adolescent health behaviors across the sample.

Inferential statistical analyses were conducted to examine relationships between variables. Correlation analysis was used to explore associations between physical activity, screen time, dietary habits, and mental health indicators. In addition, comparative analyses were performed to identify differences based on gender and age groups.

The results of these analyses were used to identify patterns and trends in adolescent health behaviors in Tirana.

**Qualitative analysis**

Qualitative interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach involved several steps:

1. Transcription of interview recordings
2. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading
3. Initial coding of meaningful statements
4. Identification of recurring themes and sub-themes
5. Organization of themes into broader conceptual categories
6. Interpretation of findings in relation to research objectives and theoretical framework

Key themes identified included physical inactivity, digital dependency, emotional stress, family communication, peer influence, and coping strategies.

Participant quotations were selected to illustrate and support each theme, ensuring that teens' voices were directly represented in the findings.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were a central aspect of the research design and implementation. The study adhered to fundamental ethical principles, including respect for participants, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Parental consent was obtained for all participants under the age of 18.

All collected data were anonymized, and no personally identifiable information was recorded. Data were stored securely and accessed only by the research team.

Special attention was given to ensuring that participation did not cause psychological discomfort, particularly during discussions related to mental health and risk behaviors. Participants were free to skip questions they did not wish to answer.

## Methodological limitations

Despite the strengths of the mixed-methods design, several limitations should be acknowledged. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce recall bias or social desirability bias, particularly in relation to sensitive topics such as risk behaviors and mental health.

Furthermore, while the sample size was adequate for descriptive and correlational analysis, findings may not be fully generalizable beyond the urban context of Tirana or to rural adolescent populations in Albania.

Future studies could benefit from longitudinal designs, larger national samples, and the inclusion of objective health measures to complement self-reported data.

## 4. Results

The findings of this study provide an extensive and multidimensional understanding of adolescent health behaviors in the city of Tirana. The results integrate quantitative patterns and qualitative narratives in order to capture not only the prevalence of specific behaviors but also the lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual factors shaping adolescent lifestyle choices. Data were organized into major thematic domains including physical activity and sedentary behavior, nutrition and dietary habits, technology use, mental health and emotional well-being, family relationships, school environment, peer influence, sleep patterns, and risk behaviors. Participant quotations are embedded throughout to strengthen interpretation and illustrate real experiences.

Physical activity. Only 32.6% of participants reported engaging in at least 60 minutes of physical activity on five or more days per week, while 67.4% did not meet WHO recommendations.

Screen time. Approximately 71.1% reported more than 3 hours of daily recreational screen time.

Nutrition. 58.3% reported skipping breakfast at least three times per week, and 62.0% consumed fast food at least once weekly.

Sleep. 54.9% reported sleeping fewer than 8 hours per night.

Mental health. Moderate-to-high perceived stress was reported by 46.0% of participants.

Risk behaviors. 14.9% reported having tried smoking at least once, and 18.6% reported having consumed alcohol.

The survey showed that 71% of adolescents reported excessive screen time. Interview data suggest that academic pressure, social media engagement, and fear of missing out contribute to prolonged digital use.

### 4.1. Physical activity and sedentary behavior

The results indicate that physical activity levels among teens in Tirana are generally low, particularly outside school-based physical education classes. A dominant pattern observed was the replacement of physical activity with sedentary and screen-based behaviors. Many teens reported spending extended periods using smartphones, computers, or engaging in online entertainment.

One participant stated:

"After school I am usually too tired, so I just stay on my phone or watch videos. I know exercise is important, but I don't really do it." (P3)

Another participant explained:

"I used to play football more often, but now I mostly stay indoors because of school pressure." (P11)

Several teens emphasized academic workload as a key barrier. Private tutoring, homework, and exam preparation significantly reduced available leisure time.

"I finish school and then I have extra classes, so there is no time left for sports or going outside." (P18)

Gender differences were observed, with males reporting higher engagement in sports compared to females, who more often reported

preference for indoor or passive activities. Age differences also emerged, as older teens demonstrated reduced physical activity due to increased academic responsibilities.

Overall, the findings suggest a clear shift toward sedentary lifestyles, which may have long-term implications for physical health, obesity risk, and psychological well-being.

### 4.2. Nutrition and dietary habits

The study reveals widespread unhealthy dietary behaviors among teens. Fast food consumption, irregular meals, skipping breakfast, and frequent intake of sugary drinks and processed snacks were commonly reported.

One participant stated:

"I skip breakfast most days because I wake up late and don't feel hungry." (P6)

Body image concerns were especially prominent among female participants. Some teens described restrictive eating behaviors or skipping meals for weight control purposes.

"Sometimes I don't eat properly because I want to stay thin." (P29)

Family influence played a significant role. Teens from households with regular family meals and structured eating routines demonstrated healthier dietary patterns compared to those with more fragmented family schedules.

Socioeconomic and environmental factors also influenced food choices. Fast food was often perceived as more accessible, affordable, and socially convenient compared to healthier alternatives.

### 4.3. Technology use and digital behavior

Technology use was identified as one of the most pervasive aspects of adolescent life. Nearly all participants reported daily engagement with smartphones and social media platforms, with many spending several hours per day online.

"My phone is basically with me all the time. Even when I don't use it, I still check it often." (P4)

Another participant stated:

"If I don't open social media, I feel like I am missing everything my friends are doing." (P15)

However, excessive use was associated with several negative outcomes, including reduced physical activity, delayed sleep, decreased concentration, and emotional dependency.

"I stay up very late on my phone, and then I feel tired and cannot focus in school." (P27)

Some participants reported emotional discomfort when disconnected from social media.

"If I am not online for a long time, I feel anxious and disconnected." (P19)

Social comparison was another important theme. Teens described comparing themselves to peers and influencers, which sometimes negatively affected self-esteem and body image.

Despite these challenges, participants also recognized positive aspects of digital technology, including social connection, educational content, and entertainment. This duality suggests that digital behavior is not inherently negative but depends on usage patterns and regulation.

## 4.4..Mental health and emotional well-being

Mental health emerged as a central determinant of adolescent behavior. Many participants reported experiencing stress, anxiety, emotional pressure, and mood fluctuations.

Academic stress was the most frequently reported issue.

"Exams are very stressful for me. I feel like everything depends on my grades." (P2)

Sleep disturbances were strongly associated with emotional distress. Teens experiencing anxiety often reported difficulty falling asleep or maintaining consistent sleep routines.

Coping strategies varied widely. Some teens engaged in positive coping mechanisms such as physical activity, music, or talking with friends. Others relied on maladaptive strategies such as overeating, social withdrawal, or excessive screen time.

"When I am stressed, I just stay on my phone for hours or eat snacks." (P21)

These findings demonstrate a strong interrelationship between mental health and behavioral outcomes.

## 4.5. Family relationships and parental influence

Family environment emerged as a key protective or risk factor for adolescent health behaviors. Participants who reported strong family communication generally exhibited healthier lifestyles and greater emotional stability.

"My parents talk to me every day, and that makes me feel supported." (P7)

"When I feel stressed, I usually talk to my mother, and it helps me calm down." (P12)

However, not all teens experienced strong family support. Some reported emotional distance, lack of time, or limited communication with parents.

"My parents are busy most of the time, so I don't talk to them much about my problems." (P25)

These findings suggest that emotional quality of family relationships is a stronger determinant of adolescent well-being than supervision alone.

### 4.6. School environment and peer relationships

Peer influence emerged as both protective and risk-enhancing. Positive peer groups encouraged physical activity and social engagement, while negative peer pressure increased vulnerability to risky behaviors.

"My friends motivate me to play sports and be active." (P10)

"Sometimes I do things just because my friends are doing them." (P19)

### 4.7. Sleep patterns and daily routine

Sleep patterns were frequently disrupted among teens. Many reported insufficient sleep due to late-night screen use, academic workload, or emotional stress.

Irregular sleep schedules were associated with fatigue, reduced concentration, irritability, and lower academic performance.

Teens with more structured daily routines generally demonstrated better emotional regulation and healthier lifestyle patterns.

### 4.8. Risk behaviors

Although most teens reported avoiding high-risk behaviors, a minority acknowledged experimentation with smoking or alcohol, often influenced by peer pressure or curiosity.

"I tried smoking once because my friends were doing it." (P16)

"At social gatherings, sometimes there is pressure to drink." (P30)

Risk behaviors were generally situational rather than habitual, strongly influenced by social context and emotional vulnerability.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the health behaviors of teens in the city of Tirana and demonstrate that adolescent well-being is influenced by a complex interaction of psychological, social, behavioral, and environmental factors. The results are consistent with international literature emphasizing that adolescence is not only a developmental stage characterized by biological change but also a period during which social influences, emotional experiences, and environmental conditions strongly shape lifestyle choices and long-term health outcomes. One of the most significant findings of the study relates to the low levels of physical activity among teens. A considerable number of participants reported engaging in limited exercise outside mandatory school activities, while a large proportion spent extended periods using smartphones, computers, and social media platforms. This finding reflects broader global trends indicating increasing sedentary behavior among teens, particularly in urban areas. Urbanization, technological dependence, and lifestyle modernization have gradually reduced opportunities for spontaneous outdoor activities and active recreation.

Academic workload and private tutoring schedules further reduce available leisure time for physical activity. These findings suggest that adolescent inactivity is not solely an individual choice but also a consequence of broader structural and environmental conditions. Therefore, interventions promoting physical activity should not focus exclusively on individual motivation but also address accessibility, school

infrastructure, and community-based opportunities for exercise and recreation.

The study additionally revealed concerning dietary patterns among teens. Frequent consumption of fast food, sugary beverages, snacks, and highly processed products was commonly reported. These findings align with international evidence suggesting that globalization and urban consumer culture have transformed adolescent eating habits. Exposure to advertising, social media marketing, and fast-food availability may normalize unhealthy nutritional practices among young people.

Skipping meals, particularly breakfast, emerged as another common behavior. Several participants associated irregular eating habits with school schedules, stress, or lack of time. Such patterns may negatively affect concentration, academic performance, metabolism, and emotional regulation. Teens experiencing nutritional imbalance may also demonstrate increased fatigue, irritability, and reduced cognitive functioning. These findings emphasize the importance of school-based nutrition education and policies promoting healthy food environments.

Family influence emerged as one of the strongest protective factors associated with healthy behaviors. Teens who reported supportive family relationships, open communication, and parental involvement demonstrated healthier lifestyle choices and greater emotional stability. This finding supports previous research emphasizing the role of family systems in adolescent development. Parents influence dietary habits, sleep routines, emotional coping strategies, and behavioral norms through both direct supervision and behavioral modeling.

Importantly, the quality of communication within the family appeared more significant than simple parental control. These findings suggest that

family-centered interventions may be highly effective in promoting adolescent well-being.

The role of the school environment also emerged as highly significant. Positive school climate, supportive teacher relationships, and access to psychological services were associated with healthier behaviors and improved mental well-being. Schools represent one of the primary social environments in adolescent life and therefore possess considerable potential for health promotion and prevention initiatives.

Mental health emerged as a central component influencing nearly all aspects of adolescent behavior. Many participants reported experiencing stress, anxiety, emotional pressure, and concerns regarding academic performance, peer relationships, and future expectations. Adolescence is naturally associated with emotional sensitivity and identity formation; however, contemporary social pressures may intensify psychological vulnerability.

The relationship between mental health and behavioral outcomes was particularly evident in this study. Teens reporting higher emotional distress were more likely to demonstrate unhealthy eating patterns, sleep difficulties, social withdrawal, and excessive technology use. Some participants also associated emotional difficulties with experimentation with smoking or alcohol as coping mechanisms. These findings support international evidence demonstrating that mental health and physical health behaviors are deeply interconnected rather than separate domains.

Technology use constituted another important theme throughout the findings. While teens acknowledged the benefits of social media and digital communication, excessive screen time appeared to negatively affect physical activity, sleep quality, concentration, and interpersonal

interaction. Many participants reported spending several hours daily online, particularly on social networking platforms, video streaming services, and gaming applications.

Social media exposure may influence adolescent self-esteem and emotional well-being through constant comparison with peers and exposure to unrealistic standards related to appearance, success, and lifestyle. Several participants described feeling pressure to maintain a positive online image or experiencing emotional discomfort related to online interactions. These findings are consistent with contemporary research linking excessive social media use with anxiety, body dissatisfaction, loneliness, and reduced psychological well-being.

Peer influence also played a substantial role in shaping adolescent behaviors. Teens often seek social acceptance and identity validation through peer groups, making them particularly vulnerable to social pressure. Positive peer relationships may encourage physical activity, academic motivation, and emotional support; however, negative peer influence may increase the likelihood of risk behaviors such as smoking, alcohol consumption, and unhealthy lifestyle choices.

Another important aspect of the discussion concerns the sociocultural context of Tirana. Albania has undergone rapid social and economic transformation over recent decades, influencing family structures, educational expectations, cultural values, and youth lifestyles. Teens growing up in Tirana are exposed simultaneously to traditional cultural norms and modern global influences. This duality may create conflicting expectations regarding identity, independence, achievement, and social behavior.

The urban context may additionally intensify stress and competition among teens. Academic success is often strongly emphasized within Albanian society, and many teens experience pressure related to educational achievement and future career opportunities. Such pressures may contribute to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and reduced life satisfaction if adequate support systems are lacking.

The findings also have important implications for public health and educational policy. Traditional health promotion approaches focusing solely on information dissemination may be insufficient to influence adolescent behavior. Instead, effective interventions should adopt comprehensive, multidisciplinary approaches integrating physical health, mental health, emotional resilience, family engagement, and social support.

Schools should play a central role in these interventions by incorporating comprehensive health education into curricula, strengthening psychological counseling services, and promoting extracurricular activities that encourage physical and social engagement. Public institutions should also invest in youth-friendly recreational spaces, community programs, and mental health services accessible to teens.

Furthermore, preventive interventions should begin early and involve multiple stakeholders including families, educators, healthcare professionals, and community organizations. Teens are more likely to adopt healthy lifestyles when consistent messages and supportive environments exist across different social contexts.

The study contributes to the limited body of literature concerning adolescent health behaviors in Albania and provides valuable evidence regarding the experiences and challenges faced by teens in Tirana.

However, several limitations should also be acknowledged. The study relied partly on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability or reporting bias. Additionally, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables.

Overall, the findings emphasize that adolescent health is multidimensional and deeply connected to family relationships, school experiences, emotional well-being, peer dynamics, and sociocultural conditions. Promoting healthy behaviors among teens in Tirana therefore requires integrated, sustainable, and collaborative approaches that address not only individual choices but also the broader social environments shaping adolescent development.

## 6. Conclusions

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of adolescent health behaviors in the urban context of Tirana, highlighting the multidimensional and interrelated nature of lifestyle choices during adolescence. Overall, the results demonstrate that adolescent health behaviors cannot be interpreted in isolation, but rather as the outcome of continuous interaction between individual characteristics, family dynamics, peer influence, school environment, and broader socio-cultural and technological factors.

A central conclusion of the study is that teens in Tirana exhibit a clear imbalance between health knowledge and actual behavioral practices. While most participants demonstrated awareness of healthy lifestyle principles—such as the importance of physical activity, balanced nutrition, adequate sleep, and stress management—this knowledge was not consistently translated into daily behaviors. This gap between awareness

and action suggests that informational approaches alone are insufficient to promote sustainable behavior change among teens.

Physical activity levels were generally low, with a dominant shift toward sedentary and screen-based behaviors. This reflects a broader global trend but is intensified in urban environments where digital devices are highly accessible and recreational spaces may be limited. The consequences of reduced physical activity are not only physical, such as increased risk of obesity and metabolic disorders, but also psychological, including higher levels of stress and reduced emotional regulation.

Dietary behaviors also revealed concerning patterns, including frequent meal skipping, high consumption of fast food, and irregular eating schedules. These behaviors are influenced by time constraints, convenience, peer culture, and family routines. Although teens demonstrated awareness of healthy eating principles, environmental and lifestyle pressures often outweighed nutritional knowledge.

Mental health emerged as a central dimension influencing nearly all aspects of adolescent behavior. High levels of academic stress, social pressure, and emotional instability were frequently reported. These psychological factors were closely associated with unhealthy coping mechanisms, including excessive screen time, emotional eating, social withdrawal, and in some cases experimentation with risk behaviors.

Family relationships were identified as a key protective factor. Teens who experienced supportive communication, emotional understanding, and parental involvement demonstrated greater psychological resilience and healthier lifestyle patterns. Conversely, emotional distance or excessive pressure within the family environment was associated with increased stress and behavioral difficulties.

Similarly, the school environment and peer relationships played a dual role in shaping adolescent behaviors. Positive school climates and supportive peer groups encouraged healthy behaviors, while negative peer influence and academic pressure contributed to stress and risk behaviors. This highlights the importance of strengthening institutional and social support systems for teens.

In conclusion, adolescent health behaviors in Tirana are shaped by a complex ecosystem of influences. Effective interventions must therefore move beyond individual-level education and address broader structural, social, and environmental determinants of health. A holistic, coordinated approach involving families, schools, healthcare systems, and digital platforms is essential to support sustainable improvements in adolescent well-being.

## 7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several evidence-based recommendations are proposed to improve adolescent health behaviors in Tirana. These recommendations emphasize a multi-level approach that integrates individual education, family engagement, school-based interventions, and broader community and policy actions.

### 7.1 School-based interventions

Schools represent one of the most influential environments in adolescent development and should therefore play a central role in health promotion. It is recommended that schools expand structured physical activity programs beyond standard physical education classes by introducing daily or weekly extracurricular sports activities.

In addition, schools should integrate comprehensive health education into the curriculum, focusing not only on theoretical knowledge but also on

practical behavior change strategies. Topics should include nutrition, sleep hygiene, mental health awareness, stress management techniques, and responsible digital use.

The establishment of school-based counseling services is also essential. Psychologists or trained counselors should be available to support students experiencing emotional distress, academic pressure, or social difficulties. Early identification and intervention can significantly reduce long-term psychological risks.

### 7.2 Mental health promotion

Given the high levels of stress and anxiety reported among teens, mental health promotion should be prioritized as a core component of public health strategy. Schools and community centers should implement structured mental health awareness programs aimed at reducing stigma and encouraging help-seeking behavior.

Teens should be encouraged to develop healthy coping mechanisms such as physical activity, creative expression, and social support rather than maladaptive behaviors like excessive screen use or emotional eating.

Furthermore, collaboration between educational institutions and mental health professionals should be strengthened to ensure timely referral and support for at-risk teens.

### 7.3 Digital literacy and screen time management

Considering the high level of digital engagement among teens, structured digital literacy programs are essential. These programs should educate teens on the risks and benefits of social media, including issues related to addiction, cyberbullying, social comparison, and privacy protection.

Practical guidelines for healthy screen time management should be introduced, encouraging teens to balance online and offline activities. Schools and parents should work together to establish reasonable screen time limits, particularly during nighttime hours to improve sleep quality.

Promoting “digital well-being” campaigns can help teens develop more conscious and controlled technology use habits.

**7.4 Family engagement and parental education**

Family involvement is a key determinant of adolescent health behaviors; therefore, parental education programs should be implemented. These programs should focus on improving communication skills, emotional support strategies, and balanced parenting styles.

Parents should be encouraged to engage in open discussions with their children regarding school stress, emotional challenges, and lifestyle habits. Regular family meals and shared activities should be promoted as protective factors for healthy development.

Importantly, parents should be educated on the negative impact of excessive academic pressure and encouraged to adopt supportive rather than purely performance-based expectations.

**7.5 Promotion of physical activity and urban infrastructure**

To address low levels of physical activity, investment in youth-friendly recreational infrastructure is necessary. Local authorities should prioritize the development of safe parks, sports fields, and community recreation centers accessible to teens across different neighborhoods.

Public campaigns promoting physical activity as a daily habit rather than a competitive activity should be implemented. Reducing barriers such as cost, accessibility, and safety concerns is essential for increasing participation in physical activity.

### 7.6 Nutrition education and healthy Food environments

Nutrition education should be strengthened within schools and community programs. Teens should be educated about the importance of balanced diets, regular meal consumption, and the long-term effects of unhealthy eating patterns.

School canteens and nearby food environments should be regulated to ensure the availability of healthier food options. Policies limiting the accessibility of fast food and sugary drinks in school areas may contribute to improved dietary behaviors.

Encouraging family-based nutrition practices, such as shared meals and home-prepared food, can also support healthier eating habits.

### 7.7 Peer support and youth engagement programs

Given the strong influence of peer groups, peer-led interventions should be developed. Teens are more likely to adopt healthy behaviors when messages are delivered by peers rather than authority figures.

Youth clubs, mentoring programs, and peer education initiatives should be promoted to encourage positive social interaction, leadership development, and health awareness.

Such programs can also reduce social exclusion and bullying by fostering inclusive environments and supportive peer networks.

### 7.8 Policy-level recommendations

At the policy level, adolescent health should be prioritized within national public health strategies. Integrated policies that combine education, health, and youth development sectors are necessary to address the multifaceted nature of adolescent well-being.

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# Rural Ageing and Social Exclusion in the Context of Migration

Juliana Ajdini
University of Tirana
Juliana.ajdini@unitri.edu.al

**Abstract**

Population ageing in rural Albania is deeply intertwined with large-scale migration of younger generations, leaving older adults behind in socially fragmented communities. This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of 17 elderly individuals (70+), residing alone in two rural municipalities — Kukës in the North and Devoll in the South-East. Through a phenomenological approach and thematic analysis, the study identifies four core dimensions of exclusion: social invisibility, absence of care, emotional abandonment, and erosion of dignity. The findings reveal a profound sense of loneliness and disconnectedness shaped by both demographic shifts and insufficient community-based support systems. The article argues for the urgent development of community-driven care models, intergenerational solidarity initiatives, and inclusive social policies that protect dignity and agency in later life.

**Keywords:** *social exclusion; ageing; migration; rural ageing; care; older adults; Albania*

## Introduction

Albania has undergone a profound demographic transformation over the past decades, shaped by declining fertility rates, increasing life expectancy, and large-scale emigration. According to the most recent census (2023), the resident population has fallen to approximately 2.4 million, showing a decrease of about 420 000 people since the 2011 census (INSTAT, 2011)

This contraction reflects not only lower birth rates, but also persistent out-migration, especially from rural areas toward urban centers or abroad (UNFPA, 2023). Simultaneously, Albania is experiencing rapid population ageing: groups aged 65 and over have grown significantly over recent decades, and this trend is forecasted to continue (INSTAT, 2011). The demographic shift transforms the population pyramid from a classic (youth-bulging) structure to a constrictive one, marked by fewer young people and a growing share of older adults (INSTAT, 2023).

These macro-demographic changes intersect with migration patterns — both internal (rural-to-urban) and international. Internal mobility has involved especially young adults (ages 15–34) relocating from rural prefectures to urban areas, while others have chosen international emigration in search of better opportunities (INSTAT, 2023). Over time, such population movements have left many rural communities not only depopulated but also disproportionately aged: older adults often remain, while younger generations build their lives elsewhere.

This demographic reality — depopulation of rural areas, shrinking younger cohorts, and a rising share of elderly — raises urgent questions about social cohesion, care provision, and dignity in old age. Older adults living alone in rural settings may face social isolation, limited access to services, and the absence of informal support networks traditionally provided by family. Yet, despite the demographic and migration data illustrating these shifts, there remains a lack of research that centers on the **subjective lived experiences** of older persons, especially in remote or rural Albania. Institutional reports and national statistics provide the numbers — percentages of elderly, migration flows, and age-dependency ratios— but rarely capture the voices and emotions of those who remain. This gap in

knowledge is what the present study seeks to address. By focusing on individuals aged 70 and over, widowed and with adult children living abroad, in two municipalities heavily affected by emigration (Kukës and Devoll), the research aims to explore how macro- demographic transformations and migratory dynamics translate into personal realities of loneliness, invisibility, and social exclusion.

This study, therefore, is not only a demographic account or a statistical portrait, but a human-centered exploration of what it means to age in a shrinking rural community. It offers a qualitative window into ageing beyond numbers: into the emotions, experiences, and dignity of older adults whose daily lives are shaped by absence, silence, and social change. By doing so, the article contributes to a broader understanding of the links between demographic change, migration, and social justice — reminding scholars and policymakers that ageing populations in rural contexts are not "data points," but human beings whose lives demand respect, visibility, and community-based responses.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the lived experiences of older adults in rural Albania requires an interdisciplinary theoretical lens that connects ageing, social exclusion, migration, and community change. This section draws upon established conceptual frameworks to contextualize the study's findings within broader academic debates.

### 2.1 Social Exclusion in Later Life

Social exclusion has become a central concept in gerontological research, reflecting not only limited access to services but also the erosion of social relationships, community belonging, and meaningful participation (Walsh et al., 2017). In rural areas, exclusion is often multidimensional, shaped by

geographic isolation, reduced mobility, limited infrastructure, and the weakening of informal support networks (Scharf & Keating, 2012). The experience of being "left behind" by migrating family members exemplifies what Walsh and colleagues (2017) identify as *relational* and *societal* exclusion—forms that are deeply connected to emotional abandonment and institutional neglect. This perspective supports the study's emphasis on subjective experiences of invisibility, absence, and disconnection.

### 2.2 Active Ageing and the Loss of Participation

The WHO's framework on Active Ageing (World Health Organization, 2002) emphasizes participation, independence, and security as essential components of well-being in later life. Yet, in depopulating rural communities, opportunities for participation diminish significantly. Without access to community activities, social spaces, or supportive services, the principles of active ageing become difficult to realize in practice (Foster & Walker, 2015). This mismatch between policy ideals and rural realities underscores the vulnerability of older adults who wish to remain engaged but lack the structural conditions to do so.

### 2.3 Emotional Loneliness and Family Migration

Theoretical work on emotional loneliness highlights the importance of intimate, meaningful relationships, particularly in later life (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2006). Migration disrupts these ties. When children relocate abroad, the absence is not merely physical—it alters patterns of emotional exchange, caregiving, and everyday connectedness. Research across Eastern and Southern Europe shows that parental loneliness intensifies when family migration removes both practical support and symbolic confirmation of social value (King et al., 2014). This

aligns with the narratives encountered in this study, where elderly participants express ambivalence: pride in their children's success abroad, yet deep emotional pain associated with their absence.

### 2.4 The Rural Ageing Paradox

Scholars describe a "rural ageing paradox," where the tranquility and familiarity of rural life coexist with the challenges of service scarcity, declining populations, and weakening social fabrics (Stockdale, 2017). In Albania, this paradox is amplified by long-term emigration, economic stagnation, and infrastructural disparities between urban and rural areas. This conceptualization helps explain why older adults interviewed in Kukës and Devoll simultaneously appreciate their connection to place while experiencing profound isolation and vulnerability.

### 2.5 Ethical and Human-centered Approaches to Ageing Research

Critical gerontology argues that research on ageing must move beyond deficit-based narratives and recognize the agency, meaning-making, and resilience of older adults (Phillipson, 2013). At the same time, scholars emphasize the ethical imperative of valuing the voices of those whose experiences are often marginalized (Barnes, 2012). The present study aligns with these principles by using qualitative methods that privilege participants' emotional and narrative depth, and by approaching them not as passive recipients of care, but as individuals whose insights illuminate broader social dynamics.

## 3. Methodology

The methodological orientation of this study grew naturally from the nature of the phenomenon we sought to understand. Ageing alone in rural Albania, shaped by migration, loss, and diminishing social ties, is not a reality that can be fully captured through numbers or standardized

indicators. For this reason, the study embraced a qualitative and phenomenological approach, grounded in the belief that the inner worlds of older adults—their emotions, memories, and reflections—hold essential knowledge about the social consequences of depopulation and migration (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Van Manen, 2016). Rather than approaching older adults as "subjects," the research process unfolded as a series of encounters: long conversations in quiet homes, pauses filled with emotion, narratives shaped as much by what was said as by what remained unsaid. Each interview was an invitation to step into participants' personal geographies—both the physical landscapes of shrinking villages and the emotional landscapes of loneliness, endurance, and dignity.

### 3.1 Sampling

The study took place in two rural municipalities—Kukës and Devoll—chosen purposefully because of their long history of out-migration and their increasingly ageing populations. These communities represent two distinct regions of Albania, yet they share a common reality: young people have left in large numbers, and the social fabric has thinned dramatically. National census data confirmed that these areas were among the most affected by depopulation, internal migration, and international emigration (INSTAT, 2023).

Local social workers and village leaders played an essential role in opening doors. They helped identify elderly individuals who lived alone, were widowed, and whose children had been abroad for years. This relational form of sampling—part purposive, part snowball—reflected not only methodological practicality but also the importance of trust, without which such intimate narratives would have been inaccessible.

Seventeen elderly individuals, all over the age of 70, agreed to share their stories. Most welcomed the researcher into their homes—spaces shaped by memories, photographs, and the quiet presence of absence. They spoke slowly, with moments of hesitation or long silences that carried emotional weight. The study included 17 participants in total—10 women and 7 men—with 9 residing in Kukës and 8 in Devoll.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, but the encounter often extended beyond formal questioning, with informal conversations and shared reflections emerging once the audio recorder was turned off. These extended moments—after the "interview" had officially ended—offered insight into the loneliness many participants felt. They often expressed gratitude simply for being listened to, reminding the researcher that the act of interviewing itself was part of the ethical responsibility of this study. As many scholars of critical gerontology have argued, research with older adults is not only about collecting data but also about honoring their voices and showing genuine presence (Barnes, 2012; Phillipson, 2013).

3.2 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews that served as a flexible framework rather than a rigid script. Although a guiding set of themes—daily routines, support networks, feelings of isolation, experiences of abandonment, and future hopes—provided direction, the conversations unfolded organically. Participants often drifted into memories, paused to manage emotions, or shifted between past and present as they made sense of their experiences. This openness allowed the interviews to become spaces where contradictions could surface: pride in children's achievements abroad alongside a profound longing for their presence; attachment to home and land coexisting with grief over shrinking

communities; gratitude for occasional help intertwined with a persistent feeling of being forgotten.

Throughout the fieldwork, the researchers complemented interview data with detailed fieldnotes. These notes documented emotional expressions—trembling hands, tear-filled eyes—as well as environmental cues such as the quietness of abandoned villages, the state of participants' homes, or the faint sound of a neighbor calling from a distance. Such observations provided essential context, enriching the verbal narratives and helping to illuminate the emotional and relational undercurrents that shaped participants' stories.

### 3.3 Ethical Grounding

Ethical considerations were central throughout the research. Participants were informed verbally and in writing about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw, and the confidentiality of their information, in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and institutional guidelines (World Medical Association, 2013). Yet ethical practice extended far beyond formal procedures.

Many participants had not engaged in extended conversation for days or even weeks. Their loneliness made the researcher acutely aware of the power dynamics inherent in the encounter. This awareness prompted a slow, respectful pace of interaction and a mindful presence—pausing interviews when emotions surfaced, staying for informal conversation afterward, and offering space for participants to navigate their stories with dignity. A reflexive journal accompanied the fieldwork, documenting the researcher's emotions, ethical tensions, and moments of connection or discomfort. Such reflexivity, as Tracy (2010) argues, is crucial for maintaining integrity in qualitative research.

### 3.4 Analysis

The analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were read and reread, allowing the researcher to immerse fully in participants' voices. Initial codes captured not only explicit content—such as references to loneliness or lack of care—but also subtler elements: metaphors of emptiness, recurring expressions of longing, moments of silence that carried narrative significance.

Themes gradually emerged, shaped by patterns across the stories:

- social exclusion,
- the absence of care,
- emotional abandonment,
- and the erosion of dignity.

These themes were not imposed but arose organically from participants' own words and emotional registers, resonating strongly with theoretical perspectives on social exclusion (Walsh et al., 2017), emotional loneliness (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2006), and rural ageing (Stockdale, 2017).

### 3.5 Ensuring Quality and Trustworthiness

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the study employed several strategies recommended for rigorous qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

- triangulation of interviews, observations, and field notes;
- rich, thick description to allow readers to understand the context deeply;
- peer debriefing with colleagues experienced in qualitative research;

- maintenance of an audit trail documenting analytical decisions;
- continuous reflexivity throughout data collection and analysis.

These practices ensured that the interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives and that the emotional truth of their experiences was presented with respect, accuracy, and depth.

## 4. Findings

The findings of this study reflect the deeply personal and emotional realities of older adults living alone in rural Albania. Across the 17 narratives, four interconnected themes emerged: social exclusion, absence of care, emotional abandonment, and erosion of dignity. Although each participant spoke from their own circumstances, their voices converged around shared experiences shaped by migration, loss, and diminishing social worlds. What follows is a narrative synthesis that brings their stories to the foreground.

### 4.1 Social Exclusion: "This Village Is No Longer a Place for People"

For many participants, the villages they once knew as vibrant social ecosystems have gradually become spaces of emptiness. Schools have closed, shops shut their doors, community events have faded, and neighbors—once central to communal life—have either passed away or moved to urban centers. Several participants described long stretches of days without speaking to another person, or without hearing any sounds beyond the wind, an occasional car, or a distant barking dog. One woman in Devoll said quietly, "*Sometimes I think even the air feels old here.*" The sense of abandonment was not only emotional but spatial: participants described roads that are rarely maintained, health posts that operate irregularly, and local institutions that seem unaware of their existence.

This aligns with literature highlighting rural ageing as a condition of "shrinking social fields," where older adults gradually lose access to networks, resources, and public visibility (Walsh et al., 2017; Stockdale, 2017). Social exclusion in this study takes the form of empty public spaces and an absence of the informal interactions that once gave rhythm to rural life. Many expressed feeling "forgotten" not only by family members abroad but by the community itself. Local authorities tried to provide support where possible, but institutional presence was described as sporadic, distant, or insufficient. Thus, exclusion emerged as both a structural issue—lack of services, depopulation—and a symbolic one: older adults felt unseen in the very places where they had spent their entire lives.

### 4.2 Absence of Care: "You Learn to Live With Pain Because There Is No One to Tell"

Although Albania's rural areas still hold cultural narratives of strong community ties and neighborly solidarity, participants' accounts painted a different picture. Most reported significant gaps in care—both formal and informal. As their mobility declined with age, accessing essential services such as medicine, health checks, or social assistance became increasingly difficult. Many described daily struggles that went unnoticed by others: difficulty fetching wood, carrying groceries, maintaining hygiene, or managing chronic illnesses. One man in Kukës remarked, *"If I fall, no one will know until the next day—or maybe later*."

While community solidarity was once taken for granted in rural Albania, participants felt that such networks had eroded as young families migrated and neighbors aged alongside them. The absence of adult children—traditionally the primary caregivers in Albanian society—was felt acutely.

Participants did not blame their children, acknowledging that they had left for economic survival, yet the emptiness left behind was undeniable. These realities resonate with regional studies that warn about the inadequacy of care structures in depopulating rural areas, where the collapse of both formal and informal support undermines older adults' well-being (King et al., 2014; Scharf & Keating, 2012).

### 4.3 Emotional Abandonment: "They Call, but They Don't Know My Life Anymore"

Perhaps the most painful aspect of participants' experiences was the emotional distance created by migration. Although most children phoned weekly or bi-weekly, participants described these calls as brief, hurried, or emotionally restrained. Several noted that they deliberately downplayed their struggles during these conversations, not wanting to worry their children or distract them from building a life abroad. One participant explained, with tears in her eyes, "*When my daughter calls, I smile and say 'I am fine.' But she doesn't know how many nights I sleep in silence*."

Emotional abandonment did not necessarily signify a lack of love; rather, it reflected the emotional toll of prolonged separation and the absence of everyday shared life. Participants expressed longing for physical presence—the ability to sit together, to share a meal, to feel the warmth of human proximity. In phenomenological terms, emotional abandonment functioned as a "felt absence," a void that shaped daily experience even in seemingly mundane moments. This theme aligns with research showing that emotional loneliness intensifies when family migration disrupts intimate bonds and consistent caregiving practices (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2006).

### 4.4 Erosion of Dignity: "You Become Like a Shadow of Yourself"

Many participants revealed a quiet but profound sense of diminished dignity. They spoke of feeling unnecessary, invisible, or burdensome. Some expressed shame at being unable to maintain their homes as they once did, or frustration at relying on others for small tasks. The loss of roles they once held—caregivers, workers, community members—left them feeling irrelevant. One man said, "*When you have no one to talk to, you start to wonder if your life still has meaning.*"

Dignity erosion was tied not only to physical decline but to the absence of recognition. Participants felt that their contributions over a lifetime—raising families, working the land, sustaining their communities—had been forgotten. The erosion of self-worth is consistent with critical gerontological perspectives that highlight how ageing becomes socially devalued in contexts of rapid change and migration (Phillipson, 2013). For some, there was also an existential dimension: a sense that time was passing without witness. They feared dying alone, worried about who would find them, and wondered whether their stories, memories, and lives would disappear without being carried forward.

### 4.5 Interplay of Themes: A Life Patterned by Absence

Although each theme is presented separately, participants' narratives revealed substantial overlap. Social exclusion fed emotional abandonment; absence of care deepened the erosion of dignity; loneliness made health challenges harder to bear. The common thread running through all their stories was *absence*—the absence of children, of community, of institutional support, of meaningful presence.

Yet, within this absence, there were also moments of resilience, humor, and pride. Participants reminisced about happier times, shared wisdom

accumulated over decades, and expressed hope that their voices might serve a purpose, that "someone might learn from our stories." This interplay ultimately demonstrates that ageing in rural Albania is shaped not by one single factor but by the intersection of demographic, social, emotional, and structural forces.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study offer an intimate and often painful portrait of what it means to grow old in rural Albania at a time of profound demographic transformation. Although each participant narrated a unique life story, their experiences were shaped by shared structural realities—mass emigration, shrinking rural communities, limited care infrastructures, and the erosion of traditional family systems. This discussion situates these lived experiences within broader scholarly debates on ageing, social exclusion and migration while highlighting the ethical and policy implications that emerge from them.

### 5.1 Ageing in the Context of Demographic Decline

Across Europe, rural ageing is increasingly described as an outcome of "territorial shrinkage," where demographic decline produces both social fragmentation and institutional withdrawal (Stockdale, 2017). The Albanian case aligns strongly with this pattern. Participants' accounts of empty homes, decaying infrastructure, and silent neighborhoods reflect what Walsh et al. (2017) define as spatial and community exclusion—forms of exclusion that arise when physical environments no longer support social engagement or access to services.

However, the Albanian context amplifies this dynamic due to the scale and speed of international emigration. As younger generations leave, the demographic pyramid in rural regions becomes inverted, leaving behind

communities disproportionately composed of older adults. This lived reality, described vividly by participants who spoke of "villages that are no longer places for people," underscores the structural vulnerability of ageing in depopulating areas. In this way, the findings not only confirm but deepen existing literature by demonstrating how demographic decline becomes a daily emotional and social experience.

### 5.2 Migration and the Transformation of Family Bonds

Family migration emerged as a central factor shaping participants' emotional worlds. While the literature has long recognized the impact of transnational family separation (King et al., 2014), this study reveals how migration reshapes the intimate fabric of ageing. The emotional dissonance—pride in children's success abroad, paired with profound longing—reflects what De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg (2006) conceptualize as emotional loneliness, the absence of close, meaningful connection even when contact exists through phone calls or remittances.

Many participants concealed their struggles from their children, illustrating a pattern of protective silence common in transnational families. This tendency complicates assumptions that regular communication reduces loneliness or feelings of abandonment. Instead, the findings suggest that emotional support cannot be reduced to frequency of contact. What older adults mourn is not only the absence of practical help, but the absence of relational presence—daily companionship, embodied proximity, and the shared continuity of family life. Thus, the study contributes to migration scholarship by centering the emotional consequences of long-term separation in later life, revealing how transnational families can sustain love yet still produce profound emotional gaps.

### 5.3 The Collapse of Informal and Formal Care Systems

Traditional Albanian family norms place responsibility for elder care primarily on adult children. Yet, as many scholars have observed, social expectations have outpaced social realities (Gedeshi & King, 2019). Participants in this study lived at the intersection of declining informal support and insufficient formal services. Their stories of being unable to access basic necessities or medical care align with broader evidence of rural-service inequality (Scharf & Keating, 2012).

This dual erosion—of family-based and institutional support—leaves older adults in a precarious position. They face what Phillipson (2013) describes as "double exclusion": marginalization within the family due to migration, and marginalization within society due to inadequate rural infrastructures. The findings illustrate how this double exclusion is lived emotionally: participants described feeling burdensome, embarrassed, or invisible, suggesting that care deficits affect not only physical well-being but also self-worth. By bridging empirical narratives with theoretical frameworks, the study underscores the urgent need to rethink care models in contexts where traditional caregiving systems have broken down.

### 5.4 Dignity, Identity, and the Moral Dimensions of Ageing

A significant contribution of the study lies in its emphasis on dignity. While policy discussions often focus on service provision, participants articulated a deeper longing: the desire to feel seen, valued, and remembered. The erosion of dignity—expressed through shame, self-doubt, or fear of dying alone—aligns with critical gerontological perspectives that argue ageing is not only a biological or social process, but also a moral one (Barnes, 2012; Phillipson, 2013).

Participants' reflections challenge simplistic narratives about resilience or independence. Their strength was evident, but so was the emotional cost of navigating daily life with limited support. The study highlights that restoring dignity in later life requires more than improving access to services; it requires rebuilding the relational and symbolic structures that affirm older adults' social value.

### 5.5 Interconnected Vulnerabilities: A Holistic Interpretation

Taken together, the themes of social exclusion, absence of care, emotional abandonment, and dignity erosion illustrate how ageing in rural Albania is shaped by *interconnected vulnerabilities*. They reinforce the argument that social exclusion in later life is multi-layered—rooted not only in material deprivation but also in relational and symbolic dimensions (Walsh et al., 2017).

This interconnectedness has several implications:

- Loneliness cannot be understood without acknowledging migration.
- Lack of care cannot be addressed without confronting rural depopulation and service disparities.
- Protecting dignity requires not only policy reform but also cultural renewal.

The findings thus call for a shift from viewing older adults as passive recipients of welfare to recognizing them as individuals navigating complex social, emotional, and structural landscapes.

## 6. Conclusion

This study set out to understand what it means to grow old in rural Albania at a time when migration, demographic decline, and shrinking communities reshape the foundations of daily life. Through the voices of

elderly individuals living alone—men and women whose children have built their futures abroad—the research illuminated experiences of social exclusion, emotional abandonment, and the gradual erosion of dignity. Their narratives remind us that ageing is not only a biological process but a deeply social, emotional, and relational one.

The findings point toward an urgent need for community-based approaches that restore visibility, connection, and care to those left behind. Recommendations emerging from this study include:

- strengthening locally rooted care services that allow older adults to age safely in their homes;
- establishing community centers or outreach programs to reduce isolation and support social participation;
- promoting intergenerational initiatives that reconnect young people with older adults; and
- integrating psychosocial support and regular home visits into municipal services.

Ultimately, this research underscores a simple but powerful truth: older adults in rural Albania are not passive recipients of help but human beings whose lives carry meaning, memory, and an enduring desire for connection. Their stories call for policies and practices that honor dignity in old age—and for a collective commitment to ensuring that those left behind are neither invisible nor forgotten.

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**Promoting Social-Emotional Competencies in Early Childhood: A School-Based SEL Intervention in Albanian Kindergartens**

Lediona Braho, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana
lediona.braho@unitir.edu.al
Arjana Muçaj, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana
arjana.mucaj@unitir.edu.al

**Abstract**

Early childhood is a critical developmental period during which social-emotional competencies begin to shape children's well-being, relationships, and future learning trajectories. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has gained increasing international attention as a framework that supports children's emotional understanding, self-regulation, empathy, and positive social interaction. These competencies are particularly important in contemporary societies characterized by rapid social change, where educational systems are increasingly expected to support children's holistic development and promote equity in learning opportunities.

Despite the growing international evidence supporting SEL interventions in early education, structured programs remain limited in many educational contexts, including Albania. This study presents the design and implementation model of a school-based SEL intervention developed for children aged 5-6 years attending preschool. The program aims to strengthen children's social-emotional competencies through structured classroom activities that focus on emotional recognition, empathy development, cooperative interaction, and conflict resolution.

The intervention is implemented in collaboration with preschool teachers supported by psychosocial professionals working within early childhood institutions. The study adopts a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design involving 204 children, with 102 assigned to the experimental group and 102 to the control group, across 34 kindergartens in Tirana. The research seeks to examine how structured SEL activities integrated into everyday classroom practices can contribute to children's socio-emotional and cognitive development and promote more supportive learning environments in preschool education.

By presenting the conceptual framework and intervention model, this study contributes to broader discussions within the social sciences on empowering young children, promoting equity in early education, and advancing human development through evidence-informed educational practices.

**Keywords:** Social-emotional learning; SEL intervention; child development; social-emotional development; early childhood education; educational equity

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background and Context

**Emotional Understanding and Theory of Mind in Early Childhood**

Early childhood represents a pivotal stage of development, during which social and emotional skills begin to influence children's overall well-being, their interactions with peers, and their future success in school. Among these competencies, emotional understanding and theory of mind

have emerged as central constructs. Emotional understanding refers to the ability to identify, interpret, and respond appropriately to emotions in oneself and others, and is closely linked to empathy, prosocial behavior, and conflict resolution (Denham et al., 2003; Trentacosta and Fine, 2010). Theory of mind, by contrast, involves the capacity to attribute mental states, such as beliefs, desires, and intentions, to oneself and others, and to recognize that these states can differ across individuals (Devine and Hughes, 2018; Wellman, 2014).

Recent research highlights the interdependence of these two skills: children who develop stronger emotional understanding often demonstrate more advanced theory of mind, as both require perspective-taking and sensitivity to social cues (Grazzani et al., 2018; Lecce et al., 2014). Moreover, both emotional understanding and theory of mind are predictive of later outcomes, including social adjustment, peer acceptance, and academic success (Hughes and Leekam, 2004; Wellman, 2014). Together, these constructs represent essential dimensions of socio-emotional and cognitive development in the preschool years, providing a foundation for children's capacity to engage meaningfully in social interactions and learning environments.

Evidence from preschool research underscores the importance of early experiences in shaping both emotional understanding and theory of mind. Longitudinal studies show that preschoolers who engage in structured emotion-focused conversations with teachers and peers demonstrate accelerated growth in recognizing and labeling emotions, which in turn supports perspective-taking and mental state attribution (Grazzani et al.,

2016; Ornaghi et al., 2015). Intervention studies further reveal that guided activities, such as storytelling, role-play, and emotion-rich dialogue, can significantly enhance children's ability to interpret others' feelings and beliefs, thereby strengthening both emotional understanding and theory of mind (Lecce et al., 2014; Ornaghi et al., 2019). These findings highlight preschool as a particularly sensitive period for cultivating socio-emotional and cognitive skills, suggesting that early educational contexts provide a unique opportunity to embed practices that foster empathy, cooperation, and social competence.

**Effectiveness of SEL-Based Interventions**

A growing body of international research demonstrates that social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions can effectively promote emotional recognition, regulation, and related competencies in preschool and early childhood settings. Structured SEL programs have been shown to enhance children's ability to identify emotions, manage interpersonal conflicts, and engage in prosocial behaviors (Bierman et al., 2008; Denham et al., 2003). Importantly, several studies also indicate that SEL interventions contribute to gains in theory of mind, as children learn to understand perspectives and mental states through guided social interaction and reflective activities (Grazzani et al., 2016; Lecce et al., 2014). These findings highlight the potential of SEL-based approaches to simultaneously strengthen emotional understanding and theory of mind, thereby supporting holistic child development in early education contexts.

Beyond individual skill development, SEL interventions have been linked to broader classroom and school-level benefits. Evidence suggests that

embedding SEL into daily routines fosters more supportive learning environments, reduces behavioral difficulties, and improves peer relationships (Domitrovich et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2015). Preschool children exposed to SEL curricula often demonstrate stronger cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution skills, which in turn predict greater social adjustment and readiness for formal schooling (Denham et al., 2012; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). These outcomes underscore the importance of introducing SEL early, when children are most receptive to socio-emotional guidance.

Recent meta-analyses further confirm the effectiveness of SEL interventions across diverse cultural and educational contexts. Durlak et al. (2011) found that universal SEL programs significantly improved children's social-emotional skills, attitudes, and academic performance, with preschool cohorts showing particularly strong gains. Similarly, studies in European preschool settings demonstrate that SEL activities embedded in storytelling, role-play, and teacher-led discussions can enhance both emotional understanding and theory of mind, reinforcing the value of structured interventions during the early years (Grazzani et al., 2019; Ornaghi et al., 2015).

**PROMEHS: A SEL-Based Intervention in European Countries**

The *Promoting Mental Health at School* (PROMEHS) program, developed through a European Erasmus+ initiative, is one of the most comprehensive frameworks for integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) and mental health promotion into school curricula. Implemented across several European countries, including Italy, Portugal, Latvia, Malta, Romania,

Croatia, and Greece, PROMEHS was designed to be universal, spanning kindergarten through secondary education (Cefai et al., 2022).

PROMEHS activities are structured around three main pillars: (a) SEL skill-building modules that target self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, cooperation, and responsible decision-making through classroom exercises, role-play, and guided discussions; (b) mental health promotion practices such as mindfulness sessions, stress management strategies, and resilience-building activities designed to reduce anxiety and foster well-being; and (c) inclusive classroom projects that encourage peer collaboration, conflict resolution, and civic engagement, often involving parents and communities to strengthen the home-school connection. Teachers receive training and manuals to deliver these activities, ensuring consistency across age groups, while students engage in interactive lessons, reflective journaling, and cooperative tasks that embed SEL into daily school life (Grazzani et al., 2023).

Evaluation studies consistently document the effectiveness of PROMEHS program. In Italy, teachers reported significant improvements in children's emotional competencies, including empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution, following program implementation (Cefai et al., 2022). Longitudinal research in Portugal and Latvia, involving more than 3,000 students aged 7-17, demonstrated that growth in socio-emotional skills predicted stronger academic motivation, engagement, and performance, even during the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cefai et al., 2023). Preschool cohorts appeared to benefit most directly, showing

marked gains in emotion recognition and regulation compared to older students (Grazzani et al., 2023).

Beyond child outcomes, PROMEHS also contributed to improved classroom climate and teacher well-being. Educators noted reductions in stress and greater confidence in managing socio-emotional challenges, underscoring the program's dual impact on learners and practitioners (Cefai et al., 2022). Although PROMEHS has not been implemented in Albania, its demonstrated success across diverse European contexts provides a strong rationale for adapting similar evidence-informed frameworks to the Albanian preschool system.

**Albanian Context of SEL Research**

*Albania's Framework Curriculum for Preschool Education* (2024) identifies socio-emotional development as a central competency, emphasizing cooperation, empathy, and self-regulation as essential skills for children aged 3-6. Preschool teaching standards require educators to foster emotional safety and positive classroom climates, yet the curriculum lacks a dedicated SEL program, embedding socio-emotional skills indirectly within broader developmental goals (Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, 2024). Complementary initiatives, such as the *Inclusive Preschool Teaching Methodology* accredited in 2022, provide teachers with tools for child-centered practices and early identification of emotional barriers (UNESCO, 2022). Reports from UNICEF Albania (2023-2024) highlight persistent inequities in access and quality: while net enrolment for five-year-olds reaches 81%, participation among younger children remains uneven, with Roma and low-income families disproportionately

excluded (UNICEF, 2024). These findings underscore systemic gaps in ensuring equitable socio-emotional support across preschool settings.

Empirical research supports these findings. Farina and Belacchi (2014) demonstrated that preschoolers' emotional competence strongly predicts peer role tendencies, shaping prosocial and hostile interaction patterns. More recent evidence from Sulstarova and colleagues (2025) reveals developmental vulnerabilities linked to trauma, emotional neglect, and culturally normalized emotional silencing, which hinder socio-emotional growth and heighten risks of exploitation. These findings underscore the importance of embedding SEL into early childhood education as a protective factor against both interpersonal difficulties and broader developmental risks.

Beyond preschool, Albanian studies highlight SEL's relevance across K-12 and vocational education. Research shows that teachers' SEL competencies are significantly associated with students' emotional well-being, emphasizing the need for professional development and supportive classroom climates (Bara, Pupe and Bomi, 2025). Parallel work on psychoeducational approaches identifies systemic barriers, such as limited teacher preparation, insufficient involvement of school psychologists, and rigid curricula, that constrain SEL integration (Budini and Melonashi, 2025). At the vocational level, UNICEF-supported initiatives have piloted *Early Warning Systems* combined with SEL programming in twelve schools, training over 250 teachers and staff to identify and support students at risk of dropout (Center for Competitive Skills, 2025). Collectively, these studies illustrate Albania's evolving but uneven SEL

landscape, where structured interventions remain scarce yet increasingly recognized as essential for fostering emotional competence, resilience, and educational equity.

Comparative studies show that neighboring countries have advanced further. North Macedonia has implemented a national SEL program in preschools since 2018, supported by UNICEF, with nationwide rollout completed by 2022 (UNICEF, 2022). Kosovo has introduced EU-funded trauma-informed training programs for teachers and multidisciplinary teams in education, health, and social care, most recently through the CARING 2.0 initiative (Terre des hommes Kosovo, 2025). Greece has embedded SEL competencies into its early childhood curriculum through European Commission, supported projects, reflecting broader EU priorities for social-emotional learning in early education (European Commission, 2023). Together, these findings highlight the pressing need for Albania to adopt comprehensive, evidence-informed SEL frameworks that explicitly promote emotional understanding and theory of mind in preschool contexts, aligning national practice with broader European trends.

### 1.2. Research Problem and Objectives

Although international evidence consistently demonstrates that social-emotional learning (SEL) and school-based mental health promotion curricula are effective in strengthening children's socio-emotional competencies (Cefai et al., 2022; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017), context-specific evaluation studies remain uneven across countries and educational systems. In Albania, the need for evidence-based tools and structured practices in preschool settings has been highlighted in national

policy documents and sector reports, yet empirical validation of SEL interventions remains scarce (Hyseni Duraku, 2021; UNICEF Albania, 2023). Existing studies have primarily emphasized broad developmental outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding whether structured SEL curricula can produce measurable gains in foundational socio-cognitive skills such as emotional understanding and theory of mind, competencies that underpin empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution in early childhood.

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of a structured SEL intervention program in enhancing emotional understanding and theory of mind among Albanian preschoolers aged 5-6. These variables are directly assessed by trained psychologists through standardized tasks administered in kindergarten settings, ensuring methodological rigor and developmental appropriateness. Secondary objectives include examining whether intervention effects vary across gender, parents' education level, and other socio-demographic factors, with particular attention to the predominantly urban Tirana context in which the sample is situated. This allows the study to explore equity dimensions, including how family background may shape children's responsiveness to SEL interventions.

To achieve these aims, the study employs a quasi-experimental design comparing two groups: one receiving the SEL intervention and a control group without exposure to the program. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: *Does implementing a structured SEL-based intervention improve emotional understanding and theory of mind in*

*preschool children aged 5–6 in Tirana, and how do these outcomes differ across gender other socio-demographic variables?*

Building on this rationale, four central hypotheses guide the study. First (H1), children aged 5-6 years old, who participate in the SEL intervention will demonstrate significantly higher levels of emotional understanding compared to peers in the control group. Second (H2), children exposed to the intervention will also show significantly greater gains in theory of mind relative to those without intervention. Third (H3), parents of children in the intervention group will report significantly greater improvements in emotional and behavioral functioning compared to parents of children in the control group. Fourth (H4), intervention effects are anticipated to vary across individual and contextual factors, with differences emerging by gender as well as by socio-demographic variables.

Together, these hypotheses provide a structured framework for evaluating both the effectiveness and the equity dimensions of SEL implementation in Albanian preschool contexts, while also incorporating multi-informant perspectives that strengthen ecological validity (De Los Reyes and Kazdin, 2005).

### 1.3. Significance of the Study

This study contributes to early childhood developmental and educational psychology by focusing on emotion recognition as a core mechanism within emotional competence. Emotion knowledge in preschool has been

repeatedly linked to children's social competence and early school adjustment, and meta-analytic evidence confirms its associations with social behavior outcomes (Cavadini et al., 2021; Denham, 2011; Trentacosta and Fine, 2010). Strengthening emotion recognition at ages 5-6 is particularly important because children are approaching a developmental transition toward more complex peer interactions and increasing academic demands, where socio-emotional competence supports learning engagement, classroom participation, and relationship quality (Denham, 2011; Nakamichi et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2017). By targeting this age group, the study addresses a critical window for intervention when socio-emotional skills are both highly malleable and predictive of later adjustment.

From a practical standpoint, the study provides applied evidence about implementing an established European curriculum (PROMEHS) within local kindergarten contexts. PROMEHS has demonstrated positive impacts on preschoolers' SEL and related outcomes across multiple European countries, yet its effectiveness has not been tested in Albania. Evaluating its effect on emotion recognition in Albanian children can inform educators, psychologists, and policymakers about the feasibility and potential benefits of structured emotional programs in Albanian early childhood settings (Cefai et al., 2022; Conte et al., 2023; Martinsone et al., 2022). At the national level, evidence supporting effective early interventions aligns with broader priorities to strengthen early childhood education quality and child development outcomes (Hamzallari, 2013; UNICEF Albania, 2023). Thus, the study holds both theoretical significance – advancing knowledge on emotion recognition as a

developmental mechanism, and applied relevance – providing insights for curriculum design and policy in Albania.

### 1.4. Theoretical Relevance and Practice Importance

The study is grounded in contemporary models that conceptualize emotional competence as a learnable, scaffolded developmental system, with emotion knowledge, particularly the recognition of emotions in others, supporting children's capacity for adaptive responding and relationship-building (Denham et al., 2012; Domitrovich et al., 2017). Within these models, accurate emotion identification is a prerequisite for later competencies such as perspective-taking, social problem solving, and regulation in emotionally demanding situations (Denham, 2011; Cavadini et al., 2021; Kujawa et al., 2014). This theoretical logic supports the use of structured classroom curricula that repeatedly train emotional vocabulary, recognition, and reflection through guided activities.

PROMEHS provides a direct applied pathway consistent with this theory: it is a universal mental health promotion curriculum that targets social-emotional competencies through structured educational activities and includes an implementation monitoring approach emphasizing delivery quality (Cefai et al., 2022; Martinsone et al., 2022). In practice, such curricula strengthen educator capacity and provide a coherent framework for integrating mental health and socio-emotional learning into daily classroom routines, an aspect particularly relevant in contexts where socio-emotional development may otherwise be addressed implicitly rather than through systematic instruction (UNICEF Albania, 2023; Hyseni Duraku, 2021). Evaluating PROMEHS in Albanian kindergartens therefore holds

both theoretical and applied importance: it tests the developmental logic of emotion recognition as a foundational skill, while generating practical evidence for educators and policymakers about scalable approaches to promoting children's emotional development and school readiness in Albania.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design and Approach

The present study adopts a quantitative, intervention-based approach using a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design to examine the effects of structured emotional training on preschool children's emotion recognition and related socio-cognitive skills at ages 5-6. The intervention is implemented through the *Promoting Mental Health at School* (PROMEHS) curriculum, representing the main study intervention.

Including children from preparatory classes reflects the transitional stage toward formal schooling, making the evaluation of emotion recognition interventions particularly relevant in this context. Ages 5-6 represent a critical developmental period for the consolidation of emotional competencies and the emergence of theory of mind, both strongly linked to social adjustment and school readiness (Denham, 2011; Wellman, 2014; Grazzani et al., 2016). Including parents and teachers as informants enhances the validity of the design by reducing single-source bias and capturing children's functioning across home and school contexts (Achenbach, McConaughy and Howell, 1987; De Los Reyes and Kazdin, 2005).

To enhance methodological rigor, the design incorporated a multi-informant strategy, combining direct child assessments (Emotional Understanding and Theory of Mind), with teacher reports of language development and parent reports of socio-emotional functioning of children. Multi-informant approaches are widely recommended in developmental and intervention research, as they reduce single-source bias and provide a more comprehensive account of children's competencies across home and school contexts (Achenbach, McConaughy and Howell, 1987; De Los Reyes and Kazdin, 2005). In socio-emotional learning (SEL) evaluations, such triangulation of perspectives is considered best practice, since children's emotional and behavioral adjustment often varies by setting and informant (Cefai et al., 2022; Skivington et al., 2021). This strategy strengthens the robustness of the quasi-experimental design and increases confidence that observed changes reflect genuine developmental shifts rather than measurement artifacts.

### 2.2. Participants

The study sample consists of 204 preschool children (102 girls and 102 boys), aged 5-6 years, enrolled in 34 kindergartens located mostly in urban Tirana. Children were randomly selected within preparatory classrooms, with equal representation of boys and girls ensured by including three children per gender per class. This sampling strategy was designed to maintain gender parity and developmental comparability across participants.

In addition to the child sample, the study also included 204 parents of participating children, who provided reports on their child's social and

behavioral functioning. Parents were sampled randomly by selecting the caregiver accompanying the child to kindergarten in the morning, thereby ensuring naturalistic and unbiased recruitment. Furthermore, 68 teachers from the 34 participating classes contributed evaluations of children's language development. Teachers were those already assigned to the preparatory classes and were therefore not sampled separately, but their inclusion ensured that the study captured professional perspectives on children's communicative competencies.

### 2.3. Data Collection Methods

**Emotion Recognition**

Emotion recognition was assessed using an adapted version of the Test of Emotion Comprehension (TEC), which was carefully modified by the researcher to ensure cultural and developmental appropriateness for Albanian preschoolers. The instrument was administered with the support of illustrated emotional cards, a format that has been shown to facilitate comprehension in young children (Cavadini et al., 2021; Pons and Harris, 2000). The TEC is a widely used, developmentally appropriate instrument designed to measure children's understanding of emotions across multiple components of emotional knowledge. It has been extensively validated in preschool populations and is considered one of the most comprehensive tools for assessing socio-emotional development in early childhood (Cavadini et al., 2021; Grazzani et al., 2018; Pons and Harris, 2000).

For this study, the TEC was adapted based on its original theoretical framework, comprising 23 scenarios that assess children's responses across nine dimensions of emotional understanding. These dimensions

include recognition of basic emotions, understanding of external causes, desire-based emotions, belief-based emotions, reminders, regulation, mixed emotions, moral emotions, and the distinction between real and apparent emotions. This multidimensional structure allows for a nuanced evaluation of children's emotional comprehension, moving beyond simple recognition to capture the developmental progression of emotion knowledge (Grazzani et al., 2016; Pons, Harris and de Rosnay, 2004).

**Theory of Mind**

Children's theory of mind (ToM) was assessed using four tasks from the Theory of Mind battery developed by Wellman and Liu (2004). This battery is widely recognized as a reliable developmental measure of children's ability to attribute mental states to themselves and others. The tasks are ordered by increasing difficulty and tap into different aspects of ToM development, including understanding diverse desires, diverse beliefs, knowledge access, and false belief. Each task presents children with short stories or scenarios accompanied by visual aids, requiring them to predict or explain a character's behavior based on mental state reasoning. Importantly, the ToM battery builds on classical false-belief and perspective-taking paradigms that have shaped developmental psychology since the 1980s (Wimmer AND Perner, 1983). The battery has been extensively validated cross-culturally and is considered a gold standard for assessing ToM in preschool and early school-age children (Grazzani et al., 2016; Wellman & Liu, 2004).

**Emotional and Behavioral Functioning**

To capture children's socio-emotional functioning beyond direct assessments, parents completed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997). The SDQ is a widely validated 25-item screening tool that measures emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer relationship difficulties, and prosocial behavior. It has been extensively used in both clinical and community samples internationally and is considered reliable for preschool populations (Stone et al., 2010).

**Language Development**

Teachers completed a language checklist for 5-6-year-olds, constructed by the researcher in alignment with the *Learning and Development Standards for 3-6-year-old Children* (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2024). This checklist was designed to evaluate receptive and expressive language skills, ensuring cultural and curricular relevance. Language development was included as a control variable, given its established role in shaping children's performance on socio-emotional and theory of mind tasks (Milligan, Astington and Dack, 2007).

**Assessment Procedure**

Measures were administered at two time points. The pretest (T1) was conducted in March 2026, prior to the start of the intervention, providing baseline data on children's emotion recognition, theory of mind, language development, and socio-emotional functioning. The intervention was implemented in the experimental group over a period of four-to-six weeks

(April-May 2026), consisting of eight-to-ten structured sessions delivered through the PROMEHS curriculum. The posttest (T2) was carried out in May-June 2026, immediately after completion of the intervention, allowing for the evaluation of short-term changes in children's competencies.

The direct child measures (TEC and ToM battery) were administered individually by trained psychosocial staff in kindergartens, specifically psychologists and social workers, to ensure standardized administration and fidelity to protocols. In contrast, the complementary measures were collected through self-reports: parents completed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), and teachers completed the language checklist for 5-6-year-olds. This division of administration responsibilities reflects best practices in developmental and intervention research, where trained professionals conduct performance-based child assessments while informant reports are gathered directly from caregivers and educators (Achenbach et al., 1987; De Los Reyes and Kazdin, 2005).

### 2.4. Analytical procedures

The data will be analyzed in accordance with the study's quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design with two groups (intervention vs. control) and guided by the stated hypotheses and research questions. Preliminary analyses will include descriptive statistics and checks for normality, homogeneity of variance, and baseline equivalence between groups (Field, 2018). To evaluate intervention effects, mixed-design analyses of variance (ANOVA) will be conducted, with time (pretest vs. posttest) as the within-subjects factor and group (intervention vs. control)

as the between-subjects factor. This approach will allow for the examination of both main effects and interaction effects, thereby testing whether changes in emotion recognition, theory of mind, and emotional and behavior functioning differ significantly across groups over time (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019).

Effect sizes (partial $\eta^2$) will be reported to assess the magnitude of observed differences, and statistical significance will be set at $p < .05$. Where assumptions are violated, appropriate corrections (e.g., Greenhouse–Geisser adjustment) will be applied. In addition, exploratory analyses will be conducted to examine potential moderating effects of gender and parental education, consistent with prior research highlighting socio-demographic influences on socio-emotional development (Denham, 2011; Grazzani et al., 2016). All analyses will be performed using SPSS (Version 29), ensuring reproducibility and adherence to established standards in educational and developmental psychology research (Cohen, 1988; Field, 2018).

### 2.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval and formal permissions were obtained from the relevant educational institutions in Tirana, Albania, in accordance with national and local regulations governing research in early childhood settings. Written informed consent was secured from teachers and parents, and children provided age-appropriate assent prior to participation. Given the researcher's professional role as a psychologist within the General Directorate of Nurseries and Kindergartens, particular care was taken to emphasize voluntariness, ensuring that participation or non-participation

did not affect children's access to services. Confidentiality was safeguarded through anonymized coding procedures and secure data handling practices, consistent with international standards for research with minors (American Psychological Association, 2017; British Psychological Society, 2021).

The phased approach, beginning with pilot testing and progressing to controlled intervention, was ethically appropriate in school-based research. It allowed careful evaluation of feasibility, acceptability, and potential benefits before expanding to larger controlled designs, thereby minimizing risks and maximizing the likelihood of positive outcomes (Moore et al., 2015; Skivington et al., 2021).

### 2.6. Pilot study

Prior to launching the main study, a pilot phase was conducted to evaluate the accuracy, clarity, and developmental appropriateness of the assessment instruments. The pilot involved 18 preschool children, 18 parents, and 6 teachers, allowing for preliminary testing of direct child measures as well as parent and teacher self-report measures. This preliminary stage confirmed that the emotion recognition test items and theory of mind tasks were well understood by children and produced consistent responses. Minor corrections were made to wording, task instructions, and scoring protocols to ensure cultural and contextual relevance for Albanian preschoolers. The pilot also tested the feasibility of incorporating teacher

reports on language development and parent reports of socio-emotional functioning through the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).

Conducting pilot studies is widely recognized as a critical step in complex educational and intervention research, as they help identify potential sources of measurement error, refine procedures, and ensure feasibility before scaling to larger controlled trials (Eldridge et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2015; Skivington et al., 2021). These refinements and methodological choices strengthened confidence in the suitability of the tools and design for the main intervention.

### 2.6. Current Status of the Study

The study has successfully completed the data collection phase, employing direct child measures to assess emotion recognition and theory of mind. Testing was conducted in kindergartens across Tirana by trained psychologists and social workers, ensuring standardized administration and developmental appropriateness. In addition to these direct assessments, parents completed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) at both the pretest (March 2026) and posttest (May-June 2026), providing standardized reports on children's socio-emotional and behavioral functioning (Goodman, 1997; Stone et al., 2010). Teachers reported on children's language development at the pretest stage, using a checklist aligned with the national preschool standards (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2024), thereby controlling for individual differences in communicative competencies of children.

The intervention was implemented over a period of four-to-six weeks (April-May 2026) in the experimental group, following the structured

framework of the *Promoting Mental Health at School* (PROMEHS) curriculum, which emphasizes evidence-based socio-emotional learning (SEL) activities designed to foster emotional understanding, regulation, and social competence (Cefai et al., 2022; Grazzani et al., 2023). Staff received targeted training to administer the measures in a standardized and reliable manner, consistent with international best practices for SEL program evaluation. This training was critical to maintaining fidelity to the PROMEHS framework, which highlights the importance of consistent delivery and accurate assessment in order to capture intervention effects (Cefai et al., 2022). By embedding PROMEHS principles into the intervention design, the study aligns with European research demonstrating that structured SEL curricula can enhance children's emotional competencies, classroom climate, and teacher well-being (Cefai et al., 2022; Grazzani et al., 2018).

### 2.7. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the strengths of employing direct child measures, parent and teacher reports, and embedding the intervention within the PROMEHS curriculum, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study utilized a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design, which, while appropriate for feasibility testing, does not allow for strong causal inferences due to the absence of random assignment (Shadish, Cook and Campbell, 2002). Second, the sample was drawn mostly from urban kindergartens in Tirana, limiting the generalizability of findings to rural contexts or other regions of Albania where socio-economic and cultural conditions may differ (UNICEF Albania, 2023). Third, although psychosocial staff (psychologists and social workers) were trained to

administer direct child measures in a standardized way, variability in administration across staff may have introduced subtle measurement bias. Fourth, while the inclusion of parent self-reports (SDQ at pretest and posttest) and teacher reports on language development (at pretest) strengthened the multi-informant design, reliance on self-report data may be subject to informant bias and situational specificity (Achenbach, McConaughy and Howell, 1987; De Los Reyes and Kazdin, 2005). Finally, the relatively short four-to-six-week intervention period may not capture longer-term developmental changes in emotional understanding, theory of mind, or socio-emotional functioning, as research on SEL programs has shown that short-term gains often diminish over time without extended exposure or longitudinal follow-up (Aksoy and Gresham, 2024; Murano, Sawyer and Lipnevich, 2020).

Future research should therefore employ larger, randomized controlled trials to strengthen causal claims and extend generalizability. Expanding the sample to include rural and diverse socio-economic contexts would provide a more comprehensive picture of the intervention's effectiveness across Albania. In addition, extending the duration of the intervention is recommended, as evidence from preschool SEL meta-analyses suggests that longer or repeated exposure is often necessary to consolidate socio-emotional skills and ensure their transfer to new contexts (Aksoy and Gresham, 2024; Murano, Sawyer and Lipnevich, 2020). Longer follow-up periods are also needed to examine the sustainability of gains in emotional competence, theory of mind, and socio-emotional functioning, since short-term effects may diminish without reinforcement (MDRC, 2026). Finally, future studies may explore the scalability of PROMEHS-based

interventions within national preschool curricula, contributing to policy efforts aimed at embedding socio-emotional learning into early childhood education systems across Europe (Cefai et al., 2022; Skivington et al., 2021).

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# "Implementation of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS): A Theoretical Perspective from Europe to Albania"

PhD. Lejda Abazi

*Barleti University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tourism and Sport, Department of Behavioral and Health Sciences, Tirana, Albania*

e-mail: l.abazi@umb.edu.al

Abstract

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) encompasses a range of interventions aimed at promoting psychological well-being, preventing mental health disorders, and supporting individuals and communities facing psychosocial stressors. The concept integrates two complementary dimensions: mental health support, which includes clinical and psychological services such as psychotherapy, counseling, and psychiatric treatment, and psychosocial support, which focuses on social, emotional, and community-based interventions that strengthen resilience, coping mechanisms, and social functioning. The theoretical framework of MHPSS is grounded in an interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral approach widely applied in public health, education systems, social services, and humanitarian contexts.

Across Europe, MHPSS programs are implemented through integrated policies and services involving schools, community health systems, and social protection structures. In Albania, the development of MHPSS initiatives has been increasingly supported through partnerships between governmental institutions and international organizations, including the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, and Terre des hommes. The

aim of this study is to examine the main MHPSS models and to provide a theoretical comparison between their implementation in Europe and Albania. The study employs a qualitative research approach based on the analysis of scientific literature, policy documents, and institutional reports related to mental health and psychosocial support interventions.

**Keywords:** *MHPSS; Europe; Albania; life course.*

## 1. Introduction

Mental health has become an increasingly important public health concern worldwide, with growing recognition that psychological well-being is closely linked to social, economic, and cultural factors (Patel et al., 2018; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). In response to this understanding, the concept of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) has emerged as a comprehensive framework that integrates mental health care with broader psychosocial interventions aimed at enhancing individual and community well-being. MHPSS encompasses a range of services and activities designed to prevent mental health disorders, promote resilience, strengthen coping mechanisms, and support recovery among individuals and populations affected by adversity, crises, social exclusion (Inter-Agency Standing Committee [IASC], 2007; WHO, 2021). Across Europe, the implementation of MHPSS has evolved significantly over the past two decades. Influenced by recommendations from international organizations and regional mental health strategies, European countries have increasingly shifted from institutional models of care toward community-based, person-centered, and rights-oriented approaches (Thornicroft et al., 2016; WHO Regional Office for Europe,

2021). These developments reflect a broader understanding that effective mental health support requires not only clinical treatment but also social interventions that address the determinants of mental health, including poverty, discrimination, unemployment, displacement, and social isolation. Recent challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, migration flows, economic instability, and humanitarian crises, have further highlighted the importance of accessible and integrated MHPSS systems throughout Europe (European Commission, 2023; UNICEF, 2021).

Within this broader European context, Albania has undergone substantial reforms in its mental health system. Since the transition from centralized institutional care, the country has made efforts to align its mental health policies and services with European standards by promoting deinstitutionalization, establishing community mental health centers, and strengthening psychosocial services (Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Albania, 2023; WHO, 2021). Despite these advances, significant challenges remain, including limited resources, shortages of specialized professionals, regional disparities in service provision, and persistent social stigma associated with mental health conditions.

These challenges raise important questions regarding the extent to which theoretical principles of MHPSS have been translated into practice and how European experiences can inform further development of mental health and psychosocial support services in Albania (IASC, 2007; WHO, 2021). The central research problem addressed in this paper concerns the gap between theoretical frameworks of MHPSS and their practical implementation within different socio-political contexts, particularly in Albania. While substantial literature exists on MHPSS models and

interventions, there is a need for a clearer understanding of how these theoretical approaches influence policy development, service delivery, and community-based mental health practices (Patel et al., 2018; Thornicroft et al., 2016). Therefore, the primary objective of this paper is to examine the theoretical foundations of MHPSS and explore their implementation from a European perspective to the Albanian context. Specifically, the study aims to analyze key theoretical models underpinning MHPSS, review European approaches to mental health and psychosocial support, and assess the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing these frameworks in Albania (European Commission, 2023; WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2021).

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both academic knowledge and practical policy development. By connecting theoretical perspectives with implementation experiences, the paper provides insights into the factors that facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of MHPSS systems (Knapp et al., 2011; Rosenberg & Hickie, 2019). The findings may support policymakers, mental health professionals, social workers, and civil society organizations in designing more responsive and sustainable mental health services. Furthermore, the study contributes to ongoing discussions regarding mental health reform and the integration of psychosocial support within broader health and social protection systems.

From a theoretical perspective, this paper draws upon key concepts including the biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1977), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), resilience theory (Masten, 2014), and human rights-based approaches to mental health (United Nations, 1948; WHO, 2021). Together, these perspectives emphasize the multidimensional nature of mental well-being and highlight the

importance of addressing individual, interpersonal, community, and structural determinants of mental health (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Patel et al., 2018). From a policy and practice perspective, the study highlights the relevance of evidence-based, community-oriented, and culturally sensitive approaches to MHPSS implementation (IASC, 2007; WHO, 2021).

Understanding how these theoretical principles can be effectively translated into practice is essential for strengthening mental health systems and promoting psychosocial well-being in Albania and across Europe (Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Albania, 2013, 2023; WHO, 2021).

Ultimately, this paper argues that effective implementation of MHPSS requires more than the availability of mental health services alone; it requires an integrated approach that combines clinical care, psychosocial support, community participation, and supportive public policies (Patel et al., 2018; Thornicroft et al., 2016).

Examining the relationship between theory and practice provides valuable insights for advancing mental health promotion and for developing accessible, equitable, and sustainable support systems capable of addressing the diverse needs of populations across different social and cultural contexts (European Commission, 2023; WHO, 2021).

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on a theoretical and descriptive analysis of existing literature and policy documents related to Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS). A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of

conceptual frameworks, policy developments, and implementation practices across different contexts. The study aims to examine how theoretical perspectives on MHPSS have informed policy and practice in Europe and how these approaches have been applied within the Albanian context.

As a desk-based study, no human participants were involved. The data sources consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy papers, strategic frameworks, government documents, and institutional reports published by international and national organizations working in the field of mental health and psychosocial support. Key sources included publications from the World Health Organization (WHO), the European Union, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the Albanian Ministry of Health, and relevant non-governmental organizations. Documents were selected based on their relevance to MHPSS theory, policy development, service implementation, and mental health reform.

Data were collected through a systematic review of academic databases and institutional repositories. Relevant literature was identified using keywords such as “Mental Health and Psychosocial Support,” “MHPSS implementation,” “community mental health,” “mental health policy,” “psychosocial interventions,” “Europe,” and “Albania.” Inclusion criteria focused on documents published in English and Albanian that addressed theoretical foundations, policy frameworks, implementation strategies, or evaluation of MHPSS programs. Priority was given to recent publications and authoritative institutional sources.

The collected documents were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involved several stages: familiarization with the data,

identification of key concepts and recurring themes, categorization of findings, and interpretation of relationships between theory and practice.

The analysis focused on four main themes: (1) theoretical foundations of MHPSS, (2) European approaches to mental health and psychosocial support, (3) implementation challenges and opportunities, and (4) the development of MHPSS within Albania. A comparative perspective was applied to identify similarities and differences between European frameworks and Albanian practices.

This study relied exclusively on publicly available literature, policy documents, and institutional reports and therefore did not involve human subjects, personal data, or direct interaction with participants. As a result, formal ethical approval was not required.

**Case Study: The Italian Model of Mental Health and Psychosocial Services**

Italy provides one of the most influential examples of community-based mental health reform in Europe and serves as a valuable case study for understanding the practical implementation of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS). The Italian model demonstrates how theoretical principles such as human rights, social inclusion, community participation, and multidisciplinary care can be translated into national mental health policies and services.

The foundation of the Italian mental health system was established through Law 180 of 1978, known as the Basaglia Reform, named after psychiatrist Franco Basaglia. The Basaglia Reform is widely regarded as one of the most significant mental health reforms of the twentieth century and has profoundly influenced contemporary community psychiatry both in

Europe and internationally. Franco Basaglia (1924–1980), an Italian psychiatrist and social reformer, challenged the dominant institutional model of psychiatric care, arguing that mental illness should not justify the exclusion of individuals from society.

His work was strongly influenced by phenomenological psychiatry, existential philosophy, and the emerging international human rights movement. Basaglia maintained that psychiatric hospitals functioned not only as healthcare institutions but also as mechanisms of social control, where patients were deprived of autonomy, civil rights, and opportunities for recovery (Foot, 2015). Before the reform, psychiatric care in Italy was governed by legislation dating back to 1904, which permitted the compulsory institutionalization of individuals considered "dangerous" or "socially undesirable." Large psychiatric hospitals were frequently overcrowded, and treatment often relied on coercive practices, prolonged confinement, physical restraint, and limited therapeutic intervention. Patients commonly remained institutionalized for many years, resulting in social isolation and the loss of family and community relationships. Basaglia argued that these institutions often reinforced disability rather than promoting recovery and social participation. The turning point occurred during Basaglia's leadership of the psychiatric hospital in Trieste in the early 1970s. Rather than simply improving institutional conditions, Basaglia introduced a radical process of deinstitutionalization by opening hospital wards, eliminating physical restraints, involving patients in decision-making, and gradually replacing custodial care with community-based services. The Trieste experience demonstrated that individuals with severe mental illnesses could successfully live within their communities when appropriate clinical treatment, housing support, employment

opportunities, and psychosocial rehabilitation were available. This local experience became an international model for psychiatric reform and significantly influenced national legislation. Law No. 180, enacted in May 1978, fundamentally transformed Italian mental health policy by prohibiting the construction of new psychiatric hospitals and initiating the gradual closure of existing institutions. The legislation established that psychiatric treatment should, whenever possible, be provided through community services rather than long-term hospitalization. Admission to psychiatric wards was restricted to acute situations requiring short-term intervention, while involuntary treatment became subject to strict legal safeguards and judicial oversight. These reforms represented a major shift from institutional custody to community-based care and reflected an emerging rights-based understanding of mental health. The implementation of the reform required extensive organizational changes throughout the Italian healthcare system. Community Mental Health Centers became the cornerstone of service delivery, assuming responsibility for psychiatric assessment, crisis intervention, outpatient treatment, psychosocial rehabilitation, family support, and long-term follow-up.

Residential facilities and supported housing programs were developed to assist individuals leaving psychiatric hospitals, while day-care centers promoted vocational rehabilitation and social integration. Importantly, the reform emphasized continuity of care, ensuring that service users could access multidisciplinary support throughout different stages of recovery. The Basaglia Reform also transformed professional practice by redefining the relationship between healthcare professionals and service users. Patients increasingly became active participants in treatment planning

rather than passive recipients of care. Respect for autonomy, informed consent, dignity, and social inclusion emerged as fundamental principles of Italian mental health policy. This recovery-oriented philosophy anticipated many of the concepts later incorporated into international Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) frameworks developed by the World Health Organization and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee.

Internationally, the Italian experience has attracted considerable attention because it represents one of the few national examples of complete psychiatric deinstitutionalization. The World Health Organization has repeatedly recognized the Trieste model as an example of good practice in community mental health, highlighting its emphasis on human rights, continuity of care, multidisciplinary teamwork, and community participation (WHO, 2021). Nevertheless, researchers have emphasized that the success of the reform depended not solely on legislative change but also on sustained political commitment, investment in community services, and collaboration between health, social welfare, housing, education, and employment sectors (Foot, 2015; Thornicroft et al., 2016).

Despite its achievements, the Basaglia Reform continues to generate academic debate. Some scholars argue that implementation has varied considerably across Italian regions because healthcare administration is decentralized. Northern regions generally developed more comprehensive community mental health networks, whereas some southern regions experienced slower implementation owing to financial constraints, workforce shortages, and differences in regional governance. These variations demonstrate that legislation alone cannot guarantee equitable mental health services and underscore the importance of continuous

investment, monitoring, and quality improvement. From the perspective of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, the Basaglia Reform remains highly relevant because it shifted the focus of mental healthcare from institutional treatment to recovery, social participation, and community resilience. Its principles closely align with contemporary MHPSS approaches that recognize mental health as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by clinical, psychological, social, cultural, and environmental factors.

This reform transformed the country's mental health care system by gradually closing psychiatric hospitals and replacing institutional care with community-based services. The reform was guided by the belief that individuals experiencing mental health conditions should be treated with dignity and supported within their communities rather than isolated in psychiatric institutions. As a result, Italy became one of the first countries to implement a nationwide deinstitutionalization strategy. Mental health services in Italy are provided through the National Health Service (Servizio Sanitario Nazionale – SSN), which guarantees universal access to healthcare. Community Mental Health Centers constitute the core of service delivery and provide psychiatric assessment, psychological counseling, crisis intervention, rehabilitation, and follow-up care. Additional support is offered through outpatient services, residential rehabilitation facilities, municipal social services, and vocational integration programs aimed at facilitating social participation and independent living. A key strength of the Italian model is its multidisciplinary approach. Psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, nurses, educators, occupational therapists, and community organizations collaborate to address the complex needs of service users. This integrated

system reflects the biopsychosocial perspective of mental health by recognizing the interaction between psychological, social, and environmental factors in shaping well-being.

The educational sector also contributes significantly to psychosocial support. Many schools provide psychological counseling, prevention programs, and mental health promotion activities. Interventions addressing bullying, emotional difficulties, anxiety, and social exclusion are frequently implemented in cooperation with mental health professionals and local community services. These initiatives demonstrate the importance of early intervention and preventive strategies within MHPSS frameworks.

From a theoretical perspective, the Italian model reflects several core MHPSS principles. The emphasis on community-based care aligns with ecological systems theory, which highlights the importance of social environments in individual well-being. The focus on recovery, empowerment, and participation corresponds with resilience theory and human rights-based approaches to mental health. Furthermore, the integration of health and social services illustrates the practical application of the biopsychosocial model. Despite its achievements, the Italian system continues to face challenges. Regional inequalities between northern and southern Italy affect service availability and quality.

Limited resources in some regions, workforce shortages, and increasing demand for mental health services place pressure on the system. These challenges demonstrate that even well-established community-based models require continuous investment, coordination, and policy adaptation. The Italian experience offers important lessons for Albania to provide an important reference point for countries such as Albania that

continue to strengthen community-based mental health systems through ongoing policy reform and inter-sectoral collaboration. Both countries have pursued mental health reforms aimed at reducing institutionalization and strengthening community services. However, Italy's longer experience highlights the importance of sustained political commitment, adequate funding, multidisciplinary collaboration, and integration between health, education, and social welfare sectors. As Albania continues to develop its mental health and psychosocial support system, the Italian model provides a practical example of how community-centered and rights-based approaches can contribute to more inclusive and effective mental health care. The organization of the Italian Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) system reflects a community-based and multidisciplinary model that integrates mental health care within the National Health Service while promoting collaboration among health, education, and social welfare sectors. Figure 1 summarizes the principal organizational components of the Italian mental health system.

**Figure 1**

***Italian Mental Health and Psychosocial Support System***

**Italy**

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Italian Mental Health System
│
├── National Level
│   ├── Ministry of Health
│   └── National Health Service (Servizio Sanitario
Nazionale - SSN)
│
├── Regional Level (20 Regions)
│   ├── Regional Health Authorities
│   └── Mental Health Planning
│
└── Local Level
    ├── Local Health Authorities (ASL)
    ├── Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs)
    └── Hospital Services
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*Note.* Adapted by the author based on the Italian National Health Service (Servizio Sanitario Nazionale), WHO (2021), and the Basaglia Reform (Law 180/1978).

**3. Findings / Discussion**

The review of the literature demonstrates that Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) has evolved from a predominantly clinical understanding of mental health toward a multidimensional framework that integrates psychological, social, cultural, and community-based interventions. The findings indicate that the biopsychosocial model, ecological systems theory, resilience theory, and human rights-based approaches constitute the primary theoretical foundations of contemporary MHPSS. These frameworks emphasize that mental well-being is shaped not only by individual psychological factors but also by social

relationships, community structures, economic conditions, and public policies.

The literature consistently highlights the importance of adopting a holistic perspective when addressing mental health needs. Rather than focusing exclusively on diagnosis and treatment, MHPSS seeks to strengthen protective factors, enhance resilience, promote social inclusion, and support community participation. This theoretical shift reflects broader international efforts to recognize mental health as a public health and human rights issue.

The analysis of European policies and institutional reports reveals a significant transition from institutionalized mental health care toward community-based and person-centered service models. The Italian case study provides a practical illustration of this transition. Through the Basaglia Reform (Law 180 of 1978), Italy replaced long-term psychiatric institutionalization with a nationwide network of community mental health services. The development of Community Mental Health Centers, multidisciplinary teams, and integrated health and social services demonstrates how theoretical MHPSS principles can be translated into practice.

Italy's experience illustrates that community-based care requires not only legislative reform but also sustained political commitment, multidisciplinary collaboration, and continued investment in local services. The findings suggest that successful implementation of MHPSS is often associated with strong policy frameworks, adequate funding, multidisciplinary collaboration, and the active involvement of local communities.

The Italian model supports these findings by demonstrating how cooperation among psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, nurses, educators, and community organizations contributes to more comprehensive and person-centered care. At the same time, the Italian experience also highlights that community-based systems are not without challenges. Regional inequalities, workforce shortages, and increasing demand for mental health services illustrate that reforms require continuous adaptation and investment even after deinstitutionalization has been achieved.

The literature also identifies several persistent challenges across Europe, including inequalities in access to services, shortages of trained professionals, increasing demand for mental health care, and difficulties in coordinating services across sectors. Recent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and large-scale population displacement, have further emphasized the need for flexible and accessible psychosocial support systems. These developments demonstrate that MHPSS is increasingly viewed as an essential component of public health preparedness and social resilience.

The findings indicate that Albania has made notable progress in reforming its mental health system and aligning it with European standards. Policy reforms have promoted deinstitutionalization, the establishment of community mental health centers, and greater recognition of psychosocial support within healthcare and social services. These developments reflect the influence of international frameworks and broader European mental health reforms, including approaches exemplified by the Italian model. The current organization of mental health and psychosocial support services in Albania reflects the country's transition toward community-

based care. Although important reforms have been implemented, the system continues to face structural and workforce challenges. Figure 2 illustrates the main components of the Albanian mental health system discussed in this study.

**Figure 2**

***Albanian Mental Health and Psychosocial Support System***

*Note.* Developed by the author based on the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Albania (2023), WHO (2021), and relevant national mental health policy documents.

However, comparison with Italy suggests that legislative reform alone is insufficient to ensure effective implementation. While Albania has adopted policies supporting community-based mental health care, the literature indicates that practical implementation continues to be affected by limited financial resources, shortages of trained professionals, disparities between

urban and rural service availability, and persistent stigma surrounding mental health conditions. Furthermore, coordination among health, education, and social protection sectors remains less developed than in more established community-based systems. The Italian experience therefore highlights the importance of sustained institutional capacity, long-term funding, and interdisciplinary collaboration for translating policy commitments into effective services.

The findings have several implications. First, future research should examine the effectiveness of specific MHPSS interventions in Albania through empirical studies involving service users, professionals, and policymakers. Additional research could also explore the long-term impact of community-based mental health programs and psychosocial support initiatives while drawing comparative lessons from countries with more established community mental health systems, such as Italy.

Second, for professional practice, there is a need to strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration among mental health professionals, social workers, educators, and community organizations. Expanding training opportunities and improving access to psychosocial services, particularly in underserved areas, may contribute to more equitable mental health outcomes.

Third, from a policy perspective, continued investment in community mental health services, workforce development, and anti-stigma initiatives is essential. Policymakers should prioritize integrated approaches that connect health, education, and social protection systems while ensuring that mental health remains a central component of public health planning. The Italian model demonstrates that sustained investment and cross-sector

collaboration are critical for maintaining effective community-based mental health services over time.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that MHPSS represents a comprehensive and evolving framework for promoting mental well-being. The experience of Europe, particularly the Italian model, together with ongoing reforms in Albania, illustrates both the opportunities and the challenges associated with implementing theory-informed, community-centered, and rights-based mental health policies and practices.

The findings support the theoretical assumption that effective mental health interventions must address both psychological and social dimensions of well-being.

The ecological and biopsychosocial perspectives are particularly useful for understanding why community-based and integrated approaches have become central to modern MHPSS strategies. Italy's experience demonstrates how these theoretical perspectives can be operationalized through multidisciplinary community services, while the Albanian case illustrates the ongoing process of adapting these principles within a developing mental health system.

From a critical perspective, the Albanian case demonstrates the challenges of translating theory into practice within contexts characterized by resource limitations and ongoing system transformation. Although policy frameworks increasingly reflect international standards, implementation gaps reveal the importance of institutional capacity, workforce development, sustainable investment, and effective inter-sectoral coordination.

This observation is consistent with the broader literature and is reinforced by the Italian experience, which shows that successful community-based

mental health reform depends on continuous policy support long after initial legislative changes have been introduced.

The analysis also highlights the continuing relevance of resilience theory and human rights-based approaches. Community participation, social inclusion, and protection of vulnerable populations emerge as essential elements for strengthening mental health systems. These principles are particularly important in societies facing social inequalities, migration pressures, economic uncertainty, or public health emergencies.

Together, the European literature and the Italian case study demonstrate that community-centered and rights-based MHPSS approaches can contribute to more inclusive, accessible, and sustainable mental health systems.

## Comparison Between the Italian and Albanian Models

### Institutional Organization

Italy has a more consolidated and decentralized system, where communities and local authorities play an active role in providing services. Albania still retains some centralized elements and remains in the process of expanding community-based care.

### Approach to Treatment

The Italian model emphasizes social integration and community care, whereas the Albanian model, despite ongoing reforms, continues to rely partly on institutional treatment.

### The Role of Schools

In Italy, psychosocial services in schools are more developed and integrated into educational policies. In Albania, the presence of

psychologists and social workers has increased, but remains insufficient compared to existing needs.

**Multidisciplinary Collaboration**

Italy has a stronger tradition of inter-institutional and multidisciplinary cooperation. In Albania, such collaboration exists but often encounters organizational difficulties and lack of coordination.

**Social Challenges**

Both countries face challenges such as the growing prevalence of mental health issues among young people and the increasing need for preventive services. However, social stigma and lack of resources remain more pronounced in Albania.

The comparison between the Italian and Albanian models of mental health and psychosocial services demostrates that Italy has established a more integrated, community-based, and multidisciplinary system that promotes social inclusion and early intervention. Albania, although it has made significant progress in reforming its system, continues to face challenges related to human resources, funding, and social stigmatization.

The Italian experience may serve as a valuable reference model for Albania, particularly regarding the strengthening of community-based services, the expansion of psychosocial support in schools, and the improvement of inter-institutional cooperation. Investment in mental health remains a necessity for social development and individual well-being in both countries.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper examined the implementation of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) from a theoretical perspective, exploring

its development within the European context and its application in Albania. Through a qualitative analysis of scientific literature, policy documents, and institutional reports, the study highlighted the evolution of MHPSS as a comprehensive framework that integrates mental health care with psychosocial and community-based support. The findings demonstrated that contemporary MHPSS is grounded in key theoretical perspectives, including the biopsychosocial model, ecological systems theory, resilience theory, and human rights-based approaches, all of which emphasize the interconnected nature of individual well-being and social environments.

The analysis revealed that European mental health systems have increasingly adopted community-based, person-centered, and rights-oriented approaches to mental health care. These reforms reflect a broader recognition of the importance of integrating psychological support with social interventions that address the determinants of mental health.

The study also found that Albania has made significant progress in aligning its mental health policies with European standards through deinstitutionalization efforts, the development of community mental health services, and the expansion of psychosocial support initiatives. However, challenges such as limited resources, workforce shortages, service inequalities, and persistent stigma continue to affect the effective implementation of MHPSS.

The contribution of this study lies in its synthesis of theoretical and policy perspectives on MHPSS and its examination of how these frameworks are translated into practice. By linking international theoretical models with European experiences and the Albanian context, the paper provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence successful implementation of mental health and psychosocial support interventions.

The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge emphasizing the importance of integrated, community-centered, and multidisciplinary approaches to mental health promotion and care.

Furthermore, it offers practical insights for policymakers, mental health professionals, social workers, and organizations involved in designing and delivering psychosocial support services.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is based exclusively on secondary data sources, including literature, policy documents, and institutional reports, and therefore does not incorporate primary empirical data from service users, practitioners, or policymakers. Second, the findings are limited by the availability and scope of existing publications and may not fully capture recent developments or local variations in MHPSS implementation. Third, because the study adopts a theoretical and descriptive approach, it does not evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions or programs in measurable terms.

Future research should build upon these findings through empirical investigations of MHPSS implementation and outcomes. Studies involving interviews, surveys, case studies, or program evaluations could provide deeper insight into the experiences of service users and professionals within mental health systems. Comparative research across different European countries and the Western Balkans may also help identify best practices and transferable models for strengthening psychosocial support services.

Additionally, future studies should explore the impact of digital mental health interventions, community resilience programs, and integrated service delivery models in addressing emerging mental health challenges.

In conclusion, the successful implementation of MHPSS requires more than the provision of clinical mental health services. It demands a holistic approach that addresses psychological, social, cultural, and structural determinants of well-being while promoting human rights, social inclusion, and community participation. The experiences of Europe and Albania demonstrate both the progress that has been achieved and the challenges that remain.

Strengthening MHPSS systems through evidence-based policies, sustainable investment, and cross-sectoral collaboration will be essential for improving mental health outcomes and fostering resilient communities in the future.

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# Grade 11 Students' Perceptions of School Curriculum Load in Some High Schools in Tirana

Prof.Asoc. Dr. Leticja Gusho
Department of Pedagogy – Psychology
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana
Corresponding Author: leticja.gusho@unitir.edu.al

Prof. Dr. Arjana Muçaj
Department of Pedagogy – Psychology
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana

The main purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of Grade 11 students at some public high schools in the city of Tirana regarding the school curriculum load. The study employed a quantitative correlational design to examine the association between curriculum load, personal time, and academic achievement. The sample consisted of 394 students selected through a multistage probability sampling procedure. Data were collected through a questionnaire based on a Likert scale, and the instrument demonstrated acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of .74. The findings showed that students perceive the school curriculum as overloaded, characterized by a large amount of theoretical content and few practical activities. In addition, a negative association was found between perceived curriculum load and both academic achievement and personal time. The implications of the study highlight

the need for a more balanced and functional curriculum with a stronger focus on practical activities.

***Keywords:*** *curriculum load, personal time, academic achievement, student perceptions, public high schools*

***Introduction***

The pre-university education curriculum is one of the most important pillars of the formation of children and young people in our education system. The curriculum itself reflects the totality of experiences that the individual needs to have for a responsible, full, and successful participation in society. In other words, the school curriculum is the main pillar of the formation of the individual. Studies show that the curriculum significantly affects all the actors involved in it, starting from its writers, the teachers who implement it every day, the students, the parents, and the entire society as a whole (Hewitt, 2006). Also, the curriculum is the result of social activities, and since society is in constant development, the curriculum should also be in constant change and development. In addition, in this aspect should it be taken into account that changes in the curriculum cannot be implemented in an thoughtless, unstudied and untested manner, since taking into account the fact of the impact that the curriculum has on the development of the individual and society, the interventions that need to be made must be well thought out (Smeed, Bourke, Nickerson, & Corsbie, 2015). When designing a curriculum, curriculum designers consider four very important aspects related to the design of curriculum objectives, the definition of its content, the organization of methods that will structure the learning process of this content, and the assessment process. Each of

these dimensions is very important. First of all, the definition of objectives serves as a starting point from which to start and to increase the certainty of achieving and realizing the learning outcome, which in turn serves as a very important concluding point of the entire process. Although there is much discussion on this point, since according to some authors, the definition of objectives "stiffens" the curriculum and leaves no room for its development, other authors reinforce the fact that the design of the curriculum should be carried out with a clear goal and objective and as such with a well-defined function, since it is precisely this clear direction that explains the reason for the engagement of students (Mølstad & Karseth, 2016). The second pillar is related to the definition of the content or knowledge to be addressed. There is much debate on this point. Some perspectives support the fact that the content of the curriculum should be organized around knowledge, as facts are already known and well accepted by everyone (Young, 2013). Other perspectives see this argument as very outdated with developments and social changes. These authors emphasize the engagement of students in the construction, recomposition and reconstruction of knowledge (Taber, 2024).

The organization of the methods or instructions by which this knowledge will be planned, addressed, and organized is one of the most important pillars of curriculum design. Methods or instructions are very important because they reveal the full meaning of knowledge, which in certain respects has its source from science, society, and the student (Orstein & Hunkins, 2016). Assessment is also one of the most important pillars of this framework. Assessment is closely related to the breadth and depth of the curricular content, so that this content is assimilable by the individual

and in full accordance with their cognitive, emotional, and social development. Assessment is also related to the ranking, where the greatest challenge is the efficient treatment of the main elements of the curriculum and the vertical connection between the areas of the curriculum. In this context, the challenge of assessing the ranking of the curricular content should be based on several principles of learning, which are: the transition of learning from the simplest to the most complex, preliminary learning, the transition from learning the whole to learning the supporting parts, as well as chronological learning (Orstein & Hunkins, 2016)

The curriculum can be organized in many ways, and as we mentioned above, the design of the curriculum should be in full support of the development, awareness, and emancipation of society. In this regard, the basic models of curriculum development are the subject-centered model, the student-centered model, and the problem-centered model. The subject-centered model is also the most widespread and most applied in the school. The main characteristic of this model is that basic knowledge is developed in different subjects. On the other hand, subjects are developed much better by having specific, elaborated texts, where the content is organized from the treatment of the simplest content to the treatment of the most complex content (Duschl, Maeng, & Sezen, 2011). In the student-centered model, the writers of the curriculum emphasize the fact that the learning process should be closely linked to the lives, needs, and interests of students, as in this way, self-realization can be achieved through their active participation. Supported by the idea that students have an innate tendency to be active in things that interest them, this approach supports the fact that the student should not be treated as a

passive recipient of information, but as an active designer of the learning process (Amiruddin, Baharuddin, & Setialaksana, 2023)

The problem-centered model is based on the fact that the curriculum should be designed based on real-life problems of the individual and society in general. This model not only reinforces cultural traditions but also addresses the important needs of the individual, where the curriculum emphasizes activities that improve the conditions and quality of life, maintain the social and political ties of the individual, and attaches great importance to entertainment and feelings. This curriculum should enable students to function successfully in the new reality and to elaborate and offer solutions to general life situations in today's society. Also in this regard, the focus of the learning process on solving life situations and problems, using the past and present experiences of students as the main tool for analyzing the basic areas of life, takes on special importance (Cullen, Harris, & Hill, 2012).

*Characteristics of the pre-university education curriculum in our country*

The pre-university education curriculum in our country has been revised several times with the main aim of reflecting the changes and developments in society. The updated curriculum is based on the development of competencies as the main tool for the formation of a successful individual and, above all, aims to prepare individuals for a society that is always changing, having as its main focus the individual's ability to learn throughout life, the development of critical and creative thinking, and the inclusion and connection of school with real life. In this curriculum, absolute attention and priority are given to the mastery of the Albanian language, communication in two foreign languages, proficiency in mathematics, and especially proficiency in information technology

(MAS, 2024). The pre-university education curriculum also emphasizes integrated teaching to understand the connection between the fields of science and those of life through competency-based learning. The main focus is now on what the student knows how to do in practice and the attitudes and values that they must demonstrate. In this regard, the student develops a very important set of key competences, such as communication competence in the Albanian language, communication competence in a foreign language, competences in mathematics, science, engineering and technology, digital competences, personal, social and learning competences, civic competences, entrepreneurial competences, competences for cultural awareness and expression (MAS, 2024; OECD, 2021). Inclusion has been and remains one of the main characteristics of this curriculum, which guarantees equal access and inclusion in quality education for all children, regardless of their background, abilities, or socio-economic status. A special place in the curriculum is also given to the elective curriculum, where the school also determines its autonomy, since the flexibility at the school level to design part of the curriculum by adapting it to the needs, specificities and characteristics of the communities to which the schools belong, makes it possible to achieve an organic and original connection between the school and society (MAS, 2024). In principle, the current curriculum is characterized by the features of continuity, articulation, and balance, which means that the curriculum is characterized by the reappearance of certain key skills or ideas that the student regains in subsequent years. Also, the interconnection of different aspects of the curriculum in its vertical or horizontal form ensures that students acquire knowledge that will enable them to master the curriculum in subsequent school years. While horizontal articulation is

closely related to the development of interconnections in different areas such as mathematics, foreign languages, or ICT (MAS, 2024).

A very important aspect is balance, which is related to the fact that each aspect of the curriculum has a certain weight not only to avoid unnecessary burden, but also to enable students to master knowledge by using it in the right way for their own purposes, not only personal, but also social and intellectual. In this case, it must be taken into account that balance is also one of the most delicate issues in the design of contemporary curriculum, since a curriculum that today can be considered balanced, tomorrow, as a result of the influence of certain variables of the development of society, may no longer be. For this, it should be pointed out that there must be a well-organized balance between the needs and interests of the student as an individual and the general content of knowledge for which the student must be trained. To further enrich the framework of this information, this paper aims to shed light on the perceptions of 11$^{th}$-grade high school students in the city of Tirana regarding the curricular load at school.

***Metodology***

*Research design and approach*

This research used a quantitative research approach and a correlational model. A correlational model aims to describe the relationship between the variables identified in the study and to test the correlational relationships proposed by the literature (Pallant, 2012). The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of 11$^{th}$-grade high school students in Tirana regarding the curricular load at school. In addition, this study has several objectives:

- To identify the perceptions of 11th-grade high school students in Tirana regarding the curriculum load at school.
- To examine the relationships between students' perceptions regarding the main dimensions of the study.

To investigate the perceptions of 11th-grade high school students in Tirana regarding the curriculum load at school, two research questions were designed.

Research question no. 1: What are the perceptions of 11th-grade students of some high schools in the city of Tirana regarding the dimension of school curricular load?

Research question no. 2: What are the associative patterns between the main study dimensions? *Participants*

From the population of 11th-grade students of 5 public high schools in the city of Tirana, using a multistage probability sampling procedure, a sample of 394 students was drawn (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). The sample of students who participated in this study consists of 118 male 11th-grade students and 276 female 11th-grade students from schools in the city of Tirana.

*Data collection methods*

Data collection was carried out using an instrument (Likert Scale) consisting of several sections. In the first section, general data about the participants were requested. In the second section, participants' perceptions were requested regarding the factors with which the main dimension of the study, which is "School Curriculum Load", was operationalized. In the third section, participants' perceptions were requested regarding the factors with which the main dimension of the study, which is "Personal Time", was operationalized. Regarding the

dimension that is "Academic Results", these data were obtained by collecting the average grades of subjects belonging to the fields of Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Languages & Communication. Despite being treated as a dimension, in this case, it should be taken into account that this is a variable that depends on the school curriculum load. To measure the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used. Analyses showed that this scale has acceptable internal consistency with a reported Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .74.

The following table organizes the study dimensions based on their component indicators.

Table No. 1. Study Dimensions

| **Study Dimensions** | **Relevant indicators** |
|---|---|
| Dimension 1: School curriculum load | Daily teaching load<br>Theoretical material load<br>High pace of development of teaching material in the classroom<br>Lack of material acquisition<br>Lack of practical activities<br>Theoretical assignment load<br>Project load<br>Fatigue as a result of teaching load |
| Dimension 2: Personal time | Time for relaxation<br>Time for personal activities<br>Time for family relationships<br>Time for social relationships<br>Time for sports activities |

| | |
|---|---|
| Dimension 3:<br>Academic results | Last year's average grade in the areas of:<br>Mathematics<br>Natural Sciences<br>Social Sciences<br>Language and Communication |

*Analytical procedures*

With all the data collected from the questionnaire, a database was built in the SPSS program, version 23. Before the appropriate analyses were performed, all the required statistical assumptions were met. In this context, the data were examined for normal distribution, as well as for missing data.

Table No. 2 Research questions and statistical analysis

| Research Questions | | SPSS analyses |
|---|---|---|
| **No:1** | What are the perceptions of 11th-grade students of some high schools in the city of Tirana regarding the dimension of school curricular load? | Descriptive statistics |
| **No:2** | What are the associative patterns between the main study dimensions? | Pearson correlation |

**Findings and Discussion**

In this section, the results that emerged from the statistical analyses will be discussed. Results and discussions for the first research question: What are the perceptions of 11th-grade students of some high schools in the city of Tirana regarding the dimension of school curriculum load?

Table No. 3 Descriptive statistics for the dimension "School curriculum load"

| School curriculum load | Perception level in % | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | I disagree. | I agree. | I completely agree. |
| Daily teaching load | 1.3 | 37.5 | 61.2 |
| Theoretical material load | 2.0 | 36.2 | 61.8 |
| High pace of development of teaching material in the classroom | 1.8 | 35.5 | 62.7 |
| Lack of material acquisition | 2.4 | 40.0 | 57.5 |
| Lack of practical activities | 2.0 | 36.7 | 61.2 |
| Theoretical assignment load | 1.9 | 37.2 | 61.0 |
| Project load | 2.8 | 40.0 | 57.2 |
| Fatigue as a result of teaching load | 2.4 | 44.1 | 53.5 |

The data collected for the dimension “School Curriculum Load”, which analyzes students’ perceptions of the curriculum load, are divided into eight main statements. With 2.1% of students disagreeing and a significant majority of 97.9% agreeing or strongly agreeing, they present a very clear picture of the perceptions of 11$^{th}$-grade students regarding the curriculum load. Thus, students report that the curriculum load is high and face difficulties in fulfilling their daily obligations in relation to their school load.

Table No. 4 Descriptive statistics for the dimension of “School Curriculum Load”

| | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| Daily teaching load | 2.60 | 0.51 |
| Theoretical material load | 2.60 | 0.53 |
| High pace of development of teaching material in the classroom | 2.61 | 0.52 |
| Lack of material acquisition | 2.55 | 0.55 |
| Lack of practical activities | 2.59 | 0.54 |
| Theoretical assignment load | 2.59 | 0.52 |
| Project load | 2.54 | 0.55 |
| Fatigue as a result of teaching load | 2.51 | 0.55 |

The averages of the indicators of the dimension "School curriculum load" range from M = 2.51 to M = 2.61, indicating a high level of perception of school load by students. The highest value was recorded for the indicator "High pace of development of teaching material in the classroom" (M = 2.61, SD = 0.52), while the lowest value was recorded for the indicator "Fatigue as a result of teaching load" (M = 2.51, SD = 0.55). The relatively low standard deviations indicate a limited distribution of responses and a general tendency of students towards agreement with the statements. This finding is supported by several studies reporting that stress from curriculum and schoolwork is closely linked to daily academic workload. Thus, about half of the students reported that increased daily demands, such as assignments, projects, tests, and maintaining high grades, caused stress at school. This workload was also

negatively associated with students' well-being, hope, and resilience (Johansen & Røsand, 2025; Cengiz, Yildirim, Kaşıkçı, & Peker, 2024).

Results and discussions for the second research question: What are the associative patterns between the main dimensions of the study?

Table No. 5: The relationship between the dimension of "Curriculum Load and Academic Results"

| **Correlations** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Curriculum load | Academic results |
| Curriculum load | Pearson Correlation | 1 | -.118* |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .036 |
| | N | 369 | 318 |
| Academic results | Pearson Correlation | -.118* | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .036 | |
| | N | 318 | 369 |
| *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). | | | |

To examine the relationship between the dimension "Curriculum Load" and the dimension "Academic Results", the Pearson correlation was used. From the table above, it is observed that there is a weak negative correlation between these two dimensions, $r = -.118$, $n = 318$, $p = .036$. This is related to the fact that the increase in curricular load is associated with a decrease in academic results. Similarly, Johansen et al. examined the stress associated with schoolwork in relation to academic

achievement in their study. In this context, the finding that increased curricular load may be associated with decreased academic performance is further strengthened; even in cases where this relationship is weak, it should be taken into account (Johansen & Røsand, 2025).

Table No. 6: The relationship between the dimension of "Personal Time" and "Curriculum Load"

| **Correlations** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Personal Time | Curriculum Load |
| Personal Time | Pearson Correlation | 1 | -.305** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | N | 346 | 294 |
| Curriculum Load | Pearson Correlation | -.305** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | N | 294 | 346 |
| **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). | | | |

In so doing, to examine the relationship between the dimension "Curricular Load" and the dimension "Personal Time", the Pearson correlation was used. From the table above, it is found that there is a negative correlation between these two dimensions, $r = -.305$, $n = 294$, $p < .001$. This is related to the fact that the increase in curricular load is associated with a decrease in personal time. This finding is supported by another study in this field, which reports that adolescents experience difficulties in balancing and prioritizing schoolwork with leisure

activities. Authors Hörbo & al, in their study, emphasize that the pressure to achieve high academic results and high performance, together with the increasing demands of extracurricular activities, causes stress, and students report difficulties in planning and controlling the time that should be devoted to school activities and personal life (Hörbo, Johansson, Garnow, Garmy, & Einberg, 2023).

**Conclusion**

This study has provided a general overview of the perceptions of students from several high schools in the city of Tirana regarding how they perceive the school curriculum load. The results of the study have shown that young students have the perception that the curricular load they do in school is heavy and has a lot of theory and few practical activities. Although this study had some limitations, such as the limited number of schools and the data collection was conducted in only one city, it has shed light on the phenomenon of curricular load applied in high schools, a phenomenon that is increasingly being discussed both in academic circles and among teachers, parents**,** and students. From statistical analysis, it has been revealed that there is a weak negative relationship between the dimensions of curriculum load in school, personal time**,** and academic results. The results of this study should be taken into consideration by the structures responsible for designing the curriculum, so that the curriculum is better equipped with practical and functional activities for the purpose it will achieve (OECD, 2020).

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**Title: The Invisible Burden of Caregiving in Palliative Care: A Critical Review of Contemporary Literature**

**Marinela Pane**

PhD Candidate, Faculty of Humanities and Linguistic Communication, Logos University College

**Erika Bejko**

Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana

Corresponding author: marinelapane@hotmail.com

**Abstract**

In the context of palliative care, family caregivers represent an essential yet often invisible pillar of health and social care systems. Despite their central role, caregiving burden remains under-recognized, while its impact is profound and multidimensional. This paper presents a critical review of contemporary scientific literature on caregiving burden in palliative care, focusing on its emotional, physical, social, and financial dimensions. Drawing on established theoretical frameworks, including stress and coping theory and the caregiver stress process model, caregiving burden is conceptualized as the result of prolonged exposure to chronic stressors linked to the complexity of care and the progressive deterioration of the patient's condition. Empirical evidence consistently shows that caregivers experience high levels of burden, significantly affecting their psychological well-being, social functioning, and physical health. Literature frames caregiving burden as a dynamic and interrelated process, where emotional distress, physical exhaustion, social isolation, and financial strain reinforce one another. In palliative care, this burden is intensified by exposure to suffering, anticipatory grief, and end-of-life

decision-making. Despite growing research, significant gaps remain, particularly in underrepresented socio-cultural contexts as Albania. This review highlights the need for integrated, context-sensitive approaches and emphasizes recognizing caregivers as key actors in palliative care policy and practice.

**Keywords:** caregiving burden, palliative care, family caregivers, stress, well-being, multidimensional burden

## Introduction

Palliative care has become an increasingly important component of contemporary health systems as populations age and the prevalence of chronic, progressive, and life-limiting illnesses continues to rise worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), palliative care is an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing problems associated with life-threatening illness through the prevention and relief of suffering, early identification of problems, and comprehensive management of physical, psychosocial, and spiritual needs. Globally, an estimated 56.8 million people require palliative care annually, yet only a small proportion receive appropriate services, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (WHO, 2020). Within the WHO European Region, approximately 4.4 million people are estimated to need palliative care each year, highlighting the growing importance of developing accessible and sustainable models of care (WHO Europe, 2023).

Over the last two decades, palliative care has progressively shifted from institutional settings toward home- and community-based models. This transition reflects both patient preferences and health-system efforts to reduce hospital utilization and support care closer to home. However, the

expansion of community-based palliative care has simultaneously increased reliance on family caregivers, who provide substantial amounts of unpaid care and support throughout the illness trajectory (OECD/European Commission, 2026). Family caregivers often assume responsibility for symptom monitoring, medication management, personal care, emotional support, coordination of healthcare services, and communication with professionals. Consequently, the effectiveness of many palliative care systems depends not only on formal healthcare services but also on the availability, capacity, and resilience of family members who undertake caregiving responsibilities (Chow et al., 2023).

Family caregiving is frequently associated with positive experiences, including a sense of meaning, personal growth, strengthened family relationships, and fulfilment of cultural or moral obligations (Pearlin et al., 1990). Nevertheless, a substantial body of evidence demonstrates that caregiving may also have significant adverse consequences for caregivers' physical health, psychological well-being, social participation, and financial stability (Zarit et al., 1980; Pearlin et al., 1990). In palliative care contexts, these challenges are often intensified by the progressive deterioration of the patient's condition, increasing functional dependency, symptom complexity, uncertainty regarding prognosis, anticipatory grief, and exposure to suffering and death (Alsirafy et al., 2021; Chow et al., 2023). Consequently, family caregivers frequently experience what has become known in the literature as caregiver burden.

Caregiver burden is generally understood as the multidimensional strain experienced by individuals providing care to a dependent person. It encompasses emotional distress, physical exhaustion, social restrictions, role conflict, financial hardship, and the subjective perception of being

overwhelmed by caregiving responsibilities (Zarit et al., 1980). Although caregiver burden has been extensively studied in dementia, chronic illness, and disability research, growing evidence suggests that the palliative care context presents unique challenges that require specific attention. Unlike many chronic disease trajectories, palliative care often involves rapid deterioration, intensive symptom management, end-of-life decision-making, and emotionally demanding interactions with patients and families. These factors create a caregiving environment characterized by prolonged uncertainty, cumulative stress, and heightened vulnerability to psychological distress (Cui et al., 2024; Shefeek et al., 2024).

The theoretical foundation of caregiver burden has been shaped by several influential frameworks. One of the most widely applied is the Stress and Coping Theory developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which conceptualizes stress as a transactional process arising when environmental demands are perceived as exceeding an individual's coping resources. Within caregiving contexts, burden emerges when caregivers perceive that the physical, emotional, and practical demands of care surpass their capacity to manage them effectively. This perspective emphasizes the importance of subjective appraisal and highlights why caregivers exposed to similar objective demands may experience different levels of burden.

A complementary framework is the Caregiver Stress Process Model proposed by Pearlin et al. (1990). This model conceptualizes caregiving burden as a dynamic process involving multiple interacting components, including primary stressors associated with direct caregiving tasks, secondary stressors resulting from role conflicts and social disruptions, mediating resources such as coping skills and social support, and

psychological or social outcomes. The stress process model remains highly relevant for palliative care because it acknowledges that caregiver burden evolves over time and is shaped not only by patient needs but also by broader social and relational contexts.

The third theoretical perspective informing this review is Engel's (1977) Biopsychosocial Model. Engel challenged purely biomedical understandings of illness and argued that health outcomes are shaped by interactions among biological, psychological, and social factors. Applied to palliative caregiving, this framework suggests that caregiver burden should not be viewed solely as an emotional reaction but rather as a multidimensional phenomenon affecting physical health, mental well-being, family functioning, social participation, and quality of life. The biopsychosocial perspective is particularly useful in understanding why caregiver burden often persists despite psychological resilience and why structural and service-related factors can significantly influence caregiver experiences.

Contemporary empirical evidence increasingly supports this multidimensional conceptualization of burden. Studies conducted in diverse cultural contexts consistently demonstrate that caregivers of patients receiving palliative care experience elevated levels of burden, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and reduced quality of life (Alsirafy et al., 2021; Shefeek et al., 2024; Cui et al., 2024). Furthermore, caregiver burden has been linked to poorer physical health outcomes, impaired social relationships, reduced workforce participation, and increased healthcare utilization among caregivers themselves (Chow et al., 2023). Such findings suggest that caregiver burden should not be regarded solely as an individual or family concern but rather as an important public

health issue with implications for healthcare systems, social policy, and service planning.

Despite growing scholarly attention, significant conceptual and empirical challenges remain. One major limitation is the heterogeneity of the literature. Studies vary considerably in their definitions of burden, measurement approaches, study populations, and theoretical orientations. Some researchers conceptualize burden primarily as emotional distress, whereas others emphasize practical demands, unmet needs, family dynamics, or social determinants. This diversity has generated valuable insights but has also limited the development of an integrated understanding of caregiver burden within palliative care settings.

Another important challenge concerns the measurement of burden. Although the Zarit Burden Interview (ZBI) remains the most widely used instrument internationally, debates continue regarding whether generic caregiver burden measures adequately capture the unique characteristics of palliative caregiving, including anticipatory grief, existential concerns, and end-of-life decision-making responsibilities (Summart et al., 2025). Recent validation studies and the development of palliative care–specific instruments indicate increasing recognition that caregiver burden in palliative care may involve dimensions that extend beyond traditional burden frameworks.

These challenges are particularly evident in countries where palliative care systems remain underdeveloped and research capacity is limited. Albania represents one such context. Compared with the extensive international literature, empirical evidence concerning family caregiver burden in palliative care remains extremely scarce. According to the EAPC Atlas of Palliative Care in the European Region, Albania continues to face

important challenges related to service availability, geographical coverage, workforce development, opioid accessibility, specialist training, and research infrastructure (European Association for Palliative Care (EAPC 2025). The absence of a dedicated national palliative care authority and the limited availability of specialist services suggest that family caregivers may assume substantial responsibilities that remain largely undocumented within the scientific literature.

The scarcity of Albanian evidence is problematic for several reasons. First, caregiving experiences are shaped by cultural norms, family structures, gender expectations, and healthcare systems. Findings from Western European or North American settings cannot automatically be generalized to Albania. Second, without local evidence, caregiver needs risk remaining invisible within policy discussions and service planning. Third, the absence of empirical research limits opportunities to develop culturally appropriate interventions and support mechanisms for caregivers. Consequently, there is a clear need to examine international evidence while simultaneously identifying its relevance and applicability to the Albanian context.

Against this background, the present paper aims to provide a critical narrative review of contemporary literature on caregiver burden in palliative care. Specifically, the review seeks to: (1) examine how caregiver burden is conceptualized within contemporary palliative care research; (2) analyse major theoretical frameworks explaining burden development; (3) evaluate current evidence regarding determinants, correlates, and consequences of caregiver burden; (4) assess the strengths and limitations of burden measurement approaches, with particular emphasis on the Zarit Burden Interview; and (5) identify implications for

future research, practice, and policy development, particularly within the Albanian context.

The significance of this review is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to a more integrated understanding of caregiver burden by synthesizing evidence across multiple disciplines and conceptual traditions. Practically, it highlights the importance of recognizing family caregivers as central stakeholders within palliative care systems and emphasizes the need for evidence-informed approaches to caregiver assessment and support. Ultimately, the review argues that caregiver burden should be understood not only as an individual psychological experience but also as a structural and public health issue requiring coordinated clinical, social, and policy responses.

## Methodology

### Research Design and Approach

This study employed a critical narrative literature review with a structured search component. The review was designed to synthesize and critically evaluate contemporary evidence concerning caregiver burden in palliative care while simultaneously identifying conceptual, methodological, and contextual gaps relevant to future empirical research. Unlike a formal systematic review, which seeks to answer narrowly defined research questions through exhaustive identification and appraisal procedures, a critical narrative review aims to provide a broader interpretive understanding of a complex phenomenon by integrating findings from diverse methodological traditions (Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019).

The choice of a critical narrative review was considered appropriate because caregiver burden in palliative care represents a multidimensional construct investigated across multiple disciplines, including nursing,

psychology, medicine, social work, public health, and health policy. Consequently, the literature encompasses heterogeneous study designs, theoretical frameworks, measurement approaches, and healthcare contexts. A narrative synthesis approach allowed for the integration of these diverse forms of evidence while maintaining a critical focus on conceptual development, theoretical interpretation, and practical implications.

Furthermore, the review was guided by principles of integrative literature review methodology, which emphasize the synthesis of empirical and theoretical literature in order to generate new perspectives and identify future research directions (Torraco, 2005). This approach was particularly relevant given the dual purpose of the study: first, to critically examine contemporary international evidence on caregiver burden in palliative care, and second, to inform the development of a future empirical research agenda in Albania.

**Data Sources and Search Strategy**

A structured search strategy was conducted to identify relevant literature. The search focused primarily on peer-reviewed publications published recently in order to capture contemporary developments in caregiver burden research. However, seminal theoretical and methodological works published before this period were also included because of their foundational importance for understanding caregiver burden and stress processes.

The search incorporated evidence from major international databases and scholarly sources, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, CINAHL, and Google Scholar. To complement peer-reviewed literature, selected grey literature and policy documents were reviewed from

internationally recognized organizations, including the World Health Organization (WHO), the WHO Regional Office for Europe, the European Association for Palliative Care (EAPC), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the European Commission. Additional searches were conducted using combinations of terms related to burden measurement, quality of life, caregiver outcomes, and psychosocial interventions. Because one objective of the review was to explore implications for Albania, supplementary searches specifically targeted evidence relating to the Albanian and Western Balkan contexts.

**Eligibility Criteria**

Studies were considered eligible if they met one or more of the following criteria:

1. Focused on adult family or informal caregivers providing care to patients receiving palliative care, hospice care, end-of-life care, or advanced cancer care.
2. Examined caregiver burden as a primary or secondary outcome.
3. Investigated determinants, predictors, mediators, or consequences of caregiver burden.
4. Evaluated interventions aimed at reducing caregiver burden or improving caregiver outcomes.
5. Examined psychometric properties or validation of caregiver burden assessment instruments.
6. Presented systematic reviews, meta-analyses, randomized controlled trials, observational studies, qualitative studies, or mixed-methods research relevant to caregiver burden.
7. Consisted of official reports or policy documents addressing palliative care systems, caregiver support, or family caregiving.

Seminal theoretical works informing caregiver burden conceptualization were also retained regardless of publication date.

Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on professional caregivers, lacked sufficient methodological transparency, did not address caregiver burden directly, or consisted solely of conference abstracts without corresponding peer-reviewed publication. Opinion pieces and non-scholarly materials were excluded unless produced by recognized international organizations and directly relevant to palliative care policy or caregiver support.

**Literature Search in the Albanian Context**

A specific component of the review focused on Albania. Preliminary searches revealed a significant scarcity of peer-reviewed studies examining caregiver burden among family caregivers of patients receiving palliative care in Albania. Consequently, the search scope was broadened to include literature on informal caregiving, family caregiving, chronic illness care, cancer care, ageing, disability, and long-term care within the Albanian context.

Additional evidence was identified through reports and publications produced by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, the Institute of Public Health, national healthcare organizations, university repositories, and international organizations operating in Albania. This broader evidence base was considered essential for contextualizing international findings and understanding the socio-cultural, institutional, and healthcare-system factors that may shape caregiving experiences within the country. The scarcity of Albania-specific evidence was itself interpreted as an important finding of the review, highlighting a substantial

knowledge gap and reinforcing the need for future empirical research focused specifically on family caregiver burden in palliative care settings.

**Analytical Procedures**

The selected literature was analysed using a thematic narrative synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Rather than aggregating findings statistically, the review sought to identify recurring patterns, conceptual themes, explanatory mechanisms, and areas of convergence and divergence across studies. Analysis proceeded through several stages. First, studies were reviewed to identify how caregiver burden was defined and conceptualized. Second, evidence relating to determinants and predictors of burden was synthesized. Third, findings concerning the consequences of burden, including quality of life, mental health, physical health, and social functioning, were examined. Fourth, intervention studies were analysed to assess the effectiveness of strategies designed to support caregivers. Finally, evidence relating to caregiver burden measurement was reviewed, with particular attention given to the Zarit Burden Interview because of its relevance for future empirical work in Albania.

Throughout the analytical process, findings were interpreted through three complementary theoretical frameworks: Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the Caregiver Stress Process Model (Pearlin et al., 1990), and the Biopsychosocial Model (Engel, 1977). These frameworks provided conceptual guidance for understanding burden as a dynamic, multidimensional, and socially embedded phenomenon.

**Ethical Considerations**

As this study was based exclusively on publicly available literature and official documents, formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, the review adhered to established principles of academic

integrity and responsible scholarship. Particular attention was given to transparency in source selection, accurate representation of findings, and critical interpretation of evidence. The review also recognizes the ethical importance of avoiding overgeneralization, especially when discussing under-researched contexts such as Albania. Where Albania-specific empirical evidence was unavailable, conclusions were drawn cautiously and grounded in internationally established findings alongside documented characteristics of the Albanian palliative care system. This approach aimed to balance scientific rigor with contextual sensitivity while identifying priorities for future research and policy development. By combining international evidence with contextual analysis, the methodological approach adopted in this review provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding caregiver burden in palliative care and for informing future empirical investigations within the Albanian healthcare context.

## Findings and Discussion

### Conceptualizing Caregiver Burden in Palliative Care

One of the most significant findings emerging from contemporary literature is that caregiver burden is no longer viewed as a unidimensional construct. Earlier studies frequently conceptualized burden as a subjective emotional response to caregiving demands; however, recent research increasingly portrays burden as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon encompassing emotional, physical, social, financial, and existential dimensions (Alsirafy et al., 2021; Cui et al., 2024; Shefeek et al., 2024).

This conceptual evolution reflects broader developments within palliative care itself. As palliative care has expanded beyond symptom management

toward holistic and family-centred approaches, greater attention has been directed toward understanding how illness affects family systems and caregiving networks. Consequently, caregiver burden is increasingly understood not merely as an individual psychological experience but as a dynamic process emerging through interactions among patients, caregivers, families, healthcare services, and broader social environments. The theoretical frameworks underpinning this review help explain this multidimensionality. According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress and Coping Theory, burden develops when caregiving demands are appraised as exceeding available coping resources. Importantly, burden is not determined solely by objective caregiving tasks but also by how caregivers interpret and respond to those demands. Two caregivers facing similar circumstances may therefore experience substantially different levels of burden depending on coping strategies, personal resources, and social support.

Pearlin et al.'s (1990) Caregiver Stress Process Model extends this perspective by conceptualizing burden as an evolving process involving primary stressors, secondary stressors, mediating resources, and outcomes. In palliative care, primary stressors include symptom management, patient dependency, and direct caregiving responsibilities, while secondary stressors may involve financial difficulties, employment disruptions, family conflict, and social isolation. This framework remains particularly relevant because it highlights how caregiving burden accumulates over time rather than emerging suddenly.

Similarly, Engel's (1977) Biopsychosocial Model emphasizes that caregiving burden cannot be reduced to emotional distress alone. Instead, burden influences and is influenced by physical health, psychological

functioning, interpersonal relationships, social participation, and healthcare-system factors. This multidimensional perspective is increasingly reflected in contemporary empirical research.

**Epidemiology and Prevalence of Caregiver Burden**

Recent studies consistently demonstrate that caregiver burden is highly prevalent among family caregivers providing palliative care. Although prevalence estimates vary according to measurement tools, populations, and healthcare settings, the overall evidence suggests that substantial levels of burden affect a significant proportion of caregivers.

In one of the largest recent studies, Alsirafy et al. (2021) examined 218 family caregivers of patients with incurable cancer in Egypt and Saudi Arabia using the Zarit Burden Interview. The authors reported that 58.7% of caregivers experienced clinically significant burden, with caregiving intensity and patient dependency emerging as major contributors. These findings are particularly important because they demonstrate that burden remains substantial even within cultural contexts characterized by strong family caregiving traditions.

Similarly, Shefeek et al. (2024), in a study involving informal caregivers receiving palliative care services in India, found that more than one-third of caregivers experienced moderate-to-severe burden. Importantly, caregivers reporting higher burden levels also reported significantly poorer physical, psychological, and social quality of life.

These findings are consistent with broader international evidence suggesting that family caregivers of individuals receiving palliative care experience higher levels of burden than many other caregiving populations (Chow et al., 2023). The advanced nature of illness, uncertainty regarding prognosis, progressive functional decline, and proximity to death create

caregiving demands that differ substantially from those observed in many chronic disease contexts.

Furthermore, caregiver burden appears to increase as patients approach the end of life. Studies consistently report that worsening functional status, symptom escalation, increasing dependency, and the need for assistance with activities of daily living are associated with higher burden levels (Alsirafy et al., 2021). This trajectory supports Pearlin et al.'s (1990) assertion that burden should be understood as a dynamic process influenced by evolving caregiving demands.

**Determinants and Predictors of Caregiver Burden**

The literature identifies multiple interacting determinants of caregiver burden. Rather than arising from a single factor, burden appears to result from the cumulative impact of patient-related, caregiver-related, family-related, and system-related variables.

**Patient-Related Factors**

Among patient-related determinants, functional dependency emerges as one of the most consistent predictors. Alsirafy et al. (2021) found that caregivers providing assistance with late-loss activities of daily living experienced significantly higher burden levels. Such tasks often involve intimate personal care, continuous supervision, and extensive physical involvement, thereby increasing both objective workload and emotional strain.

Disease severity and symptom burden also contribute significantly. Patients experiencing uncontrolled pain, fatigue, dyspnoea, cognitive impairment, or psychological distress often require more intensive support, increasing caregiver responsibilities and reducing opportunities for respite. Several studies indicate that advanced cancer trajectories are associated

with particularly high levels of caregiver burden because of rapid disease progression and complex symptom management needs (Chow et al., 2023).

**Caregiver-Related Factors**

Caregiver characteristics play an equally important role. Age, gender, relationship to the patient, educational level, employment status, and physical health have all been associated with burden levels.

Research suggests that adult children frequently report higher burden than spouses because they often experience competing demands related to employment, parenting, and other family responsibilities (Shefeek et al., 2024). Similarly, caregivers with poorer physical health or pre-existing psychological difficulties may be more vulnerable to burden because they possess fewer personal resources for managing caregiving demands.

Caregiving intensity represents another important determinant. The number of hours spent caregiving, duration of caregiving, and level of responsibility are consistently associated with burden. This finding supports the Stress and Coping Theory assumption that burden emerges when demands exceed available resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

**Family and Social Factors**

Recent literature increasingly highlights the role of family dynamics and social support. Cui et al. (2024) demonstrated that family resilience significantly moderates the relationship between burden and quality of life among caregivers of patients with advanced cancer. Families characterized by effective communication, collaborative problem-solving, and strong social networks appear better equipped to cope with caregiving demands.

Conversely, family conflict, social isolation, and limited support networks contribute to increased burden. Caregivers often report feeling

unsupported, misunderstood, or solely responsible for caregiving tasks. Such experiences can intensify emotional distress and increase perceptions of burden even when objective caregiving demands remain unchanged.

**Structural and Health-System Factors**

Perhaps one of the most important developments in recent literature is growing recognition of structural determinants of caregiver burden. WHO (2020), WHO Europe (2023), and OECD reports (OECD/European Commission, 2026) collectively highlight how healthcare-system characteristics influence caregiving experiences.

Limited access to specialist palliative care, fragmented services, workforce shortages, inadequate caregiver training, and barriers to symptom management can all increase caregiver burden. When healthcare systems shift responsibility to families without providing sufficient support, caregivers effectively become extensions of the healthcare workforce.

This perspective is particularly relevant in resource-constrained settings, where caregivers frequently compensate for gaps in formal services. Consequently, burden should be understood not only as an individual experience but also as an indicator of broader system performance.

**Caregiver Burden, Psychological Distress, and Quality of Life**

One of the strongest and most consistent findings across contemporary studies is the close relationship between caregiver burden and psychological distress. Caregivers experiencing higher burden frequently report elevated levels of anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbances, and stress-related symptoms (Cui et al., 2024; Rangel et al., 2024). In many cases, these psychological difficulties persist long after caregiving responsibilities have ended, suggesting that burden may have enduring consequences for mental health. Cui et al. (2024) provide

particularly important evidence regarding the mechanisms underlying these relationships. Their moderated mediation analysis demonstrated that psychological distress mediates the relationship between caregiver burden and quality of life. In other words, burden contributes to poorer quality of life largely through its impact on emotional well-being.

At the same time, family resilience was found to moderate this relationship. Caregivers embedded within supportive and resilient family systems experienced better outcomes despite similar levels of burden. These findings highlight the importance of protective factors and suggest that interventions should focus not only on reducing burden but also on strengthening coping resources.

The relationship between burden and quality of life is especially important because quality of life represents a central outcome in palliative care. Shefeek et al. (2024) found that caregivers with higher burden reported significantly lower physical, psychological, social, and environmental quality-of-life scores. Similar findings have been reported across multiple countries and healthcare settings.

Taken together, these studies suggest that burden should be viewed as both an outcome and a mechanism. It reflects the cumulative effects of caregiving demands while simultaneously contributing to poorer psychological and social functioning.

**Measurement of Caregiver Burden: The Role of the Zarit Burden Interview**

The measurement of caregiver burden remains a critical methodological issue. Among available instruments, the Zarit Burden Interview (ZBI) is the most widely used internationally and remains one of the most extensively validated caregiver burden measures (Zarit et al., 1980). The

ZBI assesses multiple dimensions of burden, including emotional strain, physical exhaustion, social restrictions, role conflict, and perceptions of overload. Its popularity stems from its relatively simple administration, strong psychometric properties, and applicability across diverse caregiving contexts. Recent validation studies support its continued relevance in palliative care. Summart et al. (2025) demonstrated good reliability and validity of the Thai version of the 12-item ZBI among informal caregivers receiving palliative care. Burden scores showed strong associations with depression, anxiety, and perceived stress, supporting the instrument's construct validity.

However, contemporary literature also identifies limitations. Some researchers argue that generic burden instruments may not fully capture dimensions unique to palliative caregiving, such as anticipatory grief, existential concerns, and end-of-life decision-making responsibilities (Summart et al., 2025). Consequently, alternative instruments have emerged.

For example, Güçlü et al. (2026) validated the Family Appraisal of Caregiving Questionnaire for Palliative Care (FACQ-PC), which assesses negative caregiving outcomes alongside positive caregiving appraisals and family well-being. This broader perspective reflects growing recognition that caregiving experiences often include both burden and meaning.

Despite these developments, the ZBI remains particularly valuable for future Albanian research. Its extensive international use facilitates cross-national comparisons and provides a strong foundation for examining caregiver burden within the Albanian palliative care context.

**Intervention Studies and Burden Reduction**

A key question within the literature concerns whether caregiver burden can be reduced through intervention. The evidence suggests cautious optimism. Chow et al.'s (2023) meta-analysis involving 49 intervention studies found significant improvements in anxiety, depression, mental well-being, and quality of life. However, effects on caregiver burden itself were less consistent. These findings suggest that while interventions can improve emotional outcomes, burden may be more resistant to change because it reflects not only psychological processes but also objective caregiving demands. The CareSTEPS trial reported by Rangel et al. (2024) provides encouraging evidence. The intervention improved caregiver depression, anxiety, and burden through a structured programme incorporating self-care, communication, problem-solving, and social support strategies.

By contrast, von Heymann et al. (2023) found no significant reductions in caregiver burden following a home-based specialized palliative care intervention combined with psychological support. Burden increased over time in both intervention and control groups, suggesting that escalating care demands may outweigh the benefits of some interventions during advanced illness trajectories. These apparently contradictory findings may actually reflect the complexity of burden itself. Psychological support can improve coping and emotional well-being, but reducing burden may require broader structural interventions addressing service access, respite care, financial support, caregiver training, and care coordination.

**Implications for Albania**

The international evidence reviewed here has important implications for Albania. Although direct empirical evidence remains scarce, available policy reports suggest that Albanian caregivers may face circumstances

associated with elevated burden. The EAPC Atlas (2025) identifies multiple challenges, including limited service availability, geographical inequalities, workforce constraints, restricted opioid prescribing practices, and limited educational infrastructure. These factors potentially increase caregiving demands and reduce access to supportive resources. Drawing on the international literature, several hypotheses emerge for future Albanian research. Caregiver burden would be expected to correlate positively with patient dependency, caregiving intensity, psychological distress, and unmet support needs. Conversely, burden would likely correlate negatively with quality of life, perceived social support, and family resilience.

A future Albanian study using the Zarit Burden Interview could therefore provide critical evidence regarding the prevalence, determinants, and consequences of caregiver burden while informing service planning and policy development. Such evidence would represent an important contribution to both national and international palliative care research. Ultimately, the literature suggests that caregiver burden should be viewed not simply as an individual problem but as a family, health-system, and public-policy issue. Recognizing caregivers as integral members of the palliative care unit is essential for improving outcomes for both patients and families.

**Conclusion**

This critical narrative review has examined contemporary evidence concerning caregiver burden in palliative care and has highlighted its significance as a multidimensional phenomenon affecting family caregivers across physical, psychological, social, and financial domains. Drawing on Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the

Caregiver Stress Process Model (Pearlin et al., 1990), and the Biopsychosocial Model (Engel, 1977), the review demonstrates that caregiver burden should be understood as a dynamic process arising from the interaction between caregiving demands, available resources, family dynamics, healthcare systems, and broader social contexts.

The findings indicate that caregiver burden is highly prevalent among family caregivers supporting individuals with advanced illness, particularly those receiving palliative care or living with advanced cancer. Across diverse cultural and healthcare settings, caregivers consistently report substantial emotional distress, physical exhaustion, reduced social participation, and diminished quality of life (Alsirafy et al., 2021; Shefeek et al., 2024). The review further demonstrates that burden intensifies as patients become increasingly dependent and require greater assistance with activities of daily living, symptom management, and end-of-life care. Consequently, burden cannot be interpreted merely as a subjective perception of stress but must be viewed as a response to a complex combination of objective caregiving demands and subjective appraisal processes.

One of the most important contributions of the contemporary literature is the recognition that caregiver burden does not develop in isolation. Rather, burden is influenced by a range of interacting determinants, including patient dependency, caregiving intensity, caregiver health, social support, family functioning, and healthcare-system characteristics. Studies consistently show that caregivers with limited support resources, poorer health status, and higher levels of caregiving responsibility are particularly vulnerable to experiencing substantial burden (Cui et al., 2024; Shefeek et al., 2024). Furthermore, psychological distress appears to play a central

mediating role in the relationship between burden and quality of life, suggesting that emotional well-being represents a key pathway through which caregiving experiences affect broader caregiver outcomes (Cui et al., 2024).

The review also highlights the importance of considering caregiver burden within broader structural and policy contexts. International evidence increasingly suggests that burden is not solely the consequence of individual caregiving circumstances but also reflects the strengths and limitations of healthcare and social care systems (WHO, 2020; OECD/European Commission, 2026). When formal palliative care services are limited, fragmented, or difficult to access, caregivers frequently assume additional responsibilities that would otherwise be shared with professionals. Under such conditions, caregiver burden becomes both a personal experience and an indicator of system performance. This perspective has important implications for policymakers, who must recognize that supporting caregivers is not simply a matter of compassion but an essential component of effective palliative care delivery.

The review further contributes to methodological discussions by examining the measurement of caregiver burden. The Zarit Burden Interview remains the most widely used and internationally recognized measure of caregiver burden and continues to demonstrate strong psychometric properties across caregiving contexts (Zarit et al., 1980; Summart et al., 2025). However, recent literature suggests that palliative caregiving involves dimensions that may not be fully captured by generic burden measures alone. Concepts such as anticipatory grief, existential concerns, family resilience, and positive caregiving experiences are

increasingly recognized as important aspects of caregiving in advanced illness (Güçlü et al., 2026). Consequently, future research may benefit from combining burden measures with broader assessments of psychological well-being, quality of life, resilience, and family functioning.

The intervention literature reviewed in this paper offers a balanced perspective regarding caregiver support. Evidence suggests that psychoeducational interventions, communication-focused programmes, structured caregiver support initiatives, and dyadic interventions can improve anxiety, depression, coping abilities, and quality of life among caregivers (Chow et al., 2023; Rangel et al., 2024). Nevertheless, reductions in burden itself appear less consistent. This finding reinforces the argument that burden is partly structural in nature. While interventions may help caregivers manage stress more effectively, they may not substantially reduce burden when caregiving demands remain high and systemic support remains limited. Therefore, effective caregiver support strategies must combine psychosocial interventions with practical assistance, service coordination, respite opportunities, and policies that address caregivers' broader social and economic needs.

The Albanian context deserves particular attention. Compared with the extensive international literature, empirical evidence concerning caregiver burden in palliative care remains remarkably limited in Albania. Existing reports from the European Association for Palliative Care indicate important challenges related to service availability, workforce development, education, opioid accessibility, and national coordination (EAPC, 2025). These structural factors suggest that Albanian family caregivers may experience substantial caregiving demands while receiving

relatively limited formal support. Yet, despite the likely importance of caregiver burden within the Albanian healthcare context, robust empirical studies examining caregiver experiences remain largely absent.

This lack of evidence represents both a limitation and an opportunity. The absence of Albanian studies means that many assumptions regarding caregiver burden are currently inferred from international findings rather than grounded in local evidence. At the same time, it highlights a significant research gap that deserves urgent attention. Future studies should seek to quantify caregiver burden among family caregivers of patients receiving palliative care, identify key determinants and protective factors, and explore the relationship between burden, quality of life, psychological distress, resilience, and social support.

Several directions for future research emerge from this review. First, empirical studies are needed to establish the prevalence and severity of caregiver burden within Albanian palliative care settings. Second, future research should examine how cultural norms, family structures, gender roles, and healthcare-system characteristics influence caregiving experiences. Third, longitudinal research would provide valuable insights into how burden evolves across the disease trajectory and during bereavement. Fourth, intervention studies are needed to evaluate whether caregiver support programmes can improve outcomes within the Albanian context. Finally, mixed-methods research could provide a deeper understanding of the subjective meanings attached to caregiving and the ways in which caregivers navigate practical and emotional challenges.

The planned use of the Zarit Burden Interview in future Albanian research is particularly promising. Based on the evidence reviewed, it is reasonable to expect that burden scores will be associated with patient dependency,

caregiving intensity, psychological distress, social support, family resilience, and quality of life. Exploring these relationships could provide important insights into the mechanisms through which burden develops and identify targets for intervention. Such research would not only contribute to the Albanian evidence base but also enrich the international literature by providing data from an underrepresented socio-cultural context.

Several limitations of the present review should be acknowledged. First, the study adopted a critical narrative review methodology rather than a formal systematic review. Consequently, although the search strategy was structured and transparent, the review did not aim to identify every potentially relevant publication. Second, much of the contemporary evidence focuses on caregivers of patients with advanced cancer, meaning that experiences associated with non-cancer palliative conditions may be underrepresented. Third, the scarcity of Albanian empirical research limited the ability to draw country-specific conclusions and required greater reliance on international evidence and policy reports. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish the value of the review. Instead, they reinforce the need for further research and highlight the importance of developing a stronger evidence base within under-researched settings.

In conclusion, caregiver burden represents one of the most significant yet frequently overlooked challenges within palliative care. Family caregivers are not peripheral participants in care; they are fundamental members of the palliative care unit and essential partners in supporting patients throughout advanced illness and end-of-life care. The evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates that caregiver burden affects not only caregivers themselves but also patients, families, healthcare systems, and society

more broadly. Recognizing, measuring, and addressing caregiver burden should therefore be considered a central objective of contemporary palliative care practice, research, and policy. For Albania, where evidence remains scarce and services continue to evolve, making the invisible burden of caregiving visible represents an important step toward developing more equitable, family-centred, and sustainable models of palliatie care.

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# Organizational Commitment and Burnout at Work in Public Administration

**Prof. Assoc. Dr. Migena Buka**
Department of Pedagogy and Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana, Albania
Corresponding author: migena.buka@unitir.edu.al
**M.Sc. Aleksandra Meta**
Authority of Audiovisual Media, Albania

## Abstract

Organizational commitment and burnout are closely connected in public administration, where employee well-being shapes service quality and institutional reliability. This study examines the relationship between organizational commitment and burnout among employees in Albanian public administration and explores whether gender, age, and work tenure are associated with these variables. A quantitative correlational design was applied to a snowball sample of 45 employees from five public institutions. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire measuring organizational commitment and psychological and physical burnout and were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and independent-samples t-tests. The findings show a statistically significant negative relationship between organizational commitment and total burnout ($r = -.303$, $p = .043$). The association is stronger for psychological burnout ($r = -.408$, $p = .005$), while physical burnout is not significantly related to commitment. Gender differences were not statistically significant. Age and work tenure were more relevant: younger employees reported higher psychological burnout, while longer tenure was associated with stronger organizational

commitment. The study highlights the need for preventive human resource practices that monitor psychological strain and strengthen commitment through recognition, role clarity, and supportive management in public institutions.
Keywords: organizational commitment; burnout; public administration; workplace well-being

## 1. Introduction

Public administration depends not only on laws, procedures, budgets, and formal structures, but also on the psychological availability of the people who carry out public work. Employees are the everyday link between institutional rules and citizens' experience of public services. When employees feel connected to their institution and are able to preserve energy, motivation, and professional meaning, public institutions are more likely to function with consistency and responsiveness. When work becomes emotionally draining and motivation declines, the quality of service may deteriorate even when employees remain formally present in their positions.

For this reason, organizational commitment and burnout are two central constructs in organizational psychology and public-sector human resource management. Organizational commitment refers to the psychological bond between employees and the organization. It includes identification with institutional goals, willingness to contribute, and a sense of attachment or obligation to remain. Burnout, in contrast, reflects the exhaustion of emotional, cognitive, and physical resources following sustained work-related strain. The two constructs are conceptually linked: a depleted employee may have fewer psychological resources for loyalty, initiative, and involvement, while a committed employee may experience

work as more meaningful and therefore better tolerate ordinary organizational difficulties.

The study of organizational commitment began from the idea that attachment to an organization is more than simple job continuation. Mowday et al. (1979) described it as the strength of identification with and involvement in an organization. Meyer and Allen (1991) later conceptualized commitment through three components: affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment. Affective commitment refers to emotional attachment and identification; continuance commitment refers to the perceived cost of leaving; and normative commitment refers to a felt obligation to remain. Later reviews have emphasized that these components may have different consequences for motivation, performance, and retention (Al-Jabari & Ghazzawi, 2019).

In public administration, this distinction is particularly important. Employees may remain in the system because of job security, career stability, or limited labour-market alternatives, but this does not necessarily mean that they are affectively engaged. Retention is therefore not the same as commitment. A public institution can retain staff while gradually losing energy, initiative, and service orientation. For this reason, commitment should be examined not only as a formal or administrative indicator, but also as a psychological resource that may support employee well-being and institutional effectiveness.

Burnout has also been understood as more than individual tiredness. Maslach (1997) and Maslach and Leiter (2005) argue that burnout signals a mismatch between the employee and the work environment. It may appear as emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, irritability,

detachment, somatic complaints, and a declining sense of professional meaning. In administrative work, burnout may be less visible than in physically demanding occupations. It may not immediately appear as absence from work or medical leave, but as slower responses, reduced patience, lower willingness to take responsibility, and a routine-based approach to tasks.

The theoretical link between burnout and commitment can also be interpreted through social exchange theory. Blau (1964) emphasized that organizational relationships involve reciprocal expectations. Employees invest time, competence, loyalty, and emotional energy. In return, they expect fair treatment, recognition, stability, support, and work conditions that allow them to function effectively. When this exchange feels balanced, commitment is more likely to be maintained. When work is experienced as draining, unrewarding, or poorly supported, the employee may still perform the formal role but gradually withdraw the energy and identification that characterize genuine commitment.

Previous research has generally found a negative relationship between burnout and organizational commitment. Burnout has been linked to lower performance, withdrawal, intention to leave, and weaker attachment to the workplace (Alarcon et al., 2009; Chen et al., 2006). In public-sector settings, Sarisik et al. (2019) also reported that burnout can undermine organizational commitment. At the same time, the strength and direction of these relationships may vary by institutional culture, job security, leadership style, autonomy, recognition, and career stage. These factors make local evidence necessary, especially in transitional public administration contexts.

The Albanian public administration context gives this relationship additional relevance. Public institutions have undergone repeated reforms aimed at improving transparency, accountability, efficiency, and service delivery. Yet the everyday implementation of reform depends on employees whose work is often shaped by formal procedures, hierarchical communication, administrative workload, and uneven opportunities for participation or recognition. Albanian organizational literature has addressed stress, organizational behaviour, and person-organization fit (Karaj, 2005; Kasimati, 2010a, 2010b), but empirical evidence connecting burnout and organizational commitment in public administration remains limited.

This gap matters because findings from other contexts cannot be transferred mechanically to Albania. Public-sector employment is shaped by local administrative traditions, expectations of job stability, salary structures, career trajectories, institutional trust, and the perceived value of public service. Even an exploratory study with a modest sample can therefore provide useful evidence by identifying patterns that deserve more systematic investigation.

The present paper examines the relationship between organizational commitment and burnout among employees working in public administration. Two objectives guide the study. The first objective is to describe the relationship between organizational commitment and burnout at work, distinguishing psychological and physical burnout. The second objective is to examine whether organizational commitment and burnout differ or vary in relation to gender, age, and work tenure. Based on the theoretical and empirical literature, four hypotheses were tested: higher organizational commitment is associated with lower burnout;

burnout is higher among women than among men; younger employees report higher burnout than older employees; and longer work tenure is associated with higher organizational commitment.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research design and approach

The study used a quantitative, correlational research design. This design was appropriate because the aim was not to test an intervention, but to examine the direction and strength of relationships between organizational commitment, burnout, and selected demographic variables. Burnout and commitment were treated as continuous psychological and organizational states that vary by degree rather than as isolated events. The design therefore allowed the study to estimate whether higher scores in one construct tended to be associated with lower or higher scores in another construct.

The design does not permit causal conclusions. The study can show that burnout and commitment are statistically related, but it cannot determine whether burnout reduces commitment, whether low commitment increases burnout, or whether both are influenced by other organizational conditions such as leadership support, workload, role clarity, communication, or perceived fairness. This limitation is taken into account in the interpretation of the findings.

### 2.2. Participants and sampling

The study population consisted of employees working in Albanian public administration. The sample included 45 employees from five public institutions: the Institute of Statistics, the Audiovisual Media Authority, the Albanian Telegraphic Agency, the National Food Authority, and the State Cadastre Agency. Snowball sampling was used because access to

public institutions depended on institutional permission and participant willingness. The sample included specialists, sector heads, and directors, although specialists represented the largest group. This structure is consistent with the occupational composition of many administrative institutions, where executive-level positions are numerically more frequent than managerial positions.

**Table 1**

*Demographic characteristics of participants*

| Characteristic | Category / statistic | n / value | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Women | 34 | 76 |
| | Men | 11 | 24 |
| Age group | 22-30 years | 6 | 13 |
| | 31-40 years | 29 | 65 |
| | 41-50 years | 6 | 13 |
| | 50-65 years | 4 | 9 |
| Education | Bachelor | 4 | 9 |
| | Master | 40 | 89 |
| | Doctorate | 1 | 2 |
| Place of birth | City | 37 | 82 |
| | Village | 8 | 18 |
| Marital status | Single | 16 | 35 |
| | Married | 26 | 58 |
| | Divorced | 2 | 4 |
| | Widowed | 1 | 2 |
| Professional status | Director | 3 | 7 |
| | Sector head | 9 | 20 |

| Characteristic | Category / statistic | n / value | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Specialist | 33 | 73 |

*Note.* N = 45. Age had M = 37.54 and SD = 8.06. Work tenure had M = 12.4 years, with a range from 2 to 41 years. Percentages are rounded to whole numbers.

### 2.3. Instrument

The instrument consisted of three sections. The first section collected demographic information, including gender, age, work tenure, place of birth, marital status, professional status, and educational level. The second section measured organizational commitment through 18 Likert-type statements. Response options ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The items covered affective, continuance, and normative aspects of commitment, in line with the three-component model of organizational commitment. Higher total scores indicated higher organizational commitment.

The third section measured burnout at work. It was organized into two parts: psychological burnout and physical burnout. The psychological part included symptoms such as forgetfulness, decreased motivation, anxiety, boredom or anger, depressed mood, desire to remain in bed, reduced sexual interest, and increased tendency to eat or smoke more than usual. The physical part included symptoms such as appetite loss, muscular tremor, pain or numbness, fatigue or exhaustion, sweating or palpitations, gastrointestinal problems, sleep difficulties, breathing difficulties, and headache or migraine. Responses were given on a five-point frequency scale, where 1 indicated never and 5 indicated every day. Higher scores indicated higher levels of burnout.

Before the main analysis, the clarity of the questionnaire items was checked with individuals who supported the data collection process. This step was used to ensure that the statements and response options were understandable for the target group. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The total instrument showed acceptable reliability, with alpha = .81, which exceeds the commonly used threshold of .70 and indicates that the instrument was sufficiently consistent for an exploratory study.

### 2.4. Data collection and ethical considerations

Data collection followed institutional and ethical procedures. A formal request was initially addressed to ten public institutions, of which five agreed to participate. Participation was voluntary. Employees were not required to complete the questionnaire, and refusal to participate had no consequences. The request and questionnaire explained that the study did not aim to evaluate individual employees or specific institutions, but to analyze aggregate patterns related to organizational commitment and burnout.

Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the process. No identifying personal information is reported in the paper. The data were used only for the purposes of this study and were analyzed in aggregated form. Because the topic involved work-related stress and psychological well-being, the interpretation avoids pathologizing employees and treats burnout as a potential signal of organizational strain rather than as an individual weakness.

### 2.5. Analytical procedures

The collected data were first entered into Excel and then processed in SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic

profile of participants and the main study variables. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to examine relationships between organizational commitment, psychological burnout, physical burnout, total burnout, age, and work tenure. Independent-samples t-tests and Levene's test were used to examine gender differences. Statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 level.

The analytical strategy was intentionally conservative because of the small and non-probability sample. The purpose was to identify theoretically meaningful patterns rather than to build a predictive model. For this reason, the results are reported through means, standard deviations, correlations, and group comparisons. Interpretation emphasizes direction, statistical significance, and practical meaning, while avoiding claims that exceed the correlational and exploratory design.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1. Descriptive results

The findings are presented in relation to the two study objectives. First, descriptive results are reported for organizational commitment and burnout. Second, the relationship between commitment and burnout is examined through Pearson correlations. Third, demographic patterns are discussed, focusing on gender, age, and work tenure.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the main variables. The mean score for organizational commitment was 55.20 (SD = 8.89), with scores ranging from 31 to 80. This suggests a moderately high level of organizational commitment in the sample. The mean total burnout score was 38.11 (SD = 11.77), with scores ranging from 20 to 66. The mean psychological burnout score was 18.76 (SD = 5.87), while the mean

physical burnout score was 19.36 (SD = 6.83). These values describe the sample and should not be generalized to the entire public administration workforce.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive statistics for organizational commitment and burnout*

| Variable | N | Mean | SD | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Organizational commitment | 45 | 55.20 | 8.89 | 31 | 80 |
| Psychological burnout | 45 | 18.76 | 5.87 | 10 | 32 |
| Physical burnout | 45 | 19.36 | 6.83 | 9 | 38 |
| Total burnout | 45 | 38.11 | 11.77 | 20 | 66 |

*Note.* Values are rounded to two decimal places.

The descriptive results indicate that burnout was not uniformly high across the sample. However, the pattern of responses suggests that psychological symptoms were more central than physical symptoms. The most frequent psychological symptoms were decreased motivation, desire to remain in bed or sleep difficulties, and boredom. More than half of the participants reported decreased motivation at least monthly. Boredom or anger was also common. Among physical symptoms, fatigue or exhaustion, headache or migraine, and pain in different parts of the body were the most frequent. This pattern supports the interpretation that, in public administration, burnout may be expressed primarily through motivational and emotional symptoms rather than through direct physical strain.

The commitment results also require a differentiated interpretation. Affective commitment appeared to be the strongest component. For

example, most participants disagreed with the statement that they did not feel they belonged to the institution, indicating a sense of belonging. Continuance commitment was less clear, with a substantial share of neutral responses to the statement about being happy to spend the rest of one's career in the institution. Normative commitment was also present, as many participants agreed that the job deserved their loyalty. This pattern suggests that public administration employees in the sample were attached to their institutions mainly through affective and normative bonds, while continuance commitment was less dominant.

### 3.2. Relationship between organizational commitment and burnout

The first hypothesis predicted that employees with higher organizational commitment would report lower burnout. Table 3 presents the Pearson correlations between organizational commitment and burnout dimensions. The results support this hypothesis for total burnout and especially for psychological burnout. Organizational commitment was negatively correlated with total burnout ($r = -.303$, $p = .043$) and psychological burnout ($r = -.408$, $p = .005$). The correlation with physical burnout was also negative but not statistically significant ($r = -.172$, $p = .259$).

**Table 3**

*Pearson correlations between organizational commitment and burnout dimensions*

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Organizational commitment | 1 | | | |
| 2. Psychological burnout | -.408** p = .005 | 1 | | |

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3. Physical burnout | -.172<br>p = .259 | .715**<br>p < .001 | 1 | |
| 4. Total burnout | -.303*<br>p = .043 | .914**<br>p < .001 | .937**<br>p < .001 | 1 |

*Note.* *p < .05. **p < .01. Two-tailed tests are reported.

The direction of these relationships is theoretically meaningful. As burnout increases, organizational commitment tends to decrease. The association is stronger for psychological burnout than for physical burnout, which is consistent with the nature of administrative work. Public administration positions generally require cognitive, emotional, and procedural engagement more than intense physical labour. Psychological symptoms such as reduced motivation, boredom, emotional fatigue, and depressed mood are therefore more likely to affect employees' sense of belonging and their willingness to remain actively engaged with the institution.

These results are consistent with the broader literature on burnout and commitment. Maslach and Leiter (2005) argue that burnout emerges when there is a prolonged mismatch between the employee and the work environment. Such a mismatch can weaken the energy and meaning that sustain organizational attachment. Similarly, Sarisik et al. (2019) found a negative relationship between burnout and organizational commitment among public-sector employees. In the present study, the relationship is not strong enough to suggest determinism, but it is statistically significant and practically relevant. It indicates that employees' psychological experience of work is related to how committed they feel to the institution.

### 3.3. Gender differences

The second hypothesis predicted that burnout would be higher among women than among men. The data did not support this hypothesis. As shown in Table 4, mean differences between women and men were not statistically significant for organizational commitment, psychological burnout, physical burnout, or total burnout. Although men reported somewhat higher mean scores for total burnout and physical burnout, these differences did not reach statistical significance.

**Table 4**

*Gender differences in organizational commitment and burnout*

| **Variable** | **Women (n = 34) M (SD)** | **Men (n = 11) M (SD)** | **t** | **df** | **p** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Organizational commitment | 54.74 (8.25) | 56.64 (10.95) | -0.61 | 43 | .544 |
| Psychological burnout | 18.47 (5.68) | 19.64 (6.65) | -0.57 | 43 | .573 |
| Physical burnout | 18.53 (6.14) | 21.91 (8.44) | -1.44 | 43 | .156 |
| Total burnout | 37.00 (10.97) | 41.55 (13.99) | -1.12 | 43 | .270 |

*Note.* Independent-samples t-tests are reported using the equal variances assumed row because Levene's test was not significant for the variables reported.

The absence of statistically significant gender differences should be interpreted with caution because the groups were unequal in size, with 34 women and 11 men. Nevertheless, the findings are relevant because they suggest that, in this sample, burnout and commitment were not primarily

structured by gender. This result is in line with studies that have found no consistent gender effect on organizational commitment or burnout, while it differs from studies reporting higher burnout among women or men depending on occupational and sociocultural conditions (Aslam & Haque, 2011; Olorunsola, 2013). The inconsistency in the broader literature suggests that gender differences in burnout should not be assumed in advance. They should be examined in relation to job demands, family-work balance, organizational culture, leadership style, and the distribution of responsibilities across positions.

### 3.4. Age and work tenure

The third hypothesis predicted that younger employees would experience higher burnout than older employees. The results partially supported this hypothesis. Age was negatively correlated with psychological burnout ($r = -.304$, $p = .042$), meaning that psychological burnout tended to be lower among older employees. However, age was not significantly related to total burnout, physical burnout, or organizational commitment, as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Pearson correlations between age and study variables*

| Variable correlated with age | r | p | N |
|---|---|---|---|
| Organizational commitment | .255 | .091 | 45 |
| Psychological burnout | -.304* | .042 | 45 |
| Physical burnout | -.180 | .237 | 45 |
| Total burnout | -.256 | .090 | 45 |

*Note.* *p < .05. Two-tailed tests are reported.

This finding has practical importance for public institutions. Younger employees may enter public administration with high expectations

regarding professional growth, recognition, participation, and meaningful work. When these expectations meet routine procedures, slow advancement, bureaucratic constraints, or limited feedback, the result may be psychological fatigue rather than physical exhaustion. Older employees may have developed more realistic expectations, stronger coping strategies, or a clearer understanding of institutional functioning. This interpretation is consistent with studies that have found a negative relationship between age and burnout (Al-Amri & Magrah, 2006; Yektatalab et al., 2019). Because the sample is small, the result should be treated as an indication for further research rather than as a definitive statement about all public administration employees.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that employees with greater work tenure would report higher organizational commitment. This hypothesis was supported. Work tenure was positively correlated with organizational commitment ($r = .325$, $p = .029$), as shown in Table 6. Tenure was also negatively correlated with psychological burnout ($r = -.311$, $p = .037$), while its correlations with physical burnout and total burnout were not statistically significant.

**Table 6**

*Pearson correlations between work tenure and study variables*

| **Variable correlated with work tenure** | **r** | **p** | **N** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Organizational commitment | .325* | .029 | 45 |
| Psychological burnout | -.311* | .037 | 45 |
| Physical burnout | -.123 | .422 | 45 |
| Total burnout | -.226 | .135 | 45 |

*Note.* *$p < .05$. Two-tailed tests are reported.

The positive relationship between tenure and organizational commitment is compatible with the three-component model of commitment. Over time, employees may develop stronger affective ties to their institution, greater familiarity with its culture, and a stronger sense of professional identity within the organization. Longer tenure can also increase perceived investment in the workplace, making the employee more likely to maintain the relationship with the institution.

At the same time, the negative association between tenure and psychological burnout suggests that employees with longer experience did not necessarily report higher psychological depletion in this sample. This may reflect better adaptation to institutional routines, greater clarity about expectations, or more stable professional identities. The result does not mean that routine is harmless. Long-term routine can still create monotony and disengagement. However, the present data support the commitment side of the interpretation more clearly than the burnout side, because the relationship with total burnout was not statistically significant.

### 3.5. Practical and theoretical implications

Taken together, the results show that organizational commitment and burnout should not be treated as separate managerial issues. In the public administration sample, the most relevant burnout dimension was psychological burnout, and this was the dimension most clearly related to organizational commitment. Interventions that focus only on formal workload or physical working conditions may miss the central issue if the dominant signs of burnout are motivational and emotional. Monitoring reduced motivation, boredom, emotional fatigue, and withdrawal may be

more informative than waiting for physical complaints or absence from work to appear.

The findings also suggest that public institutions should pay particular attention to the early career stage. Younger employees appear more vulnerable to psychological burnout, even though their level of organizational commitment does not differ significantly by age. Early-career employees may need clearer onboarding, mentoring, realistic role expectations, constructive feedback, and opportunities to see how their work contributes to institutional goals. Such practices can reduce the risk that initial motivation turns into frustration or disengagement.

Another important implication concerns the meaning of commitment. High organizational commitment should not be interpreted only as a positive administrative indicator. If employees remain attached to the institution mainly because of affective loyalty or moral obligation, but experience reduced motivation or emotional fatigue, the organization may retain staff while still losing energy, creativity, and service quality. For this reason, public institutions should not measure commitment without also monitoring burnout. A committed but psychologically exhausted employee may continue to stay in the organization but may not function at an optimal level.

The strength of the main correlation should also be interpreted responsibly. The relationship between organizational commitment and total burnout was statistically significant, but moderate in size. Values around .30 indicate a meaningful association, but not a deterministic relationship (Hemphill, 2003). Burnout is therefore related to commitment, but it is not the only factor explaining commitment. Other variables, such as organizational justice, leadership support, career

opportunities, salary satisfaction, work autonomy, role clarity, and public-service motivation, may also shape how attached employees feel to their institution. The findings should therefore be read as one part of a broader organizational diagnosis.

The non-significant relationship between physical burnout and organizational commitment should not be misunderstood as evidence that physical symptoms are irrelevant. Physical symptoms such as fatigue, headaches, sleep difficulties, and gastrointestinal discomfort can affect well-being and work capacity. However, in this sample, the mechanism linking burnout to commitment appears to pass more clearly through psychological symptoms than through physical complaints. This is important because psychological symptoms are often less visible to managers and colleagues than physical absence or medical leave.

For institutional practice, the findings point toward preventive rather than reactive human resource management. A reactive model waits until employees show severe symptoms, request sick leave, withdraw from responsibilities, or leave the institution. A preventive model monitors early indicators, especially reduced motivation, boredom, emotional exhaustion, and perceived lack of meaning. In public institutions, prevention may include regular employee climate surveys, confidential consultation channels, workload reviews, mentoring for new employees, transparent communication about career pathways, and supervisor training on supportive management. These actions are not only welfare measures; they are also organizational performance measures because employee well-being is connected to service quality.

The results also raise a policy-relevant issue. Public administration reforms often focus on procedures, recruitment criteria, digitalization,

accountability mechanisms, and service standards. These reforms are necessary, but they are incomplete if they ignore the psychological condition of the people who implement them. Employees are the operational link between institutional rules and citizen experience. If the workforce is formally present but psychologically depleted, reform efforts may remain procedural rather than effective. Integrating employee well-being indicators into public-sector management would therefore strengthen both internal organizational functioning and external service delivery.

Finally, the results suggest that commitment should be supported through organizational practices rather than expected as a personal virtue. Recognition, predictable communication, fair distribution of tasks, and opportunities for professional growth may strengthen affective commitment, while unclear expectations and low feedback may intensify psychological burnout. In this sense, the findings encourage a shift from individualizing burnout to examining the relationship between institutional demands and institutional resources.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper examined organizational commitment and burnout among employees in Albanian public administration. The findings showed a statistically significant negative relationship between organizational commitment and total burnout, with the strongest relationship observed between organizational commitment and psychological burnout. In practical terms, employees who reported higher burnout tended to report lower organizational commitment. The physical burnout dimension was not significantly related to commitment, which is consistent with the

nature of public administration work as primarily cognitive, emotional, and procedural rather than physically demanding.

The study also showed that gender differences were not statistically significant, while age and work tenure had more meaningful associations with the study variables. Age was negatively related to psychological burnout, suggesting that younger employees may be more exposed to psychological depletion. Work tenure was positively related to organizational commitment, indicating that longer experience in the institution may strengthen attachment, identification, or perceived investment. These findings partially support the study hypotheses and provide a basis for more systematic research in the Albanian public sector.

The contribution of the study is both empirical and practical. Empirically, it provides evidence on the relationship between burnout and commitment in a public administration context where local research remains limited. Practically, it suggests that public institutions should integrate burnout monitoring into human resource management, especially for younger employees and for positions characterized by repetitive administrative work, limited feedback, or low perceived autonomy. Training programs, mentoring systems, supportive supervision, and regular employee climate assessments could help identify early signs of psychological burnout before they become more serious organizational problems.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample was small and selected through snowball sampling, so the findings cannot be generalized to the entire Albanian public administration. The sample was also drawn from five independent public institutions and may not reflect

the experience of employees in ministries, local government, or dependent agencies. The data were self-reported, which means they may be affected by social desirability, mood at the time of completion, or individual interpretation of the questionnaire items. In addition, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal conclusions. The results show associations, not proof that burnout causes lower commitment or that commitment protects employees from burnout.

A practical recommendation is that public institutions should avoid interpreting commitment as a stable trait that belongs only to the employee. Commitment is partly produced by the organizational environment. Employees are more likely to remain affectively committed when they experience recognition, communication, professional respect, and a sense that their work has value. Similarly, burnout should not be reduced to individual weakness or lack of resilience. It should be treated as a signal that the relationship between job demands, resources, and employee expectations may require institutional attention.

For managers and human resource units, the most immediate implication is to create simple and regular mechanisms for identifying psychological burnout. This does not require a clinical diagnostic approach. It can begin with anonymous organizational climate surveys, structured discussions with employees, periodic assessment of workload and role clarity, and training for supervisors to recognize early signs of exhaustion or disengagement. In the Albanian public administration context, such mechanisms would also help normalize conversations about well-being at work and reduce the tendency to treat stress as a private problem rather than an organizational issue.

Future research should use larger and more representative samples, include a broader range of public institutions, and consider longitudinal designs that can track changes in burnout and commitment over time. Qualitative interviews could also help explain why younger employees report more psychological burnout and how employees with longer tenure develop stronger organizational commitment. Future studies should also examine additional variables such as leadership style, perceived organizational support, job security, workload, role clarity, fairness, and opportunities for professional development. These factors would allow a more complete understanding of how public institutions can protect employees' well-being while strengthening organizational effectiveness.

A final implication concerns how public institutions communicate responsibility for well-being. Employees should not be expected to manage burnout only through private coping strategies after work. Individual resilience is useful, but it cannot compensate for persistent organizational problems such as unclear roles, low participation, weak feedback, or chronic overload. A more balanced approach would combine individual support with institutional changes that make everyday work more predictable, meaningful, and manageable. This would align employee well-being with the broader goal of building professional, reliable, and citizen-oriented public administration, particularly in institutions that face continuous reform pressure and increasing public expectations over time.

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# Migration, Family and the Reconfiguration of Social Solidarity in Albania

**Dr. Miranda Spahiu**[1]

**miranda,spahiu@uniti.edu.al**

*University of Tirana, Albania*

*Faculty of Social Science*

*Department of Social Work and Social Policy*

**Prof.Asoc. Eris Dhamo**[2]

**eris.dhamo@unitir.edu.al**

*University of Tirana, Albania*

*Faculty of Social Science*

*Department of Social Work and Social Policy*

**Msc. Gentiana Iseberi**[3]

**gentiana.iseberi@unitir.edu.al**

*University of Tirana, Albania*

*Faculty of Social Science*

*Department of Social Work and Social Policy*

## Abstract

Migration has been one of the most significant processes shaping social transformation in Albania since the 1990s, profoundly affecting family relations, forms of solidarity, and mechanisms of care. Within a context of fragmented welfare provision, the Albanian family has historically served as the primary actor of informal social protection, a role substantially

reconfigured by migration and transnational ties. This study examines how migration has transformed family relationships and forms of social solidarity and analyses the implications of these transformations for social policy in Albania. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the study draws on 21 semi-structured interviews with migrants and family members across five Albanian regions, as well as a focus group with six social protection professionals. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that migration generates a social paradox: while it reinforces family solidarity through remittances, long-distance care, and transnational communication, it also produces care gaps, intensifies gender inequalities, and contributes to social fragmentation. The study concludes that more inclusive, migration-sensitive social policies are needed to address the challenges faced by transnational families in Albania.

**Keywords:** migration, social solidarity, family, social policies, Albania

## Introduction

International migration has been one of the most dominant processes shaping Albanian society since the 1990s, profoundly affecting the country's demographic, economic, and social structure. Beyond its direct economic impact, migration has reconfigured the ways in which family life is organized, care responsibilities are distributed, and forms of solidarity are constructed. This study aims to analyse how migration has influenced the transformation of family relationships and the reconfiguration of social solidarity in Albania by examining the role of informal social protection, transnational ties, and the implications of these processes for social policies.

*Objectives of the study*: To analyse the impact of migration on forms of family and social solidarity within the Albanian context; To identify the ways in which transnational families construct informal social protection mechanisms, including remittances, long-distance care, and emotional support; To examine the limits and challenges of these mechanisms, particularly in relation to care gaps, gender burden, and social fragmentation, as well as their implications for social policies in Albania.

*Research Questions*: In what ways has migration contributed to the reconfiguration of family relationships and forms of social solidarity in Albania?; How are informal social protection mechanisms and transnational solidarity constructed and maintained within families experiencing migration?; What are the limits and challenges of

transnational solidarity in relation to care gaps, gender burden, and social fragmentation in the Albanian context?

## Literature Review

Migration is increasingly understood not as a linear movement from one country to another, but as a transnational process through which individuals and families maintain continuous social, economic, and emotional ties across national borders. The transnationalism approach, developed by Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton (1992), argues that migrants create social fields linking their country of origin with the country of destination, thereby transforming family and community life into part of an extended social space. Similarly, Stark and Bloom (1985), through the New Economics of Labour Migration framework, argue that migration should not be viewed solely as an individual decision driven by wage differentials. Instead, it should be understood as a family strategy aimed at reducing risks and diversifying household income sources. In this perspective, remittances are not merely financial transfers but also constitute an informal form of social protection at the family level.

The literature on transnational families further develops this argument by demonstrating that families continue to exist and function even when their members live in different countries. Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) describe the transnational family as a social unit that maintains identity, obligations, and emotional ties across borders. Parreñas (2005) further argues that this form of family organization is often accompanied by emotional tensions and a gendered redistribution of care responsibilities. From the perspective of social capital theory, Bourdieu

(1986) conceptualizes social capital as a resource derived from membership in durable networks of relationships. Putnam (2000) distinguishes between “bonding” social capital, which strengthens solidarity within groups, and “bridging” social capital, which creates connections with external actors. Applied to migration, this perspective helps explain how family and community networks function as sources of support, while also highlighting their limitations in preventing social fragmentation.

The concept of global care chains, introduced by Hochschild (2000), emphasizes how migration redistributes care work across different geographical spaces, often placing disproportionate burdens on women. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how migration reshapes family solidarity while simultaneously creating care gaps and reinforcing gender inequalities. The approaches adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2012) and the broader social protection literature emphasize that social protection should be understood as a system of measures and institutions designed to help individuals cope with risks, poverty, and social insecurity. However, migration studies have demonstrated that migrants and their families frequently find themselves between different national welfare systems, often experiencing gaps in protection. These gaps help explain why families and informal support networks assume such a significant role in ensuring everyday well-being.

Within the Albanian context, Dhëmbo (2020) demonstrates that Albanian transnational families rely on remittances, long-distance care, and emotional support to maintain family cohesion and social protection across borders. Likewise, the study by Vathi, Duci, and Dhëmbo (2019) on return migration in the Albania–Greece migration corridor highlights

the existence of cross-border and cross-temporal gaps in social protection, showing that many migrants remain insufficiently protected between the welfare systems of the two countries. In particular, Dhëmbo's work emphasizes the importance of informal social protection and transnational solidarity in maintaining family relationships within the context of Albanian migration.

However, it also opens space for further investigation into the limits and consequences of these mechanisms, especially regarding the reconfiguration of social solidarity and their implications for social policy. Building upon this literature, the present study contributes to the debate by examining not only how migration transforms family and social solidarity, but also the limits of these forms of support and their implications for the development of social policies in Albania.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, which enables an in-depth exploration of the experiences, perceptions, and meanings that individuals attribute to social phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative design was considered most appropriate because the objective of the study is not to measure migration statistically, but rather to understand how migration shapes family relationships, forms of social solidarity, and care arrangements within the Albanian context.

### *Sampling*

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a technique widely used in qualitative research to identify individuals with direct knowledge and experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). The sample included individuals with diverse migration experiences as well as professionals working in fields related to migration and social protection, thereby ensuring a broad range of perspectives on family and social transformations associated with migration. The study involved families with experiences of both long-term and seasonal migration, young migrants and professionals engaged in social protection, policy-making, and migration studies. In total, 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted with migrants and family members affected by migration, alongside one focus group consisting of six professionals from social services and related fields.

***Data Collection***

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection because they provide flexibility in exploring individual experiences while maintaining a common thematic structure across participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This approach enabled participants to reflect on family dynamics, care arrangements, transnational support networks, and the challenges associated with migration. In addition, a focus group was conducted to gather the perspectives of professionals and experts working in the fields of migration and social protection. The focus group facilitated discussion on the broader institutional and policy implications of the issues identified through the interviews.

Although qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalization, participant selection focused on areas with high levels of migration experience in Albania. Drawing on data from INSTAT and the existing literature on Albanian migration, the study concentrated on the regions of Kukës, Dibër, Lezhë, and Gjirokastër, which are characterized by long-standing migration traditions and significant dependence on remittances. Tirana was also included as the country's largest urban and economic center. This geographical diversity enabled the inclusion of multiple perspectives on the relationship between migration, family life, and social solidarity.

***Data Analysis***

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis following the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method facilitated the identification of key themes and recurring patterns related to informal social protection, transnational solidarity, care gaps, gender burden, and social fragmentation. Through a systematic process of coding and categorization, the analysis aimed to capture both shared experiences and variations in participants' perceptions of migration and its social consequences.

***Limitations of the Study***

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, due to its qualitative nature and purposive sampling strategy, the results are not intended to be statistically

generalizable to the entire Albanian population. Second, the study focuses on a limited number of regions with high migration intensity and may therefore not fully reflect the diversity of migration experiences across Albania. Furthermore, the findings are primarily based on participants' subjective perceptions and lived experiences, which may be influenced by individual and family circumstances. Nevertheless, the qualitative approach enabled a rich and nuanced understanding of the ways in which migration shapes family relationships, social solidarity, and care arrangements in the Albanian context.

## Main Findings

### *Remittances as an Informal Social Protection Mechanism*

The findings indicate that remittances continue to represent a crucial source of economic security for Albanian families, particularly in meeting basic household needs, financing education, and covering care-related expenses. Participants consistently described remittances as an essential resource for maintaining family well-being and coping with economic uncertainty. As one participant, a 46-year-old mother whose husband had been working in Italy for eight years, explained:

> "*remittances are the main source of income for our family … they help us a great deal with basic expenses, the children's education, and monthly bills*" (P.1, I.).

Similarly, a specialist in social protection policy participating in the focus group observed that

*"remittances are compensating for the gaps in the social protection system, especially for low-income families"* (P.6, F.G.).

These accounts underscore that remittances function not merely as supplementary income but as a primary substitute for absent public provision. Notably, interview accounts reveal that remittances frequently extended beyond subsistence needs. Several participants reported directing a significant portion of transferred funds towards the education of children and the medical care of elderly relatives, thereby constituting a de facto private welfare arrangement in the absence of adequate public provision. This pattern aligns with the New Economics of Labour Migration framework proposed by Stark and Bloom (1985), which conceptualizes remittances as a household risk-diversification strategy rather than a purely individual economic transfer.

These findings suggest that, in the presence of institutional gaps and limited welfare provision, the family continues to function as an informal mechanism of social protection. However, such dependence on informal transfers simultaneously exposes households to structural vulnerability: when the migrant's income is disrupted by unemployment or illness in the destination country, the entire support network may be affected simultaneously, revealing the precariousness inherent in remittance-based welfare arrangements. These findings suggest that, in the presence of institutional gaps and limited welfare provision, the family continues to function as an informal mechanism of social protection. This finding is consistent with Dhëmbo's (2020) argument regarding the role of transnational solidarity and family networks in safeguarding the well-being of Albanian migrant families. . Nonetheless, the data also point to the emotional cost of this arrangement. A 39-year-old wife whose husband had spent 14 years in Italy reflected that *"sometimes we feel that economic well-being has been achieved at an emotional and family cost" (*P.3, I.), illustrating the paradox at the core of remittance-based welfare: material security achieved at the expense of relational well-being.

*Transnational Solidarity and Family Relationships*

The study findings demonstrate that migration has not necessarily weakened family ties; rather, it has transformed the ways in which families function and organize themselves across national borders. Long-distance care, frequent communication, and emotional support facilitated through digital technologies and remittances have generated new forms of

transnational solidarity. Interview data reveal that, despite physical separation, family members continue to participate in decision-making processes, care arrangements, and the provision of both emotional and economic support. . A 46-year-old participant described how digital tools had become central to sustaining family bonds:

> *"we communicate every day through WhatsApp and video calls; we try to keep our closeness even though we are physically far apart" (P.3, I.).*

However, participants also acknowledged the limits of digitally mediated contact. A 24-year-old male emigrant in Germany noted that *"technology makes the distance easier, but it does not replace physical presence"* (P.5, I.), a tension that points to the structural gap between virtual connection and embodied family presence

Several participants described the use of video calls and messaging applications as central to sustaining family intimacy and coordinating care responsibilities across borders, reflecting what Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) describe as the capacity of transnational families to maintain identity, obligations, and emotional ties despite geographical distance. Furthermore, the data indicate that digital communication does not merely replicate pre-migration family interactions but gives rise to qualitatively new forms of relational practice, including virtual co-presence during significant family events and real-time participation in decisions regarding health, education, and household management. These findings support the literature on transnational families and reinforce Dhëmbo's (2020) argument that migration reconfigures rather than dissolves family relationships.

*Care Gaps and Gender Burden*

The analysis reveals that migration has led to a redistribution of care responsibilities within families, creating significant gaps in the daily care of children and older family members. In most cases, the responsibility for organizing family life and providing care falls primarily on women, particularly spouses and grandmothers, who assume not only practical responsibilities but also the emotional management of family relationships. This was articulated with particular clarity by a 39-year-old participant who described her daily reality:

"*I take care of the children, school, everyday problems, and the care of elderly parents"*

(P.4, I.).

A seasonal migrant father similarly acknowledged that during his absences:

*"my wife carries the greater part of responsibilities at home and with the children"*

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At the institutional level, a social protection specialist confirmed that this burden is both visible and systemic, noting that migration-driven care inequality

*"often limits women's participation in the labour market and public life"* (P. 8, F. G.).

Participants in several interviews described situations in which grandmothers had assumed full-time care of grandchildren for extended periods, often without access to formal support services or financial compensation, thereby substituting for both absent parents and absent state provision. In other cases, wives left behind reported a significant expansion of their domestic and decision-making roles, taking on responsibilities previously shared with their migrant partners while simultaneously managing the emotional labour of maintaining family cohesion across borders. This gendered intensification of unpaid care work constitutes a structural dimension of Albanian migration that has received insufficient attention in social policy debates. The findings suggest that, although migration may enhance economic security through remittances, it simultaneously generates new forms of gender inequality and social burden. These results are closely aligned with Hochschild's (2000) concept

of global care chains, which emphasizes how migration restructures care arrangements and transfers care responsibilities to other family members, predominantly women.

*Social Fragmentation and the Limits of Solidarity*

The findings further indicate that transnational solidarity, while playing an important role in maintaining family and economic support, also has significant social and emotional limitations. Participants reported that prolonged physical separation may contribute to emotional distancing, the weakening of traditional family bonds, and various forms of social fragmentation. Feelings of loneliness, reduced belonging, and difficulties in maintaining close family relationships emerged across several interviews. A 46-year-old mother captured this dual reality:

> *"it has brought emotional exhaustion and a sense of loneliness, especially for the children who feel the absence of their father in everyday life" (P. 11, I).*

A 21-year-old young man who had grown up with his father absent in Germany for 12 years offered a particularly reflective account:

> "*it had an emotional impact, especially during childhood; sometimes I felt distant from*
> *my father even though we communicated often" (P. 4, I.).*

Likewise, a young Albanian emigrant in Germany reflected that "*migration gives you economic opportunities, but it also creates a sense of loneliness and emotional distance from family and society" (P.5, I.),* encapsulating the ambivalence experienced by both those who leave and those who remain.

Children in migrant households, in particular, reported difficulties in sustaining meaningful relationships with absent parents, with some describing a growing emotional distance that periodic return visits were insufficient to bridge.

Several focus group participants from social services noted an increase in referrals involving children from migration-affected families presenting with anxiety, behavioural difficulties, and disrupted attachment patterns a dimension of migration's social cost that warrants greater attention in both research and policy. These observations resonate with Parreñas's (2005) analysis of the "gender woes" experienced by children in transnational families, in which the absence of one or both parents generates emotional burdens that material remittances alone cannot address.

These findings suggest that, although family solidarity remains an important source of support in the context of migration, it is not always sufficient to ensure long-term social cohesion and emotional well-being. Consequently, migration appears to generate both opportunities for solidarity and risks of fragmentation within family and community life.

## Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that migration has significantly reconfigured family relationships and forms of social solidarity in Albania. The analysis reveals that, in the context of limited institutional support and a fragmented welfare system, the family continues to function as a central mechanism of economic, emotional, and social support. Remittances and transnational ties emerge as important

expressions of family solidarity, contributing to the well-being of family members and helping them cope with social and economic insecurity. These findings are consistent with Dhëmbo's (2020) argument regarding the importance of informal social protection and transnational solidarity in the Albanian context.

Importantly, this study adds empirical depth to Dhëmbo's (2020) theoretical arguments by illustrating the specific mechanisms through which transnational solidarity is operationalized in everyday family life, including targeted remittance allocation, digitally mediated care coordination, and the emotional labour performed by non-migrant family members. These mechanisms collectively constitute what Levitt et al. (2017) describe as transnational social protection, a system of cross-border support that partially compensates for the insufficiencies of national welfare systems, yet remains structurally precarious and unevenly distributed across gender and generational lines. Similar to previous studies, the findings indicate that migration does not necessarily weaken family bonds but rather transforms the ways in which family members maintain relationships and fulfill obligations across national borders.

Through financial support, long-distance care, and continuous communication, migrant families develop alternative forms of solidarity that enable them to sustain family cohesion despite geographical separation.

However, this study extends the existing literature by highlighting the limitations and contradictions of these mechanisms. While transnational solidarity provides important resources for family well-being, it also generates new forms of inequality and social tension. The findings reveal that care responsibilities are redistributed unevenly within

families, with women particularly spouses and grandmothers assuming a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities. These findings support Hochschild's (2000) concept of global care chains, which emphasizes that migration not only transforms family economies but also reshapes the social organization of care. The Albanian case is particularly instructive in this regard, as it illustrates how pre-existing patriarchal norms intersect with migration driven care deficits to produce compounded gendered burdens.

Women who remain in Albania are not merely filling a care vacuum created by male migration; rather, they are doing so within a normative framework that renders such labour invisible, uncompensated, and structurally expected. This dynamic is consistent with Parreñas's (2005) observation that transnational family arrangements frequently reproduce, rather than challenge, gender hierarchies, even as they create new forms of female agency and resilience. From a social capital perspective, these findings also point to the exhaustion of bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) within migration-affected families: the intensive drawing upon internal family resources may progressively deplete the relational reserves that sustain solidarity, ultimately undermining the very mechanisms on which households depend.

Another important finding concerns the limitations of informal social protection mechanisms. Although family solidarity and transnational support networks play a crucial role in compensating for institutional deficiencies, they are not always sufficient to ensure long-term social cohesion and well-being. Several participants described experiences of emotional distance, loneliness, and weakened family relationships resulting from prolonged separation. These findings suggest

that migration may simultaneously strengthen family solidarity and contribute to social fragmentation. This tension between solidarity and fragmentation is not simply an individual or family-level phenomenon: it has structural roots in the gap between the demands placed upon informal support networks and the capacity of those networks to sustain adequate responses over time.

The evidence from this study suggests that transnational solidarity operates effectively in the short to medium term, providing material and emotional resources that help families navigate the immediate disruptions of migration. Over the longer term, however, the cumulative effects of separation manifesting as emotional distancing, role exhaustion, and identity fragmentation may erode the relational foundations on which such solidarity depends. This trajectory implies that informal mechanisms of social protection, however resilient in the short term, are inherently limited in their capacity to substitute for institutional provision across generations.

From a broader perspective, the study highlights a social paradox at the heart of migration processes. On the one hand, migration reinforces family solidarity through remittances, emotional support, and transnational connections. On the other hand, it creates care gaps, intensifies gender inequalities, and contributes to new forms of social fragmentation. This paradox illustrates both the resilience and the limitations of family-based support systems in contemporary Albanian society.

The findings also have important implications for social policy. While informal family networks continue to play a significant role in supporting migrant households, they cannot fully substitute for institutional forms of social protection. The results therefore underline the need for more inclusive and responsive social policies capable of

addressing the challenges faced by transnational families, particularly in relation to care provision, gender inequalities, and social cohesion. In practical terms, this implies the development of targeted support mechanisms for women who function as primary caregivers in the absence of migrant partners, including access to respite care, psychological support services, and community-based childcare provisions. It also calls for the recognition of transnational family structures within social protection eligibility frameworks, so that households whose members are dispersed across national borders are not systematically excluded from services designed for co-resident family units.

Additionally, the findings point to the need for intergovernmental cooperation on social protection portability, enabling Albanian migrants and their families to access benefits across the origin destination corridor, as recommended by the ILO's Social Protection Floors framework (ILO, 2012). Strengthening community-based services and developing policies that recognize the realities of migration-affected families remain essential for promoting social well-being in Albania.

***Conclusions and Policy Implications***

This study examined how migration has influenced the reconfiguration of family relationships and forms of social solidarity in Albania within the context of a fragmented social protection system. The findings demonstrate that migration has transformed the ways in which Albanian families organize economic support, emotional relationships, and care arrangements, giving rise to new forms of transnational solidarity. The study highlights that remittances and transnational family ties continue

to play a crucial role in helping households cope with economic and social insecurity. In the absence of adequate institutional support, families often function as informal mechanisms of social protection, compensating for gaps within the welfare system. At the same time, however, the findings reveal that these mechanisms have important limitations. Migration is associated with care deficits, increased gender burdens, and various forms of social fragmentation that affect family cohesion and social well-being. The principal contribution of this study lies in moving beyond approaches that primarily view migration as a source of economic support and family solidarity. By examining the limits and unintended consequences of informal support mechanisms, the study demonstrates that migration generates a social paradox: while it strengthens family solidarity through transnational support networks, it may also deepen social fragmentation and reinforce dependence on informal forms of social protection.

These findings have important implications for social policy in Albania. They suggest that family solidarity, although essential, cannot fully replace the role of public institutions in ensuring social protection and well-being. Consequently, there is a need for more comprehensive and migration-sensitive social policies that recognize the realities of transnational families and address the social consequences of migration. Particular attention should be given to strengthening care services for children and older adults, expanding community-based social services, and developing support mechanisms for families affected by long-term migration. Furthermore, policies aimed at reducing gender inequalities in care responsibilities and improving access to social protection for migrant and transnational families are essential. Addressing these challenges is crucial not only for enhancing the well-being of individual families but

also for promoting social cohesion and sustainable social development in Albania.

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# Juvenile Substance Use and Violence in Albania: An Analysis of Institutional Fragmentation in the Child Protection System

**Dr. Monika Taçi**

Department of Social Work and Social Policy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana

monikataci@yahoo.com

**Jona Cenameri**

Gazetare Faktoje.al

jonacenameri@gmail.com

**Abstract**

This study examines the growing prevalence of psychoactive substance use and violent behaviour among minors in Albania, interpreting these phenomena as outcomes of institutional fragmentation within the child protection system. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study analyses adolescent vulnerability across five interrelated systemic levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. It operationalizes the concept of systemic entropy to explain how weakened coordination among family, school, healthcare, social protection, and juvenile justice institutions reduces the effectiveness of prevention, treatment, and reintegration mechanisms. Methodologically, the research adopts a mixed-methods design, combining in-depth interviews with rehabilitated minors and professional testimonies from toxicologists, psychologists, social workers, and rehabilitation practitioners with quantitative data from the Albanian State Police and the University Hospital Centre "Mother Teresa" for 2020-2024. The findings reveal a marked decline in the age of substance initiation,

with cases reported at 10-11 years old, and identify a strong association between substance use, violence, and juvenile criminality. The study further documents a structural rehabilitation gap, as Albania lacks specialized addiction services for minors. It argues for an integrated, child-centred prevention and rehabilitation model involving education, health, social protection, and justice sectors as mutually reinforcing components of a coherent national child protection response.
**Keywords:** *Ecological Systems Theory; child protection; substance use; juvenile delinquency; systemic entropy; Albania.*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background and Context

Juvenile substance use and violent behaviour constitute interrelated public health, child protection, and social policy challenges. International evidence shows that early exposure to psychoactive substances may impair adolescent neurodevelopment, increase vulnerability to mental health disorders, and heighten the likelihood of addiction in adulthood *(WHO, 2024)*. In Europe, cannabis remains the most commonly used illicit substance among young people, while its normalization within peer and school environments has complicated prevention efforts *(UNODC, 2023)*. These dynamics are particularly relevant for Albania, where adolescent substance use is emerging within a context of limited epidemiological monitoring, fragmented prevention mechanisms, and insufficient age-specific rehabilitation services.

Available national data indicate both the presence of substance use among adolescents and important limitations in institutional visibility. The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Albania 2021-2022 report found that

approximately 7% of 15-year-old students had tried cannabis at least once, while nearly 5% reported cannabis use during the previous 30 days *(HBSC Albania, 2022).* However, Albania has not conducted a comprehensive nationwide survey on adolescent substance use since ESPAD Albania 2015, creating a substantial evidence gap regarding developments over the last decade *(ESPAD Albania, 2015).*

Clinical data from the Toxicology Service at the *University Hospital Centre "Mother Teresa" (QSUT)* suggest a progressive expansion of psychoactive-substance intoxication cases, increasing from 92 cases in 2020 to 314 cases in 2024 *(Tahiri et al., 2025).* Among minors treated at QSUT, cannabis remained the most frequently reported substance, followed by opioids, polysubstance use, and cocaine *(Tahiri et al., 2025).* Professional testimonies included in this study further indicate that initiation may occur as early as 10-11 years old, suggesting that substance exposure is increasingly penetrating pre-adolescent developmental stages. Juvenile substance use in Albania is closely linked to broader patterns of social vulnerability, school insecurity, and juvenile offending. Institutional data show that 560 suspected juvenile offenders under the age of 18 were registered for narcotics-related criminal offences during 2020-2024 *(Albanian State Police, 2025).* In parallel, the number of minors in conflict with the law monitored by local child protection structures increased from 58 cases in 2020 to 291 cases in 2024 *(ASHMDF, 2025).* These trends indicate the need to analyse substance use not as an isolated behavioural issue, but as part of a wider institutional and socio-ecological problem.

**Table 1. Children in Conflict with the Law Monitored by Child Protection Structures in Albania (2020-2024)**

| Year | Reported Cases | Main Institutional Characteristics | Key Protection and Rehabilitation Interventions |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2020 | 58 | Initial emergence of children in conflict with the law as a structured child-protection category monitored by Child Protection Units (NJMF). | Reintegration plans, school referrals, family visits, daily monitoring, vocational-course referrals. |
| 2021 | 212 | Significant increase in identified cases. Enhanced cooperation between Child Protection Workers (PMF) and the Probation Service. | Individual Protection Plans (IPPs), psychosocial monitoring, educational reintegration, rehabilitation plans, vocational referrals. |
| 2022 | 239 | Continued increase in juvenile delinquency cases and stronger interinstitutional coordination between justice and social-protection structures. | Rehabilitation-oriented interventions, family monitoring, school reintegration, vocational training, probation-service cooperation. |
| 2023 | 229 | Cases included theft, narcotics distribution, and involvement in criminal groups. Increased focus on | Coordinated interventions involving municipalities, police, schools, communities, and families |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | prevention and alternative sentencing measures. | for rehabilitation and reintegration. |
| 2024 | 291 | Highest number of reported cases during the study period. Cases included theft, property damage, narcotics distribution, participation in criminal groups, and violent offences. | Multidisciplinary interventions including IPPs, psychological counselling, legal assistance, family mediation, educational/vocational referrals, and continuous professional monitoring. |

***Source:*** State Agency for Child Rights and Protection (ASHMDF), Annual Reports 2020-2024

Further institutional evidence indicates that juvenile criminality is more concentrated in large urban areas and is associated with economic hardship, insufficient parental supervision, school exclusion, bullying, uncontrolled technology use, and social media influence. Data from the Albanian State Police also show that narcotics-related offences increased among children under 14 and adolescents aged 15-17 during 2020-2025, suggesting earlier exposure to narcotics-related environments and weakened preventive mechanisms within families, schools, and communities *(Albanian State Police, 2025).*

**1.2. Research Problem and Objectives**

The central research problem addressed in this study is the disjunction between the multidimensional nature of juvenile vulnerability and the fragmented institutional mechanisms responsible for prevention, identification, treatment, and reintegration. Existing responses remain

largely reactive and weakly coordinated across health, education, social protection, justice, and rehabilitation structures. This limits the capacity of institutions to identify risk early, provide age-appropriate intervention, and prevent the escalation of substance use into violence, delinquency, or repeated exposure to criminal networks.

Using a mixed-methods research design, this study examines how institutional fragmentation within the Albanian child protection system contributes to juvenile substance use, violent behaviour, and criminality. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. analyse recent trends in juvenile substance use and violent behaviour in Albania through institutional and epidemiological data;
2. identify social, familial, school-related, and institutional factors associated with early exposure to psychoactive substances;
3. examine how fragmented institutional responses affect prevention, protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration;
4. investigate the structural rehabilitation gap within the Albanian addiction-treatment system for minors;
5. provide evidence-based recommendations for strengthening intersectoral coordination and developing integrated prevention and rehabilitation policies.

### 1.3. Significance of the Study

This study contributes to a limited empirical field by examining juvenile substance use, violence, and child protection as interconnected dimensions of institutional capacity. Its significance lies in the integration of qualitative testimonies from professionals and rehabilitated youth with institutional data from healthcare, law enforcement, and child-protection

structures. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between addiction, juvenile delinquency, and system-level gaps in Albania.

The study is particularly relevant because the country continues to lack updated national epidemiological monitoring on adolescent substance use. In the absence of systematic surveillance, integrated databases, and specialized services for minors, public institutions face substantial constraints in designing targeted, evidence-based interventions. By documenting early substance initiation, changing drug-consumption profiles, links between narcotics and juvenile offending, and limitations in rehabilitation pathways, the study offers empirical evidence with direct relevance for child-protection policy and practice.

### 1.4. Theoretical Relevance and Policy/Practice Importance

The study is theoretically grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which conceptualizes child development as the outcome of interactions among family, school, community, institutional, and broader socio-political environments *(Bronfenbrenner, 1979)*. Within this framework, juvenile substance use and violence are analysed not as individual deviance alone, but as outcomes shaped by the weakening interaction between protective systems.

The concept of "systemic entropy" is used to describe the progressive disorganization of these protective subsystems. In the Albanian context, this refers to weak coordination among healthcare, education, social protection, justice, and rehabilitation institutions. When these systems fail to communicate, share data, coordinate interventions, or provide specialized services for minors, adolescents remain exposed to preventable risks, including substance use, violence, and criminal recruitment.

From a policy and practice perspective, the study argues for a shift from reactive, security-centred responses toward integrated, multidisciplinary, and child-centred models of prevention and rehabilitation. Strengthening epidemiological monitoring, expanding school-based psychosocial support, improving interinstitutional coordination, and establishing specialized rehabilitation services for minors are essential for transforming juvenile substance use and violence from a public security concern into a comprehensive child-protection priority.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to examine juvenile substance use, violent behaviour, and institutional fragmentation within the Albanian child protection system. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data was considered appropriate because the phenomenon involves interrelated social, familial, institutional, health, and criminological dimensions. The study was conducted between *November 2024* and *May 2025* and combined institutional statistics, documentary evidence, and qualitative testimonies to enable methodological triangulation and strengthen the empirical validity of the findings.

### 2.2. Participants and Data Sources

Primary qualitative data were collected through purposive and criterion-based sampling. Participants were selected on the basis of their direct professional involvement in addiction treatment, child protection, psychosocial intervention, juvenile rehabilitation, or child-rights policy. The final qualitative sample included 10 institutional and professional participants, as well as two rehabilitated young people with previous experience of substance use during adolescence.

**Table 2. Distribution of Institutional Participants Included in the Primary Qualitative Sample**

| Institutional Sector | Participant Profile | Number of Participants |
|---|---|---|
| Healthcare sector | Toxicologists from the University Hospital Centre "Mother Teresa" (QSUT) | 2 |
| Harm-reduction and psychosocial services | Psychologists and addiction specialists from Aksion Plus | 2 |
| Child protection system | Social workers from Child Protection Units in Tirana Municipality | 2 |
| Rehabilitation sector | Rehabilitation specialists and administrators from Teen Challenge Albania | 2 |
| Child-rights institutions | Specialists from the State Agency for Child Rights and Protection (ASHMDF) | 2 |

**Note.* Source: Prepared by the authors based on the primary qualitative sample of the study.

Secondary data were drawn from institutional and documentary sources, including *QSUT* clinical intoxication data for 2020-2024, *Albanian State Police* statistics on juvenile criminality and narcotics-related offences, *ASHMDF* reports, *HBSC Albania 2021-2022, ESPAD Albania 2015, KLSH* audit reports on school safety, and policy documents related to prevention, psychosocial services, and child protection.

### 2.3. Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in confidential and professionally appropriate settings. The interview guide focused on four thematic areas: trends in juvenile substance use, familial and school-related risk factors, institutional responses to prevention and rehabilitation, and intersectoral coordination challenges. Interviews with rehabilitated youth followed a narrative-oriented format to capture experiences of early initiation, peer influence, institutional contact, and rehabilitation trajectories.

Documentary and institutional data were reviewed systematically to identify trends in psychoactive-substance intoxication, juvenile criminal proceedings, school violence, narcotics-related offences, psychosocial support capacities, and the availability of specialized addiction-treatment services for minors.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis following *Braun and Clarke's (2006)* framework. The process involved transcription, coding, theme development, and interpretive synthesis. Coding focused on institutional fragmentation, early exposure to substances, family and peer vulnerabilities, school safety deficits, rehabilitation gaps, and interinstitutional coordination failures.

Quantitative data were analysed descriptively through longitudinal comparison for the *period 2020-2024.* The analysis examined trends in intoxication cases, juvenile offending, age-related patterns, institutional response capacities, and rehabilitation demand. Qualitative and quantitative findings were integrated through triangulation to produce a

coherent interpretation of the relationship between substance use, violence, and child protection mechanisms.

### 2.5. Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and non-maleficence. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, data use, and confidentiality safeguards prior to participation. Identifying information was removed during transcription and analysis. Particular attention was given to the protection of rehabilitated youth due to the sensitivity of addiction, criminality, and personal vulnerability. Institutional and administrative data were used responsibly and interpreted in a non-stigmatizing manner.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1. Early Substance Initiation and the Transformation of Drug Consumption Profiles

The integrated analysis of qualitative interviews and institutional data indicates a progressive lowering of the age of first exposure to psychoactive substances among minors in Albania. While earlier public and institutional discussions often associated drug use primarily with late adolescence or high-school age groups, the findings of this study suggest that initiation is increasingly occurring during pre-adolescence, including among children aged 10-12. This shift was repeatedly emphasized by professionals working directly with young people affected by substance use. A psychologist from Aksion Plus stated: *"We are no longer talking about high-school students. We have cases of children in the fifth and sixth grades who have experimented with substances."* This testimony suggests that substance experimentation is no longer limited to older adolescents,

but is penetrating earlier developmental stages, when children are still highly dependent on family, school, and community protection structures. This finding is further supported by the narrative testimony of a rehabilitated young person included in the study, who reported that his first contact with cannabis occurred at the age of 11, while cocaine use began at the age of 15. He stated: *"It was very easy to find drugs. Being the youngest in the group, I felt more grown-up when I did the same things as them."* This quote is analytically important because it demonstrates that substance use among minors is not only a matter of availability, but also a mechanism of social belonging, symbolic maturity, and peer-group integration. In Bronfenbrenner's terms, this reflects the weakening of protective functions within the microsystem, particularly family supervision, and the growing influence of peer networks and community-level risk environments. A second significant finding concerns the changing profile of substances used by young people. Toxicologists from QSUT reported that the phenomenon is no longer limited to cannabis, traditionally considered the first and most frequent substance among younger users. One toxicologist stated: *"What we are seeing as a trend is that while cannabis used to be the first substance consumed and the most frequent one even among younger ages, now cocaine consumption is increasingly prevailing among younger ages as well. We are also observing that the lowering age of cocaine use further intensifies physical, moral, and mental-health problems."* This testimony indicates a qualitative transformation of the Albanian drug-use landscape, where cocaine is becoming increasingly visible among younger users. The same professional emphasized that cocaine, until recently perceived as an *"elite substance"* associated with older users and higher socio-economic groups,

is now appearing among adolescents: *"Children aged 11-12 using cannabis, and adolescents aged 18-20 using cocaine, whereas until five years ago cocaine was considered an elite substance both in terms of age and social status. Now we are seeing adolescents consuming cocaine as well."* This development suggests a democratization of access to stronger substances and challenges earlier assumptions that drug use is confined to either marginalized groups or older consumers. The qualitative findings also show that adolescents are not only consumers, but may also become connected to informal distribution networks. A social worker from the Child Protection Unit in Tirana stated: *"Very often adolescents are also involved in distribution networks, which makes access easier because it becomes a work tool for them."* This finding is crucial because it shifts the analysis from individual consumption to the structural relationship between substance use and informal criminal economies. In this context, drugs function not only as psychoactive substances but also as social and economic tools through which minors become involved in broader networks of illegality. From a theoretical perspective, these findings confirm the relevance of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Early substance initiation appears not as an isolated behavioural choice, but as the outcome of weakened interaction between family, school, peer networks, community environments, and institutional protection systems.

### 3.2. Institutional Invisibility and the Epidemiological Data Crisis

A second central finding concerns the lack of an integrated epidemiological monitoring system for juvenile substance use in Albania. The study identifies this as a form of institutional invisibility, where the real scale of the phenomenon remains largely hidden because institutions collect fragmented, incomplete, and non-harmonized data. One

toxicologist from the Clinical Toxicology Service at QSUT described the situation as follows: *"The figures we see at QSUT are only the tip of the iceberg. Many cases remain invisible because systematic testing and epidemiological monitoring are lacking."* This statement is analytically significant because it suggests that official clinical statistics represent only the most visible cases, namely those requiring emergency or hospital treatment. Clinical data from QSUT confirm a progressive increase in cases of intoxication from psychoactive substances during the period 2020–2024. The number of treated cases increased from 92 in 2020, representing 8.9% of the total, to 158 cases in 2021, 205 cases in 2022, 263 cases in 2023, and 314 cases in 2024, representing 30.4% of the total. In total, 1,032 patients were treated for psychoactive-substance intoxication during this five-year period. Among them, 27 were minors under the age of 18, representing 2.6% of all cases. Within the minor group, 92.6% were male, 96.3% lived in urban areas, and 66.7% came from the Tirana prefecture. Among minors treated at QSUT, cannabis was the most frequently used substance, accounting for 37% of cases, followed by opioids and polysubstance use at 22.2%, while cocaine represented 18.5% of cases. However, these figures should not be interpreted as representing the full epidemiological burden of adolescent substance use in Albania. They include only cases that reached the national tertiary toxicology service and exclude minors who use substances without medical complications, those treated outside hospital structures, those never tested, and those whose families avoid reporting due to stigma. This limitation was also emphasized by professionals, who argued that Albania lacks systematic testing, updated national studies, and harmonized institutional databases. The absence of updated national epidemiological research

further deepens this problem. ESPAD Albania 2015 remains one of the last comprehensive national school-based surveys on substance use among young people. One toxicologist interviewed in the study stated: *"Since 2015, no comprehensive national study on drug use among young people has been conducted."* This gap limits the capacity of institutions to identify new trends, design targeted prevention programmes, allocate resources effectively, and develop evidence-based policies. The findings also show that identification often depends on parental vigilance rather than systematic institutional mechanisms. One toxicologist stated: "These are isolated cases that get identified, or rather through the vigilance of parents who come seeking advice. Sometimes it comes from curiosity, sometimes from age-related issues, sometimes from community pressure, and they may become victims of this problem.*" He also emphasized the cross-class character of the phenomenon: "Drugs do not discriminate.* They can trap both the richest and most educated person, as well as someone who is homeless." These findings reveal a failure of the exosystem: institutions responsible for health, education, child protection, and justice do not operate through a shared surveillance architecture. The result is a cycle of institutional invisibility: lack of data reduces public intervention, while lack of intervention allows the phenomenon to expand further.

### 3.3. Substance Use, Violence, and Juvenile Criminality

The findings indicate a strong relationship between substance use, violent behaviour, and juvenile criminality. Institutional data from the Albanian State Police show that a total of 560 suspected perpetrators of narcotics-related criminal offences were registered among minors under the age of 18 during the period 2020-2024. The data further indicate an increase in narcotics-related offences across younger age groups during 2020-2025.

The most concerning trend appears among children under 14 and adolescents aged 15-17, suggesting increasingly early exposure to narcotics-related networks.

**Table 3. Suspected perpetrators of drug-related criminal offenses (Article 283 of the Albanian Criminal Code) by age group, 2020-2025**

| Age group | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | Analytical interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Under 14 years** | 4 | 4 | 8 | 15 | 9 | 15 | The trend indicates increasingly early exposure of children to substance use and narcotics distribution networks, reflecting weakened preventive mechanisms in family, school, and community settings. |
| **15–17 years** | 75 | 94 | 109 | 139 | 103 | 147 | The progressive increase shows |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | high adolescent vulnerability to substance use and involvement in narcotics-related criminal activity. |
| **18–29 years** | 1,142 | 1,637 | 1,563 | 1,750 | 1,459 | 1,797 | This age group remains the most affected by narcotics-related criminality. Persistently high levels suggest the limited effectiveness of repressive policies and the social escalation of the phenomenon. |

**Source:* *General Directorate of the Albanian State Police*

These data show that juvenile involvement in narcotics-related criminality cannot be explained only through individual deviance. Rather, it reflects the interaction between early substance exposure, peer-group pressure, economic vulnerability, weak family supervision, and the instrumental use of minors by criminal networks. The study also found that proceedings for cold weapons have tripled among minors and increased tenfold among children under 14, reinforcing the relationship between substance use, violence, and risk behaviour. Data from the State Agency for Child Rights and Protection further show that cases of minors in conflict with the law followed by local units increased from 58 in 2020 to 291 in 2024. At the same time, cases involving children in street situations remained persistently high throughout the study period, with an annual average of approximately 224 reported cases between 2020 and 2024. According to the Centre for the Prevention of Crimes among Minors and Youths in Albania, juvenile criminality is higher in large urban areas, where factors such as family economic hardship, lack of parental care, uncontrolled technology use, bullying, and social media influence play an important role. The qualitative interviews deepen the interpretation of these data. A social worker from the Child Protection Unit in Tirana stated: *"Children who grow up in street situations or without the care of an adult are more exposed to manipulation and recruitment into illegal activities, and are often used precisely because the law does not treat them as adults."* This quote illustrates the intersection between poverty, social exclusion, lack of adult supervision, and criminal recruitment. From a neuropsychological perspective, the findings are consistent with international literature showing that psychoactive substances, especially cocaine and stimulants,

are associated with impulsivity, aggression, reduced behavioural self-control, and risk-taking during adolescence *(WHO, 2024; UNODC, 2023).* Toxicologists interviewed in the study similarly emphasized: *"Substance use directly affects impulsive behaviour, increases aggressiveness, and reduces control over actions."* Theoretically, this finding reflects the weakening of the microsystem and mesosystem. When family, school, community, and child protection structures fail to interact effectively, criminal networks occupy the protective vacuum.

### 3.4. Schools as Risk Environments and the Failure of Protective Mechanisms

A fourth major finding concerns the transformation of schools from protective educational spaces into environments where violence, bullying, psychological insecurity, and substance exposure are increasingly present. The analysis of the Supreme State Audit Institution report on the role and effectiveness of school security officers for the period September 2021–December 2024 shows that incidents in pre-university schools are significant in both frequency and diversity. Reported cases included 892 incidents of physical violence, identified as the most frequent problem referred by school security officers; 333 cases of psychological or verbal violence, ranking as the second most widespread category; 186 cases of bullying, including harassment, mockery, and insults; 178 cases involving threats, blackmail, or stalking; and 133 cases involving substance use, including drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol. These statistics were generated through referrals by school security officers to a dedicated ASCAP reporting link. However, the audit found that the data may provide a distorted and incomplete picture of school safety. These statistics were generated through referrals by school security officers to a dedicated

ASCAP reporting link. However, the audit found that the data may provide a distorted and incomplete picture of school safety. Security officers reportedly self-censor and do not report all incidents due to pressure from school leaders, who fear that their schools may be labelled as *"not good schools."* The audit also found that officers rarely conduct physical checks of students or school environments in order to avoid conflicts with parents, increasing the risk that prohibited substances or objects circulate within schools. The testimonies of rehabilitated youth confirm the normalization of substance use within school environments. One young person stated: "At school it was very normal. You knew who brought them, who used them, and nobody was surprised anymore." Another participant connected substance use to peer belonging: *"If you were not part of the group, you felt excluded. Many started out of curiosity, but then it became part of everyday life."* These testimonies show that school is not only an educational setting but also a socialization space where deviant behaviours may become normalized through peer interaction. Institutional responses have included the expansion of the "school security officer" programme, which covers 1,378 public schools through 240 security officers. Nevertheless, the KLSH audit identified serious limitations: lack of coordinated action plans for school safety, insufficient monitoring of security officers, formal or absent use of questionnaires for students and parents, and inaccurate or incomplete periodic reporting. These findings indicate that the current school-safety model remains primarily reactive and incident-oriented rather than preventive and psychosocial. The role of psychosocial services is also limited by capacity constraints. As of May 2025, approximately 850 psychosocial workers covered more than 1,300 public schools in Albania. This ratio significantly limits early

identification, psychological intervention, case management, and long-term prevention. Although the Manual for Psychosocial Service Units in Pre-University Education defines schools as inclusive institutions where psychologists, social workers, teachers, and families cooperate for early identification and multidisciplinary management of risk cases, the empirical findings suggest that these mechanisms often remain formal or under-resourced. The director of Teen Challenge Albania summarized the limits of isolated awareness activities: *"One hour of awareness-raising in school is not enough. Multidisciplinary teams, psychologists, social workers, and active parental involvement are needed."* This quote captures the central policy implication of the finding: schools should not be treated merely as spaces of control, but as nodes within a broader prevention and support network. Within Bronfenbrenner's framework, this represents a weakening of the mesosystem, particularly the relationship between family, school, psychosocial services, and child protection institutions.

### 3.5. The Rehabilitation Gap and the Absence of Specialized Services for Minors

A fifth finding concerns the existence of a structural rehabilitation gap in Albania's addiction-treatment system. Interviews with toxicologists, rehabilitation specialists, and rehabilitated youth indicate that the current system is oriented mainly toward acute medical treatment rather than long-term rehabilitation and social reintegration for adolescents. One toxicologist emphasized: *"Albania has only one national service for patients with addiction, but for minors there is neither specialized staff nor dedicated infrastructure."* This finding is particularly important because it shows that minors with substance-use disorders are treated within adult-oriented structures, despite their different developmental, psychological,

educational, and social needs. Such a practice conflicts with international standards for adolescent addiction treatment, which emphasize developmentally appropriate, multidisciplinary, family-centred, and community-based rehabilitation. The QSUT study on narcotic substance abuse among minors during 2020-2024 similarly concludes that strengthening surveillance systems and integrating mental-health and rehabilitation services are essential for protecting vulnerable populations and designing effective prevention policies. The absence of specialized services affects not only clinical treatment but also the continuity of care after hospital discharge. Adolescents may receive emergency toxicological treatment, but the system lacks structured pathways for follow-up, psychosocial counselling, family therapy, educational reintegration, relapse prevention, and community support. This creates a gap between acute intervention and long-term rehabilitation. From an ecological perspective, rehabilitation should not be understood only as a medical process. It requires coordinated interaction between the child, family, school, health services, social protection institutions, and community organizations. The absence of specialized rehabilitation structures for minors therefore reflects a failure of the exosystem and mesosystem: institutions exist, but they do not function as an integrated protective ecology.

### 3.6. Systemic Entropy and Institutional Fragmentation in Child Protection

The overarching finding of this study is that juvenile substance use and violence in Albania are best understood as outcomes of systemic entropy within the child protection system. Across all empirical dimensions early substance initiation, changing drug profiles, lack of epidemiological

monitoring, juvenile criminality, school violence, weak psychosocial services, and absence of specialized rehabilitation the study identifies a repeated pattern: institutions operate in fragmented, reactive, and weakly coordinated ways. Family supervision weakens, schools become reactive rather than preventive, health institutions treat acute cases without long-term rehabilitation pathways, child protection structures lack integrated data, and justice institutions respond only after risk has already escalated. Empirical findings further show that the absence of specialized rehabilitation structures affects not only the clinical treatment of minors, but also the continuity of rehabilitation after hospital discharge. One toxicologist emphasized: *"The problem is that after leaving the hospital, after diagnosis and the treatment programme are determined, the patient is released back into the street environment, and relapses remain present."* This testimony illustrates how institutional intervention often ends with emergency medical stabilization, while long-term psychosocial reintegration mechanisms remain weak or absent. The narratives of rehabilitated adolescents reinforce this institutional gap. One participant described the experience of returning to the same social environment after treatment: *"When I left treatment, I returned to the same neighbourhood, the same people, and the same offers. It felt like nothing had changed."* Another rehabilitated young person explained the lack of support after rehabilitation as one of the principal causes of relapse: *"At first you think you have won the battle, but when you go outside and you are alone, without support and under the same social pressure, it becomes very easy to return."* These testimonies demonstrate that rehabilitation cannot be understood solely as an individual medical intervention when adolescents return to the same environments characterized by peer pressure, economic

insecurity, family difficulties, school exclusion, and easy access to psychoactive substances. The findings therefore confirm that systemic fragmentation represents one of the central structural drivers of juvenile vulnerability in Albania. Without integrated coordination between healthcare institutions, schools, psychosocial services, child-protection units, rehabilitation centres, and justice structures, institutional interventions remain reactive, temporary, and insufficiently preventive.

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1. Summary of Main Findings

This study examined juvenile substance use and violent behaviour in Albania as interrelated manifestations of institutional fragmentation within the child protection system. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the concept of systemic entropy, the findings show that adolescent exposure to psychoactive substances cannot be reduced to individual deviance, but must be understood as the outcome of weakened protective interactions among family, school, community, healthcare, social protection, rehabilitation, and justice institutions.

The study identifies four core findings. First, substance initiation is occurring at increasingly younger ages, with professional testimonies indicating cases beginning as early as 10-11 years old and a growing visibility of cocaine use among adolescents. Second, substance use is closely associated with juvenile violence, delinquency, and exposure to informal narcotics-related networks, as reflected in institutional data on minors involved in narcotics-related offences. Third, Albania continues to face a significant epidemiological data gap, as fragmented institutional reporting and the absence of updated nationwide monitoring obscure the full scale of the phenomenon. Fourth, the lack of specialized addiction-

treatment and rehabilitation services for minors leaves adolescents dependent on adult-oriented structures that are not designed to address their developmental, psychosocial, educational, and family-related needs.

Taken together, these findings suggest that juvenile substance use and violence in Albania constitute not only public health or security concerns, but also indicators of deeper structural weaknesses in child protection capacity.

### 4.2. Contributions to Knowledge and Practice

This study contributes to the limited empirical literature on juvenile substance use, violence, and institutional response in Albania by integrating qualitative testimonies with institutional and documentary data. Theoretically, it applies *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory* to the Albanian context and operationalizes systemic entropy as an analytical concept for explaining how weak interinstitutional coordination increases adolescent vulnerability.

From a practical perspective, the study provides evidence that reactive and punitive responses are insufficient when substance use, violence, school insecurity, and juvenile offending are produced through interconnected social and institutional conditions. Its findings support the need for multidisciplinary, prevention-oriented, and child-centred interventions that connect health, education, social protection, rehabilitation, and justice sectors. Methodologically, the mixed-methods design strengthens the analysis by combining institutional trends with professional perspectives and the lived experiences of rehabilitated youth.

### 4.3. Limitations

The study has several limitations. The absence of updated nationwide epidemiological data on adolescent substance use restricts the possibility

of longitudinal and nationally representative analysis. Institutional databases remain fragmented across sectors, while reporting practices may underestimate the real scale of substance use, school violence, and juvenile criminality.

The qualitative component provides interpretive depth but does not allow statistical generalization. The sample was purposive and focused on professionals and rehabilitated youth with direct experience of the phenomenon. Moreover, the sensitive nature of substance use, violence, criminality, and institutional failure may have affected disclosure during interviews. Finally, some administrative data may reflect institutional underreporting, particularly in school settings where reputational concerns can discourage full documentation of incidents.

### 4.4. Recommendations for Future Research and Policy

The findings point to the need for an integrated national framework for juvenile substance-use prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation. Such a framework should include systematic epidemiological surveillance, early identification mechanisms in schools and communities, strengthened psychosocial services, specialized rehabilitation structures for minors, and coordinated referral pathways among healthcare, education, child protection, rehabilitation, and justice institutions.

Prevention should begin before high school and include primary-school awareness, parental education, psychosocial screening, anti-bullying interventions, and community-based support. Albania should also invest in specialized training for psychologists, social workers, toxicologists, rehabilitation specialists, teachers, and school security personnel working with vulnerable adolescents.

Future research should examine the role of digital environments, social media, migration, parental absence, socio-economic inequality, and peer-group dynamics in shaping adolescent substance use and violence. Further longitudinal and evaluative studies are also needed to assess the effectiveness of prevention programmes, school-safety mechanisms, psychosocial interventions, and rehabilitation models. Ultimately, the study argues for a transition from fragmented, reactive responses toward an integrated, evidence-based, and child-centred model of prevention, rehabilitation, and social reintegration.

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# Digital transformation among older adults

Neus Caparros Civera. University of La Rioja. caparros@unirioja.es

**ABSTRACT**

The digitalisation of society is advancing relentlessly, affecting and involving the entire population. However, the use, mastery and control of digital technologies vary significantly depending on age. Older people are one of the groups most vulnerable to these changes, so understanding their digital reality is essential for identifying potential shortcomings and designing strategies to address them.

It is within this context that the ADOPTIC project has been developed, with the aim of analysing the digital situation of older people and setting up digital labs designed to provide them with the knowledge and tools to acquire and improve their digital skills.

This es a larger project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education.

In the specific case of La Rioja (Sapin), the project is currently in the diagnostic phase. To this end, informal discussion groups are being held with older people, in which information is gathered on their characteristics, their level of knowledge regarding mobile devices, their usual uses, their current and future needs, as well as the sources of support available to them for resolving queries. These same individuals have been given a questionnaire regarding their socio-demographic details, habits and use of this technology.

The initial findings point to a need to learn more about the devices in order to manage aspects of daily life without having to ask for help, alongside a desire to delve deeper into this technological world.

**KEYWORDS**: digitalization, older adults, devices, skills

## INTRODUCTION

For several decades now, the international literature has seen a proliferation of descriptive, explanatory and predictive models relating to the acceptance, learning and use of technology (Al-Emran and Granić, 2021; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Davis, 1989). These are the so-called TAM (Technology Acceptance Model) frameworks, which, with variations depending on the context, population or technology under study (Msweli and Mawela, 2020; Heinsch, Wyllie, Carlson, Wells, Tickner and Kay-Lambkin, 2021). These models are highly inspiring when approaching the phenomenon of digital inclusion and when designing and articulating models and solutions that can promote and foster it (Gil, 2019). Perhaps the most comprehensive framework to date is the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), in its various versions (Chang, 2012; Dwivedi, Rana, Jeyaraj, Clement and Williams, 2019; Rondan, Arenas and Ramirez, 2015), originally proposed by Venkatesh et al. (2003).

It appears that the best predictor of behaviour—in this case, the use of a particular digital technology or service—is behavioural intention. In turn, behavioural intention is directly related to performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence and facilitating conditions, and is moderated by gender—which crystallises inequalities accumulated over the course of a lifetime—age, experience and voluntary use (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Venkatesh and Bala, 2008).

According to Venkatesh et al. (2003), performance expectation is defined as the degree to which a person believes that using a particular technology will help them achieve performance improvements or fulfil the function for which it is designed. Effort expectation relates to the ease of use associated with the technology in question. Social influence relates to the extent to which it is perceived that significant others believe the technology should be used. Finally, enabling conditions are defined as the extent to which the individual believes that an organisational and technical infrastructure exists to support the use of the technology.
Exploratory and qualitative studies suggest that non-formal support may be crucial in terms of both intending to use and actually using a particular technology, device or digital service (Hanninen, Pajula, Korpela and Taipale, 2021; Hanninen, Taipale and Luostari, 2021), particularly in the case of older women and men in situations of precariousness and social exclusion (Klausen, 2019).

To date, research into technology use among older people has focused primarily on the individual and has overlooked the influence of group processes, an aspect that will undoubtedly lead to significant advances in our understanding of adoption processes (Hanninen, Pajula, Korpela and Taipale, 2021) and particularly in the coordination and decision-making regarding solutions and strategies to promote the digital inclusion of older people. It therefore seems worthwhile to explore the role of a particular type of informal expert, the so-called 'local expert', in the formation and functioning of local informal networks of collaboration and knowledge exchange linked to the 'domestication of technology' (Stewart, 2015).

In this regard, it is important to analyse the role of interaction with others and technological mediation between peers and people of different ages in technological adoption. All this takes place in a context where the value of intergenerational and intragenerational exchange has been highlighted and reinforced as a tool that contributes to people's mutual well-being (Ayalon et al., 2020).

Of course, the older population is not homogeneous in terms of its relationship with technology, nor is the technology itself or the essential digital services available to them (Hanninen, Taipale and Luostari, 2021; Tsatsou, 2021).

A partial, biased and stereotypical view of older women's and men's knowledge and use of technology is often presented, when the reality of older people in all areas is multidimensional (Pérez, Abellan, Aceituno, and Ramiro, 2020). It is therefore reasonable to hypothesise that there are significant differences in older people's relationship with technology, not only in terms of age or gender, but also in terms of living environment (rural and medium-sized and large urban areas), career history or educational attainment – factors that undoubtedly have a significant impact on the use of and attitudes towards technology and digital services (Alonso et al, 2021). For the same reasons, the hypothesis is put forward that the reality of people who play, or could play, the role of informal experts cannot be homogeneous either.

In light of these realities, this text addresses a specific situation concerning older adults and their relationship with technology. How do they use their mobile devices in general, if they have more than one, and specifically how do they use their mobile phone? Their proficiency and knowledge of these

devices may either widen or narrow the social gaps between this group and the general population.

The study presented here forms part of a larger project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education, under the call for Knowledge Generation Projects and initiatives for the training of pre-doctoral research staff associated with these projects. The title of the project is 'Technology adoption, informal experts and digital education among older adults' (ADOPTIC65+)

The project began last year and is scheduled to conclude in 2027.

The research is being carried out in different regions of Spain, with each region supported by a university. The participating universities are the Complutense University of Madrid; the University of Castilla-La Mancha; the University of Jaén; the University of Barcelona; the University of Alicante; and the University of La Rioja.

In the specific case of La Rioja, the project will examine the relationship between technology and older adults in that region, serving as a situational analysis to identify how older adults use and manage mobile devices.

Specifically, the project aims to:

Investigate the specific needs regarding mobile phone use

Assess the feasibility of delivering specific training

Establish an informal support group on the use of mobile devices

## METHODOLOGY

This project employs a sequential mixed-methods research approach (Creswell and Clark, 2017), combining quantitative research strategies

(data collection via questionnaires and observation scripts) with qualitative strategies (interviews and focus groups)

There are also reports from the meetings themselves and notes

One of the objectives is to identify potential collaborators and provide informal support; thus, throughout the study, older people who can support other older people have been identified, thereby creating these informal support groups.

The ultimate aim of the project, as already mentioned, is the creation of informal support spaces, where people can support one another in the face of difficulties arising from the use and handling of technology. These spaces will be called Labs65+

***Participants or data sources***

The following participants and units of analysis are envisaged, in principle:

- A selected sample of the population of La Rioja aged over 65 from different parts of the region.

Two groups in Central Rioja: Logroño (the capital)

Two groups in Upper Rioja: Arnedo and Calahorra

Two groups in Lower Rioja: Haro and Nájera

- Professionals working with the elderly population
- Groups of volunteers recruited to participate in future Labs65+

The ages of the participants ranged from 65 to 85 years.

The majority were women, accounting for over 50%

In terms of educational attainment, there was a wide range, including primary education (35%), secondary education (35%), vocational training (20%) and university education (10%). None of the survey respondents had no formal education

Their place of origin varies between people from La Rioja and neighboring regions such as Navarre, Aragon and the Basque Country. However, all participants currently live in La Rioja. The average length of residence in this region is 25 years. Some came here to work and stayed. Others moved here because their parents did and have spent the rest of their lives in La Rioja.

As for household composition, the majority live alone. A similar number live with their partner (husband or wife), and a small percentage live with a child.

***Data collection methods***

The data collection method involved a survey distributed amongst the various selected groups of older adults.

The survey consisted of several sections. The first section collected sociodemographic data on the participants.

A second section covered the use and handling of mobile phones, and a third section addressed expectations regarding technology in general and the specific needs they might have regarding the use of technology.

To complete the survey, all participants were invited to the center they usually attend. Once everyone had gathered, they were given an explanation of the project they were to take part in, after which the questionnaires were distributed for them to complete.

The final part, section 3, opened the discussion on perspectives, needs, advantages, disadvantages… regarding the use of mobile phones. The discussion took place in the manner of focus groups.

***Analytical procedures***

The results were therefore both quantitative and qualitative.
The analysis involved counting the responses to the various questions and subsequently analyzing the discourse generated in the focus groups.

***Ethical considerations***

All participants gave their consent to the processing of their data for the purposes of the study and subsequent analysis of the research subject. They were given the opportunity to be kept informed of the project's results and progress, not only in their local area but across all the regions where the project is being carried out.

## RESULTS

The study presented here aims to provide an assessment of the current situation regarding the reality of older people and their use of technology. This exploratory study was carried out in the autonomous community of La Rioja, as mentioned. The region of La Rioja is divided geographically into three zones: lower, middle and upper. For this reason, we have sought to ensure the study is representative of the different zones, aiming to identify commonalities and specific characteristics in order to implement concrete actions in the future. Thus, the results obtained highlight the specific needs of older people regarding the use of mobile devices, specifically mobile phones and their applications.
The specific needs identified serve as a roadmap for future training, as well as for the specific informal support required for older people in the different locations where the information was collected. The idea is to strengthen local social networks – in neighbourhoods and communities –

in response to current and future specific needs regarding technology, whilst also identifying areas for support to mitigate the potential loneliness or isolation they may experience.

The reality for older people is that they are losing family members and friends, and the feeling of loneliness is becoming increasingly prevalent – a loneliness that is often unwanted. This feeling is becoming a growing and significant phenomenon in our increasingly ageing societies. This phenomenon is becoming a silent problem that affects more and more people every day. This increase is directly linked to population ageing, which brings with it new social challenges such as isolation in old age. Various studies show that loneliness among older people is associated with a significant decline in quality of life, with more people feeling isolated and alone. (Fundación amigos de los mayores, 2024; Jiménez, 2024; Melendez et al, 2025)

If we add to this feeling of loneliness and isolation the inadequate use and uncertain handling of technology, we find ourselves facing a situation that has arisen unexpectedly but has been identified; therefore, gaining a detailed understanding of the situation of these older people and how to support them will benefit the whole community.

Looking at the questionnaire responses, we find that 100% of respondents have owned a smartphone for at least five years and use it every day, for an average of two hours a day.

They use it to make and receive phone calls.

As for their perception of their own proficiency with the phone, 75% say they are quite proficient.

The landline, which used to be the centrepiece of every living room, is now virtually non-existent. Only 5% say they have one.

When asked what they use the phone for, 85% basically replied that it is for receiving or making calls. Next, they use it to send messages via WhatsApp; and to search for information using a search engine such as Google.

Using the phone for leisure activities such as buying theatre or cinema tickets is rare, just as they make limited use of social media or for banking transactions and/or booking medical appointments.

When older people do not understand or do not know how to use the device, they generally feel frustrated or annoyed, whilst at the same time being curious to learn so that the next time the same thing happens, they can sort it out without needing to ask for help.

If they do need help, they do not always have someone nearby to turn to. Faced with the reality of what to do when they encounter difficulties, have doubts or cannot find what they are looking for, most turn to family members, particularly children or grandchildren, whilst those without family to turn to seek help from neighbours or friends. When faced with difficulties, they look for someone who can explain things to them patiently and clearly; however, they would prefer the problem to be solved for them rather than simply being given an explanation.

As for the focus groups that took place, the participants showed a keen interest in learning and finding out more, but only about those issues they felt would be useful to them, such as learning more about the device's functions or how to use the camera.

Apps are a whole new world for them, full of the unknown and uncertainty, and, as some point out, they find it "an uphill struggle". "Everything is easy and accessible", as young people tell them, but they find that they don't know "which button to press to get it to do what I want it to do".

As for their main focus, beyond practicality, it is not uniform. There is a desire to gain a deeper understanding of how to use a mobile phone, to learn about the practical applications of certain apps, and to learn how to carry out tasks such as online shopping, buying tickets for leisure and entertainment, as well as banking, renewing their ID card, or booking a doctor's appointment. They consider all of this to be extremely useful, but some "don't even know where to start".

The participants say they know how to use a mobile phone, but some only at a very basic level. With the first mobile phone they had, they could only make calls, and now, although they have considerable possibilities, they do not know how to use them.

Age is a significant factor. The group aged between 65 and 70 report having fewer difficulties using a mobile phone or searching the internet… These are people who, until recently, had working lives in which they used mobile phones and were accustomed to working with computers; therefore, stopping work has not meant stopping using technology, and that world remains accessible to them.

Those furthest removed from working life and with little support from their surroundings are the ones who report having the greatest difficulty in managing and overcoming any challenges with technology.

Even those who have only recently stopped working say that with age they have gradually lost skills and reflexes, and that 'a lot of skills are required' for everything technology entails.

As for receiving specific training on the use of technology, they feel that anything can be useful, although they are aware that they learn slowly and that as new applications emerge and new models appear, they will always be lagging behind technology.

They also say that having someone to rely on gives them peace of mind, so they can ask someone if they need to.

All those who take part regularly attend local senior citizens' centres. For them, it is a safe space for sharing, socializing, and feeling supported and accompanied.

Older people who lack social support networks and community ties are at greater risk of physical, cognitive and emotional decline, highlighting the central role of social relationships as key determinants of health and well-being in old age. Added to this situation, in the current context, is the digital divide arising from the use—or non-use—of digital technologies, which can intensify processes of exclusion and isolation, creating situations of vulnerability among the older adult population. (Gallardo-Peralta, et al 2023; Lyu, C., 2024)

## DISCUSSION

Based on the results obtained, we can arrive at an assessment of the relationship between older people and technology, but their main value lies in how they highlight a divide that goes beyond the merely practical. In this regard, the results suggest that access to devices does not necessarily equate to meaningful technological adoption. The fact that smartphone use is largely limited to calls and messaging indicates the persistence of a 'usage gap', even in contexts where the 'access gap' appears to have been overcome. This calls for a rethinking of training strategies, focusing them not only on basic technical skills but also on functional uses that promote autonomy in key areas, such as administrative management or access to digital services. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider that many

everyday processes have been rapidly digitised, progressively displacing traditional face-to-face channels. This forces older people to interact with tools for which, in many cases, they have received no prior training, increasing the risk of exclusion and dependency. The digitisation of banking, healthcare or administrative services can therefore become a factor of inequality if it is not accompanied by measures that are accessible, inclusive and adapted to the characteristics and learning pace of this group. Furthermore, the relational dimension underlying the study is particularly significant. The preference for support from family or local communities highlights the fundamental role of social capital in digital inclusion processes. However, this dependence can also create further inequalities between those who have support networks and those who do not, underscoring the need to develop more structured and sustainable community-based responses.

Moreover, the combination of a curiosity to learn and frustration in the face of difficulties points to a clear opportunity for educational interventions based on positive reinforcement and ongoing support. In this regard, incorporating participatory or intergenerational methodologies could not only improve digital skills but also help to alleviate unwanted loneliness, simultaneously addressing two interrelated issues from a more holistic perspective. Similarly, creating safe, judgement-free learning spaces can foster greater confidence in one's own abilities, reducing the fear of making mistakes and strengthening the perception of digital self-efficacy. The opportunity to learn in a group, share experiences and progress at a suitable pace emerges as an element particularly valued by participants.

The focus groups reveal that older people are highly motivated to learn about technology, particularly when it is perceived as useful for everyday

life. This finding is consistent with the literature, which emphasises that the adoption of technology in later life is strongly influenced by perceptions of its usefulness and practical relevance. In this regard, interest in specific functions—such as using the camera, managing apps or carrying out administrative tasks online—reflects an instrumental approach to digital learning, rather than a general interest in technology itself.

However, this motivation coexists with feelings of insecurity, uncertainty and operational difficulties, particularly in relation to the use of apps. The perception that technology is "accessible" among younger generations contrasts with the actual experience of older people, who face cognitive and usability barriers, highlighting a gap that is not only digital but also generational and symbolic. The expression "they don't know which button to press" clearly illustrates the gap between technological design and the actual skills of this population group.

In addition, the results show significant variation depending on age and previous work history. Those closer to retirement and with recent experience in digital environments face fewer difficulties, suggesting the importance of technological capital accumulated over a lifetime. Conversely, those who have been out of the labour market for longer and lack support networks show greater limitations, reinforcing the idea of cumulative inequality in access to and use of technologies.

Another relevant aspect is the perception of learning as a slow process that always lags behind technological progress. This self-perception can negatively influence digital self-efficacy, fostering an attitude of resignation or dependence. However, the presence of social support

emerges as a key protective factor: having someone to turn to in times of difficulty provides reassurance and encourages continuity in learning.

In this regard, senior centres play a vital role as spaces for socialising, companionship and informal learning. These environments facilitate not only access to training, but also the building of support networks that help combat isolation and promote well-being. As noted by Gallardo-Peralta et al. (2023) and Lyu (2024), a lack of social connections and the non-use of digital technologies can intensify processes of exclusion, increasing the risk of physical, cognitive and emotional decline.

Overall, the results show that the digital divide among older people cannot be understood solely as a matter of access or technical skills, but is deeply linked to social, relational and biographical factors. Therefore, future interventions should adopt a comprehensive approach, combining tailored training, ongoing support and the strengthening of community networks, with the aim of promoting meaningful and sustainable digital inclusion.

## CONCLUSION

This exploratory study has provided a rigorous insight into the reality faced by older people in La Rioja regarding the use of technology, highlighting both significant progress and major limitations that need to be addressed from a holistic perspective. Firstly, the results show that the digital divide among this group lies not so much in access to devices—since all participants own a smartphone and use it daily—as in the diversity and complexity of their usage. Basic use predominates, centred on phone calls and messaging, whilst other functions linked to administrative tasks, digital leisure or access to services remain underused. This suggests the

persistence of a usage gap that limits the full exploitation of the opportunities offered by digitalisation.

In addition , the study highlights the coexistence of subjective perceptions of competence—a majority claim to manage adequately—with objective difficulties in the advanced use of devices. This apparent contradiction highlights the need to design training strategies tailored to different levels of competence, which build on prior knowledge and progress gradually towards greater digital autonomy. In this regard, the motivation to learn identified in both the questionnaires and the focus groups constitutes a key element upon which to build effective interventions, especially if accompanied by methodologies that are accessible, practical and adapted to older people's learning pace.

Furthermore, the research underscores the critical importance of social support networks in digital inclusion processes. Reliance on family members, neighbours or friends to resolve technological queries highlights the central role of social capital, but also reveals inequalities between those who have access to these resources and those who do not. In this context, senior citizens' centres emerge as prime spaces for socialisation, learning and mutual support, with significant potential to coordinate community-based responses that integrate technological training and social support.

Finally, the findings establish a close link between the use of technology, unwanted loneliness and situations of vulnerability in old age. The progressive loss of social networks, combined with difficulties in using digital tools, can intensify isolation and limit access to essential resources.

It is therefore essential to promote policies and programmes that jointly address digital inclusion and the strengthening of community ties, fostering environments that are more accessible, inclusive and tailored to the needs of older people. In short, improving this group's digital literacy not only contributes to their autonomy but also has a positive impact on their well-being and on the social cohesion of the community as a whole.

Looking ahead, it is recommended that tailored, progressive digital literacy programmes be designed, focusing on practical applications (administrative tasks, health, leisure), and incorporating intergenerational methodologies and peer-to-peer learning. These initiatives should not only focus on technical skills but also on building digital confidence, ensuring that fear of technology does not become a barrier to adoption. It is key to strengthen community networks through local spaces (senior centres, associations) that integrate training and ongoing support. Furthermore, it is proposed to reduce inequalities by providing personalised support to those lacking a social network, thereby preventing further social exclusion among the most isolated individuals. It is important to promote public policies that link digital inclusion and active ageing, fostering accessible environments and more intuitive technologies that adhere to universal design principles. Finally, future research should explore regional differences, particularly between rural and urban areas within La Rioja, and evaluate the long-term socio-emotional impact of the interventions implemented to ensure sustainable, evidence-based public strategies.

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***Psychological and Cultural Adaptation as a Key Factor in the Integration of Afghan Refugees in Albania***

***MSc. Renisa Beqiri, Prof. Asoc. Dr. Edvin Lame***

renisa.beqiri@unitir.edu.al

edvin.lame@unitir.edu.al

**Abstract**

Afghanistan's conflict, instability, and displacement have produced psychological vulnerability among Afghan populations, with high distress reported across refugee groups (Alemi, James, Cruz, Zepeda, & Racadio, 2014). Following the Taliban takeover in 2021, several thousand Afghans were temporarily hosted in Albania, where arrival was experienced as safety and as entry into an unfamiliar cultural, linguistic, and social environment (IOM,2023). This study examined psychological and cultural adaptation as a key factor in the integration of Afghan refugee families in Albania. It was hypothesized that families reporting higher cultural adaptation would show lower symptoms of anxiety, depressive mood, isolation, and post-traumatic stress, despite previous exposure to war. A mixed-method descriptive design was used with a sample of 50 Afghan refugee families residing in temporary accommodation settings in Albania. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, family observation notes, and an adaptation checklist measuring perceived safety, language adjustment, social interaction, parenting stress, help-seeking behavior, and emotional well-being. Results indicated that war exposure had deeply influenced participants' perception of life, especially through persistent insecurity, fear of loss, distrust, and difficulty planning for the future. During the first months in Albania, common behaviors included

withdrawal, hypervigilance, sleep disturbance, irritability, somatic complaints, and emotional dependence on family networks. Over time, families who developed basic Albanian communication skills, social routines, and contact with local services reported greater stability and hope. However, 58% continued to report anxiety symptoms, 46% depressive mood, and 40% trauma-related memories. Findings suggest that integration is not only a legal or social process, but also a psychological reconstruction of safety, identity, and belonging.

**Keywords:** *Afghan refugees; cultural adaptation; mental health, Albania.*

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Forced Displacement and Mental Health among Afghan Refugees

Forced displacement is one of the major humanitarian challenges of the twenty-first century, exposing millions of individuals to prolonged adversity, traumatic experiences, and complex psychosocial stressors. Unlike voluntary migration, forced migration results from armed conflict, persecution, or human rights violations and disrupts multiple aspects of personal, family, and community life. Consequently, refugees are affected by both pre-migration trauma and post-migration stressors that shape long-term psychological adjustment (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017).

Afghanistan has experienced decades of conflict, political instability, and humanitarian crises, making Afghans one of the largest refugee populations worldwide. Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, thousands of Afghans sought temporary protection in countries such as Albania. Although relocation ensured physical safety, many refugees continued to experience uncertainty, cultural transition, social isolation, and identity disruption (UNHCR, 2024). Forced migration is therefore increasingly understood as a dynamic process of psychological adaptation

rather than a single traumatic event, with cumulative trauma and post-migration conditions jointly influencing mental health (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2023).

Ecological theory provides a useful framework for understanding refugee adjustment by emphasizing the interaction between individuals and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Psychological recovery depends not only on individual resilience but also on access to healthcare, education, employment, supportive institutions, and social inclusion. Accordingly, recovery cannot be separated from cultural and social integration.

Research consistently reports elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among refugee populations, although prevalence varies according to post-migration living conditions (Blackmore et al., 2020). Among Afghan refugees, PTSD, depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and somatic complaints are particularly common (Alemi et al., 2014; Slewa-Younan et al., 2017). Recent evidence also highlights the concept of continuous traumatic stress, suggesting that prolonged uncertainty regarding asylum procedures, family reunification, financial security, and legal status may sustain psychological distress even after physical safety has been achieved (Silove et al., 2017).

Family functioning represents both a protective and a vulnerability factor. While families often provide essential emotional support, cumulative trauma may increase parenting stress, alter family roles, and contribute to the intergenerational transmission of distress (Betancourt et al., 2015). These processes are particularly relevant for Afghan refugee families temporarily residing in Albania, where uncertainty regarding future

relocation may continue to deplete psychological resources despite the absence of immediate physical danger (Hobfoll, 1989).

Current evidence indicates that psychological recovery depends not only on previous trauma but also on successful post-migration adaptation. Access to supportive institutions, opportunities for social participation, language acquisition, and trust in the host community facilitate both emotional recovery and cultural adaptation (Porter & Haslam, 2005; Blackmore et al., 2020). Therefore, refugee integration should be understood as a multidimensional process involving the reconstruction of safety, identity, belonging, and psychological well-being.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that Afghan refugees remain particularly vulnerable because of cumulative trauma and persistent post-migration stressors. However, growing evidence suggests that successful adaptation within the receiving society can mitigate psychological distress. This provides the theoretical basis for examining cultural adaptation as a protective factor associated with reduced anxiety, depressive symptoms, trauma-related symptoms, and social isolation among Afghan refugee families residing in Albania.

### 2.2 Psychological Adaptation Following Forced Migration

Psychological adaptation refers to the process through which individuals regain emotional stability, reconstruct their identity, and develop effective coping strategies following traumatic or highly stressful experiences. Among refugee populations, adaptation extends beyond recovery from trauma and involves negotiating safety, belonging, autonomy, and participation within a new sociocultural environment. Contemporary research conceptualizes psychological adaptation as a multidimensional

process influenced by pre-migration experiences, post-migration conditions, and individual resilience (Fazel et al., 2012).

Early refugee research focused primarily on psychopathology, particularly PTSD, anxiety, and depression. More recent perspectives, however, argue that adaptation should be viewed as a continuum in which psychological distress and resilience coexist. Refugees may experience significant emotional suffering while simultaneously developing new coping capacities, social roles, and adaptive resources (Ungar, 2021). This strengths-based perspective emphasizes recovery, agency, and positive adaptation alongside symptom reduction.

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) explains that emotional outcomes depend on individuals' appraisal of stressful situations and their perceived coping resources. In refugee contexts, adaptation is shaped not only by previous trauma but also by ongoing challenges such as family separation, language barriers, legal uncertainty, unemployment, and cultural differences. Accordingly, psychological adjustment reflects continuous interactions between individuals and their post-migration environment rather than trauma exposure alone.

Similarly, Conservation of Resources Theory proposes that psychological distress results from the loss of valued personal, social, and material resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Forced migration frequently involves the loss of housing, employment, social networks, cultural identity, and future opportunities. Recovery therefore depends on rebuilding these resources through stable living conditions, supportive relationships, education, employment, and trust in public institutions.

Evidence suggests that post-migration living conditions often exert a stronger influence on mental health than pre-migration trauma alone (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). Poor housing, prolonged asylum procedures, unemployment, discrimination, and social exclusion are consistently associated with persistent psychological distress, whereas supportive environments facilitate recovery despite severe previous adversity.

An important aspect of adaptation is psychological safety, defined as the subjective perception that the environment is predictable, trustworthy, and sufficiently secure for emotional expression and future planning. Refugees may achieve physical safety while continuing to experience uncertainty regarding legal status, family reunification, employment, and social acceptance, thereby maintaining chronic stress responses (Silove et al., 2017). This distinction is particularly relevant for Afghan refugee families temporarily residing in Albania, where physical protection coexists with uncertainty about long-term relocation.

Family functioning also plays a central role in refugee adaptation. Refugee parents often manage their own trauma while supporting their children's adjustment, increasing parenting stress and emotional burden. At the same time, cohesive family relationships promote resilience, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping (Walsh, 2016). Contemporary resilience theory further emphasizes that successful adaptation results from interactions between individual strengths and supportive environmental resources rather than the absence of psychological distress (Ungar, 2021).

Overall, theoretical and empirical evidence indicates that psychological adaptation is a gradual and multidimensional process shaped by previous trauma, current living conditions, perceived safety, family functioning, and access to social and community resources. These perspectives provide the

conceptual basis for examining perceived safety, emotional well-being, parenting stress, help-seeking behaviour, and social interaction as key indicators of adaptation among Afghan refugee families in Albania, and support the hypothesis that higher adaptation is associated with lower anxiety, depressive symptoms, trauma-related symptoms, and social isolation.

### 2.3 Cultural Adaptation and Acculturation as Determinants of Refugee Integration

Although forced migration initially involves physical relocation, successful refugee integration depends largely on psychological and cultural adaptation within the host society. Cultural adaptation extends beyond language acquisition or adopting local customs; it is a dynamic process through which refugees reconstruct their identity, establish meaningful social relationships, and develop a sense of belonging. Consequently, contemporary research identifies cultural adaptation as a key protective factor against persistent psychological distress.

Earlier migration theories emphasized assimilation, assuming that migrants gradually replaced their original cultural identity with that of the host society. More recent approaches recognize cultural identity as multidimensional, allowing refugees to maintain their cultural heritage while actively participating in the receiving community. The most influential framework explaining this process is Berry's Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997, 2005), which describes four acculturation strategies—integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization—based on the interaction between cultural identity maintenance and participation in the host society.

Among these strategies, integration has consistently been associated with the most favorable psychological outcomes, including lower anxiety and depression, greater life satisfaction, and improved psychological well-being. In contrast, marginalization is linked to loneliness, social withdrawal, reduced institutional trust, and poorer mental health. These findings suggest that successful adaptation requires meaningful participation in the host society while preserving important aspects of one's cultural identity.

Cultural adaptation influences psychological adjustment through several interconnected mechanisms. Language acquisition enhances access to education, healthcare, employment, and public services while facilitating communication with local communities. Improved language skills also increase self-efficacy, reduce social anxiety, and strengthen feelings of belonging (Ager & Strang, 2008). Thus, language functions not only as a communication tool but also as an important psychosocial resource supporting emotional recovery.

Social interaction represents another essential component of cultural adaptation. Refugees frequently experience disruption of established social networks following displacement, increasing vulnerability to loneliness and isolation. According to social capital theory, successful integration depends on both bonding relationships within one's own community and bridging relationships with members of the host society (Putnam, 2000). While bonding networks provide emotional support during the early stages of resettlement, bridging relationships facilitate language acquisition, institutional trust, employment opportunities, and broader social integration.

Contemporary research further emphasizes that cultural adaptation is a reciprocal process. Successful integration depends not only on refugees' motivation but also on the willingness of host societies to promote inclusion through accessible institutions, culturally sensitive services, and supportive community environments (Ager & Strang, 2008). Within this context, perceived belonging has emerged as an important predictor of long-term psychological adjustment, with refugees who feel accepted and valued reporting greater emotional stability and lower levels of anxiety and depression.

These issues are particularly relevant for Afghan refugee families temporarily residing in Albania, where adaptation occurs under conditions of prolonged uncertainty regarding future resettlement. Nevertheless, developing communication skills, engaging with local institutions, establishing daily routines, and participating in community activities may strengthen emotional stability and reduce perceived isolation.

Recent studies recommend assessing cultural adaptation through both objective and subjective indicators. Beyond language proficiency or employment, perceptions of safety, confidence interacting with local residents, willingness to seek professional support, satisfaction with daily functioning, and emotional comfort within the host community provide valuable indicators of successful adaptation (Ward & Geeraert, 2016). Accordingly, the present study operationalizes cultural adaptation through perceived safety, language adjustment, social interaction, parenting stress, help-seeking behaviour, and emotional well-being.

Overall, the literature indicates that cultural adaptation is a multidimensional psychological process through which refugees reconstruct safety, identity, trust, and belonging following forced

displacement. Higher levels of cultural adaptation are therefore expected to be associated with lower anxiety, depressive symptoms, trauma-related symptoms, and social isolation among Afghan refugee families residing in Albania.

### 2.4 Mental Health Outcomes among Afghan Refugees: Anxiety, Depression, Trauma-Related Symptoms, and Social Isolation

Mental health is one of the most extensively studied dimensions of forced migration, reflecting the psychological consequences of war, persecution, displacement, and post-migration adversity. Contemporary evidence suggests that refugee mental health is shaped not only by previous traumatic experiences but also by post-displacement living conditions and adaptation processes. Therefore, psychological distress should be understood as the result of continuous interactions between pre-migration trauma and current environmental factors.

Anxiety is among the most common mental health conditions reported by refugees. Initially serving as an adaptive response to danger, persistent anxiety may continue after displacement, manifesting as chronic worry, hypervigilance, irritability, sleep disturbances, and concentration difficulties. Afghan refugees consistently report elevated anxiety levels compared with the general population, largely due to ongoing uncertainty related to legal status, employment, language barriers, and family reunification (Alemi et al., 2014; Blackmore et al., 2020).

Depression is another major consequence of forced displacement, often resulting from cumulative experiences of loss, disrupted social roles, and uncertainty about the future. Refugees experiencing limited opportunities for education, employment, and community participation consistently

report higher levels of depressive symptoms, highlighting the importance of social integration for psychological recovery (Fazel et al., 2012).

Trauma-related symptoms, including intrusive memories, nightmares, emotional numbing, avoidance, and hypervigilance, remain highly prevalent among refugee populations. However, recent research emphasizes that PTSD alone cannot fully explain refugee mental health, as many individuals experience overlapping symptoms of anxiety, depression, grief, and adjustment difficulties (Silove et al., 2017). Persistent hypervigilance and sleep disturbances frequently continue even after physical safety has been achieved, reflecting the long-term impact of prolonged exposure to threat.

Refugees also commonly experience somatic complaints such as headaches, gastrointestinal problems, fatigue, and chronic pain. Cultural differences in expressing emotional distress often lead individuals to communicate psychological suffering through physical symptoms rather than explicitly describing anxiety or depression. Consequently, culturally sensitive assessment should recognize somatic symptoms as important indicators of emotional distress (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

Beyond psychiatric symptoms, social isolation has emerged as an important determinant of refugee mental health. Disruption of social networks, language barriers, and limited opportunities for community participation often contribute to loneliness and exclusion. Social isolation and psychological distress reinforce one another, creating a cycle that may delay emotional recovery. Conversely, refugees who establish meaningful relationships with members of the host community consistently report better emotional well-being, greater optimism, and lower levels of anxiety and depression (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Current research also emphasizes the importance of emotional well-being as a positive indicator of adaptation. Rather than focusing exclusively on psychopathology, contemporary approaches examine optimism, life satisfaction, emotional stability, and confidence in coping with future challenges as essential components of successful adjustment. For Afghan refugee families temporarily residing in Albania, these outcomes are likely influenced by perceived safety, language acquisition, family cohesion, access to community resources, and interactions with local institutions.

The literature indicates that anxiety, depression, trauma-related symptoms, social isolation, and emotional well-being are closely interconnected dimensions of refugee psychological adaptation. Examining these outcomes simultaneously provides a more comprehensive understanding of refugee adjustment and supports the present study's investigation of cultural adaptation as a protective factor associated with improved psychological functioning among Afghan refugee families residing in Albania.

### 2.5 Family Functioning, Parenting Stress, Help-Seeking Behaviour, and Social Support

Forced migration affects not only individuals but also family systems, exposing refugee families to collective trauma, prolonged uncertainty, disrupted social roles, and major environmental changes. Consequently, refugee adaptation should be understood as both an individual and family process, with family functioning acting as either a protective factor or a source of vulnerability.

According to Family Systems Theory, family members continuously influence one another through emotional interactions, communication, and caregiving practices (Bowen, 1978). Within refugee families, traumatic

experiences often affect the entire family system rather than isolated individuals. Afghan families, typically characterized by strong collectivistic values and intergenerational support, frequently rely on family cohesion as a primary source of emotional security during displacement.

At the same time, displacement places considerable pressure on family functioning. Parents must cope with unfamiliar institutions, financial insecurity, language barriers, and uncertainty while maintaining emotional stability for their children. These demands often contribute to elevated parenting stress, emotional exhaustion, and reduced confidence in caregiving. Higher parenting stress has consistently been associated with poorer family communication, reduced emotional availability, and greater emotional and behavioral difficulties among children (Betancourt et al., 2015).

Conversely, family resilience serves as an important protective factor. Families capable of maintaining supportive relationships, flexible roles, and effective communication generally demonstrate better psychological adjustment despite exposure to severe adversity (Walsh, 2016). These findings emphasize that resilience reflects adaptive family functioning rather than the absence of psychological distress.

Successful adaptation also depends on the availability of social support. Emotional, informational, and practical support provided by family members, friends, professionals, and community organizations has consistently been associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and trauma-related symptoms (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Importantly, the quality of social relationships appears more influential than their quantity, as

meaningful connections with members of the host community promote social inclusion, confidence, and emotional recovery.

Help-seeking behaviour has emerged as another important indicator of refugee adaptation. Although psychological services may be available, refugees frequently underutilize them because of stigma surrounding mental illness, language barriers, unfamiliarity with healthcare systems, and limited institutional trust. Refugees are more likely to seek professional support when services are culturally responsive, accessible, and delivered in ways that promote trust and respect (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

Within the present study, help-seeking behaviour is considered an important component of cultural adaptation because it reflects both openness to psychological support and confidence in navigating the host country's institutions. Families willing to access available services may experience greater perceptions of safety and stronger social integration.

### 2.6 Conceptual Framework and Research Hypotheses

Existing literature demonstrates that refugee integration extends beyond physical protection and involves a multidimensional process of psychological recovery, cultural adaptation, family functioning, and social participation. Contemporary theories consistently emphasize that successful adaptation results from interactions between individual capacities and environmental resources rather than from trauma exposure alone.

The present study integrates several complementary theoretical perspectives. Ecological Systems Theory highlights the influence of family, community, institutions, and broader social environments on

refugee adjustment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping explains that psychological outcomes depend on individuals' appraisal of environmental demands and available coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Similarly, Conservation of Resources Theory suggests that emotional recovery occurs through the reconstruction of personal, social, and institutional resources following forced displacement (Hobfoll, 1989). Finally, Berry's Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997, 2005) proposes that refugees who maintain their cultural identity while actively participating in the host society generally experience more favorable psychological outcomes than those experiencing marginalization.

Drawing upon these frameworks, the present study conceptualizes cultural adaptation as the principal explanatory construct influencing psychological adjustment among Afghan refugee families. Cultural adaptation is operationalized through six dimensions: perceived safety, language adjustment, social interaction, parenting stress, help-seeking behaviour, and emotional well-being. Together, these dimensions reflect refugees' ability to rebuild stability, confidence, and meaningful participation within the Albanian context.

Perceived safety, language adjustment, and social interaction facilitate emotional recovery by increasing security, communication, and community participation. Parenting stress reflects family-level adaptation, while help-seeking behaviour indicates institutional trust and willingness to access available support. Emotional well-being represents positive psychological functioning beyond the absence of psychopathology. Collectively, these dimensions are expected to reduce anxiety, depressive symptoms, trauma-related symptoms, and social isolation.

Accordingly, the conceptual framework proposes that higher levels of cultural adaptation will be associated with better psychological adjustment among Afghan refugee families residing in Albania.

**Research Hypotheses**

Based on the theoretical framework and previous empirical evidence, the following hypotheses were formulated:

**H1.** Higher levels of cultural adaptation will be significantly associated with lower levels of anxiety among Afghan refugee families.

**H2.** Higher levels of cultural adaptation will be significantly associated with lower depressive symptoms.

**H3.** Greater cultural adaptation will be associated with fewer trauma-related symptoms.

**H4.** Higher cultural adaptation will be negatively associated with perceived social isolation.

**H5.** Perceived safety, language adjustment, social interaction, parenting stress, help-seeking behaviour, and emotional well-being will significantly predict overall cultural adaptation.

**H6.** Families demonstrating higher levels of cultural adaptation will report better overall psychological adjustment than families with lower adaptation levels.

**2.7 Research Gap and Contribution of the Present Study**

Although research on refugee mental health has expanded considerably, important gaps remain. Most studies have focused on the prevalence of psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD among refugees permanently resettled in high-income countries. Comparatively little attention has been given to refugee populations living under temporary protection, where prolonged uncertainty, transitional

accommodation, and future relocation create unique psychological challenges.

The Albanian context remains particularly underexplored. Following the 2021 evacuation from Afghanistan, Albania became a temporary host country for Afghan refugee families awaiting resettlement. This setting differs substantially from permanent resettlement contexts and provides an opportunity to examine how cultural adaptation influences psychological adjustment under conditions of continued uncertainty.

Another limitation of existing research is its predominant focus on psychopathology, often overlooking protective factors such as perceived safety, social interaction, emotional well-being, parenting stress, and help-seeking behaviour. Moreover, relatively few studies have adopted multidimensional or family-centered approaches that integrate psychological, cultural, and social aspects of adaptation.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining Afghan refugee families residing in Albania using a mixed-method approach. It conceptualizes cultural adaptation as a multidimensional construct and investigates its relationship with anxiety, depressive symptoms, trauma-related symptoms, and social isolation. By focusing on a temporary protection setting and integrating psychological, family, and sociocultural dimensions, the study contributes to a broader understanding of refugee adaptation while providing evidence that may inform culturally responsive interventions and refugee integration policies.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

The present study employed a mixed-method descriptive cross-sectional design to examine the relationship between cultural adaptation and psychological adjustment among Afghan refugee families residing in temporary accommodation facilities in Albania. A mixed-method approach was selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of both measurable psychological outcomes and participants' lived experiences. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires assessing cultural adaptation and mental health indicators, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and family observations. Quantitative and qualitative findings were analyzed separately and integrated during interpretation to enhance the validity and comprehensiveness of the results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

### 3.2 Study Setting

The study was conducted in temporary accommodation facilities hosting Afghan refugee families in Albania following the 2021 humanitarian evacuation. At the time of data collection, participants had been living in Albania for several months under temporary protection while awaiting relocation. This context provided an appropriate setting for examining psychological and cultural adaptation during a period of prolonged uncertainty.

### 3.3 Participants

The study included 50 Afghan refugee families selected through purposive sampling. One adult family representative participated in the assessment and interview. Eligible participants were Afghan nationals aged 18 years or older, residing in temporary accommodation in Albania, and willing to

provide informed consent. Families unable to complete the interview due to severe health conditions or communication difficulties were excluded.

### 3.4 Study Variables

The independent variable was cultural adaptation, assessed through six dimensions: perceived safety, language adjustment, social interaction, parenting stress, help-seeking behaviour, and emotional well-being. The dependent variables included anxiety, depressive symptoms, trauma-related symptoms, and social isolation. Demographic variables such as age, gender, education, employment status, family composition, length of stay in Albania, and previous exposure to war-related events were collected to describe the sample.

### 3.5 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using a structured socio-demographic questionnaire, a researcher-developed Cultural Adaptation Checklist based on the literature (Berry, 2005; Ager & Strang, 2008), a psychological symptom checklist assessing anxiety, depression, trauma-related symptoms, and social isolation, semi-structured interviews, and structured family observation notes. All questionnaire items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater cultural adaptation or higher psychological distress, depending on the construct measured.

### 3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately and subsequently integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between cultural adaptation and psychological adjustment among Afghan refugee families.

Quantitative data were entered, cleaned, and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Prior to statistical analyses, data were screened for

completeness, missing values, normality, and outliers. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize participants' demographic characteristics and the distribution of the study variables.

The internal consistency of the Cultural Adaptation Checklist and the Psychological Adjustment Checklist was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Values equal to or greater than .70 were considered indicative of acceptable reliability.

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between cultural adaptation and the four psychological outcome variables (anxiety, depressive symptoms, trauma-related symptoms, and social isolation). Correlation coefficients were interpreted according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines.

Multiple linear regression analyses were performed to determine whether the dimensions of cultural adaptation (perceived safety, language adjustment, social interaction, parenting stress, help-seeking behaviour, and emotional well-being) significantly predicted psychological adjustment after controlling for demographic variables. Statistical significance was established at $p < .05$.

Qualitative interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts and observation notes were coded independently before being organized into broader themes reflecting participants' experiences of adaptation, perceived safety, social relationships, parenting challenges, emotional well-being, and future expectations. The qualitative findings were subsequently compared with quantitative results to identify convergent and complementary evidence.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings followed a triangulation approach, allowing interpretation of statistical relationships alongside participants' lived experiences and enhancing the overall credibility of the study.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and international standards for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana, and permission was granted by the institutions hosting Afghan refugee families in Albania. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided written informed consent after receiving information about the study objectives, procedures, confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Trained interpreters assisted during interviews when necessary to ensure accurate communication and minimize participants' psychological burden. All personal information was anonymized, and electronic data were securely stored with access restricted to the research team. Findings are reported only in aggregate form to protect participants' privacy.

## 4.1 Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

The study included 50 Afghan refugee families residing in temporary accommodation facilities in Albania. One adult representative from each family participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 61 years, with a mean age of 39.8 years (SD = 8.74). Females represented a slightly larger proportion of the sample (56.0%) than males (44.0%).

Most participants were married (84.0%), reflecting the family-based nature of the refugee population. Nearly half of the participants had completed secondary education (46.0%), while 28.0% reported primary education and 26.0% had attended university or vocational education.

The majority of families (62.0%) had between two and four children. At the time of data collection, participants had lived in Albania for an average of 9.4 months (SD = 2.8). Almost all participants (94.0%) reported direct exposure to war-related events before displacement, whereas 72.0% indicated experiencing the loss of a close family member, friend, or home due to conflict.

Prior to displacement, 58.0% of participants had been employed, while only 14.0% reported any form of employment or structured daily activity during their stay in Albania. Approximately one-third of the participants (32.0%) reported having previously received some form of psychological or psychosocial support.

**Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 50)**

| **Variable** | **N** | **%** |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | |
| Male | 22 | 44.0 |
| Female | 28 | 56.0 |
| **Marital Status** | | |
| Married | 42 | 84.0 |
| Single/Widowed | 8 | 16.0 |
| **Education** | | |
| Primary | 14 | 28.0 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Secondary | 23 | 46.0 |
| Higher Education | 13 | 26.0 |
| **Children per Family** | | |
| 1–2 | 13 | 26.0 |
| 3–4 | 24 | 48.0 |
| ≥5 | 13 | 26.0 |
| **Previous War Exposure** | | |
| Yes | 47 | 94.0 |
| No | 3 | 6.0 |
| **Previous Psychological Support** | | |
| Yes | 16 | 32.0 |
| No | 34 | 68.0 |

The demographic profile indicates that participants shared relatively similar migration experiences, characterized by prolonged exposure to armed conflict, family responsibilities, and temporary protection in Albania. Such characteristics provide an appropriate context for examining the relationship between cultural adaptation and psychological adjustment.

### 4.2 Reliability Analysis

The internal consistency of the study instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. All scales demonstrated satisfactory to excellent reliability, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 for research purposes.

The overall Cultural Adaptation Checklist demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$). Reliability coefficients for individual dimensions

ranged from .79 to .88, indicating strong homogeneity among the items measuring each construct.

Similarly, the Psychological Adjustment Checklist demonstrated excellent reliability (α = .93). The four psychological outcome domains also showed satisfactory internal consistency.

**Table 2. Internal Consistency of Study Instruments**

| Scale | Number of Items | Cronbach's α |
|---|---|---|
| Cultural Adaptation Checklist | 30 | .91 |
| Perceived Safety | 5 | .84 |
| Language Adjustment | 5 | .82 |
| Social Interaction | 5 | .88 |
| Parenting Stress | 5 | .80 |
| Help-Seeking Behaviour | 5 | .79 |
| Emotional Well-being | 5 | .86 |
| Psychological Adjustment Checklist | 20 | .93 |

The high reliability coefficients indicate that the instruments provided consistent measurements of the constructs included in the study and were appropriate for subsequent statistical analyses.

### 4.3 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive analyses revealed moderate levels of cultural adaptation across the sample. Among the adaptation dimensions, perceived safety and emotional well-being demonstrated the highest mean scores, whereas language adjustment and social interaction remained comparatively lower,

reflecting the challenges associated with temporary residence and limited opportunities for integration.

Regarding psychological outcomes, anxiety exhibited the highest mean score, followed by trauma-related symptoms and depressive symptoms. Social isolation also remained relatively elevated, suggesting that many families continued experiencing limited social participation despite physical safety.

| **Variable** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Minimum** | **Maximum** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cultural Adaptation | 3.48 | 0.54 | 2.12 | 4.62 |
| Perceived Safety | 3.81 | 0.61 | 2.20 | 5.00 |
| Language Adjustment | 2.96 | 0.75 | 1.40 | 4.60 |
| Social Interaction | 3.11 | 0.69 | 1.80 | 4.70 |
| Parenting Stress | 2.89 | 0.71 | 1.60 | 4.50 |
| Help-Seeking Behaviour | 3.18 | 0.67 | 1.80 | 4.80 |
| Emotional Well-being | 3.44 | 0.63 | 1.90 | 4.90 |
| Anxiety | 3.29 | 0.74 | 1.60 | 4.90 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Depression | 2.94 | 0.71 | 1.30 | 4.60 |
| Trauma-related Symptoms | 3.07 | 0.69 | 1.40 | 4.80 |
| Social Isolation | 2.81 | 0.72 | 1.20 | 4.50 |

These findings suggest that although participants reported gradual progress in several aspects of cultural adaptation, considerable psychological distress remained evident, particularly in relation to anxiety and trauma-related symptoms. The coexistence of moderate adaptation and persistent emotional difficulties supports the multidimensional nature of refugee adjustment described in previous literature.

### 4.4 Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between cultural adaptation and the four psychological outcome variables. The results revealed statistically significant negative correlations between cultural adaptation and all indicators of psychological distress. Specifically, higher levels of cultural adaptation were associated with lower levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, trauma-related symptoms, and social isolation.

Among the dimensions of cultural adaptation, perceived safety and emotional well-being demonstrated the strongest negative associations with anxiety and trauma-related symptoms. Social interaction and language adjustment were also significantly associated with lower levels of psychological distress, suggesting that increased engagement with the host community and improved communication skills contribute to better

emotional adjustment. Parenting stress showed positive correlations with anxiety, depression, and trauma-related symptoms, indicating that higher caregiving burden was associated with poorer psychological functioning.

**Table 4. Pearson Correlations Between Study Variables**

| **Variables** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Cultural Adaptation | 1 | | | | |
| 2. Anxiety | -.68** | 1 | | | |
| 3. Depression | -.61** | .73** | 1 | | |
| 4. Trauma-related Symptoms | -.65** | .71** | .69** | 1 | |
| 5. Social Isolation | -.58** | .60** | .64** | .62** | 1 |

**Note. p** < .01.

Further analyses examining the dimensions of cultural adaptation indicated that perceived safety ($r = -.63$, $p < .001$), emotional well-being ($r = -.66$, $p < .001$), and social interaction ($r = -.54$, $p < .001$) demonstrated the strongest associations with reduced anxiety. Similar patterns were observed for depressive symptoms and trauma-related symptoms, whereas language adjustment showed moderate but statistically significant relationships across all psychological outcomes.

Overall, the correlation analyses provide preliminary support for the proposed conceptual model, indicating that higher levels of cultural adaptation are consistently associated with better psychological adjustment among Afghan refugee families.

### 4.5 Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

To further examine the predictive value of cultural adaptation, multiple linear regression analyses were performed using anxiety, depressive

symptoms, trauma-related symptoms, and social isolation as dependent variables. The six dimensions of cultural adaptation were entered simultaneously as predictors.

The regression model predicting anxiety was statistically significant, $F(6,43) = 9.84$, $p < .001$, explaining 57% of the variance (Adjusted $R^2 = .57$). Perceived safety ($\beta = -.36$, $p = .002$), emotional well-being ($\beta = -.31$, $p = .005$), and social interaction ($\beta = -.27$, $p = .014$) emerged as significant independent predictors of lower anxiety levels.

Similarly, the regression model predicting depressive symptoms was significant, $F(6,43) = 8.17$, $p < .001$, accounting for 52% of the variance. Emotional well-being represented the strongest predictor ($\beta = -.39$, $p = .001$), followed by parenting stress ($\beta = .29$, $p = .011$) and perceived safety ($\beta = -.24$, $p = .028$).

Trauma-related symptoms were also significantly predicted by the adaptation dimensions, $F(6,43) = 8.92$, $p < .001$, explaining 55% of the variance. Perceived safety ($\beta = -.34$, $p = .003$), emotional well-being ($\beta = -.29$, $p = .009$), and help-seeking behaviour ($\beta = -.22$, $p = .041$) were statistically significant predictors.

Finally, the regression model predicting social isolation explained 48% of the observed variance, $F(6,43) = 6.95$, $p < .001$. Social interaction emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = -.41$, $p < .001$), followed by language adjustment ($\beta = -.26$, $p = .018$) and emotional well-being ($\beta = -.21$, $p = .036$).

**Table 5. Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Psychological Outcomes**

| Predictor | Anxiety β | Depression β | Trauma β | Social Isolation β |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Perceived Safety | -.36** | -.24* | -.34** | -.17 |
| Language Adjustment | -.18 | -.15 | -.16 | -.26* |
| Social Interaction | -.27* | -.20 | -.18 | -.41*** |
| Parenting Stress | .19 | .29* | .22 | .18 |
| Help-Seeking Behaviour | -.14 | -.17 | -.22* | -.19 |
| Emotional Well-being | -.31** | -.39*** | -.29** | -.21* |

**$R^2$**

| Outcome | Adjusted $R^2$ |
|---|---|
| Anxiety | .57 |
| Depression | .52 |
| Trauma-related Symptoms | .55 |
| Social Isolation | .48 |

The regression analyses indicate that emotional well-being and perceived safety consistently predicted lower psychological distress across multiple outcome variables. Social interaction emerged as the strongest predictor of reduced social isolation, while parenting stress significantly contributed to depressive symptoms. These findings support the theoretical assumption that successful cultural adaptation facilitates psychological adjustment by

strengthening emotional stability, increasing perceptions of safety, and promoting meaningful participation within the host community.

### 4.6 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

The statistical findings generally supported the proposed research hypotheses.

**Table 6. Hypothesis Testing Summary**

| Hypothesis | Result |
|---|---|
| H1. Higher cultural adaptation is associated with lower anxiety. | Supported |
| H2. Higher cultural adaptation is associated with lower depressive symptoms. | Supported |
| H3. Higher cultural adaptation is associated with fewer trauma-related symptoms. | Supported |
| H4. Higher cultural adaptation is associated with lower social isolation. | Supported |
| H5. The six dimensions significantly predict psychological adjustment. | Partially Supported |
| H6. Families with higher cultural adaptation demonstrate better overall psychological adjustment. | Supported |

The findings indicate that cultural adaptation constitutes a significant protective factor associated with improved psychological functioning among Afghan refugee families living in temporary accommodation in Albania. Although not every adaptation dimension contributed equally across all models, perceived safety, emotional well-being, and social

interaction consistently emerged as the strongest predictors of positive psychological outcomes.

**5. Discussion**

The present study examined the relationship between cultural adaptation and psychological adjustment among Afghan refugee families residing in temporary accommodation facilities in Albania. Consistent with the proposed hypotheses, the findings indicate that higher levels of cultural adaptation were associated with lower anxiety, depressive symptoms, trauma-related symptoms, and social isolation. These results support previous evidence suggesting that refugee integration is fundamentally a psychological and social process rather than solely a legal or administrative one.

Among the dimensions of cultural adaptation, perceived safety, emotional well-being, and social interaction emerged as the strongest predictors of positive psychological adjustment. These findings are consistent with Berry's Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997, 2005), which emphasizes that successful integration into the host society promotes better psychological outcomes, as well as Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective, highlighting the importance of supportive social environments for psychological recovery.

Perceived safety was one of the strongest predictors of reduced psychological distress, supporting previous research showing that subjective feelings of security are critical for emotional recovery following forced displacement (Silove et al., 2017). Similarly, higher emotional well-being was associated with lower levels of anxiety, depression, and trauma-related symptoms, reinforcing resilience-based approaches that emphasize

positive psychological functioning alongside symptom reduction (Ungar, 2021).

Social interaction also played an important role in reducing social isolation. Refugees who reported stronger engagement with the Albanian community experienced better psychological adjustment, supporting Ager and Strang's (2008) integration framework. Although language adjustment demonstrated more modest effects, it remained significantly associated with social participation and emotional functioning, consistent with previous findings highlighting communication as a facilitator of cultural integration (Ward & Geeraert, 2016).

The study further identified parenting stress as an important contributor to depressive symptoms, confirming previous evidence that family functioning directly influences refugee psychological adjustment (Betancourt et al., 2015; Walsh, 2016). Help-seeking behaviour also contributed to lower trauma-related symptoms, emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive mental health services and reducing barriers such as stigma, language difficulties, and institutional mistrust (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

An important contribution of the present study is its focus on Afghan refugee families living under temporary protection in Albania. Unlike most previous studies conducted in permanent resettlement settings, this study demonstrates that meaningful psychological adaptation can begin even during periods of prolonged uncertainty when refugees experience safety, supportive social relationships, and opportunities for community participation.

These findings have important practical implications. Integration policies should extend beyond housing and legal assistance to include language

education, community engagement, family-centered psychosocial support, and culturally sensitive mental health services. Strengthening perceived safety, reducing parenting stress, and promoting social participation may substantially improve refugee well-being and long-term integration.

The findings support multidimensional models of refugee adaptation by demonstrating that psychological recovery results from the interaction of individual, family, and environmental factors. The study contributes to the growing evidence that cultural adaptation serves as an important protective factor for the psychological well-being of forcibly displaced populations.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between cultural adaptation and psychological adjustment among Afghan refugee families residing in temporary accommodation facilities in Albania. The findings demonstrated that higher levels of cultural adaptation were significantly associated with lower anxiety, depressive symptoms, trauma-related symptoms, and social isolation. Perceived safety, emotional well-being, and social interaction emerged as the strongest predictors of positive psychological adjustment, highlighting the importance of psychosocial and cultural factors in refugee integration.

The study contributes to the limited evidence on refugee adaptation in temporary protection settings and supports multidimensional approaches that integrate psychological, family, and sociocultural dimensions. Despite the limitations of the cross-sectional design and relatively small sample, the findings provide valuable implications for future research and humanitarian practice. Strengthening culturally responsive mental health services, family support, language education, and community participation

may facilitate both psychological recovery and successful refugee integration.

**7.Contributions to Knowledge and Practice**

The study contributes to the limited literature on Afghan refugees in temporary protection settings by demonstrating that cultural adaptation plays a key role in promoting psychological well-being. The findings support the development of integrated interventions that combine psychosocial support, language education, family-based services, and community engagement to facilitate refugee adaptation and mental health.

**Limitations**

The study has several limitations, including a relatively small sample size, the use of a cross-sectional design, and reliance on self-reported data. These factors limit the generalizability of the findings and preclude causal interpretations.

**Recommendations for Future Research and Practice**

Future studies should include larger and more diverse refugee populations and adopt longitudinal designs to better understand adaptation over time. From a practical perspective, policymakers and humanitarian organizations should prioritize culturally sensitive mental health services, language support, family-centered interventions, and community integration programs to strengthen refugee well-being and successful adaptation.

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# Merit-Based Recruitment in the Albanian Civil Service: Challenges and Opportunities

MSc. Romina Liçaj[1], Prof. Asoc. Dr. Artur Rada[1]
Faculty of Social Sciences, Tirana University, Tirana, Albania

## Abstract

Merit-based recruitment and equal opportunities are fundamental principles for ensuring professionalism and effectiveness in public administration. Albania has undertaken significant reforms to strengthen the civil service system and align recruitment practices with European standards. Although the legal framework has remained stable since 2015, recent assessments indicate that important challenges persist in ensuring the full and effective implementation of these principles in practice. This paper analyzes the transparency, professionalism, and effectiveness of recruitment procedures in the Albanian civil service, with a focus on mechanisms coordinated by the Department of Public Administration (DAP). The study aims to assess the extent to which the current system supports merit-based selection and attracts qualified candidates for positions in the public sector. The research relies on a qualitative approach, based on the analysis of secondary data, including legislation, strategic documents, reports, and administrative data. Findings show that, although recruitment procedures are formally competitive and non-discriminatory, structural limitations remain evident, including weaknesses in strategic human resource planning, limited use of competency-based selection

instruments, and declining levels of candidate participation in recruitment processes. The study highlights the need to strengthen human resource planning capacities and modernize recruitment instruments, with the aim of enhancing the quality, transparency, and credibility of recruitment processes in the Albanian civil service.

Keywords: Merit-based recruitment, civil service, state administration, Albania

## 1. Introduction

Merit-based recruitment is widely recognized as a cornerstone of modern public administration systems, ensuring that public institutions are staffed with competent professionals selected through fair and transparent procedures. In the context of European integration, Albania has undertaken substantial reforms to align its civil service system with EU administrative standards, particularly focusing on professionalism, depoliticization, and equal access to public employment.

Despite a stable legal framework governing civil service recruitment since 2015, implementation challenges remain evident. According to OECD (2023), *The Principles of Public Administration* emphasize that transparency, professionalism, and effectiveness in recruitment processes constitute key dimensions of administrative quality. In Albania, the Department of Public Administration (DoPA) plays a central role in coordinating recruitment processes across the civil service system.

Public administration reform has been one of the most persistent and complex challenges in Albania's democratic transition and European

integration process. Since the early 1990s, successive governments have sought to professionalize the civil service, reduce politicization, and align recruitment practices with European Union (EU) standards. The adoption of the Civil Service Law (CSL) in 2013 marked a turning point, establishing a legal framework for merit-based recruitment, neutrality, and accountability. This law, complemented by secondary legislation, established the institutional framework for the development of a modern civil service system.

Yet, as the SIGMA Monitoring Report (2024) demonstrates, the translation of legal principles into practice remains uneven. Recruitment procedures are formally competitive and non-discriminatory, but structural weaknesses persist.

***Aim and Objectives of the Study***

This study aims to analyze the extent to which the current civil service system supports merit-based selection and attracts qualified candidates for positions in the public sector.

The objectives of the study are:

1. To analyze the extent to which recruitment practices in Albania comply with merit-based principles;
2. To identify structural and operational challenges affecting their effectiveness;
3. To analyze recruitment mechanisms, selection methods, human resource planning, inclusiveness, and candidate attraction.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding the gap between formal legal provisions and practical implementation in civil service recruitment. Strengthening merit-based recruitment is essential not only for administrative efficiency but also for public trust in

government institutions and for advancing Albania's European integration agenda.

The study is significant for both theory and practice. Theoretically, it contributes to debates on meritocracy and institutional trust in transitional democracies. Public administration in post-communist contexts often struggles with politicization, clientelism, and weak institutional capacity. By examining Albania's recruitment system, the study sheds light on how legal frameworks interact with political realities.

Practically, the study informs ongoing reforms under the Public Administration Reform Roadmap (2023–2030). Recruitment is central to building a professional civil service capable of delivering quality public services. Weaknesses in recruitment undermine not only administrative efficiency but also public trust in institutions. Strengthening recruitment processes is therefore essential for Albania's EU accession and for consolidating democratic governance.

*Theoretical Relevance*

The study is grounded in the OECD/SIGMA Principles of Public Administration, specifically Principle 9: "Public administration attracts and recruits competent people based on merit and equal opportunities." This principle emphasizes transparency, professionalism, and inclusiveness as key dimensions of recruitment. The analysis also draws on broader literature on public sector meritocracy, which highlights the role of recruitment in safeguarding neutrality and preventing politicization.

Comparative perspectives are particularly relevant. In the Western Balkans, recruitment systems vary in their effectiveness. For example, North Macedonia has introduced competency-based frameworks, while Serbia has struggled with politicization of appointments. By situating

Albania within this regional context, the study highlights both common challenges and distinctive features.

Recruitment is not merely a technical process; it has profound implications for governance and public trust. Transparent and merit-based recruitment enhances the legitimacy of public institutions, while politicized or opaque processes erode confidence. In Albania, SIGMA's 2024 survey shows that only 40% of citizens trust civil servants, below the EU average of 46%. Recruitment practices directly influence this perception.

## 2. Methodology

### Research design and approach

The study adopts a qualitative research design, based on secondary data analysis, which is particularly suitable for analyzing institutional frameworks, recruitment procedures, and policy documents. Unlike quantitative approaches that rely on statistical modeling or surveys, qualitative research allows for a deeper exploration of the meanings, structures, and processes embedded in recruitment practices. This design is aligned with the study's aim: to assess how merit-based recruitment principles are implemented in practice and to identify structural limitations.

The qualitative approach is interpretive, focusing on how laws, regulations, and administrative practices shape recruitment outcomes. It also allows for critical reflection on the gap between formal rules and actual implementation, a recurring theme in public administration reform in transitional democracies.

The approach is exploratory and analytical, aiming to assess the implementation of merit-based recruitment principles in the Albanian civil

service, with particular attention to mechanisms coordinated by the Department of Public Administration (DoPA).

The study does not involve direct participants. Instead, it relies on secondary official sources, including the legal framework of the civil service, human resource planning documents, annual reports of the Department of Public Administration, OECD/EU/RESPA reports, policy and assessment reports related to public administration reform, as well as administrative statistics.

**Analytical procedures**

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, which involves the identification, categorization, and interpretation of key patterns emerging from the reviewed documents. In this framework, the information was organized into key analytical categories: transparency, professionalism, efficiency, inclusiveness, and merit-based selection.

This approach enabled a comparison between the formal practices defined in the legal framework and their actual implementation in institutional practice. In particular, discrepancies between normative regulations and administrative reality were identified, and the main trends characterizing the recruitment process were analyzed.

The study employed data triangulation, whereby information obtained from legislative documents, policy reports, and official assessments was cross-checked to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

The study also considers quantitative indicators such as recruitment duration, number of applications, and distribution of vacancies.

Comparative analysis was also employed, situating Albania's recruitment practices within the broader Western Balkan context. This allowed for

identification of common challenges (e.g., politicization, weak HR planning) and potential lessons from neighboring countries.

Ethical considerations are observed through the use of publicly available and non-sensitive administrative data. No personal or confidential information is used in the analysis.

*Methodological Limitations*

While qualitative document analysis provides valuable insights, it has limitations. The reliance on secondary data means that the study cannot capture the lived experiences of candidates or HR managers. For example, declining candidate participation is noted in the SIGMA report, but the reasons behind this trend (e.g., perceptions of fairness, attractiveness of salaries) are not explored through primary interviews.

Despite these limitations, the chosen methodology is appropriate for the study's objectives. It provides a structured, evidence-based assessment of recruitment practices, highlighting both achievements and areas for reform.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1 Institutional and Legal Framework

The recruitment system in the Albanian civil service is formally grounded in a comprehensive legal framework that ensures competitive and merit-based procedures. Recruitment processes are centrally managed by Department of Public Administration, particularly for entry-level positions, through standardized procedures and centralized recruitment pools.

The system is designed to safeguard against political influence and to ensure equal access to public employment. Job descriptions, selection

criteria, and evaluation methods are formally regulated and standardized across institutions.

However, despite this strong institutional framework, the practical implementation reveals several structural limitations.

Law no. 152/2013 “On the civil servant” and its accompanying secondary legislation constitute the foundation of a formalized meritocratic system. This framework is consistent with Weber’s principles of bureaucratic neutrality (Weber, 1978), aiming to shield the administration from political influence. However, as highlighted by SIGMA (2024), practical implementation remains uneven, creating gaps between the legal norm and administrative reality.

3.2 Human Resource Planning and Strategic Gaps

One of the key weaknesses identified is the insufficient quality of strategic human resource (HR) planning. Annual recruitment plans are adopted, but they lack comprehensive workforce analysis. Although institutions are required to submit annual staffing needs, the process is not supported by comprehensive workforce analysis or long-term forecasting of skills and competencies. Department of Public Administration reports focus on past developments rather than future needs, failing to identify gaps and skills requirements.

The absence of robust analytical tools limits the ability of the system to anticipate future workforce needs. Annual reports by the Department of Public Administration largely reflect retrospective data without in-depth analysis of staffing trends, demographic composition, or evolving competency requirements.

In 2025, out of 1,196 planned vacancies, 949 were published and only 654 were successfully filled. In 2024, out of 1,187 planned vacancies, 1510

were published and 1221 were filled. In 2023, out of 1,158 planned vacancies, 838 were successfully filled. While this indicates operational functionality, it does not address structural planning deficiencies that affect long-term efficiency.

Kolvani & Nistotskaya (2025) argue that meritocracy cannot function without mechanisms that measure competence and anticipate the skills required for evolving administrative demands. Without competency-based frameworks, recruitment cannot anticipate evolving demands, such as digital skills or policy analysis capacities. This reactive approach undermines the effectiveness of recruitment and limits the ability of the civil service to adapt to changing contexts.

In the regional context, for example North Macedonia has begun integrating HR planning with competency frameworks, offering a model for Albania.

Weaknesses in Albania's strategic human resource planning reveal a lack of in-depth analysis of future needs, standing in contrast to practices recommended by the OECD (2023), where competency-based planning is considered a prerequisite for a modern and effective administration. In the regional context, the case of North Macedonia—where human resource planning has been aligned with competency frameworks—offers a practical benchmark for Albania.

### 3.3 Recruitment Procedures and Centralization

The recruitment system is highly centralized, particularly for entry-level positions, where pooled recruitment procedures are organized by the Department of Public Administration. This approach enhances

standardization and reduces fragmentation; however, in practice, full pooling is limited due to difficulties in harmonizing job descriptions.

As a result, a significant number of recruitments still occur for individual positions. In 2023, 370 candidates were recruited through group competitions, while 126 were recruited through individual procedures.

Recruitment procedures involve sequential stages including lateral movement, promotion, and external recruitment. Although this structure ensures internal mobility and prioritization of civil servants, it also prolongs recruitment processes.

The centralization of procedures by the Department of Public Administration (DoPA) has brought about standardization, but not always efficiency. ReSPA (2020) emphasizes that in the Western Balkans, centralization often reduces fragmentation but requires harmonization of job descriptions. The case of North Macedonia, where competency-based frameworks have been introduced, offers a comparative model for Albania.

### 3.4 Efficiency and Timeliness

Recruitment procedures last on average 63 days, which is considered efficient by regional standards. Group competitions at the executive level have increased candidate intake, with 355 recruited in 2025 compared to 124 through individual competitions. However, reliance on individual competitions persists due to non-harmonised job descriptions.

The use of an electronic recruitment module has improved procedural management, enabling online applications, tracking, and coordination of candidate selection.

Despite these improvements, efficiency is still constrained by procedural complexity and multiple sequential steps. The simultaneous announcement

of recruitment stages aims to reduce delays, but structural bottlenecks persist.

Onboarding processes are moderately effective, providing basic orientation but lacking structured programs to integrate new recruits into institutional culture. This limits the long-term effectiveness of recruitment, as new employees may struggle to adapt.

When compared to the region, Croatia has developed comprehensive onboarding programs, including mentorship and training, which enhance retention and effectiveness. Albania could adopt similar measures to strengthen integration.

As noted above, the average of 63 days required to complete recruitment procedures is comparable to regional standards, yet remains burdened by sequential steps. OECD/SIGMA (2021) suggests that simplifying procedures and employing digital modules increases efficiency. Nevertheless, Albania's limited onboarding practices contrast with Croatia, where mentoring programs have significantly improved integration (ReSPA, 2021).

### 3.5 Transparency and Merit-Based Selection

Transparency is a fundamental principle of merit-based recruitment. In Albania, recruitment procedures are formally competitive and non-discriminatory, with vacancies announced publicly and applications submitted online through the DoPA's recruitment module. This system allows for tracking candidate progress and managing the recruitment workflow efficiently. In 2023, all newly appointed civil servants entered through competitive procedures.

While job announcements are accessible, they often provide limited information on job conditions and remuneration. This reduces the

attractiveness of positions and undermines the principle of informed choice. Moreover, transparency is uneven across institutions: while Civil Service Law-covered bodies adhere to standardized procedures, institutions governed by the Labour Code or special legislation may not require open competitions.

Selection methods include written tests and structured interviews, but written assessments are predominantly multiple-choice questions. This limits the ability to assess higher-order competencies, analytical skills, and behavioral attributes.

Appeal mechanisms exist, allowing candidates to challenge recruitment outcomes. However, awareness of these mechanisms remains limited, and their effectiveness depends on the capacity of administrative courts to process cases in a timely manner.

Moreover, there is limited evidence of systematic involvement of recruitment experts in designing assessment tools.

In conclusion, transparency is formally guaranteed, but not always comprehensive. Job announcements frequently lack detailed information on working conditions, thereby reducing attractiveness. This issue is directly linked to low levels of public trust: only 40% of Albanian citizens express confidence in civil servants (OECD/SIGMA, 2024), compared to 46% in the EU. Nistotskaya (2025) stresses that bureaucratic meritocracy is sustainable only when transparency is complete and credible. In North Macedonia, for example, job announcements include detailed information on responsibilities, conditions, and career progression, enhancing transparency. Albania could adopt similar practices to strengthen candidate confidence.

### 3.6 Professionalism of Selection Committees

Professionalism is reflected in the role of selection committees, the use of job profiles, and the alignment of recruitment instruments with competencies. Selection is conducted by permanent admission committees composed of representatives from Department of Public Administration, representatives from the institution where the vacant position is located and field experts. While the composition ensures a degree of professionalism and multi-stakeholder involvement, training opportunities for committee members remain limited. This may affect consistency and quality in evaluation processes. Moreover, competency-based instruments are underutilized. Recruitment relies heavily on written tests and interviews, which assess knowledge but not necessarily skills or behavioral competencies. This limits the ability to identify candidates with the adaptive capacities required in modern public administration.

The SIGMA report highlights declining candidate participation, suggesting that recruitment instruments may not be perceived as credible or relevant. This trend is concerning, as it undermines the pool of qualified applicants and reduces competition.

In the Western Balkans, Serbia has introduced competency-based frameworks, though implementation remains partial. Albania could benefit from adopting similar instruments, tailored to its administrative context.

Permanent admission committees ensure a degree of professionalism, yet the absence of systematic training limits the quality of evaluation. Assefa (2020), in his study of the Ethiopian civil service, demonstrates that without competency-based instruments, recruitment remains formalistic and ineffective. Albania requires instruments that assess analytical skills and behavioral attributes, not merely theoretical knowledge.

3.7 Inclusiveness and Equal Opportunities

Despite formal legal provisions ensuring equal access to employment, inclusiveness remains a significant challenge. For managerial positions, only 20% may be opened to external candidates, restricting diversity and innovation. This rule prioritizes internal mobility but reduces opportunities for fresh perspectives.

Candidate participation has declined, despite a 46% salary increase across the public sector. This suggests that inclusiveness is not merely a matter of access but also of attractiveness. Recruitment must be perceived as fair, credible, and rewarding to encourage participation.

Moreover, based on administrative data from the Department of Public Administration, persons with disabilities represent only 0.004% of civil service employees in 2023. There are no systematic measures to ensure reasonable accommodation or proactive inclusion strategies. Adaptations are made only on an ad-hoc basis upon request. This reflects a broader absence of inclusive recruitment policies and targeted outreach strategies.

In comparison with the region, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, inclusiveness is enhanced through affirmative measures for underrepresented groups. Albania could consider similar policies to broaden access.

The low participation of underrepresented groups, particularly persons with disabilities (0.004% in 2023), indicates a lack of affirmative policies. Compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina, where affirmative measures are in place (ReSPA, 2020), Albania lags behind. Furthermore, restricting external access to managerial positions to only 20% diminishes diversity and innovation.

### 3.8 Attraction of Candidates and Employer Branding

Efforts to attract qualified candidates include the organization of job fairs, university presentations, and social media campaigns. In addition, special

programs such as “Students of Excellence” aim to engage high-performing graduates. However, data reveal a significant decline in candidate participation in 2025 (19,038 applications) compared to 2024 (26,502 applications), suggesting that public administration may encounter challenges in maintaining its attractiveness as an employer. Temporary programs for talented graduates, such as “Students of Excellence,” lack a comprehensive legal basis within the civil service framework, thereby limiting their long-term sustainability. The decrease in applications from 26,502 in 2024 to 19,038 in 2025 demonstrates that a 46% salary increase is insufficient to enhance attractiveness. As emphasized by the European Commission (2024), institutional credibility and career prospects carry greater weight than financial compensation. Initiatives such as “Students of Excellence” represent positive steps, but without a stable legal foundation they cannot ensure continuity.

*3.9 Comparative Regional Perspective*

Situating Albania within the Western Balkans reveals common challenges such as politicization, weak HR planning, and limited inclusiveness, but also diverse approaches to addressing them. North Macedonia has advanced by introducing competency-based frameworks, which strengthen the link between recruitment and professional skills. However, implementation remains partial and uneven, with difficulties in ensuring consistency across institutions (ReSPA, 2020). Croatia stands out for its structured onboarding programs, including mentoring and training, which have improved integration and retention of civil servants. Yet, despite these strengths, Croatia continues to face challenges in depoliticizing appointments and ensuring transparency in higher-level positions (ReSPA, 2021). Bosnia and Herzegovina has adopted affirmative measures to

enhance inclusiveness and broaden access for underrepresented groups, a step that Albania has yet to take. Nevertheless, Bosnia's recruitment system remains fragmented due to complex institutional arrangements and persistent political influence (OECD/SIGMA, 2024).

Against this backdrop, Albania's centralized recruitment system offers advantages in efficiency and professionalism, particularly through standardized procedures coordinated by the Department of Public Administration. At the same time, Albania struggles with declining candidate participation, limited competency-based instruments, and weak inclusiveness policies. This mixed picture suggests that Albania can learn not only from the strengths but also from the shortcomings of its neighbors. By adapting competency frameworks from North Macedonia, onboarding practices from Croatia, and inclusiveness measures from Bosnia—while avoiding their respective weaknesses—Albania could build a recruitment system that is both efficient and credible. Such reforms would bridge the gap between formal legal guarantees and substantive meritocracy, enhancing public trust and supporting the country's European integration agenda (European Commission, 2024; Kolvani & Nistotskaya, 2025).

**4. Conclusion**

This study analyzed the extent to which the current system supports merit-based selection and attracts qualified candidates for positions in the public sector. The findings confirms that the legal and institutional framework of recruitment in the Albanian civil service is consolidated, yet practical implementation remains fragmented. Law No. 152/2013 and its secondary legislation ensure competitive and meritocratic procedures, consistent with Weber's principles of bureaucratic neutrality (Weber, 1978). However, as emphasized by OECD/SIGMA (2024), transparency and professionalism

are not always guaranteed in practice, creating gaps between the legal norm and administrative reality.

The main strengths of the system include the centralization of procedures by the Department of Public Administration (DoPA), the use of digital modules, and the standardization of selection criteria. Nevertheless, weaknesses are evident in strategic human resource planning, the absence of competency-based instruments, and the limited inclusion of underrepresented groups. As Kolvani & Nistotskaya (2025) argue, meritocracy cannot function without mechanisms that measure competence and anticipate future skill requirements. Similarly, Assefa (2020) demonstrates that recruitment based solely on theoretical testing does not ensure long-term professionalism.

From a comparative perspective, regional practices provide valuable models: North Macedonia has integrated competency frameworks, Croatia has developed onboarding programs with mentoring, and Bosnia and Herzegovina has applied affirmative measures for underrepresented groups (ReSPA, 2020; ReSPA, 2021). Albania could benefit from adopting these experiences to strengthen its system.

The findings have broader implications for governance and public trust. Recruitment practices directly influence perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. Transparent and merit-based recruitment enhances trust in institutions, while politicized or opaque processes erode confidence. In Albania, SIGMA's 2024 survey shows that only 40% of citizens trust civil servants, below the EU average of 46%. Strengthening recruitment is therefore essential not only for administrative efficiency but also for democratic consolidation.

Moreover, recruitment affects the attractiveness of the civil service as an employer. Despite recent salary increases, declining candidate participation suggests that credibility and career prospects matter more than remuneration alone. Modernizing recruitment instruments and enhancing inclusiveness would make the civil service more appealing to qualified candidates.

Albania's civil service recruitment system stands at a crossroads. The legal framework is sound, but operational weaknesses persist. Reform is needed to bridge the gap between formal rules and practical implementation. By adopting competency-based frameworks, strengthening HR planning, enhancing inclusiveness, and modernizing instruments, Albania can build a recruitment system that is transparent, professional, and effective. Such reforms would not only improve administrative efficiency but also strengthen public trust and support Albania's European integration.

*Recommendations for Future Research*

Future research should adopt mixed methods, combining document analysis with qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of recruitment practices, capturing both institutional frameworks and individual experiences. Comparative studies across the Western Balkans would also be valuable, highlighting common challenges and best practices.

*Recommendations for Policy and Practice*

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed:

1. Introduce competency-based frameworks: Recruitment should assess not only knowledge but also skills and behaviors.

Competency-based instruments would enhance professionalism and ensure that candidates possess the adaptive capacities required in modern public administration.

2. Strengthen HR planning: Comprehensive workforce analysis is needed to align recruitment with future needs. This should include demographic dynamics, skills gaps, and medium-term projections. HR planning must move beyond annual reports to strategic foresight.
3. Enhance inclusiveness: External access to managerial positions should be expanded, and affirmative measures considered for underrepresented groups. This would improve diversity, innovation, and legitimacy.
4. Improve transparency: Job announcements should provide detailed information on conditions, remuneration, and career progression. This would enhance candidate confidence and attractiveness.
5. Develop onboarding programs: Structured integration measures, including mentorship and training, would strengthen retention and effectiveness. Onboarding should be seen as an extension of recruitment, ensuring that new employees adapt successfully.
6. Modernize recruitment instruments: Digital tools should be upgraded to ensure credibility and efficiency. The recruitment module should incorporate competency assessments, feedback mechanisms, and data analytics.

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# The 2018 Student Movement in Albania: Opportunity Structures, Collective Action Frames, and Limitations to Value Changes

Sokol Lleshi, PhD
University of New York Tirana
sokollleshi@unyt.edu.al

Abstract

In December 2018, university students across higher educational institutions organized a wave of protest events, and a sustained collective action against the educational reforms. This particular collective action by the young generation constituted the second largest mobilization of students in post-communist Albania since the 1990 student movement. What remains puzzling concerning the 2018 student movement is the ambiguity of the collective action frames which, on the one hand, emphasized a claim for value changes in the Albanian society, contesting the existing political system, and on the other hand, emphasizing changes of the public policies on higher education. Henceforth, the paper asks why the collective action of the students falls short of a social movement embodying value change? The key theoretical framework explaining the limitations of the 2018 student movement relies on the explanatory arguments of opportunity structures. Besides this theoretical framework, the paper addresses the presence of wider social coalitions in support of the social movement. The research design relies on a qualitative

methodology, combining process-tracing, case-study research, and text analysis. One of the expected results is that of highlighting institutional and structural factors of social movement's effects. This research aims to contribute to social movements literature and democratization.

Keywords: social movement, collective action, students, post-communist Albania, value changes

## 1. Introduction

Post-communist countries are usually depicted in the comparative politics literature as countries characterized by weak civil societies and not effective state institutions. This particular argument emphasizes low degrees of political participation of the citizens (Hoxha, 2019) either through institutional means of the existing political system or through extra-institutional means such as protests, social movements, and any other type of collective action that take place in the realm of the non-conventional political institutions. However, referring to concrete cases of extra-institutional means of political participation in the Western Balkans, one notices a stable pattern of protest movements and emergence of social movements in North Macedonia, in Serbia, in Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina in the last decade (Pollozhani and Bieber, 2025; Milan, 2017). In December 2018, students of public universities in Albania organized and established a mass student movement that emerged as a consequences of grievances of the student community, on the one hand, and discrepancies between the educational policy goals of the government and the actual implementation of the

policies, on the other hand. Initally triggered by an arbitrary increase of the tuition fees, the student movement was transformed into a social movement that aimed to achieve two main goals. On the one hand, the student movement demanded changes of the educational policy and a revamping of the policy goals of the government. Yet, on the other hand, the student movement sought to accomplish cultural and social transformation of the Albanian society. In that respect, the establishment of the student movement of December 2018 constitutes a continuation in terms of the regional pattern of student movements, which are intially committed to overhaul certain elements of the educational policies, asking for policy change, which is followed by broader demands of cultural outcomes of such a collective action.

Scholars and experts on the Western Balkan region and post-communist transformations observe that contrary to the social movements of the late 1980s or early 1990s, which focused on political regime change, the social movements of the recent decade, including the student movement of December 2018 in Albania, take place within the institutional structures of competitive authoritarian regimes (Pollozhani and Bieber, 2024), and whose demands center on political accountability, anti-corruption and more inclusive deliberative policy-making (Milan, 2017). Therefore, student movements have been pivotal in galvanizing the societal response and mobilization to the competitive authoritarian regime of Nikola Gruevski in North Macedonia, and more recently in Serbia since 2024. It should be mentioned that scholars of social movements tend to give priority to those social movements that actually succeed in achieving their collective action goals. As Koopmans argues, "most social movements are short-lived, and most movements fail to

attain their objectives" (2005, p. 19). Yet, the lack of effect of a social movement in producing radical social or cultural transformation needs to be formalized in a theoretical framework rather than recognized as one of probable outcomes of the emergence of the social movement. The December 2018 student movement in Albania constitutes a puzzle in terms of combining simultaneously demands that pertain to policy goals and demands that seek cultural transformation of the society. Such an empirical puzzle is theoretically relevant, if one focuses not just on the emergence of the movement and its varied effect on the society or political system but highlights primarily the sequence in which the policy goals are combined with transformative cultural goals of the social movement. It is also important to trace the interaction between the social movement itself and other conventional political institutions such as political parties, besides the interaction with the political elite, and the social groups that are not affiliated with the social movement, at least not from the very beginning. Apparently, based on the existing empirical evidence, the student movement in North Macedonia in 2014, demanded primarily policy changes (Milan, 2017, p. 835), and was later followed, if not replaced, by two consecutive social movements called #Protestiram (I protest) and Sharena Revolucije (Colorful Revolution) (REFERENCE) that brought about  broader political changes in the political system and cultural outcomes that affected individual citizens and the society to a large extent. Thus, the student movement of 2014 in North Macedonia had a more restrictive set of goals and was superseded by other consecutive movements that cooperated extensively with the opposition parties across ethnic communities. The social movement in Serbia that emerged after November 2024 had from the very start a political

character, demanding political accountability, and an end to the practice of state capture. Albeit dominated and established by the young generation, most of them being students from public universities, the social movement in Serbia did not seek to change the educational policies. Therefore, the case study of the December 2018 student movement in Albania, which partly resembles the other students movements in the region, represents a case of an ambitious student movement which is not merely content with policy change but simultaneously requires cultural and political transformation of the political order, to resemble a consolidated liberal democracy. In short, the research problem of the paper focuses on the theoretical goal of formulating a conceptual framework to understand the scope and the effect of the cultural outcomes of the student movement. The Albanian case study represents a critical case to scrutinize the configuration overlapping social movement goals, with the intention of uncovering the conditions that have led to the formation of such a social movement and the limitations that the social movement manifests when it comes to the cultural outcomes or effects of the social movement to the existing political system and social formation.

Studying the December 2018 student movement is significant because it avoids the reductionist and conventional or common-sense argument that associates the outcome of a social movement to idiosyncratic reasons, strictly related to power struggles, instrumentality and personalized politics. On the other hand, this paper does not subsume the Albanian student movement of December 2018 within a standard typology of student movements (Gill & DeFronzo, 2009, p. 204) that does not pay attention to the peculiarities of the case and the actual

empirical evidence. On the contrary, relying on a conceptual framework borrowed from a modified version of the political opportunity structure (POS) theory (Goldstone, 2004), and the theoretical approach that emphasizes the cultural outcomes of a social movement (Van Dyke & Taylor, 2019), this paper seeks, within certain limitations, shed light on the emergence, outcomes and legacy of the student movement.

The existing scholarship on social movements that relies on the political opportunity structure theoretical framework to analyze the emergence and the success of a social movement has a very restrictive definition of the political opportunity structure. Sindney Tarrow provides a standard definition of political opportunity structure as: "consistent but not necessarily formal or permanent dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success and failure" (1994, p. 85 quoted in Koopmans, 2005, p. 26). The key components of the classical political opportunity stucture framework include "shifting alignments, divided elites, limited repression and facilitation, international conditions and allies, ineffective and illegitimate state repression, influential [domestic] allies" (Goldstone, 2004, p. 347). Such a conceptualization of the political opportunity structures emphasize primarily the response of the state authorities and political elites to the emergence or success of a social movement. Furthermore, this framework assumes a consistent pattern of the political configuration of political order across cases of success or failure of social movements. However, as Goldstone argues: "While shifts in political opportunity structures can broadly point to whether opportunities for protest are opening up, and whether they are likely to trigger a protest cycle, they are too broad to tell us much about

the development or success of specific movements…"(2004, p. 356). Therefore, the case study of the December 2018 student movement allows a modification of the existing political opportunity structure as a conceptual framework as part of the theory-building aim of the paper. Consequently, relying on a more extensive understanding of the political opportunity structures, the theoretical framework of the paper, indicating the theoretical relevance of this study, emphasizes the role of party youth wings as important elements of the existing political system, in interaction with political parties and the student movement itself, leading to a limited effect of the December 2018 social movement in terms of its cultural outcomes. This additional, yet pivotal, institutional component of the political opportunity structure in contemporary Albania, will constitute partly the theoretical contribution of the paper.

Another relevant debate in the existing literature that impacts the success of a social movement is the dichotomy between the policy outcomes and the cultural outcomes of a social movement. According to the literature, student movements can have an impact in the society by either changing the policy status quo (Van Dyke & Taylor, 2019, p. 482), or by producing a long-term cultural change (Van Dyke & Taylor, 2019, p. 484). Definitely, either of these outcomes of a social movement can be advantageous to society. It is also likely that a social movement can attain both these goals. However, policy changes can be implemented, in a highly institutionalized democratic regime, within the existing political institutions of a country without participating in a collective action and establishing a social movement to achieve the same policy goals (Goldstone, 2004, p. 336). This paper does not consider the Albanian student movement's demands for policy changes in the higher education

field as theoretically relevant as the cultural outcomes of the social movement and the very fact that it articulates certain symbolic frames that resonate broadly in the society. As it has been mentioned earlier, similar student movements in the region, which initially articulated claims and used collective action frames to demand policy change, such as the student movement in 2014 in North Macedonia, were replaced and followed by other social movements that aimed for political and cultural transformation in the society. The paper builds on Van Dyke and Taylor's conceptualization of cultural outcomes. "Our analysis relies on a conception of culture proposed by social movement scholars that parses it into three basic categories (Johnston, 2009; Snow, Owens, and Tan, 2014): a) performances (protest events, individual behavior, organizational practices); b) ideations (values, beliefs, ideologies, frames, identities, stories); and c) artifacts or products (music, art, texts, languages, signs and symbols)" (2019, p. 484). The key components that best defines the cultural outcome of a social movement to a wider society are what Van Dyke and Taylor call ideations, which are a reflection of values, beliefs, frames and ideologies. Furthermore, according to Van Dyke and Taylor, the effect of the cultural outcomes of the movement are either directed towards the individual behavior of the participants in the social movement or directed to the wider society (2019, p. 484). This particular theoretical framework on the cultural outcomes of a social movement helps direct the empirical analysis towards the prevailing conceptual and thematic themes of the public discourse articulated by the December 2018 student movement in relation to collective identity of the participants in the social movement and to the set of ideas and frames that appeal for cultural transformation in the wider society. Therefore, the

paper will provide the causal factors that led to the emergence of such an ambitious social movement led by students and why the cultural outcome of this particular student movement had a limited effect, at least in the short-term.

The very fact that students or other social groups organize themselves into a social movement and make claims to the political authorities for policy changes indicates that the political system does not necessarily provide equal access to decision making. Henceforth, based on Pollozhani and Bieber's the theoretical framework, which formulates a sub-category of non-democratic regimes defined as high capacity competitive authoritarian regimes (2025, p. 100), this paper considers the existing political system in Albania as a high capacity competitive authoritarian regime. However, it should be mentioned that such kind of political system is not relying on coercion or repression nor is it devoid of political legitimacy. What seems to be specific to such kind of political system, according to Pollozhani and Bieber (2025) is that they "demonstrate the high level of centralisation, control, and patronage systems" (p. 100). As a consequence, the incumbent of such political regimes can "exert influence and pressure on civil society" (p. 100). In other words, the goal of the incubent and representatives of the political system is "to thwart a movement without mobilizing a counter-movement" (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1642). Thwarting a student movement and reducing its impact on the society and political system is not just a rational and justifiable goal of the representatives of the ruling elites. What matters most is the ability of the incumbent to actually reduce the effect of the social movement and the means and instruments used to contain the broader effect of the student movement. High

capacity competitive authoritarian regimes have the ability to co-opt the policy goals of the social movement or factions of the social movement, aiming to reduce the cultural impact of the social movement to the society and the political system. There is a persistent debate within the social movement scholarship whether social movements emerge and flourish most often in democratic regimes, or authoritarian settings provide a favorable political opportunity structure for the emergence and success of social movements (Goldstone, 2004, p. 348). Despite the various merits of each of these approaches, the debate seems to be inconclusive and there is no shared consensus on the interaction between the type of the political system and the frequency of the establishment of social movements. In any case, this paper considers the institutional response of a high capacity competitive authoritarian regime to a student movement as a structural factor that enables the emergence of the student movement and functions as a constraint to limit the cultural impact of the social movement in the short-term in conjuction with the pivotal role of party youth wings, which have a different conceptualization of the political compared to the one articulated by the Albanian student movement of December 2018.

The following sections of the paper delineate the methdological framework of the research, followed by the presentation of the results and the interpretation and critical discussion of the findings. The next section of the paper summarizes the overall findings of the research and underlines the broader theoretical implications of this study as well as acknowledges the limitations and prospective research projects.

## 2. Methodology

Since the research focus of the paper is to understand the degree of the cultural outcome of the student movement in Albania and scrutinize the public discourse and ideational framework of the social movement itself in interaction with other relevant actors in the public sphere, then the qualitative methodological approach is the most appropriate one to address the research question and analyze the evidence. The student movement of December 2018 in Albania represents a critical case study in order to understand the conditions that led to the transformation of protest events into a social movement that simultaneously demanded policy change and cultural change in the Albanian post-communist society. Therefore, this research relies on case-study research methods (Gerring, 2004), which allow to explain within case variation in terms of the impact of the social movement, from it emergence, to recognition, public claim-making to the political order, and its interaction with other social groups, the political elite and other relevant political organizations such as party youth wings. The focus of the research is to formulate new theoretical explanations that introduce a new causal factor or component, namely partisan participation of young generation into party youth wings, as a novel institutional feature within the classical conceptual framework political opportunity structures. The case study method allows for the in-depth understanding of the context and interactions between various societal, political and institutional actors or units in enabling or constraining the effect of the student movement.

In general, social movements become involved in meaning making practices by articulating their own ideas, symbolic frames, and collective identities through their public statements, press releases,

slogans, and public discourse. In fact, social movements attain a certain degree of resonance in the broader society by producing a certain "cultural content" (Van Dyke & Taylor, 2019, p. 488). As Van Dyke and Taylor argue: "Qualities of the cultural symbols, rhetoric, frames, and performances deployed by a movement influence whether the movement has an enduring impact (2019, p. 489). The data sources for this research include public statements of representatives and participants of the social movement, press releases, programmatic documents of the social movement as well as interviews of social activists of the social movement to the massmedia. All these data sources can be considered as 'texts' "in a variety of representations" (Preiser et. al., 2021, p. 270). The paper uses the qualitative content analysis method (Preiser et. al., 2021; Schreier et. al., 2019) to tease out from the variety of texts the symbolic frames, ideas, and values of the student movement that are associated with the cultural outcomes of hte social movement. As Preiser et. al., argue: "The general purpose of qualitative content analysis is to make the various forms of 'meaning' that emerge through different methods of analysis, more explicitly noticeable" (Preiser et. al., 2021, 272).

The procedures to analyze the data are based on the methodological practice of qualitative content analysis. The main themes that emerge from the texts are selected on the basis of the conceptual framework of the research in combination with the inductive approach that emphasizes the peculiarities of the properties of the discourse of the text. Thus, according to this methodological practices: “The process of thematic analysis aims to identify themes - also called patterns - in the dataset” (Preiser et. al., 2021, 274). More specifically, the research focuses these methodological steps described below: “ There are

fundamentally three stages in the identification of themes: (a) the researcher begins with an initial and holistic reading of a text (e.g. an interview), (b) the researcher analyzes or fragments the text by identifying meaningful subsections ('meaning' is defined in terms of prior reading, research questions, etc.) and by coding or categorising the subsections…" (Prieser et. al., YEAR, 274). The self-identification of the participants in the social movement, their individual or collective beliefs constitute one of the categories of the themes that emerge from the data, albeit theoretically-informed, based on the arguments that social movements produce two types of cultural outcomes, one internal and the other external to the wider society (Van Dyke & Taylor, 2019). The other theme that appears inductively from the texts is the theme of the univesity, namely how the student movement defines the role and function of a university as a social institutions in a democratic society. The other category of themes, which are equally important and theoretically-constructed, centers on the values and ideas of the student movement such as the values of social justice, solidarity, equality and the goal of political accountability and efficient state. These categories of values are related to the cultural impact that the social movement is seeking to exercise in the Albanian society. Finally, a relevant component of the ideational role of the social movement, which appears to be at the same time rather contentious, is the concept of the political as defined by the participants and the texts produced by the social movement.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

As it is usually the case, a particular concrete economic concern or grievance and a protest event can be radically transformed into broader demands for social and political transformation represented and articulated by a social movement. Students of the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the Polytechnic University of Tirana initiated a protest event in early December in 2018 as a response to what they perceived as an injust and non-transparent increase of the tuition tariffs. However, within a few days the protest event was transformed into a student movement. Students from public universities in Albania joined the protest events and together with other existing organizations such as Lëvizja për Universitetin (Movement for the University) established the second largest and most enduring student movement after the first student movement of December 1990 prior to regime change due to the collapse of the communist rule. At the very beginning, the demands of the student movement focused on policy changes in the higher educational policy. The most important demands that the student movement articulated in terms of policies included improvements in the infrastructural conditions and quality of higher education, repealing of the Higher Education Law, reduction of the tuition fees and a higher participation and inclusion of the students in the decision-making within universities (Dervishi, 2018). Initially, the government sought to thwart the movement and to delegitimize the grievances of the student movement. Later, the government started a process of negotiations and policy reforms that aimed at resolving most of the policy issues raised by the student movement. The Prime Minister made ministerial changes in the cabinet in response to the student movement. This led to a a set of policy changes

known as the ‘Pact for the University’, which partially addressed some of the key policy demands of the social movement.

Yet, the transformation of a massive student mobilization into a social movement that gained a certain recognition in the media and in the society, to some extent, without necessarily broadening its cross-class alliances, succeeded in transforming the set of values and individual beliefs as well as the identities of the participants in the social movement. Students as participants of the social movement experimented with a non-hierarchical and leaderless movement, albeit not following a more coherent and structured practic of deliberative democracy as in the case of the student movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia (Milan, 2017), which relied on pleniums as venues of non-hierarchical deliberations. As participants of the social movement, the students emphasized a changing role for the university seeking to make this social institution not just more relevant to the society but also more inclusive and democratic. “Albanian students are protesting not only to improve the infrastructural conditions of the student life, but also to restore foundational values of the university” ( Ruci, 2018). The idea of an inclusive, democratic, and empancipatory university is one of the central themes of the texts produced by the student movement. On the other hand, the students, due to the cultural outcomes of the social movement, successed in transforming their own political and cultural identities as hypothesized by Van Dyke and Taylor (2019). One of the students, when interviewed by the BIRN media, argues that he has participated in the social movement because: “I had a feeling that I belonged to the university. Thus, as university students, we should have our own rights and we should fight to gain those rights” ( Cherry, 2019).

Therefore, the students have internalized a set of beliefs and attitudes that were forged during the involvement in the social movement.

As mentioned throughout the paper, this social movement made public claims in favor of deeper and more stuctural political and cultural transformations to the political system and the society in Albania. A central theme of the social movement's symbolic frames and ideational discursive outputs is the theme of effective state institutions, meritocracy and political accountability. Here it is how one independent media portrays the broader cultural goals of the student movement: "Most often triggered by a minor issue or an existing law, as the protest events are transformed into social movements the latter include concepts that put into question the actual nature of the political system in their own country" ( Cherry, 2019). The cultural goals of the student movement resonated in the Albanian public sphere as indicated by the public statements and texts produced by Movement for the University, and representatives of the legacy media in Albania. In the official press release of the Movement for the University, months after the social movement reached partially its policy goals, the representatives of this organization highlighted the anti-hegemonic character of the social movement, and the political, yet not partisan, nature of the social movement that challenged the existing political system and sought to transform the university as a social institutions (Movement for the University, 2019). Yet, the peculiar feature of the political opportunity structure that was represented by partisan and anti-incumbency movements as factions of the social movement controlled by the party young wings, combined with the limited set of cross-class alliances with other representatives of the communities, or social groups in the

Albanian society led to the weakening of the cultural outcomes of the social movement in the short-term.

## 4. Conclusion

The student movement of December 2018 in Albania caught off guard the political elite, political parties, and party youth wings of the mainstream political parties. The politicaland autonommous mobilization of the citizens in post-communist Albania has been rather infrequent and mostly controlled or directed by the opposition parties, making partisan mobilizations and protest the most frequent collective action in the country. It should be noted, nonetheless, that autonomous protest movements such as the protest events of 2014 organized by the Movement for the University against the higher education reform have preceded some of the policy goals and autonomous actions of the student movement of December 2018. The student movement constituted an effective social movement that achieved most of its policy goals to reform existing policies in relation to the higher education institutions, after the government conceded to the pressure and demand of the student movement. The change in the policies could have been a sufficient and positive outcome of the student movement if the student movement had demanded only policy changes instead of demanding as well cultural and political transformation of the post-communist Albania. Therefore, the uniquess of this social movements, contrary to other student movements in the region, consists of collective action frames and symbolic and ideational frames that combine simultaneously policy goals and cultural outcomes. The institutional features of the high capacity competitive

authoritarian regime, which are not relying at all in repressive policies to contain a social movement, and the ineffective political representation of social groups by the mainstream political parties enabled the emergence of the social movement. This research has confirmed the existing theoretical framework (Pollozhani and Bieber, 2025) that explains the emergence of student movements in the Western Balkans as a challenge to the competitive authoritarian regimes. Henceforth, the dominant sub-type of political systems in the Western Balkans provide the structural conditions for the establishment of social movements which go beyond mere policy change demands through extra-institutional means.

However, this paper has formulated a different and a more context-specific theoretical explanation regarding the limits of the cultural impact of the social movement to the existing political system and the society at large. While affirming the transformation of the individual identity of the social movement participants, embracing a more radical yet progressive political identity, and a collective identity of the student community emphasizing a more democratic, inclusive, and emancipatory understanding of the role of the university, this research underlines the limits of the student movement to impact through its own ideas and values the Albanian society, at least in the short-term. The actual reasons for the limits to value change reside in the emergence of an 'anti-incumbency movement' led by representatives of the party youth wings, which aimed to channel the grievance towards the goal of ousting the government. In this respect, the the party youth wings, particularly those representing opposition parties, reflected a restrictive understanding of politics and of the political. As a consequence, the ideological, organizational, and conceptual disagreements between the anti-

incumbency movement and the social movement narrowed down the goals of the social movement into an either or stance, namely, either seeking to accomplish policy change only, or seeking to oust the government at any cost. Ultimately, the student movement's cultural outcome that demanded political accountability, effective and impartial state institutions, and a more inclusive and equal society were hindered by a pivotal element of political opportunity structure, namely the partisan party youth wings that have not been able to appeal to the wider constituency of the young generation.

One of the limitations of this research is that of not assessing the prospect of value change at the individual or societal level through other methodological tools, such as surveys that could have measured the actual transformations of individual behavior and the cultural and ideational impact of the social movement on the various social groups in the Albanian society. Instead, the methodological approach has been mostly interpretive and has focused on the public discourse of the student movement. However, the absence of other social groups supporting the student movement through their own collective actions and the inability of the social movement to forge alliances with factions of the political elite, or other social classes is understood as an indication of the limitation of the cultural outcomes of the social movement to the wider society.

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# Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education: Rethinking Students' Knowledge, Lifelong Learning, and Cognitive Competency

Dr. Stela Dhima
*Steinbeis University – Schools of Next Practices, Berlin, Germany*
*New York University of Tirana, Tirana, Albania*
s.dhima@steinbeis-next.de
ORCID ID 0009-0003-4989-2791

Prof. Assoc. Dr. Migena Buka
*University of Tirana, Tirana, Albania*
migena.buka@unitir.edu.al
ORCID ID 0000-0001-9388-2513

## Abstract

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) tools is transforming learning and knowledge practices in higher education. This study examines the impact of AI on learning, with a particular focus on students' cognitive competency and lifelong learning patterns. It addresses concerns that widespread AI adoption may encourage passive learning rather than reflective engagement, thereby reshaping processes of knowledge construction and internalization. The research investigates students' AI usage, behavioral tendencies, and learning patterns through a mixed-methods approach, including desk review, analysis of students' self-reported AI tool usage in master's theses, and observations from in-class group tasks and presentations. Findings indicate that although AI is widely adopted, there is a notable misalignment between its potential and

actual application. Students primarily use AI for text generation or enhancement, rather than for co-creation or critical idea development. Consequently, passive AI use diminishes critical engagement, whereas structured, co-creative practices may foster knowledge autonomy, critical thinking, and enduring skills. This study introduces a novel pedagogical framework for understanding student AI use and highlights the necessity for guided support to optimize AI tools in enhancing learning and work quality.
*Keywords: Artificial Intelligence in Education; Knowledge; Student Cognitive Competency; Digital Literacy; Co-Creation; Higher Education*

## Introduction

### Background and context

Generative Artificial Intelligence, commonly referred to as AI, has transitioned from being a luxury or novelty to becoming essential infrastructure across industries and disciplines. In higher education, students employ tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, Grammarly, and discipline-specific assistants for tasks including brainstorming, summarizing, translating, drafting, and editing. This widespread adoption has prompted institutions to adapt their monitoring and assessment practices. While initial institutional responses focused primarily on preventing plagiarism, more recent approaches acknowledge the pervasive presence of AI in academic practice and emphasize the need to address it directly. Many universities now promote the productive use of AI in the classroom. However, current policies often place significant responsibility on individual instructors to redesign teaching and assessment strategies (McDonald, Johri, Ali, & Hingle Collier, 2025). The widespread and varied use of AI by students has intensified the urgency of pedagogical considerations. Recent surveys indicate that AI adoption is both extensive and frequent, with usage surging in 2025: 92% of undergraduate students (Freeman, 2025) and three-quarters of students over 16 years old (OECD, 2025) reported using generative AI tools. This trend is accompanied by concerns regarding inconsistent formal training and ongoing uncertainty about ethical, critical, and effective AI use, as highlighted in the OECD's most recent report (2026), even at pre-university levels. Although the field is rapidly expanding, the educational benefits of AI are contingent upon effective scaffolding, thoughtful task design, and students' capacity to critically evaluate outputs rather than

simply generate them (Liu & Zhong, 2025; Li, Tan, Wang, & Lowell, 2025).

This issue is particularly acute in the social sciences, where learning relies on dialogue, interpretation, argumentation, and perspective-taking. In these disciplines, the educational risks associated with AI extend beyond factual inaccuracies or academic misconduct to include the homogenization of academic work: similar structures, arguments, references, and conclusions that satisfy formal requirements but bypass the cognitive processes of judgment. Conversely, AI can also support students who encounter linguistic, confidence-related, or procedural challenges. For multilingual students, first-generation students, or those reluctant to participate in discussions, AI may enhance access and facilitate academic discourse, provided it is used thoughtfully and transparently (Pretorius, et al., 2025).

Regardless of whether students employ AI for language enhancement, often regarded as 'ethical use,' or for idea generation, sometimes viewed as 'unethical use,' the central question is how to define productive AI use. Productive use should not be measured by improved grades, faster completion, or more polished work, but by the extent to which it fosters students' capacity to think independently, exercise judgment, create, participate, and act with confidence. Only under these conditions can university policies prioritize equity and well-being within digital pedagogies and promote transformative, capability-focused learning.

Faculty members are adopting diverse strategies to detect academic dishonesty and discourage reliance on AI-generated texts. Simultaneously, some instructors are guiding students in effective

prompting and brainstorming with AI tools to enhance learning and information retention.

## Research problem and objectives

This research paper deals with the problem of AI use in the scholarly context. More specifically, it examines the tension between AI as a supportive learning tool and AI as a substitute for students' own cognitive engagement. While AI tools can assist students in brainstorming, structuring, editing, translating, and improving academic work, they may also encourage passive learning when students rely on generated outputs without questioning, revising, or critically evaluating them. In this sense, the problem is not the use of AI itself, but the way in which it is used and integrated into academic learning practices.

The central concern of this study is that students may increasingly use AI to produce polished academic outputs without developing the underlying skills that higher education is expected to foster, such as critical thinking, independent judgment, argumentation, reflective learning, and knowledge construction. This creates a pedagogical challenge for universities: how can AI be used productively without weakening students' cognitive competency and long-term learning capacity?

The objective of this study is therefore to explore how students use AI tools in higher education and to identify whether these practices support or limit meaningful learning. The study aims to analyze students' reported use of AI in master's thesis writing, examine patterns observed in final essay assessments, and reflect on in-class group work where AI was used as a support tool. Based on these findings, the paper seeks to distinguish between passive, output-oriented AI use and active, co-creative AI use. A further objective is to contribute to the development of

pedagogical recommendations that guide students toward more reflective, autonomous, and critically engaged use of AI.

## Significance of the study

The study comes at a time when AI has turned into the main go-to tool for students not only to support their studies but also for general-purpose use. Students use it as a search engine, to consult daily issues, and certainly as a research assistant, tutor, and learning partner. The latter is the scope of this study's research and what makes it significant for the academic field.

This study is significant because it addresses one of the most urgent questions currently facing higher education: how AI changes the way students learn, think, and produce academic work. Much of the discussion around AI in universities has focused on plagiarism, detection, and academic misconduct. However, this study shifts the focus from whether students use AI to how they use it and what this means for learning quality. This distinction is important because AI use does not automatically lead to either improvement or decline in education. Its impact depends on whether students engage with it critically, dialogically, and reflectively, or whether they simply delegate cognitive effort to the tool.

The study is also significant because it draws attention to the risk of hidden learning loss. AI-generated or AI-supported work may appear coherent, well-structured, and academically appropriate, but this does not necessarily mean that students have developed the reasoning, judgment, or conceptual understanding behind the final product. In this way, the study contributes to the academic debate by showing that the central

challenge is not only academic integrity but also cognitive competency, intellectual authorship, and lifelong learning.

Furthermore, this research is relevant for teaching practice. Examining students' actual reported use of AI, essay patterns, and in-class group work provides practical insight into how AI is currently being used in learning situations. These insights can support lecturers, supervisors, and institutions in designing better guidelines, assessment formats, and classroom activities. Instead of treating AI only as a threat, the study argues for a more pedagogically productive approach in which AI is used as a co-pilot: a tool that supports exploration, reflection, iteration, and critical engagement while keeping students responsible for their own thinking and learning.

## Literature Review: AI as crutch and AI as co-pilot

The distinction between AI as a crutch and AI as a co-pilot encapsulates both the advantages and disadvantages of AI use in education. AI functions as a crutch when it supplants human judgment, reduces inquiry to mere answer retrieval, and restricts opportunities for independent reasoning. In contrast, AI operates as a co-pilot when it extends inquiry, supports iterative processes, and fosters inclusive participation, while still requiring human selection, critique, and responsibility. This conceptual distinction underpins the present research.

Recent empirical and review literature shows a clear shift in higher education from asking whether students use AI to asking how their use should be shaped. A systematic review from a TPACK perspective concludes that pedagogical scaffolding is fundamental and that the effects of AI integration vary by task design, learning goals, and the ways in which instructors mediate student interaction with these tools (Liu &

Zhong, 2025). Similarly, McDonald et al. (2025) show that institutional guidance has moved toward productive use, but that classroom integration often remains uneven and burdensome for instructors.

The existing literature also points to a distinction between technical AI literacy and educationally meaningful AI use. Park and Choo (2025) emphasise that effective AI use requires more than access to generative tools; it involves structured prompt engineering, output evaluation, iterative refinement, and accountable use. This suggests that simple access to AI does not ensure reflective or effective engagement. In higher education, Suh (2025) found that structured, hands-on AI literacy education can positively shift students' attitudes toward AI and may support equitable learning outcomes across gender and major when the pedagogy is explicit rather than left to informal experimentation.

Recent research further indicates that AI's effects on learning are deeply connected to question design, critical dialogue, and human supervision. Zhao et al., (2025) recently analyzed that critical-thinking interventions reduced students' direct adoption of AI-produced content and led to more creative, original group solutions. This finding is especially relevant to social science teaching because it suggests that the issue is not AI exposure alone, but the quality of the reflective structures surrounding it.

Research on language learning and academic communication likewise offers important insight for balancing students' capacities. Li, Tan, Wang, & Lowell (2025) show that writing and feedback dominate the empirical literature on AI use in education, while critical and psychological dimensions remain less evenly developed. Pretorius, et al., (2025) argue that AI can assist multilingual doctoral students by reducing language

challenges and shifting attention toward intellectual contribution rather than technical correction.

Finally, the literature on well-being continues to be emergent but increasingly relevant. Klimova and Pikhart (2025) review evidence showing that AI can support personalized learning, inclusive design, and flexible academic support, while also generating technostress, digital fatigue, and dependency. The OECD report (2026) similarly warns that unguided use may create a false sense of mastery by improving output quality without corresponding learning benefits. Taken all together, these studies support a central claim of this paper, that AI is pedagogically beneficial only when its use is monitored and intentionally aligned with autonomy, interpretation, and inclusion.

## Methodology

This study explores how students use AI tools in higher education and how these practices may influence learning, with particular attention to cognitive competency, reflective engagement, and lifelong learning patterns. The methodological focus is not only on whether students use AI, but on the forms of use that emerge in academic tasks and the extent to which these forms support or limit meaningful knowledge construction.

The study is guided by the concern that widespread AI use may encourage passive, output-oriented learning when students rely on generated responses without sufficient interpretation, evaluation, or intellectual ownership. At the same time, AI may also support learning when it is used as a tool for brainstorming, reflection, revision, and co-creation. The methodology was therefore designed to capture both

reported and observed patterns of AI use across different academic contexts.

To address this aim, the study combines desk-based document analysis of students' AI-use declarations in master's thesis submissions with qualitative observations from in-class group tasks and final essay assessments. This triangulated approach allows the study to examine AI use from multiple angles: what students report using AI for, how AI-supported work appears in written academic outputs, and how students engage with AI during collaborative learning activities.

## Research design and approach

The research methodology is a triangulation of desk review and analysis of data from students' reports of AI tools used for their master's theses, combined with in-class observations of group work and presentations, as well as observations on essay structures of final examination essays. The data are collected at different times, as the research methodology has developed.

Initially, a quantitative desk review was conducted of 45 master's theses submitted in 2025. Students are required by the university guidelines to self-report on the use of AI tools for writing their master's thesis. This method relies on self-reporting, and it bears the limitations that come with self-declaration.

Following the desk review, observations on two in-class tasks: one where students were asked to use AI, and the other where they were not asked to do so, are analyzed to evaluate the outcomes of the group tasks in class. Other assessments are collected by analyzing 100 final essay exams from two social science courses.

All in-class observations and essay assessments are presented as formal, generalizable evidence that are analytically useful in the pedagogical scenes. Results are extrapolated as the sum of all cases and analyzed in three main sub-categories: a) quantitative results of AI use reports, b) qualitative results of essay assessments, and c) qualitative results of in-class group work observation.

### Participants or data sources

Participants in this research are the students of the master's program, MA in Business and Organizational Psychology. At various stages of the research, the 2023-2025 and 2024-2026 cohorts are included. The former cohort is included in the quantitative component, after submitting their master's thesis, while the latter is included in the in-class observations and exam assessments. In total, the submitted works of about 110 students are included in the data collection and processing for this research.

The in-class observation of group work was conducted during the organizational behavior seminar, where students were working in groups using AI as a supporting tool for their presentation preparation. In this exercise, 20 graduate-level students participated and were divided into five working groups.

### Data collection methods and analytical procedures

Data is collected post-submission of the students. Only their reports, with no identifying information, are included in the data collection.

The data collected consists of desk-based document analysis of secondary/self-reported student materials, specifically their master's thesis reports and final exam essays. The analytical procedure followed

for the extrapolation of the data is a document-based quantitative and qualitative analysis.

## Ethical considerations

Several ethical considerations were addressed in the use of student-submitted documents as research data. First, the students' anonymity was rigorously maintained. To protect confidentiality, all identifying information was removed before the data extraction and analysis. Students' names, matriculation numbers, company names, institutional details, and any other potentially identifiable information were excluded from the dataset. Because of the nature of the research and the post-submission data collection, students' evaluations were not impacted by this research. The data were collected only after all academic procedures for thesis and exam evaluations had been completed to avoid any conflicts or grade-related issues.

## Finding and discussions

This section presents and discusses the main findings of the study, organized according to the three data sources described in the methodology. First, it examines the quantitative results from students' self-reported AI use in master's thesis submissions. Second, it analyses qualitative patterns identified in final essay assessments, particularly the emergence of structural similarity, reduced interpretative judgment, and limited intellectual authorship. Third, it discusses observations from in-class group work, where students' interaction with AI revealed both the efficiency and the limitations of relying on generative tools during collaborative academic tasks. Together, these findings illustrate the central tension of AI use in higher education: while AI can support

academic production, its pedagogical value depends on whether students use it as a co-creative learning tool or as a shortcut for task completion.

## Quantitative results of AI use reports

As described in the methodology section, the results of this research were collected through a quantitative, desk-based document analysis. Given the current situation regarding the use of AI in students' work, the university has designed a policy that embraces its use for academic tasks. However, for transparency and ethical implications, students are required within the master's thesis writing guidelines to report their AI use in a format that includes a) the tool used, b) the purpose of use and c) the actual prompt.

Of the 45 students submitting their theses in the summer of 2025, 36% have not reported using any AI tools in writing their theses.

In the figure below, the AI tools used are summarized. A greater number of students have reported using ChatGPT and Grammarly, at 82% and 77%, respectively. While Grammarly serves a narrow purpose of writing, ChatGPT can be used for everything from refining language to drafting entire sections, brainstorming ideas, or generating recommendations and conclusions

All students have combined ChatGPT and Grammarly tools with at least one additional tool, as 100% of students mention at least one AI tool in their self-reports.

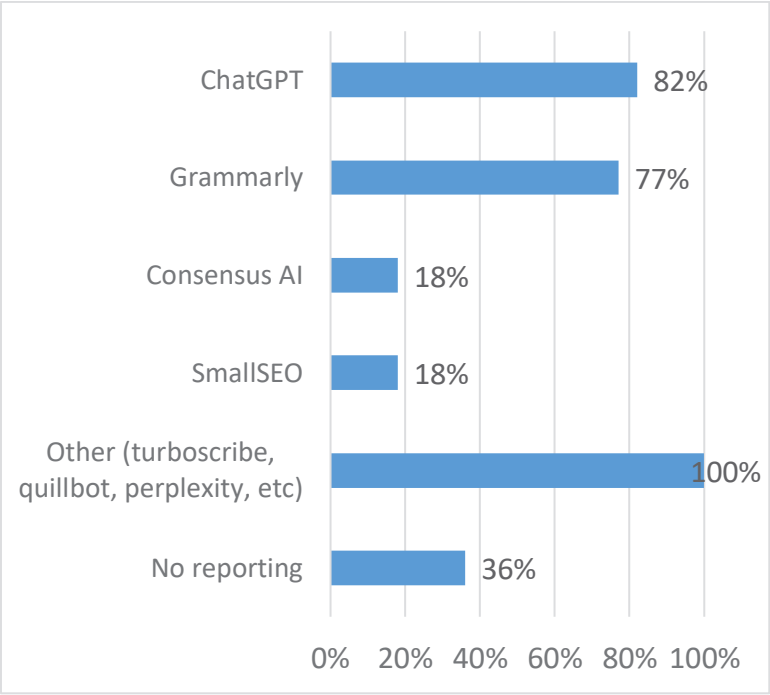


*Figure 2: AI tools used as reported in master's thesis submissions*

The reported prompts included "provide recommendations, conclusions, academic text, etc". Fewer prompts reported brainstorming on the methodology, the research question, or the topic itself. This could have also been due to the fact that when these works started, or the ideation of the research itself was completed, the students didn't yet have full access to or knowledge of AI tools. It should be noted that the 2023-2025 cohort began ideating the research as early as 2023, when AI tools were not yet widely known or mastered by the general public.

However, the use of these tools is primarily limited to grammar and rephrasing. Half of the students are using both ChatGPT and Grammarly as a language enhancement tool. It should be noted that in Summer 2025, AI detector tools in the higher education system were neither widely used nor trusted. Thus, an AI detector check was not done for these

documents. The back-office check on the submissions was limited to a plagiarism check via the Turnitin platform.

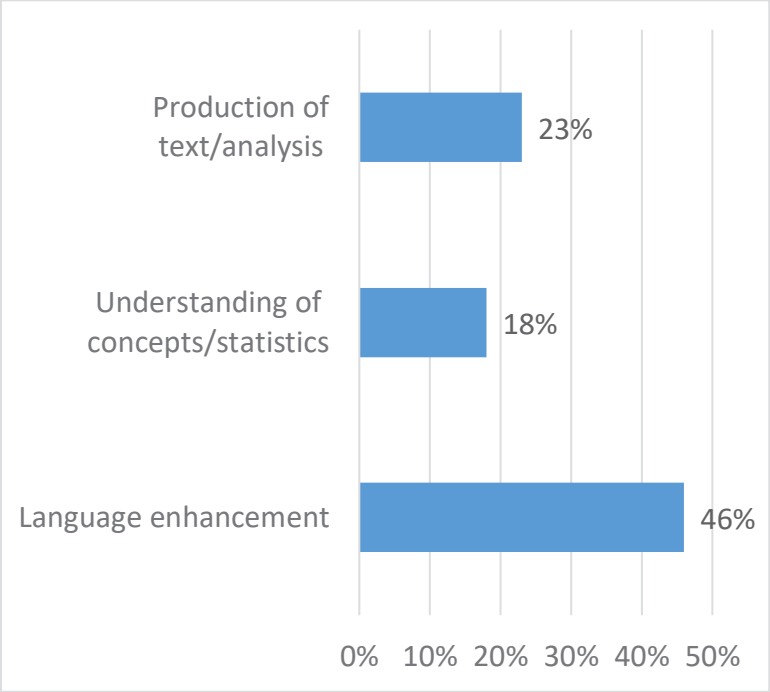


*Figure 3: Purpose of use of AI tools in the master's thesis submissions*

Based on the students' reported purposes of use, AI is limited to text production or enhancement (respectively 23% and 46%). This is perceived as limited use because AI can indeed have a much greater capacity.

A question that may follow these results is: why does it matter to know what AI was used for? Why would it matter that AI was used properly, transparently, and ethically?

This distinction matters because the educational value of AI depends almost entirely on how students choose to engage with it. Used well, AI can support learning in at least three ways: as a tool for exploration, as a prompt for reflection, and as an engine for iteration. When students

approach it as a thinking partner rather than an answer machine, AI can help them generate multiple perspectives on a problem, surface unexpected connections between ideas, and break through the kind of conceptual stagnation that often blocks early drafting. It can prompt reflection by inviting students to compare alternatives, interrogate their own assumptions, just as a coach or supervisor would, and to articulate why one line of reasoning carries more weight than another. Furthermore, it enables a faster, more experimental relationship with ideas, allowing students to draft, test, and revise without the friction that makes revision feel like failure. However, the risk lies on the other side of this use. When students use AI passively, simply accepting its outputs without interrogation, assembling its suggestions without judgment, the same tool that could deepen learning instead short-circuits it. Surface-level engagement produces surface-level understanding, and if that pattern becomes habitual, students may gradually lose the capacity for the sustained, difficult thinking that higher education is supposed to foster. When the academic focus is on task production, this behavioral pattern may be even more supported, since the students would be able to deliver high-quality tasks produced with less time and effort. The difference in this discourse, then, is not between using AI and not using it, but in differentiating between dialogue and delegation. Students who treat AI as a collaborator, who push back, question, and build on what it offers, are doing something educationally meaningful. Those who treat it as a shortcut are not learning with AI; they are missing the opportunity to learn through it.

The passive or limited use of AI tools, in turn, does not constitute misuse but rather a missed pedagogical opportunity, from which both students and instructors could benefit greatly.

## Qualitative results of essay assessments

Diving deeper into the purpose of AI use and the results it generates when not used as a challenging experimental tool, the qualitative document-based analysis of the final exam essays illustrates another very important issue: essay uniformity and the lack of interpretative judgment. Across 100 written assignments in two courses in the MA Business and Organizational Psychology program, a consistent pattern emerged amongst students' essays. The essays were remarkably similar in structure, ideas, presentation, and even sources cited. This observation is both formally impressive and educationally concerning. Visible details were noted in students' essays: comparable openings, repeated theoretical frameworks, overlapping reference selections, and near-identical conclusions. Considering conventional grading criteria, many of these answers performed brilliantly. The terminology was accurate, the arguments were internally coherent, and the writing met the expectations encoded in the rubrics. Yet a systematic review of the submissions revealed limited evidence of theoretical and empirical research choice, interpretive stance, or critical disagreement. What was absent, in other words, was not the argumentative competence in the formal sense but something closer to intellectual authorship.

This uncovered pattern is significant because it points to a much deeper effect than the surface-level language adoption. Under a more critical lens, AI appears to shape not only how students phrase ideas but the underlying architecture, composition and structure of their academic

argument. It impacts the sequence in which claims are introduced, the way literature is surveyed, and the form that conclusions take. Zooming in on the essays, it is observed that literature reviews became descriptive rather than evaluative; theoretical frameworks were inserted rather than selected; conclusions were simply formulated as generic statements rather than reasoned and derived from the actual arguments. With very few exceptions, all submitted essays presented a form of writing that resembled independent academic work yet systematically bypassed the judgments that make such work educationally meaningful. The students' individuality, even the unique flaws each student would have presented, were all dissolved into very similar content.

### Qualitative results of in-class group work observation

As a third methodological tool for the results of this research, an in-class observation of students' group work task was conducted. In an organizational psychology seminar, students were asked to design a product, service, or organizational solution that could improve staff motivation and well-being. The class was divided into five groups. Each group of four students worked independently and, if they chose to, they were encouraged to use AI as a support tool for idea refinement, concept visualization, and presentation design.

When the groups presented their work, however, a striking pattern was observed: all five groups produced highly similar products with only minor variations. Discussion after the presentations showed that all groups had followed the same working procedure. They had copied the task into ChatGPT, selected one of the first suggestions, and treated that response as the core solution, making only minor changes. It appears that the timing when AI was used was not the right one. Students started by

simply pasting the exercise prompt into ChatGPT, allowing it to initiate the ideas. Instead, they should have done the opposite. They should have asked themselves: “What would I want for my motivation and well-being?” Then, they could have brainstormed some of their ideas and discussed with AI which ones would be more feasible. Just like mock market research.

In this situation, rather than using AI to expand the range of possibilities, the students faced the collapse of the designed task into a single machine-generated option.

Recent empirical work helps explain this dynamic; critical-thinking prompts and structured dialogue reduce the direct adoption of AI-generated content and increase originality. If this task were to be redesigned, students would be asked to brainstorm as a group on possible products, services, etc., then discuss their feasibility and satisfaction using AI, bringing data and arguments to the final choice. Alternatively, they would be asked to generate three contrasting AI-supported options, explain why two were rejected, identify which assumptions in the AI responses reflect bias or generic thinking, and justify their final concept in relation to staff well-being, feasibility, and user diversity. Only under such conditions does AI become a co-pilot rather than a substitute designer to whom the students delegate both thinking and implementation.

## Discussions

The findings of this study reveal a clear tension between access to AI tools and their meaningful educational use. AI is not merely used outside the learning process; it is increasingly integrated into writing, assessment, group work, and the production of academic output. Nevertheless,

evidence from thesis reports, essays, and classroom observations indicates that this integration is predominantly instrumental. AI is primarily employed to enhance text, expedite production, or generate ready-made solutions, while its potential for conceptual exploration, critical inquiry, and reflective iteration remains underutilized.

Analysis of the three data sources reveals a consistent pedagogical pattern. In thesis reports, students primarily characterize AI as a tool for grammar, language enhancement, and text production. Essay assessments highlight a shift from individual AI use to the outcome: work that is formally acceptable yet highly similar, with limited evidence of independent theoretical judgment. In group work, students delegated initial ideation to AI, resulting in reduced diversity of solutions.

Collectively, these findings indicate that passive AI use does not necessarily yield poor academic work, but may instead produce polished outputs that mask limited cognitive engagement. This issue is significant for higher education, as traditional assessment criteria may no longer adequately determine whether genuine learning has occurred. Coherent structure, appropriate terminology, and fluent academic language can be produced or enhanced with AI assistance. Consequently, instructors must evaluate not only the final product but also the underlying reasoning process. In AI-supported learning environments, assessments should reveal how students selected ideas, rejected alternatives, evaluated sources, revised arguments, and justified their final decisions.

The findings further indicate that AI use should not be viewed solely through the lens of academic integrity. A defensive or policing-oriented approach risks neglecting valuable pedagogical opportunities. The central issue is not whether students use AI, but whether their use enhances or

diminishes autonomy, interpretation, and intellectual responsibility. When AI is used as a crutch, students delegate cognitive tasks such as framing, selection, and judgment. When used as a co-pilot, students retain responsibility for formulating questions, comparing alternatives, identifying weaknesses, and developing independent positions.

For teaching practice, these findings imply that AI literacy should be integrated into discipline-specific learning tasks. Students require structured prompts, staged assignments, reflective logs, comparison exercises, and explicit documentation of AI use. Such scaffolding can facilitate a transition from mere output generation to co-creation, in which AI supports, but does not supplant, the human learning process. Accordingly, the study advocates a shift from AI detection to AI pedagogy, emphasizing the design of learning environments that promote meaningful AI use.

## Conclusions

This section concludes the study by bringing together the main insights from the quantitative desk review, qualitative essay assessment, and in-class group work observation. The findings suggest that the central issue in higher education is not simply whether students use AI, but how they use it and what kind of learning behavior this use encourages. Across the analyzed materials, AI appears to support academic production, language improvement, and task completion, but it also raises concerns about passive learning, reduced interpretative judgment, and weakened intellectual authorship. The conclusion, therefore, reflects on the pedagogical implications of these findings, highlighting the need to move from uncontrolled or output-oriented AI use toward structured, reflective,

and co-creative practices that strengthen students' cognitive competency and lifelong learning skills.

## Summary of main findings

The study found that AI tools are widely present in students' academic work, but their use is often limited to surface-level support. In the analysis of master's thesis reports, students most frequently reported using ChatGPT and Grammarly, mainly for language enhancement, rephrasing, and text production. Fewer reports indicated the use of AI for brainstorming, methodological reflection, conceptual development, or critical dialogue.

The qualitative analysis of final exam essays showed a pattern of structural and conceptual uniformity. Many essays were formally coherent and well written, yet they displayed similar openings, theoretical frameworks, citation patterns, and conclusions. This suggests that AI-supported writing can meet formal academic expectations while reducing visible evidence of intellectual authorship, interpretive judgment, and individual argumentation.

The in-class group observation further showed that when students used AI at the beginning of the task, they tended to adopt the first machine-generated ideas available. As a result, the groups produced highly similar solutions. This finding illustrates how AI can narrow, rather than expand, creativity when it is used before students have engaged in their own problem framing and brainstorming.

## Contributions to knowledge or practice

This study contributes to the discussion on AI in higher education by shifting attention from access and detection toward pedagogy and cognitive engagement. It shows that the educational value of AI cannot

be assessed only by whether students use it ethically or transparently. The more important question is whether AI use supports autonomy, critical thinking, reflective judgment, and meaningful knowledge construction. The study also contributes a practical distinction between AI as a crutch and AI as a co-pilot. This distinction can help instructors, supervisors, and institutions design clearer expectations for student use of AI. AI as a crutch describes use that replaces student thinking, while AI as a co-pilot describes use that expands thinking through questioning, iteration, critique, and comparison. This framework can be used in course design, assessment rubrics, thesis supervision, and AI-use declarations.

For teaching practice, the findings suggest the need for structured AI-supported learning tasks. Instead of only asking students to declare which tools they used, instructors can require students to explain how they used AI, what alternatives they considered, what they rejected, and how their final decisions were justified. Such practices make the learning process more visible and reduce the risk that AI-supported work becomes a polished substitute for cognitive engagement.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, part of the data is based on students' self-reported AI use in master's thesis submissions. Self-reporting may underrepresent or oversimplify actual AI use, especially when students are uncertain about what to disclose or when they use AI tools informally during the earlier stages of thinking and drafting. Second, the study is based on a single academic program and cohorts from a specific institutional context. The findings are therefore analytically useful for understanding patterns of AI use in social science-

oriented higher education, but they should not be interpreted as statistically generalizable to all students, disciplines, or universities. Third, the classroom observations and essay assessments were used as pedagogical evidence rather than as controlled experimental data. They provide insight into learning patterns, task outcomes, and assessment challenges, but they do not allow causal conclusions about AI use. Other factors, such as course design, assessment expectations, student motivation, language proficiency, and time pressure, may also have influenced the observed outcomes.

### Recommendations for future research or applications

Future research should examine AI use through more systematic and comparative designs. Studies could compare groups that receive structured AI-use guidance with groups that use AI without explicit scaffolding. Such designs would help clarify whether staged prompting, reflective documentation, and critical-thinking interventions improve originality, conceptual understanding, and long-term learning outcomes. Future studies should also investigate students' actual interaction with AI tools during the learning process, not only their final products or retrospective declarations. Prompt logs, reflective journals, process portfolios, interviews, and classroom-based observation could provide a more accurate understanding of how students move from task instructions to AI interaction, revision, and final submission.

For practical application, universities should move beyond general AI policies and develop discipline-specific AI pedagogy. Instructors should be supported in redesigning assessments so that students are required to demonstrate reasoning, comparison, critique, and decision-making. AI-use declarations should include not only the tool and prompt, but also the

student's explanation of how AI contributed to the development of the work and where human judgment was applied.

Finally, students should be trained to use AI after, not before, initial human engagement with a task. A useful pedagogical sequence would be: first, individual or group brainstorming; second, AI-supported expansion and comparison; third, critical evaluation of AI suggestions; and fourth, independent justification of the final choice. This sequence can help students develop AI-supported cognitive competence while maintaining responsibility for their own learning.

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# Fostering Resilience and Inclusion: Holistic Support for Adults with Disabilities Without Parental Care

**Suela Ndoja**[1]

[1]Clinical Psychologist / Psychotherapist EMDR (Level 2)

Email: sundoprospe@gmail.com

**Abstract**

Adults with disabilities who lack parental care are at increased risk of social exclusion, reduced autonomy, and poor psychosocial outcomes. This mixed-methods study examined the impact of holistic family-style residential care on resilience, emotional well-being, social participation, and functional independence among 35 adults with disabilities residing in community-based residential settings. Guided by the biopsychosocial model and the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and integrated during analysis. Paired-samples *t*-tests demonstrated statistically significant improvements across all outcome domains following participation in the residential care program (all $p < .001$), with large effect sizes (Cohen's $d = 0.80–1.05$). Qualitative findings identified emotional safety, stable caregiving relationships, autonomy development, and social belonging as key mechanisms underlying these improvements. The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that family-style residential care functions as a supportive relational environment that promotes resilience, functional independence, and community inclusion. These findings support the implementation of person-centered, community-based residential services for adults with disabilities who lack parental care and highlight the importance of integrating psychosocial support within long-term disability care.

**Keywords:** adults with disabilities; family-style residential care; resilience; social inclusion; biopsychosocial model; International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)

## 1. Introduction

Adults with disabilities who lack parental care represent one of the most socially and psychologically vulnerable populations within contemporary health and social care systems. Beyond the challenges associated with disability, these individuals frequently experience disrupted attachment relationships, prolonged institutionalization, limited opportunities for independent living, and restricted participation in community life. The combined effects of these experiences can negatively influence emotional well-being, functional independence, identity development, and overall quality of life (Bowlby, 1988; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). These psychosocial and emotional difficulties may also be understood within broader diagnostic and clinical frameworks of mental health and functioning as outlined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

International disability policy has increasingly shifted from institutional care toward community-based, person-centered services that emphasize autonomy, social inclusion, and participation. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and the World Health Organization advocate for support models that enable individuals to live within their communities while exercising choice and control over their daily lives (WHO, 2022). Nevertheless, adults with disabilities who lack parental care continue to face substantial barriers to inclusion, and many remain dependent on institutional or semi-

institutional services that prioritize routine care rather than individualized psychosocial support.

Family-style residential care has emerged as a promising alternative to traditional institutional models. Typically organized in small community-based living environments, these services emphasize stable caregiving relationships, structured daily routines, individualized support, and opportunities for community participation. Previous research has shown that supported residential environments can improve autonomy, quality of life, and psychosocial functioning when they are based on person-centered principles and sustained relational support (McPherson et al., 2018; Sjöberg et al., 2025). The shift from institutional approaches toward community-based and person-centered systems has been driven by growing recognition that participation, autonomy, and quality of life are best promoted within supportive social environments rather than custodial settings (Drake et al., 2003). However, empirical evidence specifically examining adults with disabilities who have experienced long-term absence of parental care remains limited.

The present study is informed by the biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1977), which conceptualizes functioning as the dynamic interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors, and by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) (WHO, 2001), which emphasizes the influence of environmental and contextual factors on participation and functioning. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive perspective for understanding how supportive residential environments may facilitate resilience, emotional well-being, social participation, and functional independence among adults with disabilities.

Although community-based disability services have expanded internationally, relatively little research has investigated the mechanisms through which family-style residential care promotes psychosocial adaptation in adults without parental support. Existing studies have largely focused on functional outcomes or broader disability populations, while giving less attention to the relational and developmental processes that contribute to resilience and social inclusion. Consequently, there remains a need for research that integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence to better understand how residential care environments influence both functional and psychosocial outcomes.

To address this gap, the present study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to examine the impact of holistic family-style residential care on adults with disabilities without parental care. Specifically, the study explored changes in life satisfaction, emotional well-being, social engagement, and functional independence while also investigating participants' lived experiences of autonomy, belonging, and personal development. By integrating quantitative and qualitative findings within a biopsychosocial and ICF-informed framework, this study contributes to the growing evidence supporting person-centered, community-based residential care and offers practical implications for disability services, clinical practice, and social policy.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Contemporary disability research has increasingly moved beyond biomedical explanations toward multidimensional perspectives that recognize disability as the product of interactions between individual characteristics and environmental conditions. Rather than viewing

disability solely as a consequence of physical or cognitive impairment, current theoretical models emphasize the influence of psychological, social, and contextual factors on functioning, participation, and quality of life (Engel, 1977; World Health Organization [WHO], 2001, 2022). These perspectives are particularly relevant for adults with disabilities who lack parental care, as their experiences are often shaped not only by disability itself but also by disrupted attachment relationships, prolonged institutionalization, and limited opportunities for community participation.

The biopsychosocial model proposed by Engel (1977) provides the principal theoretical foundation for this study. The model conceptualizes health and functioning as dynamic outcomes of interactions among biological, psychological, and social systems. Within disability care, biological factors such as congenital or acquired impairments interact with psychological processes—including emotional regulation, self-efficacy, coping, and identity development—and with social influences such as caregiving relationships, community participation, social attitudes, and service organization. Consequently, disability outcomes cannot be adequately understood through medical diagnosis alone but must be interpreted within the broader context of individual life experiences and environmental supports.

This perspective is complemented by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) developed by the World Health Organization (2001). The ICF shifts attention from pathology to functioning by emphasizing the interaction between health conditions and contextual factors. It distinguishes among body functions and structures, activities, participation, and environmental factors, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding how disability is experienced

in everyday life.(Üstün et al., 2003) Environmental conditions—including accessibility, social support, caregiving continuity, and opportunities for participation—may function either as barriers or facilitators of independence and inclusion. Yeung et al. (2026) argue that ICF-based interdisciplinary case management enhances the assessment of disability-related needs while facilitating coordinated intervention planning across multiple domains of functioning. In the present study, the ICF framework guides the interpretation of changes in functional independence, social engagement, and participation within family-style residential care.

Ecological theories of development further reinforce the importance of environmental influences. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that human development occurs through continuous interaction between individuals and multiple environmental systems, ranging from immediate interpersonal relationships to broader social and policy contexts. For adults with disabilities who have experienced parental loss or long-term institutional care, the quality of everyday environments becomes particularly important because supportive relationships and stable living conditions may compensate for earlier experiences of deprivation and social exclusion.

Attachment theory provides an additional developmental perspective. Bowlby (1988) proposed that secure and consistent caregiving relationships are fundamental for emotional regulation, identity formation, and healthy interpersonal functioning. Individuals who have experienced disrupted attachment or prolonged institutionalization may face increased risks of emotional insecurity, dependency, and reduced self-confidence. Within family-style residential care, stable relationships with caregivers

and peers may promote emotional security, foster trust, and support the development of autonomy and resilience.

Within this context, family-style residential care has emerged as an alternative to traditional institutional models. Unlike large residential institutions, family-style homes are characterized by small living groups, continuity of caregiving relationships, individualized support, and active participation in community life. These environments aim to create stable, predictable, and socially supportive settings that encourage independence while maintaining appropriate levels of assistance. Evidence suggests that supported accommodation can improve autonomy, quality of life, and psychosocial functioning when services are genuinely person-centered and integrated within community settings (McPherson et al., 2018; Sjöberg et al., 2025).

Holistic care models further extend these principles by integrating psychosocial support, rehabilitation, health care, life-skills training, and opportunities for community participation. Rather than focusing exclusively on impairment, holistic approaches recognize that emotional well-being, social connectedness, and environmental support are essential determinants of long-term functioning. Rehabilitation is therefore understood as a multidimensional process that promotes participation, autonomy, and quality of life through coordinated interventions across biological, psychological, and social domains (De Groote, 2019; WHO, 2017).

An important outcome associated with holistic care is resilience. Contemporary research conceptualizes resilience not as a fixed personal characteristic but as a dynamic process that develops through supportive relationships, positive environmental experiences, and opportunities for

meaningful participation. Stable caregiving relationships, increased autonomy, and community engagement can strengthen self-efficacy, promote identity reconstruction, and facilitate psychological adaptation among adults with disabilities (Bandura, 1997; Bowlby, 1988). These processes are especially relevant for individuals without parental care, whose developmental histories often include relational disruption and institutional dependency.

Despite increasing international support for community-based disability services, important gaps remain in the literature. Much of the existing research has focused on general disability populations or on functional outcomes such as independent living and rehabilitation. Comparatively fewer studies have examined adults with disabilities who have experienced long-term absence of parental care, a group with distinctive developmental and psychosocial needs. In addition, many studies rely exclusively on either quantitative or qualitative methods, limiting understanding of both the measurable outcomes of residential care and the lived experiences that explain how change occurs.

The present study addresses these limitations by integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence within a combined biopsychosocial and ICF framework. By examining emotional well-being, social participation, functional independence, and participants' experiences of belonging and autonomy, the study provides a comprehensive evaluation of family-style residential care as a person-centered model of support. In doing so, it contributes to the growing evidence that relationally grounded, community-based residential services can promote resilience, inclusion, and improved quality of life for adults with disabilities who lack parental care.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to examine the impact of family-style residential care on resilience, emotional well-being, social participation, and functional independence among adults with disabilities without parental care. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and integrated during interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of participant outcomes. This design was selected because disability-related functioning is shaped by interacting biological, psychological, and social factors that cannot be fully captured through a single methodological approach.

The study was conducted in family-style residential care homes operated by the Association "Project Hope" in Shkoder, Albania. These services provide long-term accommodation together with psychosocial support, rehabilitation, life-skills training, and community participation opportunities.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority, and all procedures complied with the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participant autonomy. (Order of Psychologists of Albania, 2017).

### 3.2 Participants

The study included 35 adults with disabilities residing in family-style residential care. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 54 years ($M$ = 36.4 years) and included individuals with intellectual, developmental, and mild-

to-moderate physical disabilities. All participants had experienced long-term absence of parental care and had previously lived in institutional or semi-institutional settings.

Eligibility criteria required participants to have lived in the residential program for at least 12 months, ensuring sufficient exposure to the care environment. The sample consisted of 54% men and 46% women, and 71% had previous experience of institutional care.

### 3.3 Residential Care Intervention

The family-style residential care program was implemented as a holistic, person-centered intervention designed to promote emotional well-being, functional independence, and social inclusion among adults with disabilities without parental care. The intervention combined long-term residential support with structured psychosocial services, life-skills training, rehabilitation activities, and opportunities for community participation. Individualized support plans were developed in accordance with participants' functional abilities, psychosocial needs, personal goals, and levels of independence.

The intervention was grounded in the biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1977) and informed by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) framework (WHO, 2001). Early applications of the ICF in clinical practice emphasized its value in structuring rehabilitation assessment and guiding goal-oriented intervention planning within multidisciplinary teams. Building on this foundation, subsequent developments have further operationalized the ICF as a practical tool for rehabilitation management in clinical settings (Rauch et al., 2008), while more recent perspectives conceptualize it as a socio-psycho-biological

framework integrating functioning across biological, psychological, and social domains (Dan, 2024).

The design of the intervention also aligned with the strategic direction of the World Health Organization's Rehabilitation 2030 initiative, which calls for strengthening rehabilitation services within health systems and expanding access to integrated, person-centered, and community-based rehabilitation (WHO, 2010, 2017). Consistent with this framework, the program emphasized multidisciplinary collaboration, functional rehabilitation, and social inclusion as core components of care delivery. Rehabilitation was therefore conceptualized not as a standalone service, but as an integral component of holistic disability support.

In this study, the ICF framework was used to identify individual strengths, functional limitations, participation goals, and environmental barriers, thereby informing individualized intervention planning and outcome-oriented care. The family-style residential care model functioned as an enabling environment in which these domains were actively addressed through structured psychosocial support, stable caregiving relationships, and opportunities for community participation.

### 3.4 Assessment Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using adapted measures of life satisfaction, social engagement, emotional well-being, and functional independence. Assessments were completed at baseline and after sustained participation in the residential program.

Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews adapted to participants' communication abilities. Interviews explored

participants' experiences of autonomy, relationships, emotional well-being, and community participation.

To strengthen methodological rigor, non-participant observations were conducted throughout the study to document daily routines, interpersonal interactions, and engagement in residential and community activities. Observational findings were used to complement interview and quantitative data through methodological triangulation.

### 3.4.1. Assessment Instrument

Quantitative data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire designed specifically for this study. Because the participants were adults with disabilities presenting diverse cognitive and communication abilities, existing standardized instruments were not fully suitable for assessing the study outcomes within this residential care context. Therefore, an adapted questionnaire was developed to evaluate four domains relevant to the study objectives: life satisfaction, emotional well-being, social engagement, and functional independence.

The questionnaire consisted of 20 items, with five items assessing each domain. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 ("not at all") to 4 ("very much"). Domain scores were calculated by summing the responses to the five items within each domain, with higher scores indicating better psychosocial functioning, greater social participation, and higher levels of functional independence. For ease of interpretation, domain scores were subsequently converted to percentages of the maximum possible score.

The questionnaire items were developed based on the biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1977) and the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) (World Health Organization, 2001), ensuring

that the assessment reflected both psychosocial functioning and participation in everyday life.

To improve accessibility, the questionnaire was adapted using simplified language, concrete examples, and interviewer support when clarification was required. These adaptations enabled participants with varying cognitive and communication abilities to understand the questions while minimizing response burden and maximizing response accuracy.

Before the main study, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with a small group of adults with disabilities receiving similar residential services. Feedback obtained during the pilot phase was used to refine item wording, improve clarity, and standardize administration procedures, thereby strengthening the instrument's content and face validity for the target population.

The adapted questionnaire as shown in Table 0, was developed exclusively for research purposes and was intended to provide an accessible measure of psychosocial and functional outcomes among adults with disabilities participating in family-style residential care.

**Table 0. Structure of the Researcher-Developed Assessment Questionnaire**

| Domain | No. of Items | Score Range | Focus of Assessment |
|---|---|---|---|
| Life satisfaction | 5 | 0–20 | Satisfaction with daily life and overall well-being |
| Emotional well-being | 5 | 0–20 | Mood, emotional stability, and self-confidence |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social engagement | 5 | 0–20 | Social relationships, participation, and interaction |
| Functional independence | 5 | 0–20 | Daily living skills, autonomy, and decision-making |
| **Total** | **20** | **0–80** | Overall psychosocial and functional outcomes |

### 3.5 Data Collection

The adapted questionnaire was administered individually to each participant by the principal researcher in a quiet and familiar setting within the residential home. Assessments were conducted at baseline and repeated following sustained participation in the family-style residential care program. Where necessary, questions were read aloud, clarified using simple language, or supported with examples to ensure participants understood each item without influencing their responses.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews adapted to participants' communication abilities. The interviews explored experiences of emotional well-being, autonomy, relationships with caregivers and peers, community participation, and perceived changes associated with living in the residential program.

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions organized around four thematic areas aligned with the study's objectives: emotional well-being, autonomy and decision-making, social relationships, and perceived changes since entering the residential program. Example questions included: "How do you feel about your daily life here?" "Can

you describe a time when you made an important decision about your life?" and "What has changed for you since you started living here?" Interviews were conducted individually in a quiet, familiar setting and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. To accommodate participants' diverse communication abilities, questions were phrased in simple, concrete language, and interviewers used pauses, prompts, and clarifications as needed to support understanding without leading responses.

To enhance methodological rigor, non-participant observations were conducted throughout the study to document participants' daily routines, interpersonal interactions, engagement in residential and community activities, and levels of independence. The integration of questionnaire data, interviews, and observations provided methodological triangulation and a comprehensive understanding of participants' psychosocial and functional outcomes. The integration of quantitative, qualitative, and observational data followed a case study logic, enhancing methodological coherence and ensuring a comprehensive understanding of functioning within real-life residential contexts (Yin, 2018).

### 3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics (means, percentages, and standard deviations) were calculated to summarize participant characteristics and outcome measures. Changes between baseline and follow-up assessments were examined using paired-samples *t*-tests. Statistical significance was established at $p < .001$, and effect sizes were estimated using Cohen's *d* to evaluate the magnitude of observed changes. Pearson correlation

coefficients were calculated to examine relationships among post-intervention outcome variables.

Qualitative interview transcripts and observational notes were analyzed using thematic analysis. Data were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns related to emotional well-being, autonomy, social belonging, resilience, and functional independence. Emerging themes were reviewed, refined, and compared across data sources to enhance analytical credibility.

Finally, quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation to examine the extent to which statistically significant changes corresponded with participants' lived experiences. This convergent mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the influence of family-style residential care on psychosocial well-being, social inclusion, and functional independence.

### 3.7 Ethical Reflections

Ethical considerations extended beyond procedural compliance to relational and contextual ethics. Working with adults with disabilities without parental care requires heightened sensitivity due to histories of relational deprivation and institutional dependency. The study adopted a person-centered ethical approach grounded in autonomy, dignity, and informed choice. Participation was voluntary, and withdrawal was permitted at any stage without consequence. Communication was adapted to ensure accessibility and meaningful understanding.

A key ethical challenge concerns the dual role of residential environments as both care and research settings, which may influence participant responses due to perceived authority structures. This was

addressed by clearly separating research procedures from caregiving activities.

Another ethical consideration relates to representation. Disability research has historically risked reinforcing deficit-based narratives; therefore, this study adopted a strengths-based perspective emphasizing resilience, agency, and relational growth.

Overall, ethical responsibility extends beyond data collection to the broader implications of research for practice and policy. In this sense, ethical rigor is achieved not only through procedural safeguards but also through contributions that promote dignity, autonomy, and inclusion in care systems.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Quantitative Findings

Quantitative analyses demonstrated significant improvements across all outcome measures following participation in the family-style residential care program. Improvements were observed in life satisfaction, social engagement, functional independence, and emotional well-being, indicating broad enhancement of psychosocial functioning.

As shown in **Table 1**, life satisfaction increased from **51.2%** at baseline to **72.4%** at follow-up (+21.2%). Social engagement showed the greatest improvement, increasing from **48.6%** to **79.1%** (+30.5%). Functional independence improved from **46.3%** to **70.2%** (+23.9%), while emotional well-being increased from **52.0%** to **74.3%** (+22.3%). These findings indicate consistent improvements across psychological, social, and functional domains.

**Table 1**

**Changes in Outcome Measures Following Family-Style Residential Care (N = 35)**

| Outcome Variable | Baseline (%) | Follow-up (%) | Change |
|---|---|---|---|
| Life satisfaction | 51.2 | 72.4 | +21.2 |
| Social engagement | 48.6 | 79.1 | +30.5 |
| Functional independence | 46.3 | 70.2 | +23.9 |
| Emotional well-being | 52.0 | 74.3 | +22.3 |

### 4.2 Inferential Statistical Analysis

As shown in **Table 2,** paired-samples *t*-tests confirmed that improvements across all outcome variables were statistically significant (dfs = 34, **all $p < .001$**). Effect sizes ranged from **large to very large** ($d$ = 0.80–1.05), indicating that the observed improvements were not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful.

Social engagement demonstrated the largest effect ($d$ = 1.05), followed by life satisfaction ($d$ = 0.92), emotional well-being ($d$ = 0.85), and functional independence ($d$ = 0.80).

**Table 2**

**Paired-Samples *t*-Test Results**

| Outcome Variable | Pre-test (%) | Post-test (%) | *t(34)* | *p* | Cohen's *d* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Life satisfaction | 51.2 | 72.4 | 6.84 | < .001 | 0.92 |
| Social engagement | 48.6 | 79.1 | 7.56 | < .001 | 1.05 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Functional independence | 46.3 | 70.2 | 5.91 | < .001 | 0.80 |
| Emotional well-being | 52.0 | 74.3 | 6.12 | < .001 | 0.85 |

Overall, the inferential analyses provide strong evidence that participation in family-style residential care was associated with meaningful improvements across all measured domains.

### 4.3 Correlational Analysis

Pearson correlation analyses revealed strong positive relationships among all post-intervention outcome variables (**Table 3**). Higher levels of emotional well-being were associated with greater social engagement ($r$ = .78, $p$ < .01), higher life satisfaction ($r$ = .75, $p$ < .01), and greater functional independence ($r$ = .66, $p$ < .01).

Similarly, life satisfaction was positively correlated with social engagement ($r$ = .72, $p$ < .01) and functional independence ($r$ = .68, $p$ < .01). These findings suggest that improvements in emotional, social, and functional outcomes occurred simultaneously and were closely interconnected.

**Table 3**

**Correlation Matrix for Post-Intervention Outcome Variables**

| **Variable** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1. Life satisfaction** | — | .72** | .68** | .75** |
| **2. Social engagement** | .72** | — | .70** | .78** |
| **3. Functional independence** | .68** | .70** | — | .66** |
| **4. Emotional well-being** | .75** | .78** | .66** | — |

**Note. p** < .01.

### 4.4 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis identified **four interrelated themes** that explain the quantitative improvements observed across participants.

**Theme 1. Emotional Safety and Stability**

Participants consistently described the residential environment as emotionally secure, predictable, and supportive. Compared with previous institutional experiences, they reported reduced anxiety, increased emotional stability, and a stronger sense of personal security.

**Theme 2. Autonomy and Self-Efficacy**

Participants reported greater confidence in managing daily activities, making decisions, and assuming personal responsibilities. These changes reflected not only improved functional skills but also increased self-efficacy and a more positive self-concept.

**Theme 3. Social Belonging**

Relationships with caregivers and peers emerged as a central source of emotional support. Participants frequently described the residential community as a "family," highlighting the importance of stable interpersonal relationships in fostering trust, belonging, and motivation.

**Theme 4. Future Orientation**

Participants expressed increased optimism regarding education, employment, and community participation. Many described a renewed sense of purpose and greater confidence in planning for the future, suggesting broader improvements in resilience and psychological well-being.

### 4.5 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings indicates that family-style residential care promotes improvements across emotional, social, and functional domains through relationally supportive environments. Quantitative analyses demonstrated significant gains in all outcome measures, while qualitative findings identified emotional safety, stable caregiving relationships, autonomy development, and social belonging as the principal mechanisms underlying these changes.

Together, the findings support the interpretation that family-style residential care functions not only as a model of accommodation but also as a therapeutic environment that facilitates resilience, functional independence, and community inclusion among adults with disabilities without parental care.

## 5. Discussion

This study examined the contribution of family-style residential care to resilience, social inclusion, emotional well-being, and functional independence among adults with disabilities without parental care. The findings indicate that participation in a holistic, person-centered residential program was associated with significant improvements across all assessed domains. More importantly, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that these improvements were not isolated outcomes but interconnected processes supported by stable relationships, individualized care, and community participation.

The quantitative findings demonstrated statistically significant gains in life satisfaction, social engagement, emotional well-being, and functional independence, with large effect sizes across all outcome measures. These findings support previous research indicating that community-based and

supported accommodation models promote better psychosocial outcomes than traditional institutional care by providing individualized support and opportunities for participation (McPherson et al., 2018; Sjöberg et al., 2025). Rather than functioning solely as a place of residence, family-style care appears to provide an environment that enables individuals to develop greater autonomy while maintaining appropriate levels of support.

The qualitative findings help explain the mechanisms underlying these improvements. Participants consistently described emotional safety, stable caregiving relationships, autonomy development, and social belonging as central to their experiences. These themes are consistent with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988), which emphasizes that secure interpersonal relationships facilitate emotional regulation, confidence, and adaptive functioning. For adults who have experienced parental loss or prolonged institutionalization, supportive relationships within residential care may compensate for earlier relational disruptions and contribute to psychological stability.

The findings also support the biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1977), which proposes that health and functioning emerge through interactions among biological, psychological, and social factors. Improvements in this study were not limited to functional skills but extended to emotional well-being and community participation, suggesting that psychosocial support and environmental conditions play a fundamental role in rehabilitation. Similarly, the ICF framework (WHO, 2001) provides a useful perspective for interpreting these findings by highlighting how environmental facilitators—including stable caregiving, structured daily routines, and accessible community opportunities—can enhance participation and reduce disability-related barriers.

An important contribution of this study is the demonstration that emotional well-being and social participation were strongly associated with functional independence. Rather than representing separate outcomes, these domains appear to reinforce one another, indicating that psychological security and supportive social relationships may facilitate greater confidence, independence, and engagement in everyday activities. This finding reinforces contemporary disability research emphasizing that successful rehabilitation requires attention not only to functional abilities but also to the relational and social contexts in which those abilities are developed and maintained.

From a practical perspective, the findings support the continued transition from institutional models of care toward community-based, person-centered residential services. Family-style residential care offers more than accommodation; it creates opportunities for meaningful relationships, participation in community life, and the development of independent living skills. Consequently, disability services should prioritize individualized support planning, multidisciplinary collaboration, and environments that promote autonomy while maintaining appropriate emotional and practical support.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The relatively small sample and the absence of a comparison group limit the generalizability of the results and preclude definitive causal conclusions. In addition, the study was conducted within a single residential organization, and outcomes may differ in other service contexts. Future research should include larger multicenter studies, longitudinal follow-up, and comparisons with alternative residential care models to

determine the long-term effectiveness and transferability of family-style residential care.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the relatively small sample size ($N$ = 35) and the inclusion of participants from a single family-style residential care organization limit the generalizability of the results. Although the mixed-methods design provided rich quantitative and qualitative evidence, the findings may not fully represent adults with disabilities receiving support in different residential or community settings.

Second, the absence of a comparison or control group limits the ability to draw causal conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the intervention. Improvements observed during the study may also have been influenced by individual characteristics, previous rehabilitation experiences, or other contextual factors. In addition, some outcome measures relied on self-report data, which may be affected by response bias despite efforts to ensure accessibility and voluntary participation.

A further limitation relates to the use of a researcher-developed adapted questionnaire. Although the instrument was specifically designed and pilot-tested to accommodate the cognitive and communication needs of adults with disabilities and demonstrated good practical applicability within the study setting, it has not undergone comprehensive psychometric validation. Future studies should evaluate its reliability, construct validity, and broader applicability across different disability populations and residential care settings.

Future research should include larger multicenter studies using longitudinal and, where feasible, controlled designs to examine the long-term effectiveness of family-style residential care. Comparative studies involving institutional care, supported independent living, and other community-based models would provide valuable evidence regarding the relative benefits of different service approaches. Further research should also investigate the mechanisms through which stable caregiving relationships, psychosocial support, and community participation influence resilience, autonomy, and quality of life. Such evidence would strengthen the development of person-centered disability services and inform policies promoting community inclusion for adults with disabilities without parental care.

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# Corporate Social Responsibility dimensions in the Albanian banking system

**Visar Dizdari**

*University of Shkodër "Luigj Gurakuqi", Albania*

*Email: visar.dizdari@unishk.edu.al*

**Abstract**

This study examines Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) within the Albanian banking system, focusing on its alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The research analyses the distributional weight and temporal trends of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions within the banking sector contributions from 2016 to 2024. Bridging historical CSR models with the three-dimensional structure of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the study adopts a quantitative methodology to conduct a secondary data analysis of annual reports from the Albanian Association of Banks. The findings reveal a distinct hierarchy among the three dimensions: the social dimension dominates the top tier, accounting for more than two-thirds of all contributions, followed by the economy, with the environment at the bottom. Furthermore, linear trend estimations provide a longitudinal perspective, revealing a clear positive trend for the social dimension, marked by a significant increase in contributions over time. Ultimately, although focusing on the banking sector, this research enriches both the academic and practical understanding of the adoption of SDGs as a framework for the CSR practices in Albania.

***Keywords:*** *Corporate Social Responsibility, 2030 Agenda, Sustainable Development Goals, Banking System, Albania.*

## Introduction

The concept of corporate social responsibility essentially means that companies decide on their own initiative to contribute to improving society and keeping the environment cleaner. They voluntarily integrate social and ecological concerns into their economic activities and into their relations with interested parties, the so-called stakeholders (CEC, 2001).

The concept of corporate social responsibility originated in the 1950s with Bowen's *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman* (1953). The term social "responsibility of businessmen" here refers to the obligations of businessmen to follow those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action that are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of society (Bowen, 1953).

In the 1970s, a change occurred in the conception of social responsibility, realizing the importance of the enterprise's internalization of the principles of responsibility. Until the early 1980s, the discussion would be dominated by the concept of "Corporate Social Responsiveness", which emphasizes a greater interest of business in social issues (Ackerman & Bauer, 1976). During this period, operational instruments and processes were designed within enterprises to actually implement social responsibility. Thus, social auditing techniques, social balance sheets, and codes of conduct for enterprises were developed. This period also saw the conception of entrepreneurial activity in the form of a four-level pyramid, which places at its base economic responsibilities (making profits) upon which legal responsibilities are based, followed by ethical ones, and philanthropic activity at the top of the pyramid (Carroll, 1991).

From the mid-1980s, a third direction of study – Business Ethics – began to gain increasing ground in the debate, where ethics referred to standards that were independent of the goals of the enterprise. Supporters of this

theoretical direction did not imagine ethics as coming after economic and legal issues, but saw it as the regulatory basis of doing business, and as a source of justification for legislation and additional legal restrictions on the activity of enterprises (De George, 2005).

Since the 1990s, the concept of responsibility towards stakeholders has prevailed, referring to subjects who have legitimate interests in the activities of the enterprise because they can be affected by them (Freeman, 1984). In this discussion, the concept of externalities plays an important role, the existence of external conditions that can affect the company's performance, therefore firms cannot fail to take external stakeholders into account. This new concept emphasizes the close connection between ethics and competitive strategy (Jones, 1995). Values and morality are considered central to the management of the organization.

The importance of engaging in CSR it is well-known and widely accepted, since such activities create shared value for both corporations and their societies (Gholami, 2011).

CSR activities are nowadays increasingly seen as linked to the global 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by 193 United Nations Member States in September 2015 and entered into force on 1 January 2016. This agenda is a 15-year global framework focused on 17 Sustainable Development Goals, 169 targets and over 230 indicators. Specifically, the 17 goals are: 1. No poverty – End poverty in all its forms everywhere; 2. Zero hunger – End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture; 3. Good health and well-being – Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages; 4. Quality education – Ensure inclusive and equitable quality

education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all; 5. Gender equality – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; 6. Clean water and sanitation – Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; 7. Affordable and clean energy – Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all; 8. Decent work and economic growth – Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all; 9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure – Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation; 10. Reduced inequalities – Reduce inequality within and among countries; 11. Sustainable cities and communities – Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; 12. Responsible consumption and production – Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns; 13. Climate action – Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts; 14. Life below water – Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development; 15. Life on land – Protect, restore and promote the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss; 16. Peace, justice and strong institutions – Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; 17. Partnerships for the goals – Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development (UN General Assembly, 2015).

Although the SDGs are thought of as objectives for governments and states, companies are also among the main agents responsible for their

accomplishment (Rosati & Faria, 2019). CSR, being a business model that embodies ethics and enables a balance between economic interests, social needs and environmental concerns, promotes the SDGs (Silva et al., 2021). Furthermore, the SDGs provide a more robust, globally recognized framework for CSR compared to older, fragmented corporate sustainability models (Scheyvens et al., 2016).

The Stockholm Resilience Centre divides the 17 SDGs into three distinct dimensions: economic (8, 9, 10, 12), social (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 11, 16) and environmental (6, 13, 14, 15), in what is globally recognized as the "Wedding Cake" model, with goal 17, Partnerships for the goals, at the top (Rockström & Sukhdev, 2016). Folke et al., (2016) provide a theoretical justification for this hierarchy, explaining how economic goals are structurally embedded within social goals, which in turn are entirely dependent on the environmental foundation.

In the Western Balkans region, the concept of corporate social responsibility is promoted mainly by multinational corporations and international development agencies (UNDP, 2008). The interest in implementing social responsibility in Albania is mainly represented by large companies and subsidiaries of multinational corporations. Therefore, the conceptualization of CSR in Albania is mainly philanthropic, unlike in some other countries, where CSR is closely related to the basic functioning of the business (OSCE & Embassy of Canada, 2013). The relatively new business and market culture in the country has not helped to make CSR an important element of business policies (ACIT, 2020). However, an increase in the level of social responsibility of businesses operating in Albania has been observed, following efforts to create a friendly environment at the national level (Valbona et al., 2021).

In this new panorama of CSR development in Albania, the banking system holds a prominent position. A consolidated practice of banks is the publication of an annual report on CSR activities. Moreover, it seems that the banking system understood earlier than others the importance of presenting CSR activities according to the SDGs. Since the entry into force of the 2030 Agenda, the Albanian Association of Banks (AAB) has reported annually on the activities of member banks under the scope of CSR, accompanied by the total figures spent, separately according to each of the 17 sustainable development goals (AAB, 2018).

At the centre of this research are precisely the practices of the Albanian banking system in the field of Corporate Social Responsibility and the achievement of the sustainable development goals. The purpose of the study is to examine the three dimensions of CSR in the banking sector in Albania and their performance over the years. The first objective is to examine the overall weight that each dimension of CSR occupies in the contributions of banks in support of institutions over the years. Secondly, the study seeks to find out if there is a sustainable growth trend across these dimensions over time, as well as within the different items comprising each dimension.

The study constitutes an innovation compared to other studies on CSR in Albania in two ways: first, it focuses exclusively on a specific sector of the economy and society, namely the banking sector; second, the analyses are carried out on objective financial data provided year after year by banks in support of institutions.

Although the study is focused only on the banking sector, bringing new data on the way contributions are distributed in different dimensions, as well as their performance over the years, it will enrich the general

knowledge we have on the development of corporate social responsibility in Albania, especially in recent years.

**Methodology**

The research is based on secondary data analysis. Since the data analysed here are numerical, the research is basically a statistical analysis of data that belong to the quantitative approach of social research.

The sources of data are the annual reports on CSR published on the official website of AAB. The database consists of 9 (nine) annual reports on the CSR of the banking sector in Albania from 2016 to 2024 (SHSHB, 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024).

Since the data are announced by the banking association and open to the public, this makes their validity and reliability are enhanced (Church, 2002; Liao et al., 2019; Tarjo et al., 2022) than research that uses surveys (Scholderer et al., 2005).

The reports include aggregated financial data from the 11 member banks, divided by the 17 SDGs as well as data on "Art, sport and culture". From 2016 to 2020 the data on art, sport and culture were shown separately, but form 2021 onward, "Sport" was integrated into Goal 3 (Good health and well-being), while "Art and culture" was integrated into Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities). The financial data also reflect the loans granted by the banks, but the present study only evaluated contributions from the banks in support of the institutions for SDGs achievement.

The data analysis proceeded through several steps. The first step was to create a database with the contributions of each year for each of the 17 goals. The amounts of contributions for the objectives of the first three

years were denominated in Euro, while for the following years in ALL; therefore, the amounts of these three years were converted into ALL using the official average exchange rate of the respective year (Bank of Albania). After this, the table was checked to see the (approximate) correspondence of the figures in the table with the annual total declared by the AAB. Finally, aggregations were made into the three relevant dimensions of the SDGs by year.

The analyses carried out had the following objectives: first, to measure the weight of each dimension; second, longitudinally, to distinguish the trends of increase or decrease of contributions in each dimension. In implementation of these objectives, the study focused on the following research questions:

-What is the banking sector's contribution (weight) to each dimension?

-Which SDGs are the most important within each dimension?

-Are there observable trends in contributions over the years for the dimensions?

In response to the first two questions, a descriptive analysis was conducted. The third question was elucidated through a linear trend estimation undertaken with regression analysis. All calculations and the construction of tables and graphs were performed using the Microsoft Excel program.

**Findings and discussion**

The data collected from the AAB's reports on CSR for the years 2016 to 2024 are presented in Table 1. The total contribution of banks to the three dimensions of the SDGs ranged from 132 million and 700 thousand ALL in 2018 to 250 million and 530 thousand ALL in 2021.

**Table 1. Contributions in years for the dimensions *(in thousands ALL)***

| Year | Economy | Society | Environment | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2016** | 36384.5 | 133934.9 | 7139.6 | **177459** |
| **2017** | 31961.24 | 99271 | 2320.795 | **133553** |
| **2018** | 39938.8 | 69669.6 | 23095.6 | **132704** |
| **2019** | 110135 | 103820 | 11712 | **225667** |
| **2020** | 52700 | 152050 | 12600 | **217350** |
| **2021** | 69260 | 125070 | 56200 | **250530** |
| **2022** | 5600 | 131500 | 0 | **137100** |
| **2023** | 11800 | 134960 | 9300 | **156060** |
| **2024** | 26300 | 200000 | 4900 | **231200** |
| **TOTAL** | **384079.5** | **1150275.5** | **127268** | **1661623** |

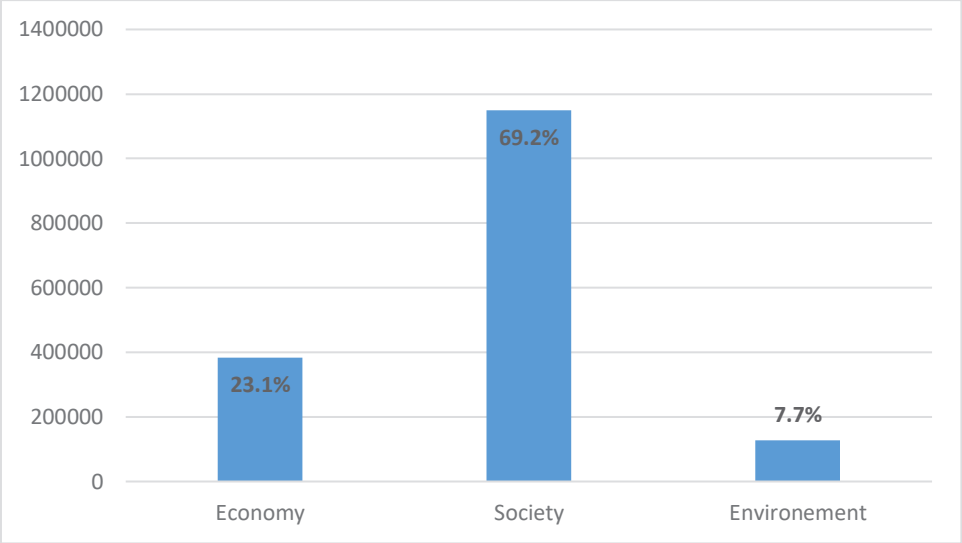
*Source:* Albanian Association of Banks

As Table 1 shows, after 2016 there was a decrease in the contributions of banks for the institutions for the two following years. By 2019 happened a rapid increase that peak in 2021, followed by another decrease (similar to that of 2017-2018) in the years 2022 and 2023. Most likely the increase in contributions from 2019 to 2021 is related to the country's social and economic problems caused by the 2019 earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic in the following two years. These figures can be interpreted as a response of the banking system to the urgent needs of society for financial contributions in the years 2019, 2020 and 2021.

The total contributions to each of the three dimensions of the SDGs for the nine years under review are illustrated in Chart 1. The Society dimension is predominant with 69.2% (1 billion and 150 million ALL) of the total of about 1 billion and 662 million ALL contributed across all years, followed by the Economy with 23.1% of the total contributions. The fact that these two dimensions received more than 90% of the total contributions portrays

the Albanian banking system's prevailing priority for economic prosperity and especially for people. Concerns about the Environment, although financed roughly 7.7% of the total contributions, were not excluded from the banks' considerations.

**Chart 1. Total contributions in years and percentage for each dimension**




An overview of the distribution of banks' financial contributions to CSR can be obtained by examining separately each of the three dimensions of the sustainable development goals.

Table 2 summarizes the data by year for the 8 specific goals of the Society dimension (1. Poverty; 2. Zero hunger; 3. Good health and well-being; 4. Quality education; 5. Gender equality; 7. Affordable and clean energy; 11. Sustainable cities and communities; 16. Peace, justice and strong institutions). After a fall in the amount of contributions from the starting year 2016 to 2017 and 2018, an increment followed in the subsequent years. The rise of contributions in 2020 and 2021, resulted from an increase in contributions to health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The maximum contribution of 200 million ALL was reached in the last year, 2024, which was related to an exceptional increase in funding for goal 11. It is possible this increase came as a result of the inclusion in this Goal of contributions that years ago were shown separately in AAB reports as "Art and culture" contributions.

*Quality education* is the most steadily funded goal, an indicator of banks transitioning towards a longer-term support for promoting sustainable development. Conversely, *Affordable and clean energy* and *Peace, justice and strong institutions* are the least steadily funded goals, with the latter being funded only in the first two years.

**Table 2. Contributions in years for the Society *(in thousands ALL)***

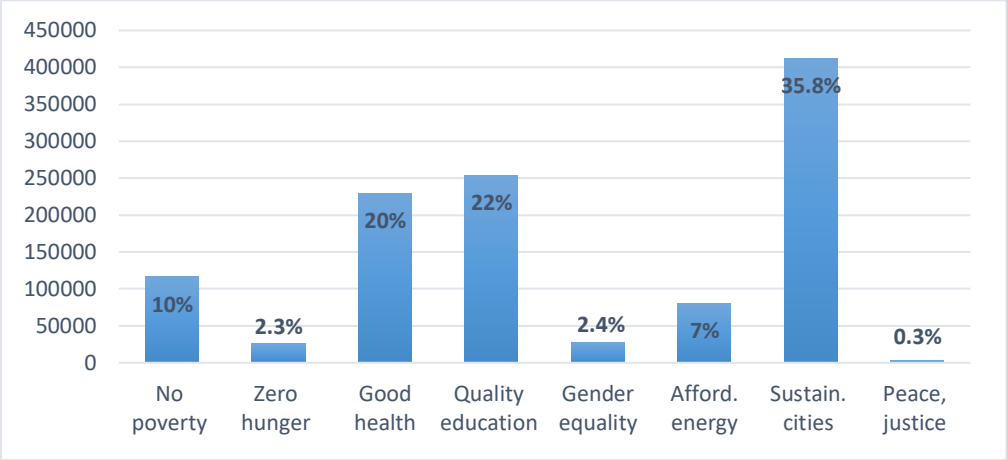
| | **1. No poverty** | **2. Zero hunger** | **3. Good health** | **4. Quality education** | **5. Gender equality** | **7. Afford. energy** | **11. Sustain. cities** | **16. Peace, justice** | **Society** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2016** | 1922 | 4394 | 20595 | 49770 | 522 | 34352 | 19222 | 3158 | **133935** |
| **2017** | 2549 | 3488 | 19988 | 49770 | 1342 | 0 | 21598 | 537 | **99272** |
| **2018** | 3828 | 1021 | 6890 | 18374 | 12760 | 1276 | 25520 | 0 | **69669** |
| **2019** | 3200 | 320 | 25000 | 15000 | 2220 | 0 | 58080 | 0 | **103820** |
| **2020** | 7000 | 6500 | 95900 | 24000 | 1400 | 250 | 17000 | 0 | **152050** |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2021** | 45000 | 1400 | 16000 | 42600 | 70 | 0 | 20000 | 0 | **125070** |
| **2022** | 24000 | 3000 | 6800 | 10200 | 2000 | 45000 | 40500 | 0 | **131500** |
| **2023** | 8000 | 4500 | 23000 | 17000 | 4460 | 0 | 78000 | 0 | **134960** |
| **2024** | 20800 | 1300 | 15600 | 27500 | 2600 | 0 | 132200 | 0 | **200000** |
| **Total** | **116299** | **25923** | **229773** | **254214** | **27374** | **80878** | **412120** | **3695** | **1150276** |

*Source:* Albanian Association of Banks

As shown more clearly in the Chart 2, Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) is the most supported (36%), followed by Goal 4 (Quality education, 22%) and Goal 3 (Good health and well-being, 20%). It is important to mention that Goal 5 (Gender equality), despite not being one of the most supported goals (2.4%), received stable funding throughout the years, proving the banks' sensitivity towards this issue. Although the bulk of funding goes to long-term goals (3, 4, 11), short-term philanthropic contributions, such as those for Goal 1 (No poverty, 10%) and Goal 2 (Zero hunger, 2.3%), continue to be present. A significant increase in support for Goal 1 was observed in the years 2021 – 2022 and continued in 2024, possibly reflecting the high levels of poverty in Albania, where 22% of the population live below the national poverty line and 44% of the population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion (INSTAT, 2023).

**Chart 2. Contributions in years and percentage for each of the Society dimension's goals**




Data for the second funded dimension, Economy (which summarizes goals *8.* Decent work and economic growth; 9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure; 10. Reduced inequalities; 12. Responsible consumption and production) are presented in Table 3. More financing was allocated to the Economy in 2019, with the lowest contributions being in the year 2022. The increase in funding allocation to the economy in 2023 and 2024, however, results in amounts that are far below 2016 – 2021 mean.

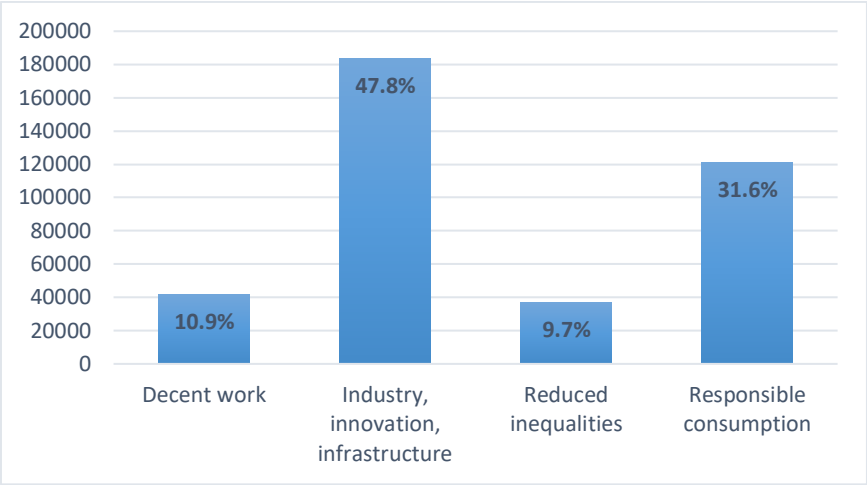
**Table 3. Contributions in years for the Economy *(in thousands ALL)***

| Years | 8. Decent work | 9. Industry | 10. Reduced inequalities | 12. Responsible consumption | Economy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2016** | 1373 | 31579 | 2746 | 687 | **36380** |
| **2017** | 12208 | 16366 | 3354 | 34 | **31962** |
| **2018** | 2552 | 32283 | 5104 | 0 | **39939** |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2019** | 2800 | 20335 | 7000 | 80000 | **110130** |
| **2020** | 3200 | 8000 | 5500 | 36000 | **52700** |
| **2021** | 10000 | 50000 | 4600 | 4660 | **69260** |
| **2022** | 1500 | 1100 | 3000 | 0 | **5600** |
| **2023** | 6500 | 4300 | 1000 | 0 | **11800** |
| **2024** | 1800 | 19700 | 4800 | 0 | **26300** |
| **Total** | **41933** | **183663** | **37104** | **121381** | **384080** |

As Chart 3 further displays, the most supported goal, beneficiary of about half of the contributions for this dimension, is Goal 9 (Industry, innovation, and infrastructure, 47.8%), followed by Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production, 31.6%). But Goal 12 is not continuously funded over the years. In fact, in the year 2018, and from 2022 to 2024 this goal received no contributions. Meanwhile, Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth, 11%) and Goal 10 (Reduced inequalities, 9.7%), although less supported, are uninterruptedly funded, possibly to mitigate Albania's deficiencies in the work environment and the imbalances in the economy.

**Chart 3. Contributions and percentage for each of the Economy dimension's goals**




The annual finances for the Environment dimension are given in Table 4. Of the four relevant goals of this dimension (6. Clean water and sanitation; 13. Climate action; 14. Life below water; 15. Life and land) two goals – *Clean water* and *Life below water* – are not financed at all by the banks. Likewise, the other two goals did not receive funds regularly every year. Thus, although Goal 13 is ranked the 7th in terms of funding among the 17 goals, it experienced an interruption in contributions in the year 2022. Likewise, Goal 15 is among the least funded goals with contribution interruptions in 2019 and from 2022 to 2024.

**Table 4. Contributions in years for Environment *(in thousands ALL)***

| Years | 6. Clean water | 13. Climate action | 14. Life below water | 15. Life and land | Environment |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2016** | 0 | 4394 | 0 | 2746 | **7140** |
| **2017** | 0 | 845 | 0 | 1476 | **2321** |
| **2018** | 0 | 21692 | 0 | 1403 | **23095** |

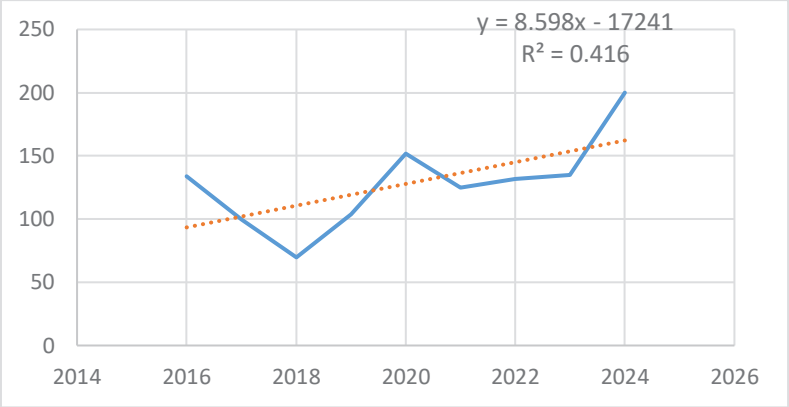
| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2019** | 0 | 11712 | 0 | 0 | **11712** |
| **2020** | 0 | 7000 | 0 | 5600 | **12600** |
| **2021** | 0 | 55000 | 0 | 1200 | **56200** |
| **2022** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | **0** |
| **2023** | 0 | 9300 | 0 | 0 | **9300** |
| **2024** | 0 | 4900 | 0 | 0 | **4900** |
| **TOTAL** | **0** | **114843** | **0** | **12425** | **127268** |

The distribution over the years of funds for the Environment dimension reflects a lack of continues attention from the banks in addressing the challenges facing the planet, in the form of directly contributing to the institutions. An alternative explanation could be the most urgent needs of the Albanian economy and society in these years, which focused attention more on the other two dimensions. In addition, the implementation of banking practices – such as monitoring of potable water consumption to avoid unnecessary losses, reducing paper and electricity consumption, replacing diesel and gasoline cars with electric ones, and putting efforts into limiting financing for transactions that contribute to increasing $CO_2$ emissions in the atmosphere (AAB, 2024) – may present the first steps of the banking system in the transition from the CSR model to ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) reporting.

Regarding the question of whether there are trends in contributions over the years for the dimensions, regression analyses were conducted. Microsoft Excel program calculates the equation of the regression on the form $y = b(x) \pm a$, where y represents the expected values of contributions, represented graphically by the regression line.

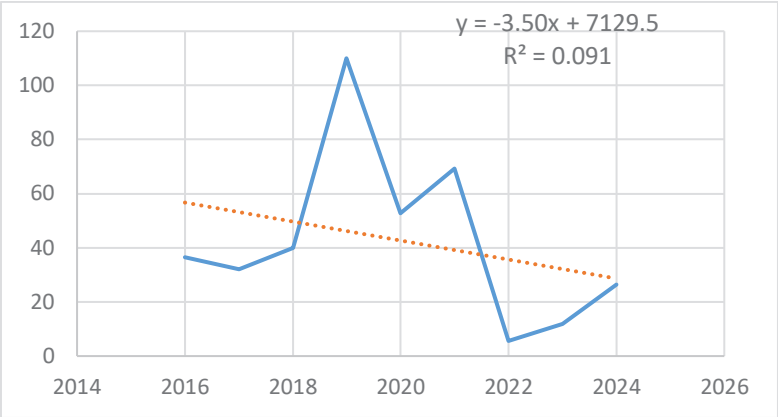
As Chart 4 shows, Society contributions have a positive trend in the years under study. The coefficient of regression being +8.598, the increment of contributions for the goals included in this dimension is about 8.6 million ALL each year. The coefficient of determination $R^2$ is 0.4 meaning that the regression model fits the data well.

**Chart 4. Linear trend estimation for the Society dimension**



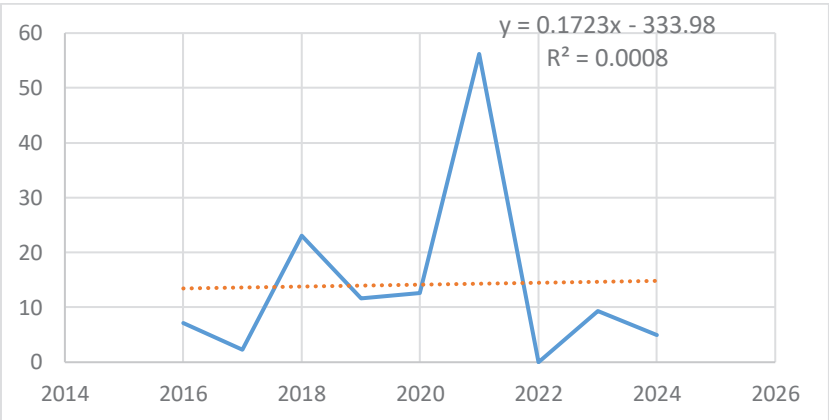

For the Economy dimension Chart 5, and the regression calculations, show a negative trend with an average decrease of 3.50 million ALL in contributions each year. But the excessively large fluctuations in contributions over the years produce a very small coefficient of determination $R^2$ of about 0.09, which indicates that the regression model does not fit the data well.

**Chart 5. Linear trend estimation for the Economy dimension**




The same argument of a lack of trend applies to Environment dimension. In fact, Chart 6 and the regression estimations indicate that the very slightly positive trend, represented by the line of regression, is presumably not significant. An $R^2$ of about 0.0008 leads to the conclusion that there is no real trend at all for this dimension.

**Chart 6. Linear trend estimation for the Environment dimension.**




## Conclusion

This study examined the three dimensions of CSR – society, economy, and environment – within the Albanian banking sector, evaluating their performance and trends over time.

Regarding the proportional weight of each dimension's contribution, the study reveals that the social dimension is the most prominent, accounting for approximately 70% of the total. The economic dimension ranks second at 23%, while the environmental dimension receives the lightest weight, comprising less than 8% of total contributions.

The distribution of funds among the SDGs within each dimension yielded the following insights:

-Within the Society dimension, Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) is the most heavily funded (36%), followed by Goal 3 (Good health and well-being) and Goal 4 (Quality education) at 20% to 22%. Although Goal 5 (Gender equality) receives minimal funding (2.4%), its support has remained stable over the years, indicating the banking sector's ongoing sensitivity to gender issues. Goal 1 (No poverty) at 10% and Goal 2 (Zero hunger) at 2.3% continue to receive regular funding, reflecting a sustained effort to mitigate high levels of poverty and the risk of social exclusion in Albania;

-For the Economy dimension, almost half of the contributions (48%) are allocated to Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure). Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production) is the second highest at 31%, though it is not funded continuously. Conversely, Goal 8 (Decent Work) and Goal 10 (Reduced inequalities) demonstrate continuity over the years, each receiving between 10% and 11%.

-The Environment dimension is the least funded. Goal 6 (Clean water and sanitation) and Goal 14 (Life below water) received no financing at all.

Goal 13 (Climate action) captures almost the entirety of this dimension's contributions (90%), whereas Goal 15 (Life on land) is funded only sporadically (10%). This lack of continuity in direct environmental contributions may reflect the banking system's ongoing transition from traditional CSR models to Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) practices.

Regarding the final research question – whether these dimensions exhibit upward or downward longitudinal trends – linear trend estimations via regression analysis revealed distinct patterns. The economic dimension displays a negative trend, though the regression model does not provide a good fit for the data. For the environmental dimension, regression estimates indicate neither an increasing nor a decreasing linear trend due to substantial annual fluctuations. Society is the only dimension with a clear positive trend, marked by a significant increase in contributions over the years.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the three-dimension SDG model serves as a suitable framework for mapping the CSR activities of Albanian banks. Aggregating these contributions into social, economic, and environmental dimensions provides a better understanding of banking sector practices.

A limitation of this research stems from changes in reporting formats: from 2016 to 2020, annual reports presented data on "Art, sport, and culture" separately, but from 2021 onward, "sport" was integrated into Goal 3 and "art and culture" into Goal 11. While this shift slightly affects the accuracy of the analysis, it does not distort the broader overview of CSR activities in the Albanian banking sector.

However, further research into corporate banking contributions toward sustainable development goals is warranted. Comparative studies exploring the distribution of contributions across the three CSR dimensions could be developed in two directions: first, comparing the Albanian banking system with those of the EU and South-Eastern European countries; second, contrasting the banking sector with other sectors of the Albanian economy. Additionally, the regulatory transition from voluntary CSR to measurable, legally binding ESG frameworks represents a compelling new line of research. Finally, given that most current research focuses on quantitative financial data, a textual analysis of sustainability reports would offer valuable qualitative insights into how SDGs are used to frame corporate social responsibility.

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# The Role of Physical Education in Higher Education in Fostering Personal Development and Promoting Physical Activity among Students at the University of Tirana

Vitiola Pelari[1]

pelarivitiola@gmail.com

Gerda Sula[1]

gerda.sula@unitir.edu.al

[1]*Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tirana*

**Abstract**

This study examines the role of physical education in higher education as a contributor to students' personal development and engagement in physical activity at the University of Tirana. Amid rising sedentary behaviors among young adults, universities play a critical role in promoting active lifestyles and psychosocial well-being. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design, data were collected from 174 students through a structured questionnaire measuring perceptions of physical education, motivation, engagement in physical activity, and lifestyle outcomes. Findings indicate that students generally perceive physical education positively, although it is still partly viewed as an academic obligation. Correlation analyses reveal significant associations between positive perceptions, motivation, and levels of engagement in physical activity. Engagement emerges as a key mediating factor influencing the adoption of an active lifestyle. The study highlights the importance of pedagogical approaches that enhance intrinsic motivation and student

participation. These findings support the need for reconceptualizing physical education in higher education institutions to foster sustainable health behaviors and holistic student development.

Keywords: *physical education, physical activity, personal development, university students, higher education, University of Tirana*

## Introduction

The increasing prevalence of sedentary lifestyles among young adults has emerged as a pressing public health concern, particularly within university populations. The transition to higher education is often associated with reduced physical activity due to academic demands, lifestyle changes, and decreased institutional structure. In this context, universities are uniquely positioned to influence students' physical, psychological, and social development.

Physical education in higher education extends beyond its traditional role of improving physical fitness. It serves as a pedagogical space for fostering critical life skills such as self-regulation, motivation, resilience, and social interaction. However, its effectiveness depends largely on how students perceive and engage with the subject.

Despite growing attention to physical education in university contexts, there remains a need to better understand the mechanisms through which it contributes to personal development and lifestyle behaviors. This study aims to examine students' perceptions, motivation, and engagement in

physical activity, and to analyse how these factors contribute to the development of an active lifestyle.

**Literature Review**

In recent years, physical education (PE) in higher education has undergone a significant conceptual transformation, evolving from a traditional curricular requirement toward a broader health-promotion and well-being-oriented discipline. This shift reflects growing concerns regarding sedentary lifestyles among university students and the recognition of universities as key environments for shaping long-term health behaviors. However, the effectiveness of physical education programs depends not only on participation itself, but also on the quality of pedagogical design, student motivation, and the broader institutional context in which these programs are embedded (Vasconcellos et al.) (Xu et al.)

The contemporary literature on higher education physical education can be broadly organized around three interrelated questions: whether participation in university PE contributes to improved health and lifestyle outcomes; how pedagogical approaches influence motivation and engagement; and why the translation of structured participation into long-term behavioral change remains limited (Zhang et al., Guo et al., & Li et al.)Over time, research has shifted from a narrow focus on fitness outcomes to more comprehensive models that incorporate psychological well-being, motivation, and the sustainability of physical activity beyond formal educational settings.

Evolution of Research in Higher-Education Physical Education

The progression of research from 2020 to 2026 illustrates a clear trajectory in the conceptualization of physical education. Early studies focused primarily on structured participation and physiological outcomes (Herbert et al. & Choi et al.), while later work increasingly emphasized psychological dimensions, student motivation, and the transfer of physical activity into everyday life (Li et al., Zhang et al., & Guo et al.)More recent contributions (Martín-Rodríguez & González-Prieto & Meng & Liu)lighlight integrative frameworks that connect individual agency, pedagogical innovation, and institutional support systems.

This shift indicates a growing recognition that physical education in higher education should not be understood solely as a short-term intervention, but rather as a formative experience with the potential to influence lifelong habits and well-being.

Health Effects of Physical Education

A substantial body of evidence confirms that university students represent a high-risk population for physical inactivity due to academic pressures, increased screen time, and life transitions during early adulthood (Choi et al., Herbert et al., & Ahmed & Salim). Within this context, physical education programs have been shown to play a protective role in promoting health and reducing risk factors associated with sedentary lifestyles.

Cross-sectional studies demonstrate that participation in physical education is associated with lower risks of obesity, physical inactivity, unhealthy dietary habits, and poor sleep patterns (Zhang et al. & Xu et al.). Empirical findings further indicate that structured participation in PE can

contribute to meaningful physiological improvements. For instance, students enrolled in reformed physical education programs exhibited sustained gains in cardiorespiratory fitness and muscular strength over an 18-month period (Zhang et al.). Additionally, observational evidence suggests that students spend a considerable proportion of class time engaged in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (Xu et al.).

These findings collectively support the role of physical education as a significant contributor to student health; however, they also underscore that its effectiveness is influenced by program design and the extent to which participation translates into broader lifestyle behaviors.

Motivation and Pedagogical Approaches

A central theme in the literature concerns the role of pedagogy in shaping students' motivation and engagement in physical activity. Research consistently demonstrates that physical education is more effective when it supports students' psychological needs—specifically autonomy, competence, and relatedness—rather than relying solely on compliance-based models (Vasconcellos et al. & Guo et al.)

Autonomy-supportive teaching approaches, which provide students with meaningful choices and encourage self-directed participation, have been shown to enhance motivation toward physical activity, although their direct effect on sustained behavior may weaken when controlling for additional variables (Guo et al.). Similarly, differentiated instruction, which adapts activities to individual skill levels, has been associated with

higher levels of engagement and satisfaction, though existing evidence is often based on quasi-experimental designs (Temirbay et al.)

Innovative instructional models have also gained attention in recent years. The sport education model has demonstrated positive effects on daily physical activity levels beyond class participation, although outcomes may vary depending on contextual factors such as gender and learning climate (Choi et al. & Choi et al.). Additionally, blended learning approaches, such as Small Private Online Course (SPOC) combined with flipped classroom models, have been linked to increased intrinsic motivation, although findings remain limited due to small and specialized samples (Hu et al.).

Across these pedagogical approaches, a consistent pattern emerges: the quality of the learning experience plays a critical role in determining whether students internalize physical activity as a meaningful and sustainable practice.

Physical Activity and Mental Well-Being

Beyond physical health, research increasingly highlights the relationship between physical activity and mental well-being among university students. Regular engagement in physical activity has been associated with reduced levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and social dysfunction, as well as improvements in overall psychological functioning (Herbert, Liu et al., & Li et al.).

Empirical studies suggest that physical activity contributes to mental health both directly and indirectly. For example, higher levels of physical activity have been linked to better overall mental health in large student

samples (Xu et al.). Moreover, physical activity appears to mitigate negative emotional states by enhancing resilience and coping mechanisms (Liu et al.). Students who maintain higher levels of physical activity also report less severe symptoms of depression and anxiety (Li et al.).

Intervention-based evidence indicates that even low-to-moderate aerobic exercise can produce noticeable improvements in psychological well-being within relatively short timeframes (Herbert et al. & Li et al.). In addition, participation in structured physical education programs, particularly those incorporating social and cooperative elements, has been shown to strengthen social support and reduce perceived stress (Herbert).

Challenges of Long-Term Adoption

Despite the well-documented benefits of physical education, a persistent challenge lies in ensuring that participation during university translates into long-term active lifestyles. Long-term adoption is more likely when physical education programs incorporate elements such as physical literacy development, activity choice, personalized training, and behavior-change strategies (Zhang et al. & Guo et al.). Additionally, the broader environment plays a crucial role: students are more likely to maintain active behaviors when universities provide supportive infrastructures, social opportunities, and accessible recreational spaces (Choi et al. 2. ).

These findings suggest that physical education should be embedded within a wider institutional strategy that promotes health and well-being across multiple contexts, rather than being treated as an isolated curricular component.

## Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research approach aimed at analyzing students' perceptions and experiences of physical education and its impact on their lifestyle. A cross-sectional design was employed, allowing for the collection and analysis of data at a single point in time.

The sample consisted of 174 students from the University of Tirana, selected using a non-probability (convenience) sampling method. This approach enabled the inclusion of participants from different study programs and levels, ensuring a diversity of perspectives. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, in accordance with ethical research standards.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed based on relevant literature in physical education and motivation research. The instrument included sections addressing demographic characteristics, perceptions of physical education, motivation for physical activity, classroom experience, engagement in physical activity, and lifestyle. Responses were measured using five-point Likert scales.

Data analysis included both descriptive and inferential statistics. Measures such as means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were used to describe the sample and response distributions. Inferential analyses, including correlation analysis, were conducted to examine relationships between variables. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. The internal reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with values above .70 considered acceptable. Ethical principles

were respected throughout the study, including informed consent and confidentiality of data.

**Results and discussions**

The results indicate that students generally hold positive perceptions of physical education, with mean values exceeding the midpoint of the scale. However, a notable proportion of participants still perceive physical education as an academic obligation, reflecting a tension between its formal and experiential dimensions.

Regarding motivation, the findings suggest moderate levels of intrinsic motivation, while extrinsic factors—such as academic requirements—remain influential. This indicates that although some students experience physical activity as personally meaningful, others remain externally driven.

Levels of engagement in physical activity are also moderate. While many students report participation in physical activity, fewer demonstrate consistent engagement beyond academic requirements. This suggests that the integration of physical activity into daily life is not yet fully achieved.

Correlation analyses reveal statistically significant positive relationships between perceptions, motivation, and engagement in physical activity. Engagement shows the strongest association with the development of an active lifestyle, highlighting its central role. These findings support the idea that positive attitudes and motivation must be translated into actual behavior to produce meaningful lifestyle changes.

Furthermore, engagement appears to function as a mediating factor in the relationship between motivation and lifestyle. This finding aligns with Bandura's (2002) perspective on the interaction between personal and behavioral factors in shaping outcomes.

The results are consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Decy), which emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation for sustained behavioral engagement. Similarly, they support Vasconcellos et al's (2001) emphasis on the importance of a supportive learning environment.

Overall, the findings underscore the need for a reconceptualization of physical education in higher education. Moving beyond a model based on obligation toward one that fosters intrinsic motivation, meaningful engagement, and positive experiences is essential for promoting long-term healthy lifestyles.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

| Variable | Mean (M) | Std. Deviation (SD) |
|---|---|---|
| Perception of Physical Education | 3.94 | 0.67 |
| Motivation for Physical Activity | 3.71 | 0.72 |
| Engagement in Physical Activity | 3.56 | 0.74 |
| Active Lifestyle | 3.68 | 0.69 |

Table 2. Internal Consistency (Cronbach's Alpha)

| Scale | Number of Items | Cronbach's α |
|---|---|---|
| Perception scale | 5 | 0.84 |
| Motivation scale | 5 | 0.86 |
| Engagement scale | 5 | 0.82 |
| Lifestyle scale | 5 | 0.88 |

Table 3. Pearson Correlations Between Study Variables

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Perception | 1 | | | |
| 2. Motivation | 51 | 1 | | |
| 3. Engagement | 48 | 65 | 1 | |
| 4. Lifestyle | 43 | 59 | 71 | 1 |

Table 1 shows that all study variables have mean scores above the midpoint of the scale, indicating generally positive student perceptions of physical education. Perception of physical education recorded the highest mean (M = 3.94), while engagement in physical activity had the lowest mean (M = 3.56), suggesting that although students value physical education, regular participation in physical activity remains moderate. The relatively low standard deviations indicate consistency in participants' responses.

Table 2 presents the internal consistency of the measurement scales. All Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceed the recommended threshold of .70, indicating good reliability. This suggests that the questionnaire items consistently measure the intended constructs and that the instrument is appropriate for further statistical analyses.

Table 3 demonstrates statistically significant positive correlations among all study variables. Motivation is positively associated with engagement, while engagement shows the strongest correlation with an active lifestyle ($r = .71$, $p < .01$). These findings suggest that students who are more motivated tend to participate more actively in physical activity, and greater engagement is closely related to the adoption of healthier and more active lifestyles.

## Conclusions

This study examined the role of physical education in higher education in shaping students' perceptions, motivation, and engagement in physical activity. The findings indicate that while physical education is often initially perceived as an academic requirement, it holds significant potential to foster sustainable lifestyle behaviors.

Engagement in physical activity emerged as a key factor mediating the relationship between motivation and lifestyle. This highlights the importance of translating attitudes and intentions into consistent behavior. The study emphasizes the need to reconceptualize physical education programs to promote intrinsic motivation and active participation. Such an

approach can contribute not only to increased physical activity during university years but also to the development of long-term healthy habits. Given the limitations of the study, including the use of a convenience sample and cross-sectional design, future research should consider larger samples and longitudinal approaches to better understand long-term impacts.

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# FROM SCROLLING TO SELF-CONFIDENCE: HOW CONSUMING PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA SHAPES PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE

**Xhoela Curri**

*Department of Psychology and Social Work, "Luigj Gurakuqi" University, Shkodër*

xhoela_curri@unishk.edu.al

**Admir Dahati**

*Department of Psychology and Social Work, "Luigj Gurakuqi" University, Shkodër*

admir_dahati@unishk.edu.al

**Abstract**

The increasing circulation of psychological content on social media has changed the way young adults interpret emotions, behavior, and interpersonal relationships. This study explores how exposure to psychological content on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok shapes young adults' perceived psychological competence. Drawing on perspectives from social learning theory, attribution theory, dual-process theory, and the illusory truth effect, the study examines the relationship between familiarity with psychological terminology and the construction of self-perceived understanding. A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 15 university students aged 18–25 who actively use social media and regularly encounter psychological or self-development content. The data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Four main themes emerged: psychological content as a source of informal learning, terminological

familiarity and the illusion of competence, the tension between reflection and overinterpretation, and psychological language as social positioning. The findings suggest that social media may encourage curiosity and self-reflection, but may also foster superficial understanding and overconfidence when complex psychological concepts are simplified. The study highlights the need to strengthen psychological literacy and critical media literacy among young adults.

**Keywords:** *social media, social psychology, competence, scrolling, youth*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background and context

With the development of digital technologies and the growing influence of social media influencers, online platforms have created both opportunities and challenges for individuals and society (Dwivedi et al., 2020; Kaňková et al., 2024). Individuals experiencing mental health-related concerns often search for explanations before seeking professional support, and this process frequently begins online, through forums, social media platforms, or similar digital discussions (Underhill & Foulkes, 2025). Previous studies have raised concerns that adolescents and young people may increasingly identify with mental disorder labels without having received a formal clinical diagnosis (Acheson & Papadima, 2023; Farnood et al., 2020). Through social media algorithms, materials such as informative videos, advice posts, and self-diagnosis-related content may become more frequent when users interact with similar content (Benkler, 2006; Yenduri et al., 2024). Many of these materials present information that may suggest possible physical or mental health conditions, although such information is not always verified or professionally controlled. Behaviors, emotions, or thoughts that are common to a wide audience may be presented in ways

that viewers without clinical knowledge interpret as indicators of personal psychological problems. As algorithmic exposure increases, these materials may become part of users' daily media consumption, potentially contributing to psychological distress, self-misinterpretation, or the overinterpretation of ordinary thoughts and behaviors (Dahati, 2025).

### 1.2. Research problem and objectives

The widespread consumption of psychological content on social media has become a growing phenomenon, particularly among young adults who increasingly rely on digital platforms as informal sources of knowledge and self-development. This trend raises important questions regarding how continuous exposure to such content influences individuals' perceived competence, self-confidence, and overall self-evaluation. While psychological content shared on social media often aims to be educational and accessible, it may also lead to the oversimplification of complex psychological concepts, potentially fostering an illusion of understanding or an inflated sense of expertise without corresponding knowledge, critical thinking, or practical application. In this context, concerns arise regarding whether frequent engagement with such content contributes to accurate self-awareness or whether it instead encourages cognitive biases related to self-assessment. Individuals may interpret exposure to psychological ideas as equivalent to mastery, thereby shaping their confidence in ways that are not necessarily aligned with their actual competence. This creates a need to explore the psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between digital content consumption and self-perception. Against this background, the present study aims to:

- explore how young adults describe the influence of psychological content on their perceived competence;

- understand how participants distinguish between familiarity with psychological terminology and actual understanding;
- examine how psychological language is used in everyday social interactions;
- identify perceived risks of overconfidence, misinterpretation, or superficial understanding.

### 1.3. Research questions

- How do young adults interpret psychological content encountered on social media?
- How does exposure to psychological terminology shape their perceived competence?
- How do participants distinguish between understanding psychological concepts and applying them in real-life situations?

### 1.4. Significance of the study

This study contributes to understanding how digital environments, particularly social media platforms, shape individuals' self-perception and cognitive biases within the context of informal learning. The study holds practical relevance for the development of media literacy, emphasizing the need for critical evaluation of online content, especially in domains that are often simplified or popularized. Its findings may inform psychological education by encouraging more structured and evidence-based approaches to learning outside formal settings. The implications for content creators, educators, and mental health professionals promote more responsible dissemination of psychological information on social media platforms. This is particularly important among young adults, who represent one of the most active groups in consuming such content and may be more susceptible to its influence on self-evaluation and confidence.

### 1.5. Theoretical relevance or policy/practice importance

Theoretically, this study advances understanding of how informal, digital learning environments influence self-perception, particularly in relation to perceived competence and confidence. It contributes to existing frameworks on cognitive biases, self-assessment, and the impact of media exposure by examining how easily accessible psychological content may blur the boundary between knowledge acquisition and perceived expertise. From a policy and practice perspective, the findings can inform the development of media literacy initiatives and educational interventions aimed at promoting critical consumption of online psychological content. They may also guide content creators, educators, and mental health professionals in designing and sharing information more responsibly, helping to reduce misinformation and prevent overconfidence based on superficial understanding.

This issue is particularly relevant because psychological content on social media is often consumed outside formal educational or clinical contexts. Young adults may encounter psychological terminology repeatedly before they have the theoretical background needed to evaluate it critically. As a result, social media may contribute not only to the circulation of psychological knowledge, but also to the construction of perceived expertise. This makes it important to examine how individuals move from exposure to familiarity, and from familiarity to confidence. By focusing on perceived competence rather than actual diagnostic or professional knowledge, the present study addresses a subtle but important dimension of digital psychological culture.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Research design and approach

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist approach, aiming to capture the subjective meanings that individuals attribute to their engagement with psychological content on social media. The study does not aim to measure actual psychological competence objectively, but rather to understand how participants construct, describe and negotiate their perceived competence through exposure to psychological content online. A semi-structured interview format is utilized to allow both consistency across participants and flexibility to probe into themes. This design is particularly suitable for exploring complex psychological constructs such as perceived competence and self-confidence, which are shaped by personal interpretation and social context.

### 2.2. Participants

The study sample consisted of 15 young adults from the University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi" who were active users of social media platforms and regularly engaged with psychological or self-development content. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure that participants had relevant experiences aligned with the research objectives. The inclusion criteria required participants to be bachelor's students, aged between 18 and 25, active users of Instagram and/or TikTok, and previously exposed to psychological, mental health, or self-development content on social media.

The sample included students from the Departments of Psychology–Social Work and Finance. These departments were selected primarily due to accessibility and participants' willingness to take part in the study, rather

than for the purpose of formal comparison between academic disciplines. Participants were recruited through university-based announcements and informal academic networks. The sample size was considered adequate for generating rich qualitative data and identifying recurring patterns across participants' narratives.

### 2.3. Data collection method

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted either in person or via online communication platforms. An interview guide with open-ended questions was developed to explore participants' patterns of content consumption, interpretations of psychological information, and the perceived impact of such content on their sense of competence and self-confidence. In addition, participants were specifically asked about the types of psychological content they encountered on social media, the frequency and context of their engagement with such content, and whether they perceived a difference between "understanding information" and "applying it in real life." Follow-up questions were used to clarify responses and encourage deeper reflection on personal experiences and perceived changes in self-evaluation over time. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data. The audio recordings were transcribed with the assistance of digital transcription tools and subsequently checked manually by the researchers for accuracy. Each interview lasted approximately 25–40 minutes, depending on the depth of responses and participant elaboration. This procedure supported consistency in data handling and allowed the researchers to remain close to participants' original accounts.

### 2.4. Analytical procedures

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's reflexive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, all transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure data familiarization and to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' narratives within their broader contextual meaning. This stage was followed by the generation of initial codes, which were developed inductively from the data and captured meaningful units related to participants' experiences, interpretations, and perceived effects of psychological content consumption on self-confidence and competence. The codes were then organized into broader categories and further refined into overarching themes. These themes were continuously reviewed and revised to ensure internal coherence, conceptual clarity, and alignment with the research objectives. Both semantic (explicit) and latent (implicit) levels of meaning were considered, allowing for a more in-depth interpretation of how digital psychological content shaped self-perceived competence among young adults. To strengthen credibility and reflexivity, both researchers independently reviewed the transcripts, compared interpretations, and refined the coding structure through discussion. Any discrepancies were resolved through iterative comparison with the data and joint agreement on the most appropriate thematic classification. Overall, the analysis followed established qualitative standards, ensuring transparency, consistency, and methodological robustness throughout the interpretative process. Reflexivity was also considered important during the analytical process, as the interpretation of qualitative data may be influenced by the researchers' academic background, prior knowledge of psychological concepts, and familiarity with social media discourse. For this reason, the researchers aimed to remain attentive to participants' own

meanings rather than imposing predefined theoretical explanations on the data. The themes were therefore treated as interpretative constructions grounded in participants' narratives, rather than as fixed categories identified independently of context.

### 1.5. *Ethical considerations*

The study adhered to established ethical standards in social science research. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the way in which their responses would be used for research purposes. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview process began, ensuring that participation was based on a clear understanding of the study's aims and procedures.

Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process. Identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and participants were not referred to by their real names in the analysis or presentation of findings. The collected data were stored securely and were accessible only to the researchers involved in the study. Participants were also informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences.

Because the interviews involved personal reflections on social media use, psychological content, and self-perceived competence, particular attention was given to participants' comfort during the interview process. They were informed that they could skip any question they did not wish to answer or stop the interview at any moment if they experienced discomfort. The interview questions were designed to avoid clinical assessment or diagnosis and focused only on participants' subjective experiences and interpretations of psychological content encountered online.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis revealed that participants associated exposure to psychological content on Instagram and TikTok with changes in the way they interpreted human behavior, emotions, and interpersonal situations. Rather than describing social media content as a source of professional knowledge, participants mainly presented it as an accessible form of informal learning that increased curiosity, reflection, and familiarity with psychological terminology. However, the findings also indicated an important tension between perceived understanding and deeper conceptual knowledge.

***Theme 1: Psychological Content as a Source of Informal Learning***

Participants described psychological content on social media as an important first point of contact with concepts related to emotions, interpersonal behavior, trauma, attachment, communication patterns, self-awareness, and personal boundaries. For many participants, such content did not function as a complete or authoritative source of psychological knowledge, but rather as an accessible entry point through which they were introduced to ideas they had not previously considered in a systematic way. In this respect, social media appeared to occupy an ambivalent position: although it was not perceived as equivalent to formal psychological education, it was experienced as a space that could stimulate curiosity, reflection, and further exploration.

Several participants indicated that exposure to psychological content encouraged them to search for additional information beyond the original video, post, or short explanation encountered online. This suggests that, for some individuals, social media may serve as a preliminary stimulus for informal learning. Rather than providing complete or structured

knowledge, this content appeared to awaken interest and direct participants' attention toward psychological questions they later attempted to understand more fully.

A recurrent pattern in participants' accounts was the perception that psychological content had influenced the way they interpreted the behavior of others. Participants frequently described becoming more cautious in their judgments, particularly in situations involving conflict, emotional reactions, or interpersonal misunderstanding. Instead of immediately attributing a person's behavior to character flaws, bad intentions, or personal weakness, they reported a greater tendency to consider emotional, relational, or situational explanations. This shift does not necessarily imply the development of advanced psychological competence, but it indicates a more reflective approach to interpreting social situations.

One participant explained: "There are times when a psychological concept I have seen online has made me view a real-life relationship or conflict differently. It helped me think about why a person behaved in a certain way, why a situation developed as it did, and how each person experienced it." This statement illustrates how psychological content may become meaningful when connected to concrete everyday experiences. The participant did not present online information as abstract knowledge detached from reality, but as a framework through which interpersonal events could be reconsidered. In this case, the psychological concept encountered online appeared to offer a language for interpreting relational dynamics, emotional responses, and the subjective positions of the individuals involved.

At the same time, this finding should be interpreted with caution. Although participants reported increased reflection, this does not necessarily mean

that they had acquired a deep or accurate understanding of the psychological concepts they encountered. Their accounts point more clearly to a perceived broadening of perspective than to verified psychological competence. In other words, social media content seemed to provide interpretive possibilities rather than systematic knowledge. It helped participants pause, reconsider, and question immediate judgments, but it did not necessarily equip them with the theoretical depth required for precise psychological analysis.

Therefore, psychological content on social media may be understood as a form of informal and preliminary psychological exposure. Its value lies not primarily in its capacity to teach complex concepts rigorously, but in its potential to introduce individuals to psychological ways of thinking. However, this reflective effect remains distinct from professional or academic competence. The content often served as a starting point for thought rather than as evidence of deep conceptual mastery.

***Theme 2: Terminological Familiarity and the Illusion of Competence***

A central finding concerned the role of psychological terminology in shaping participants' perceived competence. Participants reported that repeated exposure to terms such as "trauma," "attachment," "defense mechanisms," "boundaries," and "toxic behavior" made these concepts appear increasingly familiar and easier to use in everyday conversations. This familiarity seemed to produce a sense of confidence, particularly when participants discussed emotional reactions, interpersonal conflicts, or behavioral patterns. In this regard, psychological language functioned not only as a means of description, but also as a resource through which participants organized and presented their understanding of human behavior.

However, participants also showed awareness of the limits of this familiarity. Several accounts revealed an important distinction between being able to recognize or use psychological terms and possessing a deeper conceptual understanding of them. One participant stated: “I often find myself using terms like defense mechanisms, attachment patterns, or trauma to explain individuals’ reactions to different situations. However, I am also aware that this process can sometimes lead to overanalysis or hasty attributions.” This statement illustrates one of the main tensions emerging from the data. Psychological terminology may create the impression of competence because it offers individuals a structured and seemingly professional language for explaining complex experiences. Nevertheless, the ability to use such terms does not necessarily indicate an understanding of their theoretical meaning, clinical limits, or appropriate context of application. In this sense, repeated exposure to psychological language may contribute to an illusion of competence, in which familiarity with terms is experienced as knowledge.

Another participant expressed this distinction clearly: “Yes, social media can create this feeling, because the information is presented simply. However, I think that the true meaning of psychology requires literature study and deep analysis.”

This finding shows that the effect of psychological content on social media cannot be interpreted in a one-sided manner. On the one hand, simplified psychological information may encourage overconfidence and premature interpretations of human behavior. On the other hand, some participants demonstrated awareness that online familiarity is not equivalent to academic or professional competence. For these participants, exposure to psychological content did not necessarily replace formal knowledge, but

made them more conscious of the difference between superficial recognition and deeper understanding. Therefore, psychological terminology appeared to have a double function: it increased confidence and provided individuals with a language for interpreting personal and social experiences, while also creating the risk of confusing linguistic familiarity with conceptual mastery. The central issue, therefore, was not merely whether participants encountered psychological terms online, but how critically they understood, contextualized, and applied them.

***Theme 3: Between Reflection and Overinterpretation***

The findings also suggested that psychological content on social media may encourage both reflection and overinterpretation. Participants described this content as useful for developing a broader understanding of emotions, relationships, and interpersonal behavior. For some of them, online psychological information created opportunities to think more carefully about their own experiences and about the possible reasons behind the behavior of others. In this sense, psychological content appeared to support a more reflective attitude toward everyday social situations. At the same time, participants recognized that the same content could also lead to simplified explanations, hasty labeling, and excessive interpretation of ordinary behavior. Psychological concepts presented in short videos, posts, or simplified narratives may become detached from their theoretical and clinical context. As a result, complex human experiences may be interpreted through limited categories, such as trauma, attachment, toxicity, or emotional avoidance, while broader personal, relational, and situational contexts may be overlooked.

One participant stated: “In general, social media has a great impact. It helps increase both understanding of emotions and behaviors, but sometimes it can simplify or misinterpret concepts.”

This statement captures the ambivalent nature of psychological content on social media. On the one hand, such content can encourage psychological awareness by helping individuals reflect on emotions, relationships, and patterns of behavior. On the other hand, it may also encourage the use of simplified psychological labels to explain experiences that are more complex than the terminology used to describe them. In this sense, social media may promote a form of psychological sensitivity, while also increasing the risk of psychological overlabeling.

This finding can be understood through attribution theory, which explains how individuals interpret the causes of their own behavior and the behavior of others (Malle, 2011). In digital environments, where psychological concepts are often presented in brief, emotionally engaging, and simplified formats, individuals may be more likely to attribute behavior to internal psychological causes, such as personality traits, trauma, attachment patterns, or emotional difficulties. However, such interpretations may overlook contextual factors, situational pressures, cultural norms, or relational dynamics. Therefore, while psychological content may help individuals move beyond immediate judgment, it may also create new forms of premature interpretation when concepts are applied too quickly or too broadly.

***Theme 4: Psychological Language as Social Positioning***

Another important theme concerned the social function of psychological terminology. Participants reported that people who used psychological language were often perceived as more informed, reflective, or competent.

In everyday discussions, psychological terminology therefore appeared to function not only as a tool for explanation, but also as a way of constructing credibility and perceived social authority. One participant explained: “When I hear others using psychological terms, I find it interesting. Sometimes it gives me the impression that they are informed, but it does not always mean that they understand it deeply.”

This statement suggests that psychological language can influence how competence is socially perceived. The use of specialized terms may create an impression of knowledge, even when the speaker’s actual understanding is uncertain. In this sense, competence appeared to become partly performative: it was not only related to what individuals knew, but also to how they presented that knowledge in social interaction. Some participants also described a form of social pressure to use psychological language in discussions, particularly in contexts where such language was associated with awareness, maturity, or emotional intelligence. However, this should not be understood only as conformity. It may also represent a form of social identity management, where individuals use psychological terminology to appear reflective, informed, or emotionally competent.

These findings may be interpreted through several theoretical perspectives. Dual-process theory helps explain why psychological content on social media may often be processed quickly and intuitively. Because platforms such as Instagram and TikTok present information in short, fragmented, and visually engaging formats, users may rely more on fast and intuitive judgments than on slow, analytical evaluation, increasing the possibility of superficial interpretation (Kahneman, 2011).

Social learning theory also provides a useful framework. Participants may learn psychological language by observing influencers, content creators,

peers, or other users who model the use of psychological concepts in everyday explanations. Through repeated exposure, these terms may become normalized and later reproduced in personal and social discussions (Bandura, 1977).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model further helps explain how psychological content may be processed. When users engage deeply with information, search for additional sources, and connect concepts to broader knowledge, they may process content through the central route. However, when they rely mainly on attractive videos, repeated phrases, or simplified explanations, they may process information through the peripheral route. In this case, the content may feel meaningful without necessarily producing deep understanding (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Finally, the illusory truth effect helps explain why repeated exposure to psychological terms may increase their perceived accuracy and familiarity. When users repeatedly encounter the same concepts online, these concepts may become easier to process and may therefore appear more credible or meaningful. This may contribute to perceived competence, even when actual understanding remains limited (Unkelbach & Rom, 2017).

The findings suggest that psychological content on social media should not be understood simply as either beneficial or harmful. Rather, it appears to have an ambivalent role: it may encourage curiosity, reflection, and self-awareness, while also producing superficial understanding, overinterpretation, and an inflated sense of competence. The central issue is not only whether young adults consume psychological content online, but how critically they process, evaluate, and apply it in everyday life. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening psychological literacy and media literacy among young adults, particularly in digital

contexts where psychological information is often consumed rapidly, repeatedly, and without sufficient verification.

## 4. CONCLUSION

### 4.1 Summary of main findings

This study examined how exposure to psychological content on social media shapes young adults' interpretations of human behavior, perceived competence, and use of psychological terminology in everyday interactions. The findings suggest that platforms such as Instagram and TikTok function as accessible spaces for informal psychological learning, encouraging curiosity, reflection, and interest in psychological concepts. However, the study also highlights a tension between familiarity with psychological terminology and deeper conceptual understanding. Repeated exposure to psychological language appeared to increase participants' confidence in discussing emotions and interpersonal behavior, but this confidence was not always accompanied by accurate or contextual knowledge. Therefore, psychological content on social media may support self-reflection while also increasing the risk of overinterpretation, simplified explanations, and an inflated sense of competence.

### 4.2 Contributions to knowledge or practice

This study contributes to the growing discussion on how digital environments shape psychological knowledge, self-perception, and informal learning. Its main contribution lies in showing that psychological content on social media should not be understood as simply beneficial or harmful. Rather, it appears to play an ambivalent role: it may encourage curiosity, emotional reflection, and more careful interpretation of human

behavior, while also creating conditions for superficial understanding and psychological overlabeling.

The study also highlights the practical importance of strengthening psychological literacy and media literacy among young adults. The findings suggest that access to psychological information is not sufficient on its own; young people also need the ability to evaluate the credibility, context, and limitations of the content they encounter online. For educators, mental health professionals, and content creators, this implies the need to communicate psychological information in ways that are accessible, responsible, contextualized, and clear about their limitations.

**4.3 Limitations**

The study has several limitations. First, the findings are based on self-reported data, meaning that participants' responses may have been influenced by memory, subjective interpretation, or the desire to present themselves as reflective and informed. Second, the study focused on perceived competence rather than objectively measured psychological knowledge; therefore, it cannot determine whether participants' confidence was matched by accurate conceptual understanding. Third, the sample was limited to 15 university students from the University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi," which restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader populations.

An additional limitation relates to the sampling strategy. Participants were recruited through university-based announcements and informal academic networks, and participation was voluntary. As a result, the sample may have included individuals who were already interested in psychological content or more willing to reflect on their social media use. Although the inclusion of students from Psychology–Social Work and Finance provided

some variation, the study did not aim to compare these academic groups formally. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific and exploratory.

### 4.4 Recommendations for future research or application

Future research should examine the relationship between social media exposure, perceived competence, and actual psychological knowledge through mixed-methods designs. Quantitative measures could be used to assess psychological literacy or conceptual understanding, while qualitative interviews could provide deeper insight into how individuals interpret and apply psychological content in everyday life. Further studies could also compare students from different academic fields, age groups, or cultural contexts to explore whether the perceived influence of psychological content varies according to educational background or prior knowledge.

In practical terms, the findings support the development of educational interventions focused on critical psychological literacy. Universities, schools, mental health professionals, and digital content creators can help young adults evaluate psychological content more critically by emphasizing source credibility, conceptual accuracy, and the distinction between personal reflection and psychological diagnosis. Such applications are especially important in digital environments where psychological information is often consumed quickly, repeatedly, and without professional guidance.

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# Understanding Burnout through the Adaptive Dynamics of a Transitional Healthcare System

Eva Filaj[16]

Marinela Sota[17]

**ABSTRACT**

Burnout is commonly understood as a consequence of chronic workplace stress resulting from an imbalance between job demands and available organizational resources. Although this perspective has substantially advanced burnout research, it offers a limited explanation in healthcare systems undergoing prolonged institutional transition, where organizational instability and continuous adaptation shape professional practice. Drawing on Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) theory, this study explores the adaptive dynamics of burnout in a transitional healthcare system.

A qualitative exploratory design employing methodological triangulation was adopted. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with tertiary-level physicians and nurses, open interviews with healthcare managers and policymakers, and a validation focus group. Data were analysed using template analysis.

The findings suggest that burnout is not solely the outcome of excessive workload or insufficient organizational resources but emerges through the dynamic interaction between structural constraints and the adaptive behaviours that enable healthcare professionals to sustain healthcare

[16] filajeva@gmail.com
[17] sotamarinela@yahoo.com

delivery. Participants described persistent staff shortages, limited material resources, organizational uncertainty, fragmented governance, and continuous pressure to maintain clinical services. In response, healthcare professionals developed adaptive practices—including informal collaboration, workarounds, emotional distancing, and the normalization of chronic overload—which enabled the healthcare system to continue functioning while simultaneously reproducing the conditions that sustained burnout.

The study proposes a cyclical conceptual model describing the adaptive dynamics of burnout in a healthcare system experiencing prolonged institutional transition. By integrating qualitative evidence with Complex Adaptive Systems theory, the study extends prevailing burnout frameworks beyond individual and organizational explanations, providing a systemic perspective with important implications for healthcare governance, organizational resilience, and workforce sustainability in transitional healthcare systems.

**Keywords:** burnout; Complex Adaptive Systems; healthcare transition; qualitative research; healthcare professionals; Albania.

## 1. Introduction

Burnout has become one of the most significant challenges facing contemporary healthcare systems because of its impact on healthcare professionals, patient safety, quality of care, and organizational performance (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Woo et al., 2020). Recognized by the World Health Organization as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019), burnout is traditionally conceptualized as a multidimensional syndrome characterized by

emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Contemporary research increasingly recognizes that burnout cannot be understood solely as an individual response to occupational stress but rather as the result of interactions between job demands, organizational conditions, and available organizational resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017).

Among the theoretical frameworks explaining burnout, the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model has become particularly influential in healthcare research because it conceptualizes burnout as the consequence of an imbalance between job demands and organizational resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In healthcare settings, excessive workload, staff shortages, emotional demands, and insufficient organizational support consistently emerge as major contributors to burnout (Devotto & Wechsler, 2019; Lesener et al., 2020). Although the JD–R model provides a robust explanation of the relationship between workplace demands and professional well-being, its application has largely focused on relatively stable organizational environments, offering only limited insight into healthcare systems undergoing prolonged institutional transformation.

This limitation is particularly relevant in post-socialist healthcare systems, where institutional transition has been accompanied by fragmented reforms, organizational instability, and persistent structural constraints (Offe, 1991; Stark & Bruszt, 1998; Kaminska, 2020). Rather than following a linear path toward institutional consolidation, transitional systems often evolve through discontinuities, competing institutional logics, and continuous organizational adaptation. Albania represents a particularly relevant example of this context. Since the early 1990s, its healthcare system has undergone prolonged institutional transformation

characterized by fragmented reforms, shortages of human and material resources, and continuing difficulties in consolidating stable governance mechanisms (Nuri et al., 2002; Dumi & Sinaj, 2015). Consequently, healthcare professionals are required to maintain service delivery while continuously adapting to organizational uncertainty and structural limitations.

Recent developments in health services research suggest that these dynamics can be more comprehensively understood through the perspective of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS). Unlike linear organizational models, CAS theory conceptualizes healthcare organizations as dynamic systems in which multiple interconnected actors continuously interact, adapt, self-organize, and respond to changing environmental pressures (Braithwaite et al., 2018; Greenhalgh & Papoutsi, 2018). Within this perspective, organizational functioning depends not only on formal structures and policies but also on the adaptive behaviours developed by healthcare professionals to compensate for resource limitations, operational constraints, and institutional uncertainty (Hollnagel & Braithwaite, 2019). These adaptive behaviours—including informal collaboration, workarounds, emotional distancing, and everyday improvisation—play a central role in maintaining healthcare delivery while simultaneously shaping the adaptive dynamics of burnout.

Despite the growing body of research on burnout, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how burnout unfolds within healthcare systems undergoing prolonged institutional transition, and even fewer studies have interpreted burnout through the lens of Complex Adaptive Systems. Existing research has predominantly focused on identifying individual, professional, and organizational risk factors, whereas the

adaptive dynamics through which healthcare systems maintain functionality under persistent structural constraints remain largely unexplored.

Against this background, the present study explores burnout among tertiary-level physicians and nurses in Albania through a Complex Adaptive Systems perspective. Using qualitative evidence from tertiary healthcare institutions, the study proposes a cyclical conceptual model describing the adaptive dynamics of burnout in a healthcare system experiencing prolonged institutional transition. The model suggests that burnout should be understood not merely as the outcome of excessive job demands or insufficient organizational resources, but also as part of the adaptive dynamics through which the healthcare system maintains operational continuity despite enduring structural pressures.

## 2. Methods

**Study design:** This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to investigate burnout among physicians and nurses working in tertiary healthcare institutions in Albania. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of burnout within the organizational context of a healthcare system undergoing prolonged institutional transition. Methodological triangulation was adopted to enhance the credibility, depth, and trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin, 1978).

**Study setting and participants:** The study was conducted in six tertiary healthcare institutions in Albania. Purposive sampling was used to recruit healthcare professionals with substantial clinical experience and direct exposure to the organizational challenges of tertiary healthcare. The study included 30 healthcare professionals (15 physicians and 15 nurses) representing different clinical specialties. To broaden the organizational perspective, an additional nine

open interviews were conducted with healthcare managers and health policymakers. Furthermore, a validation focus group was organized to discuss and verify the emerging conceptual interpretation.

**Data collection:** Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, open interviews, and a validation focus group. Semi-structured interviews explored participants' experiences of burnout, perceived organizational challenges, and strategies used to cope with everyday professional demands. Data were documented through interview transcripts and researcher notes, anonymized, and prepared for qualitative analysis.

**Data analysis:** Data were analysed using Template Analysis, a flexible form of thematic analysis that combines deductive and inductive coding while allowing continuous refinement of the coding template throughout the analytical process (King, 2012; Brooks et al., 2015). Initial coding was informed by the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model, whereas higher-order conceptual categories emerged iteratively from participants' narratives. The interpretation of the findings was subsequently informed by the perspective of Complex Adaptive Systems to understand how adaptive behaviours interacted with organizational conditions in shaping the adaptive dynamics of burnout.

**Ethical considerations:** Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Structural Constraints Shaping the Adaptive Dynamics of Burnout

Participants consistently described burnout as emerging within a healthcare environment characterized by persistent structural constraints rather than isolated occupational stressors. Across all professional groups, excessive workload,

chronic shortages of human and material resources, organizational fragmentation, and institutional uncertainty were experienced as interconnected structural conditions that continuously shaped everyday clinical practice.

Workload was described as extending far beyond the number of patients or working hours. Participants emphasized that the imbalance between increasing clinical demands and insufficient staffing required them to sustain an uninterrupted pace of work while simultaneously assuming additional responsibilities. As one emergency physician explained:

> "There are days when I do not even have five minutes to sit down. Patients never stop coming, and every single case requires maximum attention." (Emergency physician)

Similarly, an intensive care nurse highlighted the extent of routine overload:

> "The number of patients we cover during each shift is beyond any acceptable standard. What we are doing is no longer medicine—it is simply running." (ICU nurse)

Participants consistently associated these conditions with chronic physical and emotional exhaustion. One paediatrician described the persistent psychological pressure generated by continuous workload:

> "I constantly feel that I don't have enough time and that someone is not receiving the attention they deserve." (Paediatrician)

These narratives suggest that workload was experienced not merely as a quantitative increase in clinical activity but as a continuous organizational pressure requiring healthcare professionals to adapt in order to sustain everyday clinical practice.

Beyond workload, shortages of staff, equipment, medications, and basic medical supplies were reported as routine organizational realities. Participants frequently

described situations in which essential treatments could not be provided because fundamental resources were unavailable.

> "Today I admitted a patient who needed a tetanus vaccine, but we simply did not have it. I had to ask the family to buy it outside the hospital. What else could I do?" (Paediatrician)

These shortages generated not only operational difficulties but also profound moral distress. As one oncologist explained:

> "It is emotionally devastating to tell a patient that we cannot provide today's chemotherapy because it has not yet arrived." (Oncologist)

Collectively, these findings indicate that structural constraints were experienced as enduring organizational conditions that continuously generated pressure while simultaneously requiring healthcare professionals to adapt in order to sustain routine clinical practice. Rather than representing temporary organizational failures, these conditions had become normalized features of the healthcare system.

### 3.2 Adaptive Behaviours Sustaining Clinical Practice

Rather than withdrawing from these demanding conditions, healthcare professionals described developing adaptive behaviours that enabled them to sustain clinical practice despite persistent structural constraints. These behaviours were not portrayed as formal organizational strategies but as practical solutions that evolved through everyday professional experience. Informal collaboration, workarounds, emotional distancing, and the gradual normalization of chronic overload consistently emerged as mechanisms through which healthcare delivery was maintained under conditions of prolonged institutional pressure.

Informal collaboration was one of the most frequently reported adaptive behaviours. Participants emphasized that mutual support among colleagues often compensated for limited institutional resources and facilitated clinical decision-

making in complex situations. Beyond sharing technical knowledge, collegial relationships also provided emotional support that reduced the psychological burden associated with difficult cases.

> "When I discuss difficult cases with my colleagues, I feel my stress decreases and I can think more clearly about how to proceed." (Psychiatrist)

These collaborative practices emerged spontaneously through everyday interactions rather than through formal organizational planning, reflecting the continuous adaptation of professionals to structural constraints.

Participants also described numerous situations in which patient care depended on improvised solutions and workarounds developed to compensate for shortages of medications, equipment, and essential clinical supplies. Rather than representing isolated deviations from formal procedures, these practices had become routine elements of everyday work.

> "Today I admitted a patient who needed a tetanus vaccine, but we simply did not have it. I asked the family to buy it outside the hospital. What else could I do?" (Paediatrician)

Emotional distancing likewise emerged as an important adaptive behaviour. Participants frequently described deliberately reducing their emotional involvement in clinical situations as a means of preserving their capacity to function under continuous pressure. Several professionals referred to operating almost automatically during particularly demanding shifts.

> "There are days when I work on autopilot, like a machine that only stops when someone switches it off." (Anaesthesiologist)

Although these adaptive behaviours initially developed to ensure continuity of care, participants recognized that prolonged reliance on them gradually altered the way they experienced their work. Over time, emotional engagement

diminished while chronic exhaustion and depersonalization became increasingly normalized. Adaptation therefore emerged as a routine feature of organizational functioning rather than as an exceptional response to crisis.

### 3.3 Adaptive Dynamics Sustaining Healthcare System Functioning

An important finding of this study was that adaptive behaviours fulfilled a dual function within the healthcare system. On the one hand, they enabled healthcare professionals to maintain continuity of patient care despite persistent structural constraints. On the other hand, these same adaptive behaviours reduced the visibility of underlying organizational problems, allowing structural deficiencies to persist without substantial institutional change.

Participants repeatedly described excessive workload, shortages of resources, and organizational uncertainty as normal aspects of professional life rather than exceptional situations requiring organizational intervention.

> "This job is stressful by nature. We accepted that from the very beginning." (Surgeon)

Similarly, one nurse explained:

> "Fatigue has become part of our everyday routine. It is nothing new anymore." (Nurse)

These narratives illustrate the gradual normalization of chronic overload, whereby prolonged exposure to structural constraints reshaped professionals' expectations regarding acceptable working conditions. Temporary adaptive behaviours progressively became routine organizational practices. Rather than challenging structural deficiencies, healthcare professionals increasingly incorporated chronic stress, resource scarcity, and continuous adaptation into their everyday clinical practice.

The validation focus group reinforced this interpretation. Participants confirmed that informal flexibility, improvisation, and continuous compensation for organizational shortcomings were essential for maintaining healthcare services in the short term. At the same time, they acknowledged that these adaptive behaviours had gradually become embedded within the everyday functioning of the healthcare system, contributing to the normalization of excessive workload while sustaining the very organizational conditions associated with burnout.

Overall, the findings indicate that burnout cannot be understood solely as the consequence of excessive job demands or insufficient organizational resources. Rather, burnout emerged through the continuous interaction between persistent structural constraints and the adaptive behaviours developed by healthcare professionals to sustain healthcare delivery. While these adaptive behaviours preserved the operational continuity of the healthcare system, they simultaneously normalized the organizational conditions that generated chronic overload, thereby reproducing the adaptive dynamics of burnout over time. These findings provide the empirical foundation for the cyclical conceptual model presented in the following section.

## 4. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that burnout among physicians and nurses working in tertiary healthcare institutions in Albania cannot be fully understood as the consequence of excessive job demands or insufficient organizational resources alone. Consistent with the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model, participants described a persistent imbalance between increasing clinical demands and limited organizational resources, including chronic staff shortages, inadequate material resources, fragmented organizational processes, and institutional uncertainty (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017). However, the qualitative evidence indicates that this imbalance is embedded within a broader organizational context

characterized by prolonged institutional transition, where structural constraints have become enduring features of everyday healthcare delivery rather than temporary organizational challenges.

These findings extend the explanatory scope of the JD–R model by demonstrating that, within transitional healthcare systems, burnout is shaped not only by the imbalance between job demands and organizational resources but also by the continuous interaction between persistent structural constraints and the adaptive behaviours developed to sustain healthcare delivery. As organizational deficiencies remain unresolved over time, the responsibility for maintaining day-to-day operational continuity increasingly falls on frontline healthcare professionals. Consequently, adaptive behaviours become essential for preserving operational continuity while simultaneously increasing professionals' vulnerability to chronic exhaustion.

The perspective of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) provides a useful framework for interpreting these dynamics. Rather than conceptualizing healthcare organizations as systems governed solely through formal structures and managerial control, CAS emphasizes that organizational functioning emerges through the continuous interactions and adaptations of multiple interconnected actors (Braithwaite et al., 2018; Greenhalgh & Papoutsi, 2018). Within this perspective, the adaptive behaviours identified in the present study—including informal collaboration, workarounds, emotional distancing, and continuous flexibility—should not be interpreted simply as individual coping strategies. Instead, they represent adaptive mechanisms through which healthcare professionals collectively sustain clinical practice under persistent structural constraints.

Importantly, the adaptive behaviours identified in this study should not be interpreted as indicators of resilience alone. Rather, they represent compensatory mechanisms that enable healthcare professionals to sustain clinical practice while progressively increasing chronic exhaustion, emotional distancing, and the risk of burnout. By compensating for persistent structural deficiencies, however, these same adaptive behaviours reduced the visibility of the organizational conditions that generated chronic overload. This created a self-reinforcing adaptive process in which successful adaptation maintained the operational continuity of the healthcare system while simultaneously allowing the underlying structural constraints to persist. Such recursive feedback processes represent a defining characteristic of Complex Adaptive Systems and provide a systemic explanation for the persistence of burnout in healthcare systems undergoing prolonged institutional transition.

This interpretation is particularly evident in participants' descriptions of workarounds and everyday improvisation. Clinical care frequently depended on informal solutions developed to compensate for shortages of personnel, medications, equipment, and organizational support. Although these adaptive practices prevented immediate service disruption and enhanced short-term system resilience, they also concealed systemic weaknesses by enabling healthcare organizations to function without addressing the structural causes of these deficiencies. Similar observations have been reported in resilient healthcare research, where adaptive performance is recognized as essential for maintaining safety while simultaneously masking vulnerabilities that require organizational intervention (Hollnagel & Braithwaite, 2019).

A second important finding concerns the gradual normalization of chronic overload. Participants consistently described excessive workload, emotional strain, resource scarcity, and organizational uncertainty as routine characteristics of professional life rather than exceptional situations requiring institutional action. This process resembles the concept of normalization of deviance, whereby repeated exposure to suboptimal organizational conditions progressively transforms exceptional circumstances into accepted practice (Vaughan, 1996; Price & Williams, 2018). As adaptive behaviours become embedded within everyday clinical work, chronic overload is increasingly perceived as an unavoidable feature of healthcare practice rather than as evidence of organizational dysfunction.

The findings also suggest the presence of organizational silence surrounding burnout. Although participants openly discussed exhaustion, emotional distancing, and chronic overload during interviews, these experiences appeared to receive little formal recognition within their organizations. Burnout therefore remained largely individualized, while organizational attention continued to focus primarily on sustaining service delivery. This observation is consistent with literature describing organizational silence as a mechanism through which widely shared systemic problems remain insufficiently acknowledged and addressed (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Morrison, 2014).

Taken together, these findings support the interpretation of burnout as an adaptive dynamic emerging within a healthcare system experiencing prolonged institutional transition. Persistent structural constraints generated continuous operational pressure, while adaptive behaviours enabled healthcare professionals to preserve clinical practice despite these

conditions. However, because these adaptive behaviours simultaneously normalized and compensated for organizational deficiencies, they also contributed to reproducing the structural conditions that sustained burnout over time. Burnout and organizational adaptation therefore emerged not as separate phenomena but as interconnected components of the same adaptive process.

The cyclical conceptual model proposed in this study synthesizes these findings by illustrating how structural constraints, adaptive behaviours, operational continuity, and chronic burnout become linked through recursive feedback processes. Rather than replacing established burnout frameworks such as the JD–R model, this perspective complements them by incorporating the adaptive organizational dynamics through which healthcare systems continue to function under prolonged structural constraints. In doing so, the study contributes to a broader systemic understanding of burnout with important implications for healthcare governance, organizational resilience, and workforce sustainability in healthcare systems undergoing institutional transition.

**6. Conclusions**

This study demonstrates that burnout in transitional healthcare systems cannot be fully understood solely as the consequence of an imbalance between job demands and organizational resources. Drawing on qualitative evidence from tertiary healthcare institutions in Albania, the findings suggest that burnout emerges through the continuous interaction between persistent structural constraints and the adaptive behaviours developed by healthcare professionals to sustain everyday clinical practice. While these adaptive behaviours preserve the operational continuity of the healthcare

system, they also contribute to normalizing and reproducing the organizational conditions that sustain burnout over time.

By integrating the Job Demands–Resources model with the perspective of Complex Adaptive Systems, this study advances a systemic understanding of burnout as an adaptive dynamic rather than exclusively an occupational outcome. The proposed cyclical conceptual model highlights how recursive interactions between structural constraints, adaptive behaviours, and organizational functioning contribute to the persistence of burnout in healthcare systems undergoing prolonged institutional transition. These findings have important implications for healthcare governance, suggesting that sustainable efforts to reduce burnout should extend beyond strengthening organizational resources to addressing the structural conditions that continuously generate the need for adaptation. Such a systemic perspective may guide the development of organizational and policy interventions aimed at reducing structural dependence on continuous professional adaptation, thereby promoting both workforce sustainability and healthcare system resilience.

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# Problems of institutional intervention for child protection in a road situation

PhD Florian Bejleri

University of Tirana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Labor and Social Policy. Email florionbejleri@yahoo.com

**Abstract**

The exploitation of minors under the age of 14 by forcing them to beg or work to ensure profits, remains one of the most challenging problems for social protection institutions for children in Albania. Regarding this problem, while the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, the National Agency for Child Protection, Municipalities, Child Protection Units, etc., have the duty to protect children and in this case not allow them to beg in dangerous places in cooperation with the state police, this phenomenon is being repeated and has not changed.

This article aims to highlight the problems that hold back child protection institutions and the state police from protecting children from exploitation by forcing them to beg or work in life-threatening places.

The methodology used is qualitative. 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with key child protection actors at central, local, and police officers.

The findings show that the lack of institutional infrastructure and human capacities are key factors, but a worrying fact remains the lack of consistent intervention for the removal of children from dangerous places, considering exploitation as a cultural issue and not as a criminal case to be pursued or a legal obligation to intervene.

It is recommended that the state police officers be ordered by the Ministry of Internal Affairs to remove children from dangerous places together with their parents in any case. Consider initiating a criminal investigation in repeated cases. The Ministry of the Field, including all Social Institutions, should have as their primary task the removal of children from dangerous places and in repeated cases the initiation of procedures for the removal of parental responsibility and placement of children at high risk in social care institutions for children.

**Keywords**: children, dangerous places, parental responsibility, social protection institutions, police.

## Introduction

A little boy, only 7 years old, was begging at a traffic light near the Kamza bend in Tirana.

A driver gives him some coins while stopping at the traffic light. The boy dropped the coins under the car and rushed to get them, but in the meantime the traffic light turned green and the driver had not seen the minor who was looking for the coins.

The car crushed the little boy and another car coming after it passes over his body.

This event happened in February 2026.

All the media broke the news. A child lost his life, the drivers were arrested. It was a disaster. A few days have passed and at the traffic lights of Tirana it is not difficult to find other children begging in the same way as the boy who lost his life hoping that the coins will not fall to the ground again.....

This event awakens not only social indignation about the lack of care for children in street situations but also the need to understand why the social protection institutions failed in this case?! What prevented them from fulfilling their duty and the mission for which they were created?

Many media actors have tried to critically explain that the fault lies with institutions that do not function by presenting political, social and cultural arguments but without professionally highlighting the concrete obstacles factors. In a general view, the public perception in this case is institutional negligence but also the poor performance of the protection structures.

This perception may be one-sided but perhaps also true, however, we cannot come to clear conclusions if we do not internally research the dynamics of the functioning of child protection institutions. Regarding this perception, there can be two situations: the first is that institutions are performing very well considering their limited capacity, lack of resources, infrastructure, budget or human resources.

Secondly, the institutions are not performing at the appropriate level, even though they have the main means of action provided and this may lead us to the conclusion that there is negligence or professional incompetence.

The objectives of this study consist in analyzing the legal aspect on the basis of which the institutions act in this case. We need to understand whether there are influential legal spaces or the law is adequate.

To understand what is the legal obligation for law enforcement institutions and how they act in relation to cases of children in a situation on the road in danger to their lives.

To recognize the level of institutional coordination to realize an adequate level of protection.

The purpose of this study is to identify the problems that hinder child protection institutions and the state police from protecting children from exploitation by forcing them to beg or work in life-threatening places.

This article does not aim to simply investigate this case, but of a social phenomenon that is much broader: institutional inaction in high-risk cases that require emergency intervention for children in street situations. Undoubtedly, an improvement in performance is required, and an increase in the level of prevention of cases where children are exposed to high risks to life, but first we need to clearly understand the institutional situation of action by analyzing the problems that affect their intervention.

The importance of this research lies in the fact of finding concrete unknown factors that hinder the functioning of the system, not just general, conjecturing elements. The focus of this research is the activity of

institutions only for cases of intervention when children are exposed to visible, life-threatening places such as car roads and traffic lights.

In order to address these problems, we are first raising some questions, which we will have to answer concretely.

What is the level of commitment of the employees of the child protection units to remove children from life-threatening areas that are mostly cars on the roads?

What are the measures taken by the state police when they notice children endangering their lives on the road of cars?

Are there any binding provisions for these institutions to act?

Is there a concrete strategy at the state level to protect children in street situations by focusing mainly on leaving life-threatening areas and taking measures for their rehabilitation?

The protection of the child from any kind of violence and exploitation is one of the fundamental principles of child protection. Article 54 point 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Albania provides that: "Every child has the right to be protected from violence, ill-treatment, exploitation and use for work, especially below the minimum age for child labour, which may harm health, morals or endanger his life or normal development".

Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges all States Parties to take all necessary measures to protect children from physical and psychological violence, neglect, ill-treatment and exploitation. These measures are concretized through Law No. 18/2017

"On the rights and protection of the child"

Article 7 of this law stipulates that; "The protection of the child's life is guaranteed by law. The child enjoys the highest possible standards of health, treatment and rehabilitation."

Article 24 stipulates that; "The child is protected from economic exploitation, according to the provisions of the Criminal Code, which includes the performance of any work that: poses risks to physical and mental health, well-being and overall development."

Article 34 defines the institutional advisory and coordination mechanisms and structures for the rights and protection of the child at the central and local level.

The institutional advisory and coordination mechanisms at the central level are:

The National Council for the Rights and Protection of the Child which has an advisory role.

a) the Minister who coordinates the work on issues of children's rights and protection;

b) the State Agency for the Rights and Protection of the Child;

c) any minister responsible, according to the field he covers, in relation to the rights of the child and their protection. These institutions have an elite role.

The structures for child protection at the local level are:

a) the municipality;

b) the structure responsible for social services in the municipality;

c) the Child Protection Unit at the structure responsible for social services in the municipality;

d) the Needs Assessment and Referral Unit to the Municipality or Administrative Units;

d) the child protection officer at the child protection unit and the needs assessment and referral unit.

The law clearly defines the concrete duties of each actor. The law is functional and applicable as there is a defined budget at the service of each body and individual, professionals employed with clearly defined tasks for each level of protection.

Meanwhile, in the Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania, Article 124/b in the second paragraph stipulates that; Coercion, exploitation, inducement or use of a minor to work, to provide income, to beg or to perform actions that impair his mental and/or physical development, or his education, is punishable by imprisonment from two to five years. When the offense caused serious damage to health or the death of a minor, it is punishable by imprisonment from ten to twenty years.

The State Agency for Children's Rights and Protection, through the implementation of the National Agenda for the Rights of the Child (2021-2026) has had as specific objectives the protection of children from economic exploitation, child labor, trafficking and other forms of violence.

One of the main elements of this agenda is the protection of children from economic exploitation and in particular from begging. The agenda has a binding character for all institutions of social protection for children and

contains concrete tasks and objectives in order to take measures for the protection of children in street situations.

Based on these provisions, law enforcement institutions in the social and law enforcement fields are obliged to take appropriate measures for the protection of children in cases of economic exploitation.

Child exploitation is a complex phenomenon. It includes cultural, educational impacts, lack of education, ignorance of laws, parental obligations, and a number of economic, social, and political factors that affect child and family development. In order to cope with this social problem, institutional intervention is needed for the protection of children in street situations and in particular, of the category of children who are forcibly forced to beg on the street with cars, traffic lights, garbage collection sites, which are dangerous for their health and life. Institutional intervention is the only hope for children to be protected from any kind of violence, mistreatment, trafficking and exploitation, so the importance of timely service, with standards, quality, qualified human resources using all means, infrastructure and capacities is vital.

**Methodology**

In order to understand the dynamics of institutional actions, a special instrument has been created for each of them, which aims to detect in a broader plan the dysfunction in the protection of children in street situations, with a focus on life-threatening cases. The in-depth interview with decision-making and law enforcement actors at the central and local level aims to bring the necessary information which will be analyzed in order to come to the conclusions that will serve to answer the research questions that were raised above.

For the purpose of this research, 12 interviews were conducted with representative actors at the central and local level and with representatives of the police.

The measurement mechanism is semi-structured in order to obtain the information necessary for the purpose of this study but also to collect more in-depth information, which can come out and is needed during the interview process. The social protection institutions involved at the central level are the State Agency for Protection and Rights of the Child, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare and at the local level the Child Protection Unit in the Municipality of Tirana. Interviews were also conducted with Tirana police officers.

The employees have been deliberately selected based on concrete tasks related to protection policies and the application of the field of direct child protection. The study has a qualitative character focused only on cases of action of institutions when children are in situations of begging on the street with cars that pose a danger to life.

The phenomenon of street begging with cars is very widespread in Albania and therefore qualitative research is necessary to bring a broader picture of the situation. According to John W Creswell & Poth, C. N (2024) qualitative research is particularly suitable for exorcising complex phenomena in their natural context and understanding participants' perspectives. Qualitative research is used when the researcher aims to understand, the experiences that individuals give to a particular phenomenon. In this case, it is intended to provide rich data with the experiences of professionals operating in the field of child protection and police officers. Since we have a dynamic on the developments of society

and individuals in terms of social changes, according to Uve Flick (2022) this method allows for a deeper understanding of social processes and the meanings that individuals build in everyday life. During the interview process, other issues may arise that have not been thought of or have not been known before, so flexibility is needed during the data collection process in order to provide sufficient information material to reach more accurate conclusions. According to Sarah J. Tracy (20220), quality research provides flexibility during the process of data collection and analysis, enabling the researcher to tailor questions and explore new topics that may emerge during the study.

The advantage of the qualitative study in this case lies in the fact that the interviewed subjects can express themselves in an unlimited way regarding the problems that affect the institutional intervention for children who beg on the road of cars. This data cannot be collected in any other way as it is complex in nature and limits the subject's ability to bring personal experiences. According to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2022) qualitative research serves especially for identifying and analyzing subjective topics, perceptions, and experiences that cannot be easily measured through quantitative methods.

During the interview process, in addition to the planned ones, new data came from the experiences of the interviewed subjects, which help to complete the research picture of the purpose of this study. The collected data were transcribed and then subjected to thematic analysis. Initially, the initial coding was applied, then the identification of the topics and then their revision and interpretation was carried out.

During the analytical process, the relationships between the topics were also examined and the verification of reliability through triangulation was carried out.

In the ethical considerations, in order to carry out this study, the informed consent of the participants was obtained. Since this study has a complex character, in order not to expose the participants to consequences or damages related to their work, anonymity has been fully preserved, including privacy for not publishing those data that may have a personal character. This study cannot be of a generalized character, as it was conducted in a limited area with a special focus only on cases of begging on the road of cars, but it can help professionals, decision-makers, legislators and law enforcement bodies to understand in more depth the problems that affect the system of protection of children at risk for life and help them to take adequate measures.

**Findings and discussions**

Regarding the level of applicability of the law, the interviewed professionals say that they know the law fully and clearly understand its binding character. In the case of the initiation of criminal proceedings, police officers say that it is difficult to understand whether children who are in street situations are begging due to the high level of poverty of the family, which has no other choice or are being exploited. They think that this is more of a social issue than a criminal one. According to them, it is not reasonable for a child who lives in extreme poverty and tries to survive, to be left without parents and to be imprisoned because of poverty.

Regarding this finding, we must bring some analytical arguments. First of all, the employees are law enforcers and not law-interpreters. This concept

should be clearly distinguished legally as police officers do not bring the same arguments if the action contrary to the law would be for another matter. In this sense, if these parents commit theft due to poverty or to feed their children, they will be prosecuted anyway. This fact was confirmed by the interview process where the participants stated that in case of theft, the police action would be to arrest the perpetrator without prejudice to the cause that pushes him to commit the illegal action.

In the case when a criminal offense is committed that is provided for by Article 124/b of the Criminal Code, which is mistreatment and exploitation to benefit the income of the minor from the family members, in this case, the police hesitates and does not carry out actions of detention or arrest against the parents. In parallel, we have two violations of the law by the same people who in this case are the parents of the children. Both are punishable by the Criminal Code. For both cases, the law enforcement body, which is the police, is obliged to act the same, but in the second case we are faced with selective action by prejudice the law with inaction when the criminal offense is committed against children.

From this analysis, the question naturally arises: Should the police officer who is law enforcement prejudge the law or should he apply it to every case equally? Why when a child from his family members is injured by a criminal offense, exposing him to dangerous places that are car roads, the police officer does not act mainly but interprets the law? The answer to this question is given by the Albanian and international legislation itself. The law has the same effect of applicability for all citizens, without any distinction. Only the court can interpret and make decisions regarding certain issues, but in any case, the police must strictly enforce the law.

Regarding the question of how a police officer acts when he sees children begging at the traffic lights: interviewees answer that they do not take action on their own initiative unless there is a special order from their superiors. Regarding the question of whether the employee will encounter a violation of another type of criminal law or the Traffic Code, is a special order from the superiors needed: the answer is no, they act directly on their own initiative in accordance with the law. Why does the intervention to protect a child from high risk on a street full of cars require a special order from the superiors when this is provided by the Criminal Code as a violation? The interviewed subjects say that in their opinion, this work is of a cultural nature and is more related to social services than to the police ones.

Regarding the fact that if we accept that there are families in extreme poverty and children beg on the streets, why should they do it in dangerous places at traffic lights, car roads; Police officers say that children should be removed from these places but they return again and there is no clear guide on how to act in each case.

The employees of the child protection units, regarding the question of why they did not intervene to remove children from the road with cars, say that the greatest difficulty lies in the fact that after measures are taken to remove children from the road, cooperating with the police, after a few days their parents take them back to the street. However, the capacities of the centers to receive children in a street situation are not enough to cope with such a large number of cases that must be treated according to the law.

Another finding is that in general the phenomenon of children being used to beg at traffic lights belongs to the Roma community. Children, and in some cases accompanied by their parents, stand at traffic lights or even in the middle of the car road. They are a large number and one child protection unit employees find it difficult to operate.

Regarding this aspect, professionals in the social field say that the number of social workers at the local level is very limited in relation to the needs and number of children in street situations. This lack of human resources makes it impossible to follow up on all cases of child exploitation in dangerous countries.

Municipal employees also encounter a cultural problem which, according to them, is very difficult to change. This is related to the fact that most of the children are from the Roma community and begging for children for them is a common phenomenon and a way of life.

Regarding the question of why children are allowed to beg in the middle of the car road or traffic lights and moreover, why drivers are allowed to pay children while begging, police representatives say that in the Traffic Code of the Republic of Albania there is no prohibiting and sanctioning provision for the users of vehicles who give money to children or adults on the street or at the traffic lights. This provision should be added as it relates to dangerous pedestrian actions. The Traffic Code of the Republic of Albania stipulates that pedestrians are obliged to cross the white lines, to respect the rules of passage and circulation on the road, but ironically they are not obliged not to stand in the middle of the road of cars or to beg at traffic lights. This is a finding that requires inadequate attention from lawmakers.

However, even in the absence of a special provision, are there alternative ways of preventive action in this case? The interviewees on this case are divided in their perception. Two of them say that there can be no actions if they are not provided for in the law, while another says that it can be operated by Orders of the Minister of the Field or senior police leaders for not allowing child or adult beggars in dangerous places and also not allowing drivers to pay at traffic lights or on the road.

The results of this research show that there are no such orders from the authorities at the executive level.

From these data, which in a very concise way refer to the main problems, it is necessary to make an exhaustive analysis in order to reach accurate conclusions in order to implement the appropriate legal or institutional changes to reduce the pronounced manifestation of the phenomenon of exploitation of children to beg in dangerous areas.

Limited human resources are one of the main problems and this is related to budget review processes for each municipality. However, collaboration spaces can be created with independent organizations operating in this field. Student interns can be activated to become part of the process.

A particular aspect that requires attention is the proportional function of protection. This factor is related to the fact that the level of protection must be in fair proportion to the level of risk in which the child is. From this point of view, children who stand on the roads of cars or traffic lights are undoubtedly in a higher risk situation than children who perform the same illegal activity in safer places such as pedestrian squares or sidewalks.

Regarding this aspect, the professionals were asked why we do not act on the extreme cases of danger in which children find themselves while begging on the street with cars?

Most of them say that these children are too many and that their parents bring them back to the same place even after the actions of the child protection unit coordinated with the police.

From this data, it emerges that the main problem of the phenomenon is the massiveness of the spread by atrophying the defense system, which is anyway limited in capacities and infrastructure. But how can a normal protection system respond to the case of the massiveness of a phenomenon with a high level of danger? The assessment of the most dangerous cases in time, working selectively, but also the institutional coordination are two elements that affect the process of dealing with the situation. According to Emily Delap (2009) the forced begging of children constitutes a serious violation of children's rights and points to the failure of state mechanisms to protect children from economic exploitation. Although this study cited above was conducted by the author in Albania about 17 years ago, according to the findings of our study it turns out to be the same problematic; failure of state child protection systems and mechanisms. This comparison shows that if Albania has experienced positive developments in other areas, child protection remains a problem and a challenge that requires increased attention.

The Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania has approved the National Agenda for the Protection of Children's Rights. This mechanism includes concrete measures for the protection of children from economic exploitation. The institutions responsible for implementing this Agenda

seem to have difficulties in their efforts to prevent and address the phenomenon of child exploitation, especially in those cases where the risk of child exposure is high. Children still remain in a fragile situation even though normative acts with clearly articulated objectives have been adopted. The challenge remains in their implementation by the responsible institutions, as they have functional coping capacities.

According to UNICEF in the Protection Strategy 2021-2030, child protection systems must be able to effectively prevent, identify and respond to all forms of child violence, neglect, abuse and exploitation. The numerous cases of child exploitation require a systemic, coordinated response between social protection, education, health and justice institutions.

It is understandable that not all children can be treated in rehabilitation centers in the case of a massive phenomenon such as begging, to reach the UNICEF standard, but at least be treated urgently in cases where the child is in danger of life and those with a lower risk level that can be treated within a reasonable timeframe. In this regard, a distinction should be made between cases and the determination of the level of risk. From the data of this study, it results that in Tirana there are many children who beg at the traffic lights accompanied by their parents, but among them there are those who have come from other districts and are completely alone, as is the case of the 7-year-old boy we dealt with at the beginning of this article.

In the analysis of the facts, it should be noted that children have been forcibly forced to beg at traffic lights that constitute dangerous places for their lives. The reason why they beg precisely in these dangerous places is because the higher the level of danger in which the child is, the greater the

profit they get from exploitation. This also explains the fact that when the employees of the child protection units in cooperation with the police have taken actions to remove the children from traffic lights and car roads, they are forced by their parents to go again to the same high-risk place after a few days.

The interviewed participants stated that they have not taken measures to seek in court the removal of parental responsibility and the placement of children victims of economic exploitation at risk for their lives in child care institutions for repeated cases. But why are such measures not taken when they are provided for in the law?

In order to carry out an adequate and systematic intervention in this case, a coordination of protection institutions is needed by coordinating actions to protect children.

A study conducted by the OSCE in 2016-2019 with about 45 children who were victims of trafficking and exploitation in Albania, in which forced begging as a form of exploitation is also addressed, concludes that early identification, referral of cases and cooperation between child protection structures, police and justice system are essential elements for the protection of children from trafficking and other forms of exploitation, including forced begging.

The application of a protection procedure according to a detailed plan assessing the needs for children who are at high risk, would affect the cultivation of a working practice that will be followed by all professionals consistently.

Another finding of this study is the lack of a ban in the Traffic Code of Albania for drivers to pay beggars at traffic lights or on the road while they are in the car.

Apparently, it is not considered dangerous by the legislators for the driver to drive between people standing on the road or at traffic lights. If we analyze this aspect a little, we can conclude that if a driver drives through an area that is only for pedestrians, he will immediately face a legal sanction as he endangers people's lives, but if the opposite happens, when pedestrians go on the road of cars, isn't their lives equally endangered? Shouldn't the Traffic Code also address this provision by forcing law enforcement authorities to remove pedestrians from the road and forcing and making drivers aware not to pay children forced to beg in these places?! Although amending the law may take longer, law enforcement authorities have the competence to take preventive actions based on the general provisions of the law related to dangerous actions on the road. Such a measure would greatly reduce the motivation of abusive parents to force children who beg on the road of cars, positively affecting the reduction of the phenomenon which, as we pointed out above, is complex and requires a series of coordinated measures and actions.

**Conclusions**

The phenomenon of exploitation of children for forced begging by parents or other persons in Tirana is very widespread and complex. This phenomenon is massive in nature with the involvement of many children, most of them from the Roma community.

Children are forced by their parents or other people to beg on the roads of cars or traffic lights because their stay in dangerous areas increases the amount of profit from begging.

The main problems that prevent child protection institutions from acting are:

The massiveness of the spread of the phenomenon of begging for children on the roads of cars, which blocks the normal functioning of institutions.

The child protection system does not have sufficient capacities such as care centers for abused and exploited children and sufficient human resources in an acceptable ratio to the number of exploited children.

The possibility of placing children who are used for begging in life-threatening areas in these institutions until they reach adulthood while ensuring their sustainable development including education, education, health and emotional care is limited.

The lack of consistent intervention for the removal of children from the dangerous places they are forced to beg and the failure to act to take preventive measures such as the request in court for the removal of parental responsibility in repeated cases and the initiation of criminal proceedings according to Article 124/b of the Criminal Code, come from the misunderstanding of the law by the actors of social institutions and those of the police, considering the exploitation of children as an issue and not as a criminal case or legal obligation that obliges them to act immediately.

The return of children to the same places that are used for begging, forced by their parents after measures have been taken for their removal in a coordinated manner by the State Agency for Protection and Children's

Rights, the Child Protection Unit in the Municipality and the police demotivates the employees of these institutions to act consistently and without tolerance to carry out all the actions provided for in the 2021-2026 Protection Agenda of the Rights of the Child and all the provisions of the Albanian legal framework regarding the protection of children.

The legal framework that defines the right of the child to protection and the obligation of the relevant institutions to act is clear, known and understandable by all professionals working in child protection institutions, but intervention becomes difficult and often impossible due to the lack of capacities needed to accommodate and care for children victims of economic exploitation at risk of life, consistently, until their complete rehabilitation.

There is no article in the Traffic Code of the Republic of Albania that prohibits begging or stopping pedestrians standing on the roads of cars or traffic lights. This legal space is used by parents or other people to exploit children by forcing them to beg in dangerous places.

In the Traffic Code of the Republic of Albania, there is no article that prohibits car drivers from communicating and undertaking dangerous actions by paying beggars in the middle of the car road or traffic lights. The addition of such a prohibitive and sanctioning article would reduce the level of motivation of owners or other persons to use children for begging in dangerous areas.

The heads of executive institutions such as the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Justice, senior Police Leaders have not taken orders of a normative character to prevent children from staying in life-threatening places to beg, such as car roads and traffic lights.

In Albania, a National Agenda 2021-2026 for the protection of children has been adopted, but even after the deadline for the realization of its objectives, the situation of exploitation of children in dangerous places remains the same. In case the Government Decisions are not accompanied by investments for increasing the capacities of the child protection system, the successful implementation of the National Strategies is not guaranteed.

**Recommendations**

Increasing the capacities of social protection for children, improving the infrastructure and increasing human resources, especially in the Child Protection units in the municipalities, remains a need that requires special attention from the Council of Ministers.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs and the General Directorate of the State Police are recommended to issue an order to the State Police, including all employees to remove children from dangerous places such as car roads, traffic lights, garbage collection sites together with their parents.

The Municipality of Tirana is recommended to adopt the same legal act ordering the Municipal Police not to allow children or adults to beg on the street with cars or traffic lights in any case.

To orient the Police from the highest bodies, in coordination with the prosecution body, to consider the start of criminal investigation in repeated cases after preventive measures have been taken by social protection institutions for the removal of children from dangerous areas.

The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, the State Agency for Child Protection and Rights, including all social institutions, should have as their primary task the removal of children from dangerous places and in

repeated cases the risk assessment structure, the Unit for Child Protection in the Municipality should apply the initiation of court procedures for the removal of parental responsibility and the placement of children at high risk in social care institutions for children.

The State Agency for Protection and Rights of the Child should organize the convening of a symposium with key child protection actors and other institutions, including the State Police, in order to design and implement a coordinated action plan for the immediate removal of children from life-threatening areas and to take other measures for the prevention and institutional treatment of this social problem.

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# Proactive Social Work in Child Protection Policy: The Case of Albania

Marinela Sota
University of Tirana
marinela.sota@unitir.edu.al

Abstract

Albania, since 2010, has adopted a policy for the protection of children and their rights. On 2017, it was approved the new law "On Child Protection and their Rights" responding to the need for a more effective protection and specialised working force, mainly social workers, in the field. Several meetings were organised during the consultation phase as a draft law. It was assessed the process of the consultation with civil society organisations, professionals and academics in the field of social work. It was used a mixed methods approach to assess the effectiveness of the consultation process. The data collected included routine data from Ministry of Health and Social Welfare as well as one consultation meetings with professionals and one consultation meeting with academics at Faculty of Social Sciences, with a total of 89 stakeholders. Results show that the consultation process in terms of quantitative and qualitative indicators was an effective process. During the process, 22 amendments of the draft law were developed. Additionally, study shows that as long as professionals in the field and researchers are involved in the policy making process, the effectiveness of the policy in the specific context has greater chances to be positive.

Keywords: *policy, consultations, effectiveness, Albania*

## Introduction

Child protection systems require coherent legislation aligned with frontline capacities and institutional arrangements that enable effective implementation. In many transitional contexts, policy development has historically been top-down and normative, resulting in laws that are difficult to operationalise at service-delivery levels. Participatory policy-making—where practitioners, academics, civil society and other stakeholders contribute to draft legislation—has been proposed as a mechanism for increasing policy relevance, feasibility, and legitimacy (UNICEF, 2018).

Albania's child protection reforms over the 2010s culminated in adoption of the Law on the Rights and Protection of the Child in 2017. This law aimed to modernise the legal framework, align it with international standards, and professionalise the child protection workforce, notably social workers. The drafting process involved consultations with civil society organisations, practitioners, and academics. This paper analyses that consultative process to assess its effectiveness in producing implementable policy provisions and explores how proactive involvement of social work professionals and researchers influenced the final law.

Child Protection Reform in Albania Following transitional political and institutional shifts after the 1990s, Albania has progressively worked to upgrade its legal and service frameworks for vulnerable groups, including children. The early 2010s saw increased attention to child welfare, influenced by international obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and by regional and donor-supported technical assistance. Key aims included establishing clearer child rights protections, strengthening prevention and family support services, and creating multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms to respond to abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

By 2016–2017, consensus emerged among policymakers, practitioners, and international partners that existing legislation needed revision to: (a) better define roles and responsibilities across sectors; (b) institutionalise professional qualifications and standards for social workers engaged in child protection; (c) strengthen procedural safeguards for children; and (d) enhance coordination and data-sharing procedures. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection led the drafting process and organised consultations as part of public and targeted engagement efforts.

This study aims to:

1. Assess whether the consultation process during drafting of the 2017 law was effective in producing relevant and implementable policy provisions.
2. Analyse how the involvement of social work professionals and academics affected the content and perceived ownership of the law.
3. Draw implications for institutionalising participatory mechanisms in child protection policy-making.

**Methodology**

The study used a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative process indicators from administrative records with qualitative analysis of consultation inputs and stakeholder feedback. This approach enables triangulation of documented outcomes (e.g., amendments adopted) with stakeholder perceptions regarding substance and influence (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Data used in this study are:

1. Administrative records from the MHSP documenting the consultation timeline, lists of participants, draft versions, and

formal written submissions received during the 2016–2017 consultation period.

2. Two targeted consultation meetings convened during the drafting process: one with social work professionals and practitioners (including frontline social workers and supervisors), and one with academics from the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS), University of Tirana. Combined attendance across both meetings was 89 stakeholders.
3. Meeting minutes, transcripts of plenary and breakout sessions, anonymised written submissions, and an internal tracking log that mapped stakeholder inputs to draft amendments.

Quantitative measures included:

a) Number of stakeholders attending targeted meetings (89).
b) Number of written submissions recorded during the consultation period (15)
c) Number of draft iterations circulated for comment (5)
d) Count of amendments incorporated and explicitly linked to consultation inputs (22).

Qualitative analysis involved thematic coding of meeting discussions, written submissions, and stakeholder reflections. Coding sought to identify recurring concerns, specific recommendations, and participants' perceptions of influence. An iterative coding process ensured themes captured both practitioner and academic perspectives. Triangulation compared quantitative indicators (amendment counts, participation) with qualitative evidence of substantive influence.

Administrative and consultation materials used were anonymised and used with institutional permission. Meeting participants provided consent for

the use of their anonymised contributions in analysis. The study followed University of Tirana ethical requirements for secondary use of administrative and consultation data.

**Findings and discussion**

Targeted consultations included 89 stakeholders across two meetings, with a mix of frontline social workers, supervisors, NGO representatives, and academics. The MHSP circulated multiple draft versions during the consultation window and established mechanisms for collecting written submissions through email and formal comment templates. The internal tracking log indicates 22 amendments were explicitly linked to stakeholder inputs and adopted in subsequent drafts and in the final law.

The amendments spanned several domains: clearer definitions of roles and responsibilities for social workers and other professionals; procedural provisions for multi-sectoral coordination; language strengthening protection of children's participation rights; and several technical clarifications to ensure consistency across articles.

Three principal themes emerged from the qualitative analysis:

1. Professionalisation and role clarity- Practitioners emphasised the need for explicit definitions of social worker roles, minimum qualifications, supervision and training requirements, and manageable caseload expectations. Specific practitioner recommendations included:

a) Defining required professional education and practical competencies for social workers assigned child protection responsibilities.

b) Including provisions for continuous professional development and supervision structures.

c) Articulating caseload guidance and mechanisms for workload monitoring. These recommendations led to amendments that clarified professional qualification requirements, created references to professional standards and training obligations, and included language mandating supervisory and peer support mechanisms.

2. Multi-sectoral coordination and procedures- both academics and practitioners identified systemic weaknesses in inter-agency collaboration—particularly among health, education, police, and social services. Recommendations focused on:

a) Formal referral pathways and timelines.

b) Data-sharing protocols balanced with privacy protections.

c) Clarified roles of coordination bodies at municipal and national levels. Consultation inputs prompted strengthened coordination clauses, including requirements for inter-sectoral protocols, responsibilities for convening case conferences, and the establishment of data-sharing agreements under specified conditions.

3. Child participation and rights-based language-Academic contributors advocated stronger articulation of children's rights and explicit mechanisms facilitating children's participation in decisions affecting them, consistent with international standards. They proposed language to ensure age-appropriate participation, procedural safeguards, and child-sensitive perspectives in decision-making. The drafters incorporated refinements ensuring children's views are solicited and considered in processes, with attention to protection of privacy and best-interest determinations.

Stakeholders at the targeted meetings reported a perceived influence and ownership, as the consultations were substantive, citing specific draft changes that mirrored their input. Practitioners described increased clarity regarding expectations, which they believed would facilitate implementation and reduce discretionary ambiguity. Academics noted that the final text better reflected evidence-based approaches and aligned more closely with rights-based frameworks. The mapping log that connected inputs to amendments contributed to participants' perception that their contributions had tangible effect.

Effectiveness is evidenced by (a) measurable outputs—22 amendments adopted; (b) substantive content improvements related to implementability; and (c) stakeholder perceptions of influence and buy-in. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative indicators suggests the consultation process moved beyond a formal engagement to a participatory approach that informed substantive legal content.

The Albanian case demonstrates how proactive inclusion of social work professionals and academics in policy consultations enhances the relevance and practicability of child protection laws. Contributions from practitioners grounded the law in operational realities—identifying potential implementation bottlenecks and proposing workforce-related solutions. Academics contributed conceptual clarity and rights-based framing that improved the law's normative alignment with international standards.

Mechanisms by which consultation improved policy include:

a) Identification and correction of ambiguous, contradictory, or unimplementable provisions through frontline input.

b) Incorporation of workforce development elements (qualification, training, supervision) that support professionalisation.
c) Strengthening of formal coordination mechanisms, improving cross-sector referrals and case management.
d) Enhancement of child participation provisions aligning procedural safeguards with best-practice principles.

The findings align with literature suggesting that participatory policy development enhances legitimacy and implementation potential (Gagnon & Labonté, 2016; March & Olsen, 2018). In child protection specifically, integrated policy-making that draws from frontline expertise tends to produce more operationally coherent legislation and clearer guidance for practitioners (UNICEF, 2018). The Albanian experience adds empirical support to these propositions within a post-transition European context where institutional capacities and professional standards are evolving.

Limitations

The study focuses on targeted consultations with professionals and academics and uses administrative records and meeting documentation. It does not comprehensively analyse the full public consultation spectrum, the views of children and caregivers, or the inputs from all civil society organisations. Outcomes measured are proximal—changes to draft law and stakeholder perceptions—rather than long-term implementation outcomes or impacts on child welfare. Further longitudinal evaluation is required to assess whether legislative changes translated into improved service delivery and child outcomes.

**Recommendations**

To maximise the benefits of participatory policy-making in child protection, the following actions are recommended:

1. Institutionalise structured consultation mechanisms

- Formalise timelines, stakeholder mapping, and targeted consultation sessions involving practitioners, academics, service users (including children where appropriate), and civil society.
- Ensure consultations are iterative, with draft versions circulated and feedback explicitly tracked.

2. Implement transparent tracking and feedback systems

- Maintain publicly accessible logs mapping inputs to amendments, providing transparency about which recommendations were adopted or rejected and the rationale.
- Use feedback loops to enhance stakeholder trust and sustained engagement.

3. Integrate implementation planning with legislative drafting

- Pair legal reforms with social work'workforce development planning (training curricula, supervision models, caseload standards) and budgetary commitments to operationalise statutory provisions.
- Create implementation guidelines and protocols that translate legal language into everyday practice.

4. Strengthen multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms

- Formalise referral pathways, case-conference procedures, and data-sharing agreements, ensuring clear roles and responsibilities at municipal and national levels.
- Invest in capacity-building for coordination bodies and frontline agencies.

5. Include voices of children and families

- Develop child-friendly consultation methods to include children's perspectives in policy-making while safeguarding their welfare, and integrate caregiver perspectives to ensure family-centered provisions.

**Conclusions**

The consultation process during drafting of Albania's 2017 Law on the Rights and Protection of the Child demonstrates that meaningful involvement of social work professionals and researchers can materially improve the clarity, relevance, and implementability of child protection legislation. The adoption of 22 amendments linked to stakeholder input, together with participant perceptions of substantive influence, indicates that consultative engagement contributed to making the law more attuned to frontline realities and scholarly evidence. For jurisdictions pursuing child protection reforms, institutionalising participatory, transparent, and iterative consultation processes—coupled with practical implementation planning—can strengthen the likelihood that legal reforms translate into improved protections for children.

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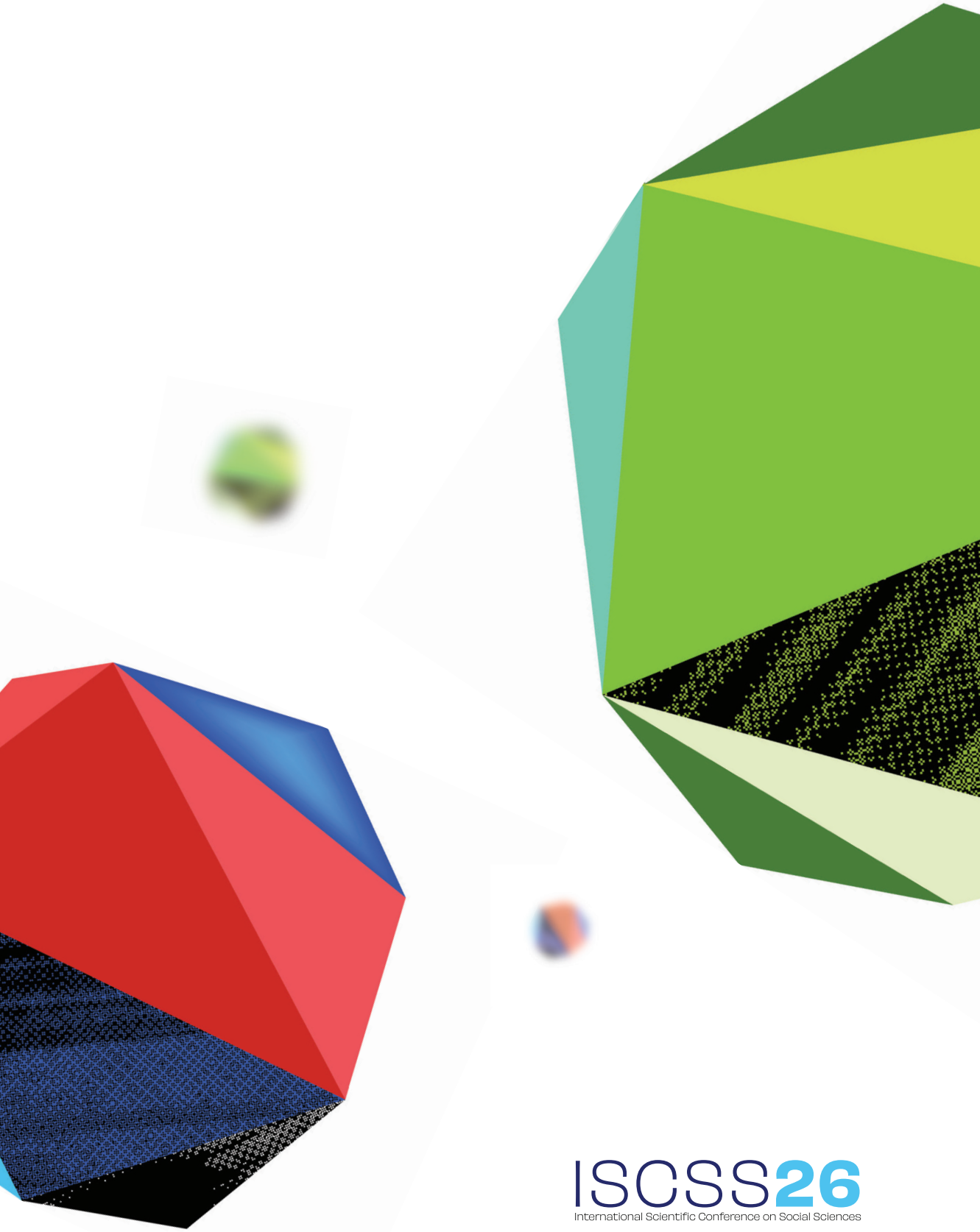

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