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Proceedings

International & Interdisciplinary Conference

Toward an Intelligent Society: Challenges & Opportunities"

University Fehmi Agani Gjakove, Kosovo
22-23 May 2026

- 230 Papers & Presentations
- 340 Authors, Co-authors & Contributors
- 27 Countries Represented • Plenary Session
- 35 Presentation Sessions • Ambassador for Peace Awards
- Award for Excellence in Research and Practice
- UFA Students for a Good Society

Universiteti·University FEHMI AGANI GJAKOVË

ALBSA-SHSSH Albanian Sociological Association Shoqata Sociologjike Shqiptare

AIS Albanian Institute of Sociology

AIS
Albanian Institute of Sociology

ALBSA-SHSSH
Albanian Sociological Association
Shoqata Sociologjike Shqiptare

ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL & INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCES (AIS-ALBSA & INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS)

ALBANIA – KOSOVO – NORTH MACEDONIA
2015 - 2027

SHKODER, ALBANIA
20TH Annual 2025

TIRANA, ALBANIA
12TH Annual 2017
22ND Annual 2027

DURRES, ALBANIA
14TH Annual 2019

VLORA, ALBANIA
18TH Annual 2023

KORCA, ALBANIA
16TH Annual 2021

MITROVICA, KOSOVO
13TH Annual 2018

PRISTINA, KOSOVO
10TH Annual 2015
19TH Annual 2024

GJILAN, KOSOVO
17TH Annual 2022

GJAKOVE, KOSOVO
21ST Annual 2026

PRIZREN, KOSOVO
15TH Annual 2020

TETOVO, NORTH MACEDONIA
11TH Annual 2016

2015	PRISTINA, KOSOVO	**2019**	DURRES, ALBANIA	**2023**	VLORA, ALBANIA
2016	TETOVO, NORTH MACEDONIA	**2020**	PRIZREN, KOSOVO	**2024**	PRISTINA, KOSOVO
2017	TIRANA, ALBANIA	**2021**	KORCA, ALBANIA	**2025**	SHKODER, ALBANIA
2018	MITROVICA, KOSOVO	**2022**	GJILAN, KOSOVO	**2026**	GJAKOVE, KOSOVO
				2027	TIRANA, ALBANIA

Proceedings

"Toward an Intelligent Society: Challenges & Opportunities"
International & Interdisciplinary Conference:

21st International Conference of AIS-ALBSA & Institutional Partners

6th Annual Conference of Center for School Leadership (CSL – AADF)
&
Midterm Conference of the Balkan Sociological Forum (BSF) - making its 15th Anniversary

Organizing Institutions:

University Fehmi Agani Gjakova, KOSOVO
International Sociological Association, ISA
CSL – AADF Center for School Leadership, ALBANIA
Universal Peace Federation, UPF
LINK University Roma, ITALY
LTC & Polis Publications
National Association of Sociologists (ANS), ITALY
University "Luigj Gurakuqi" Shkoder, ALBANIA
South East European University, NORTH MACEDONIA
University "Aleksander Moisiu" Durres, ALBANIA
Public University "Kadri Zeka" Gjilan, KOSOVO
University "Fan S. Noli" Korca, ALBANIA
University of Mitrovica "Isa Boletini", KOSOVO
University "Ismail Qemali" Vlora, ALBANIA
University "Ukshin Hoti" Prizren, KOSOVO
Sports University of Tirana, ALBANIA
University of Arts Tirana, ALBANIA
AAB University College, KOSOVO
Barleti University Tirana, ALBANIA
Dardania University College, KOSOVO
Qiriazi University College Tirana, ALBANIA
Institute of Sociology, Demographic Research and Innovation (ISDI), KOSOVO
Institute of Science and Technology - INSI, KOSOVO
International Sociological Association, ISA
Balkan Sociological Forum, BSF
Albanian Institute of Sociology - Albanian Sociological Association

Place & Time:
University Fehmi Agani Gjakova, KOSOVO
22-23 May 2026

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www.sociology.al

ALL ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL & INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCES (2006-2027)

22nd International Conference: "Art and Sport in Present & Future Society "
University of Arts Tirana & Sports University of Tirana, ALBANIA: 7–8 May 2027

21thAnnual International Conference: "Toward an Intelligent Society: Challenges & Opportunities"
University Fehmi Agani Gjakove, Kosovo: 22-23 May 2026

20thAnnual International Conference: "Development in Turbulent Times"
University Luigj Gurakuqi Shkoder, ALBANIA, 14-15 November 2025

19thAnnual International Conference: "Well-being in the Challenging Times"
AAB College, KOSOVA: 15-16 November 2024

18th Annual International Conference: "Social Capital and Public Sphere in Contemporary Society"
University Ismail Qemali Vlora, ALBANIA: 10-11 November 2023

17th Annual International Conference: The role of Technology in the Shaping of Society
University of Gjilan Kadri Zeka, KOSOVO: 11-12 November 2022

16th Annual International Conference: Education and Culture in Contemporary Society
University Fan S. Noli of Korca, Albania: 5-6 November 2021

15th Annual International Conference: Comparative Studies in Modern Society; Balkans in European and Global Context
Universiteti of Prizren Ukshin Hoti, KOSOVO: 6-7 November 2020
(Postponed from November 2020 to 19-20 March 2021, due to Covid-19 Pandemic)

14th Annual International Conference: Social institutions in Contemporary Society
[The Interaction between Education, Family, Religion, Politics, and Economy]
Durres-Albania: 15-16 November 2019

13th Annual International Conference: Continuity & Change; Balkans in European, and Global Context
[Balanced Perspective of Past, Present & Future]
Mitrovica-Kosovo: 16-17 November 2018

12th Annual International Conference: Good Society – a multidimensional Approach
Tirana-Albania: 17-18 November 2017

11th Annual International Conference: Education & Sustainable Development: the future we are creating
Skopje-Tetovo, North Macedonia: 18-19 November 2016

10th Annual International Conference: How Migration is shaping the Contemporary Society?
Pristine-Kosovo: 20-21 November 2015

9th Annual International Conference: Law and values in contemporary society
Tirana-Albania 21-22 November 2014

8th Annual International Conference: Democracy in Times of Turmoil; A multidimensional approach
Durres –Albania: 22-23 November 2013

7th Annual International Conference: Identity, image, and social cohesion in our time of interdependence
Vlora-Albania: 26-28 November 2012

6th Annual International Conference: Education in turbulent times: The Albanian case in European and global context
Tirana-Albania: 21-22 November 2011

5th Annual conference: The social problems: their study, treatment, and solutions; Albania in global context
Tirana-Albania: 7-8 June 2010

4th Annual International conference: Twenty Years of Democratic Transformations: Albania in East European Context
Tirana-Albania: 10 December 2009

3rd AIS International Conference: World Economic Crises and its impact on the Albanian Economic and Social Life
Tirana-Albania: 22 May 2009

2nd Annual International Conference: Issues and Models of Communitarian Organization
Tirana-Albania: 27 June 2008

1st Annual International Conference: Political pluralism and Albanian political thought
Tirana-Albania: 15 June 2007

Funding Meeting and the Founding AIS Conference: Sociology in Albania and the need of its Institutionalization
Tirana-Albania: 21 November 2006; Tirana International Hotel

Contents:

I. **Scientific Committee and Local Organizing Committee** 4

II. **General Conference Program** 6

III. **Next International & Interdisciplinary Conference** 9

IV. **Abstracts Book & Full Papers** 11

4th Peace Studies Forum of UPF & AIS 11

Midterm Conference of the Balkan Sociological Forum, marking its 15th Anniversary 17

6th Conference of School Leadership (CSL – AADF) 28

"Toward an Intelligent Society: Challenges & Opportunities" (21st Annual International & Interdisciplinary Conference 57

TS 01. Culture, Arts, Public Sphere and Communication

TS 02. Population, Migration and Diaspora

TS 03. Education and Sport

TS 04. Politics, Democracy, Integration and Law

TS 05. Religion, Collective Behavior and Social Movements

TS 06. Marriage, Family, Welfare, Social Policy and Community

TS 07. Childhood, Youth, Leisure, Aging and Gender

TS 08. Work, Professions and Organization

TS 09. Comparative, Historical, Regional, Global and Future Studies

TS 10. Security, Public Health, Deviance and Social Control

TS 11. Ethnic Relations, Nationalism, Human Rights

TS 12. Environment, Economy, Tourism and Development

TS 13. Science, Technology, Digitalization and Innovation

V. **Index – Presenters & Contributors.** 461

I. SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE, COORDINATORS & LOCAL ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

Chair of the Conference:
Drilon BUNJAKU – Rector, University "Fehmi Agani" Gjakova, KOSOVO

(In alphabetic order)
Anila HYKA SMØRGRAV – *Diaspora Coordinating Council,* **FRANCE**
Aledia KONDAJ – *Sports University of Tirana,* **ALBANIA**
Apostolos G. PAPADOPOULOS – *BSF, Harokopio University,* **GREECE**
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Tonin GJURAJ – *University Luigj Gurakuqi Shkoder,* **ALBANIA**
Vasil TOLE – *Albanian Academy of Science,* **ALBANIA**

Conference Coordinators:
Ferdi KAMBERI – *University "Fehmi Agani" Gjakova,* **KOSOVO**
Jola KEPI – *CEO, Center for School Leadership (CSL-AADF),* **ALBANIA**

Coordinators of partner institutions:
Leke SOKOLI – *Albanian Institute of Sociology,* **ALBANIA**
Besim GOLLOPENI – *UMIB & Institute of Sociology, Demographic Research and Innovation - ISDI,* **KOSOVO**

Local Organizing Committee:
Chair
Nita SINA PRUTHI – *Secretary General, University "Fehmi Agani" Gjakova,* **KOSOVO**
Arta KAQI – *Administration of UEA Gjakova,* **KOSOVO**
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Ina XHAKOLLI – *Center for School Leadership (CSL-AADF)*
Eurona LEKA – *Center for School Leadership (CSL-AADF)*

Chair of the conference Secretary:
Elda SOKOLI KUTROLLI – *AIS-ALBSA*

II. GENERAL CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Registrations:

Registration Desk:
22 May 2026, from 09.00
University "Fehmi Agani" Gjakova, Kosovo
Faculty of Education, Philology, Social Science
https://uni-gjk.org/
[Dossiers: Conference Book/Proceedings, detailed information for the participants…]

Opening Ceremony and Plenary Session

Main Hall
University "Fehmi Agani" Gjakova, Kosovo
Faculty of Education, Philology, Social Science

Moderator:
Ferdi KAMBERI - Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences; University "Fehmi Agani" Gjakova, KOSOVO

Welcome to Kosovo and the University of Gjakova
Drilon BUNJAKU – Rector, University "Fehmi Agani" Gjakova, Kosovo

Representative of the Government of the Republic of Kosovo

Mr. **Hajrulla ÇEKU** – Minister of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, KOSOVO

Welcome to the 6th Annual Conference "Leadership and Management in Education"
Jola KEPI - Executive Director of Center for School Leadership (CSL)

Jacques MARION, France – Chairman of Universal Peace Federation for Europe and Middle East

Jonida LAMAJ - Albanian-American Development Foundation (AADF), ALBANIA

Representatives of the Organizing Institutions

Awards:

Ambassador of Peace
Jacques MARION (France) – Chairman of Universal Peace Federation for Europe and Middle East
&
Gani RROSHI – General Secretary of the Universal Peace Federation, Balkan

Award for Excellence in Research and Practice
& Best Partnership Award
Leke SOKOLI - Coordinator of the Partner Institutions & Scientific Secretary of the Commission of Academic Contribution Evaluation.
&
Tonin GJURAJ – Rector of University "Luigj Gurakuqi" Shkoder, ALBANIA

From Gjakova-Kosovo to Tirana-Albania

Next International Conference:
22nd International & Interdisciplinary Conference, 2027
& 7th Annual Conference of CSL – AADF

"Art and Sport in the Present and Future Society"
Albanian Academy of Science
University of Arts Tirana, ALBANIA
University of Sports Tirana, ALBANIA
Tirana, ALBANIA: 7-8 May 2026

Vasil TOLE – Acad. Albanian Academy of Science, ALBANIA
Agron KASA - Rector, University of Sports Tirana, ALBANIA
Erald BAKALLI – Rector, University of Arts Tirana, ALBANIA
Drilon BUNJAKU – Rector, University "Fehmi Agani" Gjakova, Kosovo

first day of the conference

22 May 2026
Opening Ceremony and Plenary Session
University "Fehmi Agani" Gjakova, Kosovo
Faculty of Education, Philology & Social Science:
10.00-11.20

Forth Peace Studies Forum (UPF & AIS-ALBSA)
12.00 – 13.30

Midterm Conference of the Balkan Sociological Forum (BSF) - making its 15th Anniversary
4 Parallel Sessions: 12.00-17.00

6th Annual Conference of School Leadership (CSL – AADF)
Presentations
2 Parallel Sessions: 12.00-17.00

21st International & Interdisciplinary Conference of AIS-ALBSA & Institutional Partners
Presentations of the first day:
14 Parallel Thematic Session: TS01-TS14
12.00-17.00

Second Day of the Conference: 23 May 2026

Presentations of Second Day
(Offline presentations)
University Fehmi Agani Gjakova, KOSOVO
10:00 – 13:00

Special and Joint Sessions/Workshops of the Second Day
Institutional Partners
10:00 – 13:00

Special Sessions – Workshops of partner institutions

22 – 29 May 2026
Each Special Session–Workshop will have its own dedicated Schedule and Program.

Conclusions, Closing Ceremony & Certificates "For participating and presenting the Paper"

with the signature of University Fehmi Agani Gjakova, Kosovo - Rector and/or Conference Coordinator.
(After the last presentation of each Conference Session)

III. NEXT INTERNATIONAL & INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE

From Gjakove - Kosovo to Tirana – Albania:
22nd International & Interdisciplinary Conference

"Art and Sport in Present & Future Society"

Tirana, ALBANIA
7–8 May 2027

Host Institutions:
Albanian Academy of Science
University of Arts Tirana
Sports University of Tirana

Format: On-site and online (for Special Sessions)

Abstract Submission Deadlines:
- **15 February 2027 - Early Deadline** (also for members of partner institutions in Good Standing)
- **15 March 2027 - Final Deadline** (including full papers for those interested in publishing them in the first edition of Proceedings)

Conference Aim

The aim of this International and Interdisciplinary Conference is to bring together researchers from all fields of study, students, academics, and other interested professionals from the Balkans, Europe, and beyond, in order to present research and exchange ideas on the central theme: *"Art and Sport in Present & Future Society"* which responds to the profound transformations that contemporary society is undergoing at cultural, social, and technological levels. Art and sport, traditionally perceived as separate domains, are increasingly intersecting, creating new interdisciplinary spaces for research, innovation, and social development…

Conference Structure

The conference is interdisciplinary and open to contributions in 15 Permanent Thematic Sessions (listed below), as well as in approximately the same number of Special Sessions or Workshops organized by Partner Institutions. This annual conference rotates each year between Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The 22nd edition (2027) will be held in Tirana, following previous conferences in Gjakova – Kosovo (2026), Shkoder – Albania (2025), Prishtina – Kosovo (2024), Vlore – Albania (2023), Gjilan – Kosovo (2022), Korce – Albania (2021), Prizren – Kosovo (2020), Durres – Albania (2019), Mitrovica – Kosovo (2018), Tirana – Albania (2017), Tetovo – North Macedonia (2016), among others.

Institutional Framework

This conference will be hosted by two universities with a distinguished history and strong academic tradition in their respective fields—the University of Arts and the Sports University of Tirana—in close partnership with the Academy of Sciences of Albania, as well as with other universities and institutions in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Italy, and beyond.

Conference Scientific Committee

Co-Chairs (on behalf of the Host Institutions):

- **Acad. Prof. Dr. Vasil TOLE** – Vice President, Albanian Academy of Sciences
- **Prof. Dr. Agron KASA** – Rector, Sports University of Tirana
- **Prof. Dr. Erald BAKALLI** – Rector, University of Arts Tirana

Members: *to be listed, before 30 June 2026*

Conference Organizing Committee & Coordinators of Partner Institutions

Chair:

Prof. Dr. Leke Sokoli – Albanian Institute of Sociology – Albanian Sociological Association (AIS-ALBSA)

Members: *to be listed, before 30 June 2026*

Conference themes:

Central Theme: **"Art and Sport in Present and Future Society"**

Other themes: by 15 Sections (CSL - TS14)

Special Sessions, Workshops, or Academic Forums:

Normally 15 Special Sessions/or Workshops/or Academic Forums (the same number as the Permanent Thematic Sessions - based on proposals from partner institutions). *(to be listed, before 30 November 2026)*

Chair of the Secretary of the conference:

Elda KUTROLLI - AIS-ALBSA Secretariat

E-mail: conference@sociology.al; annual.int.conference@gmail.com

WhatsApp: +355692044722; +355694067682

Call for papers: https://www.sociology.al/en/conferences/call-papers

We are looking forward to meeting you in Tirana, ALBANIA, in May 2027…!

IV. ABSTRACTS OR FULL PAPERS

4TH PEACE STUDIES FORUM

N° 2026 Uni.Gjakove-Int.Conf.181/Peace Studies Forum

An Intelligent Society: Toward a Peaceful World?

Jacques MARION
Universal Peace Federation Europe & Middle East Chapter, France
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The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence is reshaping contemporary society, enabling machines to perform increasingly complex cognitive tasks. This raises a fundamental question: can artificial intelligence contribute to the emergence of a more peaceful world? The answer depends not on the technology itself, but on the intentions and frameworks guiding its use. AI holds significant potential to mitigate conflict but also carries the risk of amplifying tensions if deployed irresponsibly. Realizing its positive potential requires international cooperation and the establishment of shared ethical standards. Such an endeavor demands more than technical or rational intelligence; it calls for the integration of "heart intelligence", a conscious cultivation of empathy, responsibility, and human-centered values. Ultimately, the scientific and technological breakthroughs that have enabled artificial intelligence must be accompanied by a parallel evolution in human awareness and moral commitment.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Global Peace, Technological Ethics, International Cooperation, Heart Intelligence, Human Values*

N° 2026 Uni.Gjakove-Int.Conf.02//Peace Studies Forum

Embedding Peace in Education: A Leadership Approach to Cultivating Harmony and Inclusion in Schools

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In an era marked by global polarization, conflict, and digital disruption, education stands as the most sustainable instrument for peacebuilding. The Center for School Leadership (CSL) in Albania has developed an innovative leadership-based educational model that integrates peace education principles into the professional formation of school principals and teachers. This model lies on three foundational pillars: emotional intelligence, inclusive pedagogy, and community-based leadership. Through the Leadership in Preschool and General Education programs, CSL equips school leaders with the competencies to foster democratic school cultures, mediate conflicts, and promote social cohesion within their institutions. The study explores how peace is operationalized through educational leadership training, focusing on methodologies such as collaborative decision-making, restorative communication, and values-based curriculum design. Using qualitative analysis of feedback from 350 certified school principals and case studies from pilot schools, findings demonstrate a measurable increase in teachers' and students' interpersonal empathy, conflict resolution capacity, and school climate satisfaction. CSL's framework suggests that sustainable peace cannot be taught as a subject alone but must be lived through leadership. By empowering educators to become agents of social harmony, the program positions education not merely to knowledge, but as a transformative pathway toward peaceful coexistence and democratic resilience in Albanian society.

Keywords: *Peace education, educational leadership, emotional intelligence, school culture*

N° 2026 Uni.Gjakove-Int.Conf.58// /Peace Studies Forum

AADF Projects: Education, Academic Diaspora & Artificial Intelligence

Jonida LAMAJ
Albanian-American Development Foundation (AADF), ALBANIA
E-mail: j.lamaj@aadf.org

This paper presents the projects of the Albanian American Development Foundation (AADF), an institution operating since 2009, as a legacy organization of the AAEF.

It began implementing projects in 2011, in four key areas of operation: Education for Sustainable Development, Leadership Development, Entrepreneurship, and Support for Cultural and Eco-tourism. To date, AADF has developed 86 projects, 35 of which are still ongoing. The total committed value since inception is about US$ 153 million and is growing every year, with US$ 92 M in Education & Leadership and US$ 61 M in Entrepreneurship & Cultural Heritage. Education, the cornerstone of AADF, has implemented a range of initiatives serving diverse age groups and stakeholders. For early learners and kindergarten-age children: Junior Achievement Albania and the Center for School Leadership. For K–9 and high-school students: Element IT, AI for Youth, and TUMO Tirana. For students: Clean Score, Junior UP, and Debating Economics. For young professionals: fellowship programs such as LEAD Albania, MIP, and the AADF Scholarship Program. For university researchers: the READ and BRIDGE programs. Development does not have to be about re-inventing the wheel! At AADF, we apply models that have proven successful. Some of the most Internationally proven successful models are BID-TIDs, LEAD Albania, Junior Achievement (JA) Albania, Center for School Leadership, TUMO Tirana, National Examination Center, EXPA, Albania's Integrated Management, Intel® AI for youth, Plug and Play Accelerator Program, 42 Tirana, Grameen Albania, etc..

Keywords: *AADF, Education and Leadership, READ Program, Academic Diaspora, Artificial Intelligence, Intelligent Society*

N° 2026 Uni.Gjakove-Int.Conf.76/Peace Studies Forum

Fehmi Agani, Andon Çeta and Pajazit Nushi as Representatives of Albanian Thought. Their Vision and Commitment to Peace

Leke SOKOLI
Albanian Institute of Sociology, ALBANIA
University of Tirana
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This paper is based on the complete body of work (both theoretical and applied) of three Kosovar scholars - Fehmi Agani, Andon Çeta, and Pajazit Nushi - who were born and received their primary education in Gjakova and dedicated their lives and intellectual activity to Kosovo. Their work is examined within the historical context in which they lived and worked, and comparatively with that of their contemporaries across the Albanian space in the Balkans and beyond. It is also analyzed in relation to the development of their respective disciplines in Europe and globally. On this basis, the paper advances generalizations indicating that they stand among the founding figures of Albanian social thought in their respective fields. First, Prof. Dr. Fehmi Agani was a philosopher, sociologist, and political scientist, and one of the central figures of Albanian social and political thought in the twentieth century. His contributions span several areas, including political sociology, state analysis, democracy, and civil society, particularly in formulating peaceful and democratic approaches to conflict resolution in Kosovo and beyond. His

thought constitutes a key reference point for the study of political transition, institution-building, and democratic culture in post-conflict societies. The paper further explores the theoretical and practical intersections between Clinical Sociology and Social Mediation, with a particular focus on the legacy of Prof. Andon Çeta in Kosovo. It revisits his work and public engagement not merely as a historical or moral reference, but as a significant case of sociological intervention in contexts of deep and protracted social conflict. The movement for the reconciliation of blood feuds in Kosovo, led by Prof. Çeta, represents a distinctive model of applied sociological practice, where academic knowledge was combined with cultural competence, moral authority, and collective action. In this sense, he can be regarded as the founder of Albanian clinical sociology. Third, the paper offers an analytical and reflective perspective on the contributions of Prof. Pajazit Nushi to the establishment of psychology as both an academic and applied discipline, as well as his broader influence on education, scientific culture, and Albanian social thought. Taken together, the paper develops broader generalizations regarding these three foundational figures in the history of Albanian social sciences, situating them within both national and international contexts. It goes beyond a merely commemorative dimension and encourages critical discussions on the contemporary relevance of their legacy in light of present-day challenges. The paper also highlights the vision of these three Kosovar scholars regarding peace, closely intertwined with their commitment to its institutionalization—from political institutions of the parallel state and civil society structures to cultural, scientific, and academic institutions. The conclusions drawn transcend the specific time and place in which these scholars from Gjakova lived and worked.

Keywords: *Kosovar scholars; Albanian social thought; conflict resolution; visions of peace; peace vs. pacifism.*

N° 2026 Gjakove Int. Conf. 106/Peace Studies Forum

Early Marriages among Girls in the RAE Community in Kosovo as a Challenge to Social Peace and Tolerance

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Early marriage is a critical violation of children's rights and remains prevalent among girls in marginalized communities. This study examines the dynamics and consequences of early marriages within the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian (RAE) communities in Kosovo, drawing on qualitative data from 60 semi-structured interviews conducted in Gjakova, Peja, and Klina. Findings indicate that a significant majority of participants entered marriage before the age of 16, driven by poverty, limited access to education, and entrenched social norms. Beyond its causes, early marriage produces profound and

interrelated consequences. It contributes to school dropout, child labor, and exposure to harmful environments, including substance abuse, petty crime, and exploitation. It is also associated with adolescent pregnancies, abortions, sexual abuse, and long-term physical and mental health challenges. These conditions often lead to unemployment, social dependency, and cycles of poverty and marginalization. Drawing on the concept of structural violence, the study argues that early marriage reflects systemic inequality and exclusion. These dynamics undermine individual well-being, weaken family structures, and erode social cohesion. Consequently, early marriage poses a direct threat to social peace and tolerance, as it perpetuates injustice and limits equal opportunities. The study concludes that addressing early marriage requires integrated, community-based policies focused on education, child protection, and social inclusion. Promoting these measures is essential for fostering sustainable peace at individual, family, and societal levels.

Keywords: *Early marriage, RAE community, Kosovo, social exclusion, children's rights, structural violence, peace, tolerance*

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Communication as a means of Peace in the family and the society

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Knowing that communication is the process of transmitting and understanding information and ideas between individuals or different groups, ideas and information which are often misunderstood and misinterpreted, then it remains to pay special attention to education on communication skills. Communication can be verbal, non-verbal, or even digital, and includes the expression of thoughts, feelings, and information in a way that others can understand. Culture is what shapes our way of communicating, communication style, language, and the meaning of expressions and symbols. If we do not have a culture, a communication education, than it is difficult for us to understand and solve certain problems. Communication is not simply the exchange of words, but an art that reveals a lot about our inner formation because as Peter Ducker says (Christian Science Monitor, 1993) "The most important thing in communication is to hear what is not said", which means we must understand the context, body language and unspoken emotions of the interlocutor. Therefore, this paper aims to highlight that effective communication promotes tolerance by being good listeners, being concise and precise in what we say, tolerance between groups, whether in the family

or in society. The paper analyzes how replacing the "language of blame" with the "language of needs" helps in de-escalating family and social tensions. In this paper, it will not be left aside an analysis of how good listeners we are as a society.

Keywords: *Communication, peace, empathy, family, dialogue*

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Building Peace in Kosovo: Challenges and Opportunities

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This paper aims to analyze the process of peacebuilding in Kosovo from an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating sociological, political, and cultural approaches. In a society that still bears the consequences of the conflicts of the 1990s and the Kosovo War, peacebuilding remains a complex process closely linked to historical, institutional, and identity-related factors. The paper addresses several key challenges, including ethnic fragmentation, lack of trust among communities, the influence of international policies, and the unfinished processes of reconciliation and transitional justice. In this context, the role of international actors is also examined, along with the impact of European integration processes on long-term stability. On the other hand, the paper highlights opportunities for building sustainable peace through peace education, inclusive economic development, the empowerment of civil society, and the promotion of intercultural dialogue. Particular attention is given to the role of youth and educational institutions as key factors in transforming a culture of conflict into a culture of coexistence. In conclusion, it is argued that peacebuilding in Kosovo requires an integrated, long-term, and trust-based approach, where the interaction between local and international actors is crucial for consolidating a democratic and peaceful society.

Keywords: *peacebuilding, Kosovo, reconciliation, social trust, intercultural dialogue, sustainable development*

MIDTERM CONFERENCE OF THE BALKAN SOCIOLOGICAL FORUM MARKING ITS 15TH ANNIVERSARY (2011-2026)

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Digitalisation as Enabling Infrastructure: Pathways in Circular Economy and Bioeconomy Research

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Digital technologies are increasingly promoted as key enablers of sustainability transitions, particularly in relation to circular economy and bioeconomy strategies. Across policy and research discourses, digitalization is often framed as a means to improve resource efficiency, coordination, and innovation outcomes. At the same time, critical scholarship in science and technology studies has highlighted the need to examine how digital technologies are embedded within existing socio-technical and governance arrangements, rather than assuming inherently transformative effects. This contribution examines how digital technologies are positioned within circular economy and bioeconomy research by analysing dominant and emerging thematic pathways in the scientific literature. Drawing on a network-based analysis of keyword co-occurrence and temporal dynamics, the study identifies major thematic clusters and explores how specific digital technologies (namely: artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, and blockchain) have gained prominence across different sustainability-related contexts. The findings show that digitalisation is most frequently framed as an enabling infrastructure supporting established domains such as resource management, energy systems, and sustainability assessment, while more recent research points to emerging, more integrated socio-technical configurations linking digital technologies with governance mechanisms and system-level coordination. By mapping how digitalisation, innovation, and sustainability are co-articulated in contemporary research, the paper contributes to sociological debates on digital innovation and sustainability transitions. It highlights the predominantly incremental role attributed to digital technologies, as well as the growing importance of governance frameworks and policy-oriented narratives, including the Sustainable Development Goals, in shaping digital sustainability discourses.

Keywords: *Digitalisation, sustainability transitions, circular economy, bioeconomy*

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Model Environment for Implementing Circular Economy principles: A Digital Infrastructure for Sustainable Transition

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The transition from a linear to a Circular Economy (CE) is one of the European Union's central development priorities, yet progress remains insufficient in meeting post-2015 strategic objectives. Simultaneously, the EU's Digital Decade agenda highlights digital transformation as a key driver of competitiveness, resilience, and strategic autonomy. This paper positions digitalization as a critical enabler of the circular transition and introduces pioneering research aimedat developing a dedicated Model Environment for implementing the Circular Economy in Slovenia. The proposed model of the environment functions as a digital infrastructure that integrates a data repository of material, financial, knowledge, and technological flows; an ontology-based framework for actor integration; and simulation modules for modeling CE processes. By combining empirical case studies, meta-analysis, and systems modeling, the platform enables controlled experimentation with circular business models and stakeholder networks without disrupting real-world operations. The research addresses the central question: To what extent can a dedicated digital environment optimize CE processes and strengthen stakeholder collaboration in Slovenia? The research contributes to the knowledge economy by transforming dispersed data into actionable insights and supporting evidence-based decision-making for businesses, policymakers, and local communities. By simulating physical, organizational, and social dimensions of circular systems, the model environment enhances institutional learning, reduces transition risks, and fosters innovation ecosystems aligned with Sustainable Development Goals. The paper argues that digital infrastructures such as CE model environments are not merely technical tools but strategic governance instruments that accelerate sustainable development, strengthen regional resilience, and position Balkan societies within emerging European green and digital transformation frameworks.

Keywords: *Circular Economy, Digitalization, Model Environment, Knowledge Economy, Sustainable Development, EU Transition*

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Digital inequality and algorithmic hiring in contemporary labour markets

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The rapid digitalization of labour markets has introduced new technological infrastructures that mediate access to employment opportunities. In recent years, artificial intelligence and

automated recruitment systems have become increasingly integrated into hiring processes through applicant tracking systems, automated screening tools, and algorithmic candidate ranking models. While these technologies promise efficiency and scalability for organizations, they also raise important sociological concerns regarding digital divides, algorithmic visibility, and emerging forms of social exclusion. This paper examines algorithmic recruitment as a mechanism that may reproduce or amplify digital inequalities in contemporary labour markets. In digitally mediated hiring environments, candidates' professional identities are translated into standardized data formats that can be processed by algorithmic systems. As a result, access to employment opportunities increasingly depends on the ability of individuals to become legible within digital infrastructures. Candidates whose educational trajectories, professional experiences, or career paths do not easily conform to standardized data structures may become less visible in automated selection processes. Drawing on sociological debates on digital inequality, labour market stratification, and labour market digitalization, the paper explores how algorithmic recruitment systems may create new forms of differentiation between candidates who are easily recognized by digital systems and those whose profiles remain difficult to interpret algorithmically. In the context of the Balkan region, where labour markets are shaped by post-socialist transformations, migration dynamics, and uneven levels of digital development, these mechanisms may contribute to reinforcing existing social inequalities. The paper argues that digital divides should not be understood solely as disparities in access to technology, but also as differences in how individuals are represented, interpreted, and evaluated within algorithmic infrastructures. By analyzing recruitment technologies as institutional mechanisms that structure access to employment, the study contributes to broader sociological discussions on digitalization, knowledge economies, and social inclusion in contemporary societies.

Keywords: *digital inequality, algorithmic recruitment, digital divides, labour market digitalization, social exclusion*

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Adversity Quotient and Collective Social Intelligence in War: Lessons from Ukraine for Balkan Societies

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine has placed extraordinary demands on collective human intelligence, testing the capacity of societies to adapt under sustained adversity. Drawing on Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences framework and the concept of Adversity Quotient (AQ), this paper explores how war-affected populations develop and express social intelligence—practical coordination, emotional regulation, and community problem-solving—in response to displacement and disruption. The analysis draws from the Life in War Survey (LIWS), a two-wave panel study conducted by the Kyiv

International Institute of Sociology (KIIS). The first wave (18 January–8 February 2022) surveyed 1,531 respondents aged 15+ in government-controlled areas using stratified three-stage random sampling and the ESS 10 questionnaire. The second wave (24 August–6 October 2022) re-interviewed 595 panel participants via telephone, adding questions on war exposure, internal displacement, and adaptive behaviors. Results show widespread economic, psychological, and relational strains, yet also robust civic engagement, volunteering, and gradual recovery in life satisfaction and trust in institutions. When contextualized with aggregate indicators from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' Humanitarian Needs Overviews and the International Organization for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix (2022–early 2026), the data reveal an initial peak in displacement followed by a progressive decline, with persistent regional imbalances in eastern and southern Ukraine. These patterns illustrate how acute adversity can stimulate collective AQ and social intelligence, enabling coordinated responses despite fragmentation. For Balkan societies confronting legacies of conflict and risks of renewed instability, the Ukrainian case offers a comparative model: resilience emerges not only from survival but from the active cultivation of shared intelligence. The paper concludes with implications for policies that strengthen inclusive, community-driven adaptation in Southeast Europe.

Keywords: *adversity quotient, social intelligence, war displacement, collective resilience, Ukraine-Balkans comparison*

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Social Transformations in the Balkans Post-socialism and delayed modernization

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This paper aims to provide an analysis of the social policies implemented in Romania in order to manage the Roma minority issue before and after the 1989 Revolution. Its main goal is to investigate whether Romania had a better social integration system put in place as to enable addressing the Roma minority issue during communism or afterwards. Today, the Romani community is dealing with systemic ethnic discrimination that brings about issues like poverty, unemployment, and homelessness. The lack of financial resources needed in order to survive in capitalism makes it hard for low-income families to ensure decent living conditions for themselves and their children. Negative attitudes towards the Romani affect their access to healthcare, counsel, education, and housing as they become systematically excluded from the social life of the majority and are made into outsiders in their own country. Thus, this study means to show the perspective of the Romani on the issue and how they feel the fall of communism has impacted their community by further exploring certain dimensions of social life in Romania - education, housing, and labour dynamics.

Keywords: *Social polarization, quality of life, vulnerable groups, economic inequality, neoliberal policies, social inclusion*

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AI in the Balkan's Context: A New Developmental Promise or Reinforcing Marginality of the Region?

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Artificial intelligence (AI) has been become a buzzword nowadays, often intertwined with misunderstanding, but also ubiquitous phenomenon, whose profound social impact cannot be neglected. As one of the pivotal dimensions of wider technological transformations labelled as the Fourth Industrial Revolution, it tremendously shifts ways in which members of a society conduct working tasks, perform daily routines, spend leisure time, and generally shapes technological environment of the 21st century. However, the central question which main societal changes cutting edge technologies convey remains to be responded. This paper brings sociological reflections about the fore questions in the context of Balkan societies. Looking at the macroscopic level, propulsion of AI may bring some promising developmental perspective in terms of at least partially catching up technologically the most advanced countries, but generally perspective is not particularly optimistic in that regard. This standing is anchored in the following attributes of Balkan countries: 1) peripherial position in the wider European context; 2) post-socialist deindustrialisation and current structures of economies; 3) severe depopulation of Balkan societies; 4) continuous brain-drain; 5) insufficient investments in R&D, science and education. Rather than becoming respectful players in growing AI industries, Balkan's countries' involvement is most likely to deepen already existing developmental disparities and will take asymmetrical roles such as: 1) mines of mineral sources 'feeding' new technologies; 2) taking ecological risks connected with the mine extraction and waste disposal; 3) once again being a market for technologies developed in the rich countries; 4) pool of underpaid workforce serving the affluent industries.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence, Balkan societies, European periphery, developmental disparities*

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The digital age and youth: psychological, social and educational aspects

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The article explores the digital skills of young people in Bulgaria, emphasizing that digitalization has become an essential component of everyday life, particularly for younger generations. It addresses the key research question concerning the significance of

digitalization and its impact on society, professional development, and social advancement. The study is based on a national online survey conducted in 2023 by the authors; involving 386 participants aged 18–29. It analyzes young people's attitudes toward digitalization. Through self-assessment, the research examines their involvement in various online activities and evaluates how these competencies may affect their professional and other life domains. The findings indicate that most respondents own mobile devices and have access to the internet, including mobile connectivity. More than half report spending up to three hours online daily. The internet is used for a wide range of purposes, such as work, education, self-directed learning, entertainment, and information seeking. The study also assesses digital skill levels, with the majority of participants perceiving the Bulgarian population as having a moderate level of digital competence. Additionally, specific individual digital skills are analyzed and presented. The article highlights the crucial role of digitalization and digital literacy among young people, identifying them as a key resource for both individual development and broader societal transformation.

Keywords: *young people, digital literacy, digital skills, digital competences*

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Dynastic choice and political legitimacy in Balkan state-building: the Albanian case

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This study examines the issues of dynastic selection and political legitimacy in the state-building processes of Balkan states that gained independence from the Ottoman Empire, focusing on the role of local elites. The main argument is that dynastic choice was shaped not only by international power balances but also by the capacity of local social and religious elites to produce legitimacy. In this context, the study compares three dynastic models in newly established Balkan states: imported dynasties, indigenous dynasties, and hybrid models. In the Balkan case, the legitimizing capacity of orthodox elites functioned as a mediating force that enabled dynasties to be accepted not only politically but also socially, religiously, and institutionally. In this regard, orthodox elites and the church significantly contributed to the formation of national consciousness. In Bulgaria and Greece, where imported dynasties were established, rulers achieved legitimacy through relatively homogeneous and organized orthodox elites. In Serbia and Montenegro, indigenous dynasties maintained political stability by cooperating with local religious and social elites. The Romanian case demonstrates that legitimacy is not fixed but can be continuously reconstructed: alexandru cuza initially came to power with elite support but was later deposed due to conflicts with them, while the subsequent accession of prince carol showed that foreign dynasties could only be sustained with local elite backing. The declaration of Albanian independence on 28 November 1912 createda crisis of authority and instability. In 1913, the foreign installation of Wilhelm von wied as ruler failed due to fragmented social structures and disagreements among local actors. Orthodox elites with Greek influence, catholic elites oriented toward external support, and Muslim elites

linked to the ottoman legacy pursued divergent political directions. Consequently, Albania demonstrates that without a unified elite consensus, political authority could not be institutionalized and dynastic selection remained unsustainable.

Keywords: *Balkan state formation, elites, post-ottoman era, legitimacy, comparative history*

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Children's Subjective Understanding of Road Safety in Pakistan

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This paper offers a child centred qualitative analysis of how Pakistani children understand and negotiate road safety in their everyday mobility across home, school and neighbourhood spaces. Grounded in the Children's Worlds (CUWB) framework, which privileges children's own standpoints and meaning-making, the study addresses three questions: How do children define being "safe" on the road? Which relational actors and material conditions shape these meanings? How do safety perceptions enable or constrain children's agency in mobility decisions? This research adapts CUWB's participatory toolkit to mobility contexts through walk along interviews on school routes, child led mental maps of "safe/unsafe" spots, short photo elicitation diaries and paired peer conversations. Participants (aged 8–12) were recruited from contrasting urban and peri urban communities in Islamabad and Rawalpindi through schools and community centres, with parental consent and child assent. Analysis followed iterative coding and cross site comparison, linking children's safety vocabularies to specific route segments, actors (parents, police, drivers) and infrastructural artefacts (zebra crossings, speed bumps, traffic lights, bus stops). Preliminary findings (pilot n=12) identify four interpretive themes: safety as cared for accompaniment; safety as infrastructural readability; safety as moral order; and safety as situated agency. Children locate safety relationally, emphasizing trusted adults and disciplined drivers, while also developing micro-tactics such as crossing in groups or avoiding aggressive traffic zones. These meanings braid affect, morality and material conditions, revealing how mobility environments shape resilience and constraint simultaneously. This paper contributes empirically grounded insight into how everyday mobility ecologies influence children's subjective wellbeing and agency. It further proposes a comparative "Children's Safe Route" agenda to harmonize participatory tools and inform child responsive urban design and governance.

Keywords: *Children's Subjective Understanding of their Wellbeing, Childhood, Road Safety, Pakistan*

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Between East and West: Sociological Dimensions of North Macedonia's Integration into the Euro-Atlantic Security Framework

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This thesis examines public perceptions of North Macedonia's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), focusing on attitudes toward security, stability, and political integration. The research is based on a survey conducted with 256 respondents from different demographic categories. The findings reveal that a significant majority, 74%, express a positive stance toward NATO membership, perceiving it as a guarantor of national security, regional stability, and international recognition. Conversely, a smaller proportion of respondents express skepticism, citing concerns related to political dependence, financial obligations, and the potential for involvement in global conflicts. The study highlights that support for NATO membership is particularly strong among younger and urban populations, whereas reservations are more common among older and rural citizens. These results suggest that NATO integration is broadly legitimized in the public sphere of North Macedonia, though nuanced by demographic, socio-economic, and political factors. The paper concludes that understanding these perceptions is crucial for policymakers aiming to strengthen democratic legitimacy, foreign policy consensus, and public trust in transatlantic institutions.

Keywords: *NATO, North Macedonia, public perceptions, security, integration, foreign policy*

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Social technologies and transdisciplinary knowledge

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Social technologies are now being talked about more and more often, relevant journals are being published, and educational courses are being read. And although there is currently no clear definition of what is meant by this, it can be generally stated that we are talking about certain methods of influencing social processes in order to direct them in the right direction. The most general model of this process looks like one that

consists of a subject of action (technology), an object of influence (a certain social process or phenomenon) and the technological techniques themselves, which are based on certain knowledge about this process. It can be argued that relevant knowledge is not exclusively scientific, and even more so, that belongs to a single disciplinary scientific direction. A technologist uses everything that works for the task at hand, and these can be both scientific developments from different disciplines and some concepts that do not have a strict scientific basis, as well as the experience of practitioners working on similar problems. Such knowledge has now been called transdisciplinary in accordance with the project of transdisciplinarity proposed by B. Nicolescu in the last decades of the last century. The three basic axioms on which it is based relate to logic (a third is not excluded), ontology (multilayeredness of the object) and epistemology (complex adaptive nonlinear systems). In accordance with this, transdisciplinary concepts include models of social change built on the basis of a methodological combination of critical realism and the complexity paradigm. In this case, social technologies themselves look like technologies for managing the processes of social self-organization. These processes are distinguished in nonlinear models as a mechanism of social change that exists alongside the organizational (formal institutional influences), and is an essential component of all social processes, and in moments of crisis, the dominant one.

Keywords: *Social technologies, transdisciplinary knowledge, critical realism, complexity paradigm, nonlinear models of social change*

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The Pharmacological Body: Late-Stage Cancer, Medical Networks, and the Social Production of Normality

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This paper examines late-stage cancer (stages III–IV) as a sociological condition in which the distinction between the normal and the pathological is continuously reworked through institutionalization, therapeutic intervention, and lived bodily disruption. At the macro level, cancer has become a normalized disease: embedded in screening regimes, standardized treatment protocols, surveillance infrastructures, classification systems, and chronic-care discourses that render it socially intelligible, manageable, and governable. In Durkheimian terms, cancer has acquired the status of a socially integrated pathology—statistically anticipated, institutionally routinized, and collectively regulated as part of the normal functioning of social order (Durkheim, 1895). Yet at the micro level, late-stage cancer is lived not as stabilized normality but as a recurring process of abnormalization. Each therapeutic intervention temporarily establishes new bodily norms, while tumor progression, resistance, or cumulative toxicity repeatedly destabilizes these norms. Pathology is not an episodic

deviation from the normal but a constitutive condition through which new norms of life are continuously generated and undone. To account for this dynamic, the paper advances the concept of the pharmacological body which is not merely acted upon by medicine but is constituted through it: its capacities, vulnerabilities, temporal rhythms, and modes of viability are continuously shaped within medical networks. Illness and treatment are not oppositional domains but mutually constitutive elements within an actor-network that stabilizes cancer as a governable object while simultaneously producing lived instability and uncertainty. By situating late-stage cancer at the intersection of social normalization and embodied pathological disruption, this paper demonstrates that illness is socially managed not as a linear trajectory from pathology to cure, but as an ongoing process of norm production, abnormalization, therapeutic reconfiguration, and networked governance—within which the pharmacological body emerges as a central sociological object.

Keywords: *Pharmacological Body, Actor Network Theory, Normal and Pathological, Late Stage Cancer, Chronical Illness, Medical Networks*

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Exploring Youth Perspectives in Timişoara on Volunteering, the European Union, and Entrepreneurship

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This study explores the perceptions of young people (aged 15–30) in Timişoara regarding volunteering, entrepreneurship, and the European Union (EU) and its policies. Positioned as a descriptive, quantitative inquiry, the research aims to provide an overview of how these key concepts are understood and evaluated by youth in an urban Romanian context. Data were collected through a structured survey designed to capture attitudes, levels of awareness, and perceived relevance of volunteering, entrepreneurial activity, and EU initiatives. The study addresses the central research question: how do young people from Timişoara perceive the ideas of volunteering, entrepreneurship, and the European Union? Findings indicate the motives of volunteering are often associated with social contribution, community engagement and even for social or personal reasons to some degree. Entrepreneurship is perceived as a possibly attractive career, with results showing people who have already chosen to follow this path. Perceptions show that the impact of the European Union was mostly moderate to positive, while highlighting the desire of the youth for it to focus more on education and employment. Overall, the results suggest that while youth in Timişoara display openness toward civic and economic engagement, there remains a need for improved information dissemination and support structures. The study contributes to a better understanding of youth attitudes and may inform local and regional initiatives aimed at fostering active participation and entrepreneurial development.

Keywords: *Youth, volunteering, EU, entrepreneurship*

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Through the Glocal Lenses: Education and Climate-Based Migrations as Sustainable Development Issues

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Social sciences have been dealing with the dialectic of global and local for decades, but in a world faced with numerous crises, this topic has not lost its relevance. In recent studies, issues of sustainable development and the challenges of climate change are considered in the context of the global-local dialectic (Ritzer & Dean, 2015; Padovan & Sannella, 2023; Geiger Zeman, 2025), or "glocal" (Robertson, 1995) perspective. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development affirms a glocal perspective by positioning itself as a global landmark that is implemented at the national and local levels (UNDESA et al., 2024; Geiger Zeman, 2025). Global statistics show the increasing impact of natural disasters on international displacements, with climate change being an important factor in these processes (IDMC, 2024). Due to the complexity of climate change, it should be understood intersectionally, bearing in mind its social, political, economic and cultural consequences (Brulle & Dunlap, 2015). In 2020, UNESCO pointed out the multiple impacts of climate change on education and indicated their relevance but also insufficient visibility (UNESCO, n.d.). The focus of the work is the analysis of the content of international educational models available in the publications of global institutions (UNESCO, OECD, etc.), as well as the visibility of climate-based migration as an important topic and global-local/ glocal challenge. Based on the analysis, recommendations are outlined for affirming the intersection of climate change and displacement with a special emphasis on the importance of local experiences. This approach opens up space for identifying new challenges but also creating opportunities for establishing dialogue, new networks and knowledge transfer with the aim of connecting theory and practice. The research was carried out as part of the project "Climate Migration in Education: Innovative Educational Media for Understanding Intersectional Crises" (KlimEd), funded by The Croatian Science Foundation.

Keywords: *Glocal perspective, climate migration, education, content analysis*

6TH CONFERENCE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

(CSL – AADF)

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Artificial Intelligence, Education Transformation and Management Challenges. A regional perspective

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This study provides an extended analysis of the transformative impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on educational systems, focusing on the interaction between technological innovation, pedagogical principles, and ethical challenges. Grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that combines constructivism, technology adoption theories (such as the Technology Acceptance Model), and critical perspectives on data ethics and socio-cultural implications, the study examines how AI is reshaping learning processes, the role of teachers, and institutional educational structures. From a comparative and empirical perspective, the analysis focuses on Albania and Western Balkan countries (Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia), highlighting differences in institutional capacity, levels of technological integration, and educational performance. The findings indicate that AI offers significant potential for personalized learning, expanded access to knowledge, and improved teaching efficiency.

However, it also introduces risks such as the weakening of critical thinking, technological dependency, increased academic dishonesty, and the deepening of digital inequalities. The study argues that the debate between the "AI as a support tool for teachers" model and the "AI as a replacement for teachers" model reflects a broader conceptual tension between pedagogical humanism and technological automation. In this regard, a hybrid model—where AI functions as an empowering tool rather than a substitute - emerges as the most sustainable and pedagogically sound approach. In the Albanian context, the study identifies key challenges related to infrastructure, teacher training, and institutional capacity, emphasizing the need for integrated policies that combine technological investment with professional development and ethical governance. Ultimately, the study concludes that the successful integration of AI in education depends on balancing innovation with the core values of education, ensuring a sustainable, inclusive, and human-centered development.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence; education; personalized learning; critical thinking; digital ethics; educational leadership; digital inequality; Western Balkans; digital transformation; educational technology*.

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When Parents Become "Shadow Principals": The Boundaries of School –Family Collaboration in Contemporary Schools

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School–family collaboration represents a fundamental pillar of effective educational institutions and a key factor in ensuring the quality of the teaching–learning process. However, contemporary school practice increasingly reveals situations in which the absence of clearly defined boundaries between partnership and parental intervention generates institutional tension and undermines the professional authority of teachers and school leaders.This paper is based on the analysis of a concrete case drawn from school leadership practice, in which a newly appointed principal, during the first three months of assuming the leadership role, encounters an established institutional culture that grants excessive priority to parental involvement in pedagogical and organizational decision-making. This dynamic has had a direct impact on the conduct of classroom instruction, the professional relationships within the teaching staff, and students' perceptions of the school as an educational institution.Through an analytical and reflective approach, the paper examines the challenges arising from role overlap, the consequences for school climate and institutional coherence, and the leadership difficulties associated with restoring a balanced relationship between parental involvement and pedagogical autonomy. The discussion is framed within the concept of human intelligence, understood as the capacity to manage relationships, emotions, and ethical decision-making in complex institutional contexts. In conclusion, the paper argues that the effective functioning of schools as educational and pedagogical institutions depends not only on formal policies and organizational structures, but above all on the exercise of human intelligence in school leadership, as a prerequisite for building a balanced, respectful, and functional school–family partnership.

Keywords: *School–family collaboration, school leadership, human intelligence, pedagogical autonomy, institutional climate*

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Receptive and Productive Competence in Contrast: A Study of Functional Silence in English Language Learning at the Upper Secondary Level (Grades 10–12)

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The development of language competencies in English teaching requires a continuous balance between receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). In high school practice, the phenomenon of "functional silence" often occurs, where students can understand the language but do not actively produce it in class. This study analyzes 2–3 concrete cases from teaching in grades 10–12, where functional silence is linked to fear of making mistakes, lack of motivation, and different teaching styles. The impact of this phenomenon on students' active participation, peer collaboration, and the development of productive language skills is examined. The discussion highlights pedagogical strategies that promote speaking activation and active participation, including the use of structured questioning, group work, and the creation of safe communicative environments. These strategies aim to improve the teaching–learning process and increase students' confidence in their productive abilities. In conclusion, the study suggests that effective English teaching in high school requires activities that balance receptive and productive competencies, supporting active participation and comprehensive student development.

Keywords: *receptive skills, productive skills, functional silence, English learning, high school, pedagogical strategies*

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Adolescence Today and Preparation for Tomorrow by Utilizing Intelligences and Addressing the Challenges of Society for the Future

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Adolescence represents a critical stage in human development, characterized by complex emotional, social, and educational challenges that require coordinated responses from schools, families, and society. In today's rapidly changing social context, technological influence and the weakening of traditional educational frameworks have significantly shaped adolescents' behavior and identity formation. This paper explores the role of school leadership and educational management in preparing adolescents for the future, drawing on thirty years of professional experience in pre-university education. The study focuses on the importance of early value and rule-based education, the recognition and

development of multiple intelligences, and the effectiveness of psycho-social services within schools. Particular attention is given to the level of collaboration between teachers, parents, and local institutions, emphasizing that limited coordination and delayed intervention often contribute to problematic adolescent behaviors. Through a reflective and practice-oriented approach, the paper argues that effective leadership extends beyond administrative management to include pedagogical guidance, ethical responsibility, and the creation of a supportive school culture. Leadership is presented as a key factor in fostering communication, collective responsibility, and inclusive educational environments that respond to students' diverse needs. The findings highlight the necessity of an integrated leadership model in which schools function as central hubs of educational and social development. Such a model promotes early intervention, strengthens partnerships with families and communities, and supports adolescents in developing resilience, responsibility, and readiness for future societal challenges. The paper concludes by emphasizing that sustainable educational leadership plays a decisive role in shaping healthy adolescence and building a more socially responsible future.

Keywords: *adolescence, school leadership, educational management, multiple intelligences, school–family–community collaboration*

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Education of Tomorrow: Building an Intelligent Society in Albania

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The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping contemporary societies, leading toward what is increasingly described as an intelligent society. This paper examines the key challenges and opportunities associated with the transition to such a society, with a particular focus on education in Albania as a crucial sector in the process of digital transformation. Special attention is given to the social, ethical, educational, and economic dimensions of this transition. The analysis is guided by the following research questions: How does artificial intelligence influence social structures and human interaction? What opportunities does an intelligent society offer for improving the quality of education in Albania? What challenges arise in relation to ethics, employment, and inequalities in access to education? The study is grounded in a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that incorporates technological determinism theory, digital transformation theory, and the

concept of human-cantered artificial intelligence. This framework enables an examination of the reciprocal relationship between technological advancement and social change, particularly within the context of the Albanian education system. A qualitative research methodology has been adopted, based on a critical review of contemporary academic literature, national education policy documents in Albania, and selected case studies on the use of intelligent technologies in educational institutions. The findings indicate that an intelligent society offers significant opportunities for education in Albania, including personalized learning, improved teaching processes, enhanced administrative efficiency, and expanded access to digital resources. However, the analysis also highlights considerable challenges, such as insufficient digital infrastructure in certain areas, the need for teacher training, ethical concerns, and the risk of widening the digital divide. In conclusion, the transition toward an intelligent society requires a balanced and responsible approach, with education in Albania playing a central role. Collaboration among government institutions, educational institutions, and technology developers is essential to ensure that artificial intelligence contributes positively to educational quality, social equity, and the sustainable development of Albanian society.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence, Education, Teaching Ethics, Technology*

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Institutional Communication as key element on School Management: five basic elements of the Aristotelian model vs. Interactive model of Communication

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This paper aims to analyze the Institutional Communication, considering as a key element on School Management. The paper is based on a review of extensive literature on communication, starting from the so-called five basic elements of the Aristotelian model of communication: the speaker, the word (discourse), the occasion (circumstances), the audience, and the effect. Grounded on Aristotle's rhetoric and contemporary literature on communication and rhetorical studies, the paper examines the role, function, and interaction of these elements within the communication process. The methodological approach is theoretical and analytical, based on philosophical interpretation and conceptual comparison. Through this approach, the study explores how each element contributes to the effectiveness of communication and how their interaction shapes meaning, persuasion, and understanding. The findings highlight that the Aristotelian model remains highly relevant in modern contexts, particularly in education, politics, and institutional communication. Despite the development of contemporary communication theories, Aristotle's framework continues to offer valuable insights into the dynamics of discourse, audience engagement, and communicative impact. The study concludes that the Aristotelian model provides a foundational and enduring perspective for analyzing communication processes and remains applicable to both classical and contemporary communicative practices. The paper

compares this classic form of institutional communication with the model of interactive communication – which characterizes contemporary communication. It also examines as a special case the communication problems in the school that the author directs, as well as in other schools of the pre-university system, making the relevant generalizations.

Keywords: *Institutional Communication, School Management, Aristotelian model, Interactive Communication*

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Digital transformation and teacher professional development in European and UK contexts

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The accelerating digital transformation of education systems across Europe and the United Kingdom has significantly reshaped pedagogical practices and expectations for teacher professional development. Within this evolving landscape, educators are increasingly required to integrate digital technologies while engaging in continuous, practice-oriented professional learning aligned with European policy priorities. This study addresses three research questions: (1) How does digital transformation shape teacher professional development practices? (2) How do collaborative digital ecosystems support transnational professional learning? (3) What challenges emerge in the implementation of digitally mediated professional development? The research is grounded in a theoretical framework that integrates digital pedagogy, communities of practice, and lifelong learning theories (e.g., Etienne Wenger; Donald Schön). Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, practice-based research design, informed by reflective practitioner inquiry. The empirical basis draws on extensive professional engagement as a Scientix Ambassador, Microsoft Innovative Educator Expert, eTwinning Ambassador, and leading teacher in EU Code Week. Data sources include reflective teaching practices, development and implementation of digital lesson models, participation in international training programmes, and involvement in collaborative educational projects. Data are analysed using thematic analysis (Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke, 2006). Findings indicate that engagement in European digital education networks significantly enhances teachers' professional competencies, fosters collaborative learning, and supports innovation in teaching methodologies. However, challenges persist, including disparities in digital competence, uneven access to resources, and varying levels of institutional support. The study concludes that sustainable and inclusive models of teacher professional development must integrate experiential knowledge, digital innovation, and collaborative practice within a coherent policy-aligned framework. It contributes to ongoing debates on educational transformation, emphasizing the role of practitioner expertise in shaping effective and scalable professional development models.

Keywords: *Digital education, teacher professional development, digital transformation, educational innovation, teacher training*

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From Assessment to Intervention: The Use of Leiter-3 in Designing Psycho-Educational Strategies – A Case Study

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This case study examines how nonverbal intelligence assessment can inform individualized psycho-educational interventions for children with learning difficulties. Guided by a cognitive-developmental framework and theories of nonverbal intelligence, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) What cognitive profile emerges from the assessment of a child with learning difficulties using a nonverbal intelligence measure? And (2) how can this profile be translated into targeted psycho-educational intervention strategies? The assessment was conducted using the Leiter-3, a standardized instrument designed to evaluate cognitive functioning without reliance on language abilities. The participant was a school-aged child referred due to difficulties in attention, information processing, and below-average academic performance. Data were collected through structured administration of the instrument and analyzed qualitatively and descriptively to identify patterns of strengths and weaknesses across cognitive domains. Findings revealed a heterogeneous cognitive profile, with relative strengths in visual reasoning and classification tasks, and notable weaknesses in sustained attention and processing speed. Based on these results, an individualized intervention plan was developed, focusing on enhancing attention control, structuring learning activities, and incorporating visual supports. The intervention emphasized structured repetition, positive reinforcement, and environmental adaptations to improve engagement and academic functioning. The study concludes that nonverbal intelligence assessment provides valuable insights into children's cognitive functioning and serves as a critical foundation for designing effective, evidence-based psycho-educational interventions. These findings highlight the importance of translating assessment data into practical strategies that support both cognitive development and academic success.

Keywords: *Nonverbal Intelligence Assessment, Cognitive Functioning, Leiter-3, Educational Intervention*

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Artificial Intelligence in Education: Opportunities and Challenges for Personalizing Teaching

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This research paper examines the integration of artificial intelligence (ai) in the teaching and learning process, focusing on its potential to transform traditional education into

an intelligent and personalized model. The primary research questions of this study are: how does the use of ai tools influence the increase in student engagement and academic performance? And to what extent can ai assist teachers in designing lesson plans tailored to the individual needs of each student? The theoretical framework is based on digital constructivism theories and the adaptive learning model. the methodology used is qualitative, relying on direct classroom observations and an analysis of specific tools and intelligent tutoring platforms used during the instructional process. The study analyzes how these technologies facilitate task differentiation and provide immediate feedback to students. The findings of the study indicate that ai integration significantly reduces administrative time for teachers, allowing them to focus on the emotional and intellectual mentoring of students. The results suggest that students show higher interest when learning materials are interactive and adapted to their individual pace. However, the study highlights that the success of this integration primarily depends on the professional preparation of teachers and the ethical use of data. In conclusion, the paper argues that artificial intelligence should not be seen as a replacement for the teacher, but as a powerful ally that enables a more inclusive and high-quality education. It is recommended that educational institutions invest in continuous training of pedagogical staff to successfully navigate toward an intelligent society.

Keywords: *artificial intelligence, intelligent education, personalized teaching, educational technology, classroom innovation, inclusion*

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Alignment Between Curriculum Requirements and Textbook Content: Evidence from 'Man and Nature' in Primary Education

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Curricula are official pedagogical frameworks that guide the design of textbooks and the implementation of teaching practices in schools. They define subject content, instructional time, learning objectives, and expected student outcomes. This study examines the alignment between the content presented in the textbook Man and Nature and the instructional time allocated by the curriculum for this subject in primary education (grades 3–5) in Kosovo. The subject integrates knowledge from Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Geography. Using a comparative and statistical approach, the study analyzes the relationship between the number of teaching units in the textbooks and the number of hours prescribed by the curriculum for each content area. The findings reveal notable discrepancies between the distribution of teaching units and the allocation of instructional time across the four subject areas. Certain content areas are overrepresented in the textbooks, while others receive less attention, indicating an

imbalance in the organization of teaching content. Such discrepancies may negatively affect the comprehensive development of students' knowledge and limit the effectiveness of environmental education. The results are presented through percentages, tables, and graphical representations, supported by statistical analysis, including Pearson's correlation coefficient. The study highlights the need for improved alignment between curriculum requirements and textbook content in order to ensure balanced and effective teaching.

Keywords: *Curriculum, textbooks, instructional time, content alignment, primary education*.

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"Psychological Dictionary" by Pajazit Nushi
The First Explanatory Dictionary in the Albanian Language

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This dictionary contains approximately 3,000 entries that define concepts related to life, psychological phenomena, states, processes, traits, personality, and their main characteristics and interrelationships. The terms included belong to key branches of psychology such as general psychology, physiological psychology, psychophysics, educational psychology, social psychology, psychopathology, psychometrics, and developmental psychology. The core material of the dictionary was initially compiled on individual index cards, which were later organized into an alphabetical system of Albanian psychological terminology. From this collection, only those terms that had reached standardized usage were selected. Their definitions are based on the method of essential definition, focusing on the fundamental and distinguishing features of each concept. The development of psychological terminology in this work reflects both practical and theoretical needs to understand mental life and its evolution, while remaining consistent with Albanian linguistic and literary creativity. This dictionary is of particular importance for Albanians, especially in the Republic of Albania, as it provides clear explanations of terms, theories, and psychological schools that were once considered inaccessible or taboo. It presents them with objectivity and scientific rigor, free from political influence. Terms specific to various psychological approaches are explained in accordance with their original theoretical contexts. Related scientific terms are treated more concisely, with the aim of emphasizing their psychological relevance and role in understanding the discipline. Overall, this is a significant scholarly contribution, demonstrating exceptional dedication, professionalism, and scientific commitment.

Keywords: *psychological dictionary, phenomena, states, processes, psychological traits, psychological schools and theories, psychologist*

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EFL Communicative Skills in Students with Autism: Linguistic Intelligence or Global Exposure?

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This study explores the development of communicative skills in English as a foreign language (EFL) among Albanian students with autism, examining whether these abilities are primarily a product of linguistic intelligence or the result of global exposure to English. The research addresses three key questions: the role of linguistic intelligence in English communicative competence, the impact of global exposure in a non-native context, and the interaction between cognitive and environmental factors. The study is grounded in theories of linguistic intelligence (Gardner) and communication in autism spectrum conditions, adopting a multidisciplinary framework that integrates educational, psychological, and linguistic perspectives. A qualitative methodology is employed, with data collected in the city of Korça, Albania, from specialized centers supporting children with autism, the Community Center of Korça, as well as through classroom observations and analysis of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Additionally, a focus group is conducted with professionals, including psychologists, clinical psychologists, speech therapists, and special education teachers. Findings indicate that while linguistic intelligence contributes to language acquisition, global exposure - particularly through digital media and instructional practice - plays a significant role in enhancing communicative competence, even in a foreign language context. The results suggest that English communicative development in students with autism emerges from a dynamic interaction between internal capacities and external influences. The study concludes that effective development of EFL communicative skills in students with autism requires an integrated approach combining individualized support and meaningful exposure to authentic language input, highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in inclusive education.

Keywords: *Autism spectrum, EFL, communicative skills, linguistic intelligence, global exposure*

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When Parents Become "Shadow Principals": The Boundaries of School –Family Collaboration in Contemporary Schools

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School–family collaboration represents a fundamental pillar of effective educational institutions and a key factor in ensuring the quality of the teaching–learning process. However, contemporary school practice increasingly reveals situations in which the absence of clearly defined boundaries between partnership and parental intervention generates institutional tension and undermines the professional authority of teachers and school leaders.This paper is based on the analysis of a concrete case drawn from school leadership practice, in which a newly appointed principal, during the first three months of assuming the leadership role, encounters an established institutional culture that grants excessive priority to parental involvement in pedagogical and organizational decision-making. This dynamic has had a direct impact on the conduct of classroom instruction, the professional relationships within the teaching staff, and students' perceptions of the school as an educational institution.Through an analytical and reflective approach, the paper examines the challenges arising from role overlap, the consequences for school climate and institutional coherence, and the leadership difficulties associated with restoring a balanced relationship between parental involvement and pedagogical autonomy. The discussion is framed within the concept of human intelligence, understood as the capacity to manage relationships, emotions, and ethical decision-making in complex institutional contexts. In conclusion, the paper argues that the effective functioning of schools as educational and pedagogical institutions depends not only on formal policies and organizational structures, but above all on the exercise of human intelligence in school leadership, as a prerequisite for building a balanced, respectful, and functional school–family partnership.

Keywords: *School–family collaboration, school leadership, human intelligence, pedagogical autonomy, institutional climate*

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School Leadership in Building a Smart Society through Education

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This paper examines the role of school leadership in preparing students for a "Smart Society" in the context of rapid developments in Artificial Intelligence and digital transformation. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How does school leadership influence the development of students' multiple intelligences? (2) How can Artificial Intelligence and

technology be effectively integrated into the teaching and learning process? (3) How can a balance be ensured between students' academic, emotional, and social development? The theoretical framework is based on the "Theory of Multiple Intelligences" (Gardner, 1983) and contemporary concepts of intelligence (IQ, EQ, SQ, and AQ) in relation to education. The methodology follows a mixed-method approach, including analysis of leadership practices, surveys with teachers and students, and direct classroom observations. The findings indicate that leadership oriented toward innovation and collaboration significantly improves the quality of learning and supports the development of multiple intelligences. The integration of technology and interactive teaching methods increases student engagement, while continuous professional development for teachers is essential for the effective implementation of these approaches. In conclusion, effective school leadership is a key factor in creating an educational environment that prepares students for the challenges of a Smart Society by balancing technological advancement with human development.

Keywords: *School leadership, smart society, artificial intelligence, multiple intelligences, student development*

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Students' use of AI for learning: A quantitative research on students' use of AI tools for academic tasks

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Artificial intelligence is changing the learning context and pace in higher education. On demand, AI tools are revolutionising learning and task completion processes in universities in an unprecedented, rapid way. From ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, Canva, Perplexity, etc., students can now choose any of these tools to complete their tasks in a fraction of the time they needed before. The main goal of this research is to understand how university students use AI to support the completion of their academic tasks. To answer the research question, the authors employed a quantitative research design and distributed an online questionnaire via Microsoft Forms. This approach was used to explore students' behavioural patterns and perceptions of AI tool use in their academic work. Results show that about 95% of students use AI for academic purposes, and 75% use it daily or weekly. Moreover, AI use extends to recreational and personal purposes. The most frequent academic uses of AI tools include finding information and conducting research, generating ideas, and structuring academic work. Students' reports of AI use are mostly seen as helpful and time-saving, but a few also associate AI with anxiety, laziness, and even brain inactivity. Although many students seem quite confident in their AI and technology proficiency, the data indicate a need for institutional guidance to support the safe and smart use of AI in the university context.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence (AI), academic tasks, students' AI use, trust, efficient learning*

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Exploring Artificial Intelligence in eTwinning: Learning for the Future

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In the context of improving contemporary teaching practices, the aim is to integrate artificial intelligence tools as an integral part of the learning process. The use of these tools contributes to the creation of a more creative, interactive and attractive environment for students, increasing their motivation and engagement in learning. Through the implementation of artificial intelligence tools in various didactic activities, students have the opportunity to explore new ways of learning, develop digital skills and acquire knowledge in line with the technological innovations of the time. This approach also encourages critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving skills, preparing students for the challenges of an increasingly digitalized society. At the same time, the use of artificial intelligence also extends to international collaborations in eTwinning projects, facilitating communication, co-creation and the exchange of ideas between students and teachers from different countries. These interactions not only enrich the learning experience, but also contribute to the development of intercultural and teamwork competencies.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence tools, learning for the Future, eTwinning projects, creative, interactive and attractive environment*

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Interacting with the future: Integrating artificial intelligence into learning for sustainable development

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This study examines the interaction with the future in terms of the digital transformation of the last decade, the challenges of integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into learning for sustainable development. In this global journey, the integration of AI in education is inevitable in the speed of GenAI tools, as well as the generative capacities in innovative content and ideas. In this context, education for sustainable development requires the integration of pedagogical practices that promote critical thinking, ethical awareness and active civic engagement. However, the use of generative AI raises important issues related to academic integrity, information reliability and the transformative role of the teacher in a new learning ecosystem. The purpose of this paper is to critically explore the role and

impact of integrating generative artificial intelligence into learning processes, analyzing its potential to contribute to the realization of sustainable development objectives in education, as well as identifying pedagogical, ethical and institutional implications. This study is characterized as a descriptive empirical theoretical and practical research (course assignment), which increases objectivity and takes care of the methodological rigor of the research. The results of the study demonstrate that generative AI represents an instrument with considerable transformative potential in increasing the effectiveness of learning, through the personalization of content, fostering creativity and strengthening student autonomy. However, its successful implementation requires the development of teachers' professional capacities, the reconceptualization of assessment practices and the construction of regulatory frameworks that address ethical and social challenges. In conclusion, the study argues that the sustainable integration of generative AI in education should rely on a holistic approach, balancing technological innovation with the fundamental values of education and sustainable development, as well as preparing students for the challenges of the future.

Keywords: *Interaction, integration, artificial intelligence, learning*

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The Role of Performing Arts and Storytelling as Innovative Pedagogical Approaches in Intelligent Education

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This study examines the role of performing arts and storytelling as innovative pedagogical approaches in promoting intelligent education in 21st-century classrooms. It seeks to explore how these methods enhance student engagement, communication skills, and active learning. The research is guided by the following questions: (1) To what extent are the approaches of performing arts and storytelling integrated into teaching practices? (2) How do these approaches influence student motivation and participation? (3) What benefits and challenges do teachers experience in their implementation? The study is grounded in constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky), the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner), and experiential learning (Kolb), emphasizing student-centered and interactive learning processes. A mixed-method approach was adopted, combining quantitative data collected through questionnaires administered to language and theatre teachers in the city of Korçë, with qualitative data derived from a mini case study conducted by the researcher. The case study is based on a theatrical performance developed and implemented by the researcher together with students, integrating storytelling and drama as core teaching strategies. The findings indicate that performing arts and storytelling significantly contribute to increased student engagement, creativity, and communication skills. Teachers report that these approaches foster a more inclusive and motivating classroom environment. The case study further demonstrates that student participation in the theatrical performance enhances collaboration, self-expression, and deeper understanding of learning content. However,

challenges such as limited time, insufficient resources, and lack of specialized training were also identified. In conclusion, performing arts and storytelling represent effective and innovative tools for developing key competencies required in modern education. Their integration into teaching practice supports a more dynamic and meaningful learning experience, highlighting the need for greater institutional support and teacher training.

Keywords: *Performing arts, storytelling, student engagement, innovative pedagogy, experiential learning*

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Intelligent Education in an Intelligent Society and the Challenges of Educational Leadership

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This paper argues that an "intelligent" society is not built solely upon technological advancement, but rather upon the cognitive, ethical, and critical capacities of human beings. Intelligent education represents the key nexus linking technological innovation, social development, and functional democracy. The authors aim to: (1) conceptualize intelligent education as a social category, not merely a technological one; (2) analyze transformations in knowledge, teaching, and learning processes; (3) examine the role of education in fostering intelligent citizenship—particularly emphasized; and (4) discuss the relationship between artificial intelligence, ethics, and human autonomy. Within this framework, the paper explores emerging challenges in educational leadership, including: the transition from traditional education to intelligent knowledge ecosystems; the concept of the intelligent school as the school of the future; lifelong learning; the integration of AI in teaching and assessment; the human versus algorithm dynamic in knowledge production; 21st-century competencies; digital inequalities and social exclusion; critical thinking as a foundation of an intelligent society; education for democracy, participation, and responsibility; and the role of education in resisting informational manipulation. Methodologically, the study is based on a review of contemporary literature—particularly from the past two to three years—as well as on the analysis of best practices that have gained international recognition.

Keywords: *Intelligent society, intelligent school, intelligent citizenship, algorithm in knowledge production, re-evaluation of competencies, challenges of educational leadership*

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Preparing Young Athletes for an Intelligent Society: AI and Multiple Intelligences in Civic Education – A Durres Case Study

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This paper explores how young athletes can be better prepared for an Intelligent Society by integrating Artificial Intelligence tools with Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences into Civic Education. The study draws on my twenty years of classroom experience as a teacher of Civic Education, History, and Geography at the Benardina Qerraxhia Secondary Sports School in Durrës, Albania. Designed as a qualitative case study, the research is based on participant observation in Civic Education classes during the 2023–2025 academic years, 28 semi-structured interviews with students aged 15–18, interviews with eight fellow teachers, and a detailed analysis of the national Civic Education curriculum. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. The findings reveal significant challenges: sports schools have very limited digital infrastructure, students' well-developed bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is rarely linked to digital competencies, and there is insufficient emphasis on emotional, social, and ethical intelligence amid intensive athletic training. However, Artificial Intelligence also presents valuable opportunities, such as personalised learning pathways, virtual simulations of civic dilemmas, and interactive modules for digital citizenship education. The paper argues that Civic Education in sports schools must evolve to meet the demands of an Intelligent Society. It should equip young athletes not only with physical excellence but also with digital literacy and ethical awareness, enabling them to become responsible citizens. Practical recommendations are offered for teachers and education policymakers in Albania on effectively integrating AI-assisted methods while respecting the unique nature of sports education.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Intelligent Society, Multiple Intelligences, Civic Education, sports schools, digital skills*

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EFL students and Inquiry-based learning

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Task - based learning, critical thinking, cognitive skills and problem-solving activities are crucial in the foreign language classroom environment. Critical thinking skills enable and provide foreign language students to search and use information available to them, relevant to a variety of situations, through task -based activities. To understand a certain topic, English language students need to analyse, evaluate and summarise information needed

for different context. For this reason, critical skills are very important. English language learning acquires the use of task or project based, through which students explores, discuss and overcome language barriers. Students activate their cognitive skills to resolve problems and use the language actively. Project- based activities require work group. In ESP courses, students inquire information relevant to a certain topic. Internet is a very good source of information, offering authentic materials usage. Videos, podcasts, language magazines are very valuable too. Inquiry based learning focuses in student centred classes. Students enhance language proficiency, motivation, critical thinking and collaboration. English language is used actively; thus, learners gather information, discuss and enhance writing. In writing tasks, learners know how to organize better their ideas, discuss findings, using cohesion and coherence. Collaboration is important in inquiry-based learning, as students share ideas and work together. Thus, using Inquiry based learning in EFL classes enable students to use language and foster proficiency. This paper aims to explore the use of inquiry learning from theoretical to practical activities used in English for Informatics students' classes.

Keywords: *Inquiry learning, language proficiency, project, activities*

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The Impact of Instructional Leadership on Student Performance: The Mediating Role of Organizational Climate in Pre-University Schools

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This study aims to analyze the impact of instructional leadership on student performance in the context of Albanian schools, by examining the mediating role of organizational climate. Drawing on contemporary literature in educational leadership, the study conceptualizes leadership as a key factor that indirectly influences student outcomes through the development of a supportive and collaborative institutional environment. The research adopts a quantitative methodology based on data collected through structured questionnaires administered to teachers in the pre-university education system. Statistical analysis is employed to test the relationships between instructional leadership, organizational climate, and student performance, as well as to verify the mediating effect of organizational climate. The findings are expected to indicate that instructional leadership has a significant positive impact on organizational climate, while the latter directly contributes to the improvement of student performance. In this framework, the study contributes to the enrichment of empirical research in the field of educational leadership in Albania and provides practical implications for school leaders and policymakers. Particular emphasis is placed on the importance of developing instruction-oriented leadership and fostering a strong institutional culture.

Keywords: *Instructional leadership; organizational climate; student performance; educational leadership; Albanian schools*

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Assessing AI Integration in Albania's Education System: A National Survey of Teachers and Institutions

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly transforming educational systems worldwide. In Albania, however, the integration of AI into schools and universities remains uneven and poorly documented. This study examines the current state of AI integration in the Albanian education system by focusing on teacher adoption, digital skills, institutional readiness, and perceived barriers. The research is based on a quantitative survey conducted among teachers and academic staff from primary, secondary, and higher education institutions across Albania. Findings indicate that while more than half of respondents have experimented with AI tools, regular pedagogical use remains limited. Teachers primarily use AI for lesson planning, content generation, assessment support, and administrative tasks. The main barriers identified include insufficient digital infrastructure, lack of formal training, uncertainty regarding ethics and data privacy, and the absence of institutional policies. Significant differences emerge between urban and rural schools and between higher education and pre-university institutions. The study argues that Albania is in an early but promising stage of AI adoption and proposes a national framework for teacher training, infrastructure investment, and ethical regulation. The findings contribute to understanding how emerging technologies can be integrated into developing educational systems.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Albanian Education, Teacher Adoption, Digital Skills, Institutional Readiness, Educational Technol*

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Teachers facing Artificial Intelligence: The challenge of moving from basic use toward professional integration in the classroom

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The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education represents one of the most significant developments of our time, transforming the ways of teaching and learning. In this context, UNESCO (2023) emphasizes that "AI should be in the service of teachers and not replace them" — a principle that lies at the heart of this study. Nevertheless, this process is not straightforward and is often accompanied by professional uncertainty and ethical dilemmas on the part of teachers. This paper aims to analyze the challenge of transitioning from a basic use of AI tools toward a conscious, ethical, and professional integration in the classroom, positioning the

teacher as the primary facilitator and architect of the learning process. The study is grounded in a combined methodological approach, which includes: surveying teachers on their perceptions and difficulties in using AI, observing concrete classroom practices, and analyzing European frameworks (DigCompEdu) for digital competencies. Preliminary observations from everyday practices indicate that, although AI offers great potential for personalizing learning and reducing administrative workload, the lack of structured and professional training remains the primary obstacle. These preliminary findings suggest that the success of education in the digital age does not lie in technology itself, but in the teacher's ability to use it critically and purposefully, keeping the human being at the center of the educational process.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence, professional integration, primary education, digital ethics, teacher competencies*

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The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Contemporary Education: A Humanistic Approach

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This paper examines the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in contemporary education through a humanistic perspective, arguing that technology should function as a supportive tool rather than a replacement for human factors in the educational process. Although AI offers significant potential for learning personalization, optimization of pedagogical processes, and support for educational decision-making, it is not capable of replacing the essential human dimensions of education, such as interpersonal relationships, empathy, reflection, and the construction of personal meaning. The study integrates theoretical literature on AI in education, principles of humanistic education, and selected elements of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) as a pedagogical and communicative framework. The analysis shows that while AI enables algorithmic personalization of learning content, humanistic approaches emphasize the importance of pedagogical personalization, which is grounded in learners' subjective meaning-making, motivation, and emotional engagement. In this context, several NLP principles—such as representational systems, rapport building, the language metamodel, reframing, and the neurological levels model—offer reflective tools that help educators mediate the use of AI in a meaningful and responsible manner. It is recommended that educational institutions develop AI integration strategies grounded in humanistic and pedagogical principles, invest in teacher training for critical and reflective use of technology, and promote a balanced approach that preserves meaningful learning relationships as a fundamental prerequisite for any sustainable digital transformation in education.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, humanistic education, pedagogical personalization, Neuro-Linguistic Programming*

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School Leadership between Daily Management and Artificial Intelligence: Reconfiguring the Role of the Principal in a Transforming Educational Landscape

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Administrative workload constrains school principals' capacity to exercise innovative leadership, at a time when artificial intelligence (AI) is creating new conditions for reconfiguring decision-making processes in pre-university education. In the Albanian context, this tension between routine management and digital transformation is shifting the role of the principal from an operational administrator toward a strategic, data-oriented actor. This study examines how administrative workload and perceptions of AI influence principals' decision-making capacity and organizational effectiveness, as well as how structural, technological, and ethical constraints mediate its integration into practice. The study adopts a qualitative approach, based on case analyses and semi-structured interviews with school leaders from primary and secondary public institutions, analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings indicate that AI does not merely reduce administrative workload but transforms the architecture of decision-making by shifting it from experience-based judgment toward structured processes that integrate data analytics, predictive insights, and algorithmic support. This transformation reshapes the source of professional authority and the way decisions are constructed at the school level. However, limited professional training, infrastructural constraints, and ethical uncertainties restrict the institutionalization of this shift. The study contributes to the theory and practice of educational leadership by proposing a hybrid leadership model in which decision-making is conceptualized as an interactive process between professional judgment and AI-supported analysis, reconfiguring the relationship between human expertise and data-driven reasoning in school leadership.

Keywords: *Educational leadership, artificial intelligence, data-informed decision-making, school management, digital transformation*

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Social Inclusion of young students with Intellectual Disabilities in Educational Institutions

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Disabilities represent key priorities within contemporary educational and social systems. This study examines independent living as a central factor in promoting autonomy, self-determination, and active participation in society among this population. The aim of the study is to analyze

the impact of structured interventions on the development of daily living skills across three main contexts: school, community - based developmental centers, and individual therapy. A mixed- method approach was used, involving 25 participants aged 16-30 years with intellectual disabilities. Data were collected through questionnaires, semi- structured interviesws, and direct observation. The analys compares levels of functional independence across the intervention models school- based support, combined school and center - based support, and ab integrated model Includinal School, center, and therapy. The findings indicate that participants explosed to integrated interventions demonstrate higher levels of independence and Social inclusion compared to those receiving single- setting supprt. The study also highlights the importance of inter- institucional colloboration and family involvement in fostering independent living skills. In conclusion, independent living should be understood as a continuous developmental prcess rather than a fixed outcome, requiring coordinated educational, therapeutic, and community - based interventions to ensure effective social inclusion!

Keywords: *Independent living, social inclusion, young Adults, therapeutic education*

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The challenge of learning differently – dyslexia

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This article analyzes the challenges of identifying and managing dyslexia within the educational system, based on the scientific standards of the DSM-5-TR. The authors argue that dyslexia are not a disease, but a specific neurological learning disorder that affects approximately 10-15% of the population, although official statistics often reflect much lower rates. This "statistical silence" is attributed to a lack of standardized testing tools in the Albanian language, linguistic masking caused by regional dialects, and social stigma. The paper proposes a new pedagogical model aimed at shifting from subjective observation to authentic methodological support. Grounded in the concept of an "island of difficulty in a sea of potential," the study suggests implementing two primary pillars: compensatory measures (using technology, audiobooks, and visual maps) and dispensing measures (exempting students from reading aloud and prioritizing content over spelling accuracy). The school must transform into a creative laboratory where intelligence and talent are valued, removing the emotional barriers that lead to academic failure. Reforming assessment ethics and fostering partnerships with parents are identified as urgent steps toward achieving a truly inclusive education.

Keywords: *Dyslexia, compensatory measures, dispensing measures, inclusivity, learning difficulties, neurodiversity*

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Integration of Artificial Intelligence in Primary Education: The Challenge of Innovation and the Preservation of Critical Thinkin

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The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming how students and teachers interact with knowledge in primary education. This study examines the opportunities and risks associated with the implementation of AI in the instructional process. On one hand, AI facilitates personalized learning through adaptive platforms and digital tools, accommodating diverse learning styles and fostering creativity. On the other hand, its unregulated use may lead to dependency on AI-generated responses, potentially hindering the development of critical thinking and independent problem-solving skills. The study focuses on the analysis of current pedagogical practices and teacher perceptions regarding the use of AI, identifying strategies that promote innovation without compromising students' cognitive development. The findings suggest that maintaining a balance between technological assistance and activities that require critical reflection is essential. The role of the teacher remains central as a guide and facilitator of the learning process, ensuring that technology is used as a supportive tool rather than a substitute for thinking. This study encourages discussion on the responsible use of AI in primary classrooms, addressing both its challenges and its potential to enhance educational outcomes.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence, primary education, critical thinking, innovation, personalized learning, educational technology*

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Professional learning networks in support of primary school teachers' professional development in the context of curricular reforms

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In recent years, the pre-university education system in Albania has undergone substantial curricular reforms aligned with national legal frameworks and strategic priorities. These changes emphasize competency-based learning, cross-curricular integration, contemporary

teaching methodologies, formative assessment, and the development of digital and 21st-century skills. Within this evolving context, teachers' professional networks have emerged as a key mechanism for supporting professional development and facilitating the implementation of these reforms in classroom practice. This study aims to examine the role and effectiveness of professional teacher networks in primary education, focusing on how they contribute to the adoption and application of recent curricular changes. The research is guided by the following questions: (1) How do professional networks support teachers in implementing curricular reforms? (2) What impact do these networks have on teachers' pedagogical competencies? (3) What challenges affect their effectiveness? The study is grounded in theories of collaborative learning and professional development, which highlight the importance of peer interaction, knowledge sharing, and reflective practice. A qualitative research approach was employed, involving four leaders of professional networks. Data were collected through document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group, and were analyzed thematically. Findings indicate that professional networks play a significant role in promoting the exchange of best practices, enhancing pedagogical skills, and supporting the alignment of teaching with new curricular demands. However, several challenges persist, including the need for updated training modules, stronger coherence between policy and practice, and greater institutional support. The study concludes that strengthening professional networks is essential for the effective implementation of educational reforms and for improving the quality of primary education in Albania.

Keywords: *Professional networks, professional development, curricular reforms, competencies, primary education*

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Play in primary and balancing human and Artificial Intelligence in primary education: Developing skills through Playful Learning

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This paper examines play-based learning in primary education as an innovative approach that contributes to the development of 21st-century competencies and to establishing a functional balance between human and artificial intelligence. In the context of digital transformation and the increasing use of technology in education, play is presented as an inherently human process that fosters social interaction, empathy, creativity, and critical thinking (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978), while digital tools and applications support personalized learning and enhance student motivation (Gee, 2007). The study is grounded in a constructivist theoretical framework and incorporates the

concept of play therapy for students with special educational needs, which promotes inclusion, communication, and emotional well-being in the classroom (Landreth, 2012). In addition to the theoretical analysis, the paper includes an empirical study conducted in three primary schools involving 150 students and 15 teachers, using questionnaires and classroom observations. The findings indicate that play significantly increases student motivation, collaboration, and content comprehension. The integration of digital applications and interactive games enhances learning outcomes only when combined with cooperative play and social interaction. This highlights the need for a balance between artificial intelligence, which provides tools for analysis and differentiation, and human intelligence, which develops through experience, emotions, and communication. The paper also emphasizes the role of pedagogical and institutional leadership in fostering a school culture that supports active methodologies, inclusive education, and the balanced use of technology (Fullan, 2007). In conclusion, play is presented as a transformative strategy for building an intelligent, inclusive, and innovative school.

Keywords: *Play-based learning, artificial intelligence, human intelligence, pedagogical leadership, inclusive education*

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Challenges of Public Education & Private Education in Albania

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This paper aims to analyze and compare the public and private education systems in Albania, focusing on teaching quality, institutional management, educational resources, and their impact on students' academic achievement. The Albanian education system is predominantly composed of public institutions, which represent the majority of the national educational network, alongside a growing number of private schools. According to official data from the Ministry of Education and national statistics, the pre-university education system includes over 2,000 public schools and approximately 120–150 private schools operating at different educational levels. The study seeks to identify the advantages, challenges, and social impact of each educational model, contributing to the improvement of educational policies and the development of effective practices within the Albanian education system.

Keywords: *Public vs. Private Education, Teachers, Students, Curricula, Comparative Approach*

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Technology in Preschool Education, Teachers' Digital Competencies, and Their Impact on Children's Skill Development

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This paper addresses the growing importance of digital technology in preschool education, focusing on teachers' digital competencies and their impact on children's overall development. In an era where digital tools are increasingly embedded in everyday life, educational institutions face the challenge of integrating them effectively into teaching and learning processes. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data. The primary instrument is a survey (n=144) administered to teachers and parents, including both closed- and open-ended questions. In addition, several in-depth interviews were conducted with both groups. The research aims to: (1) identify the extent of digital technology use by preschool teachers; (2) analyze the role of digital competencies in the teaching-learning process; (3) assess the impact of technology on educational activities with children; and (4) explore parents' perceptions and attitudes toward the use of technology in early childhood education. The findings highlight significant challenges in the effective use of ICT in preschool settings, particularly disparities between urban and rural areas. They also underline the importance of strengthening teachers' digital competencies and leadership capacities in order to ensure meaningful and developmentally appropriate use of technology. The study contributes to ongoing debates on when, how, and to what extent digital technology should be integrated into early childhood education.

Keywords: *Digital competencies, preschool education, learning, leadership, ICT*

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The Homeroom Teacher Yesterday and Today—But What About Tomorrow?

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This paper examines the evolving role, responsibilities, and competencies of the homeroom teacher in Albania from the 1920s to the present. It analyzes the historical transformation of this role and its current position within the Albanian education system. The study is guided by two main variables: (i) the assessment of the historical and contemporary role

of the homeroom teacher, and (ii) the need to reconceptualize this role within the pre-university education system in light of contemporary international models. The research adopts a qualitative methodology based on archival analysis, focusing primarily on primary sources, complemented by relevant secondary literature to enhance the reliability of the findings. Particular attention is paid to the legal and institutional framework governing this role across different historical periods. The findings highlight significant shifts in the functions and expectations associated with the homeroom teacher, pointing to the need for a clearer definition and modernization of this role in line with current educational demands. The paper contributes to ongoing discussions on redefining the professional profile and responsibilities of the homeroom teacher in contemporary education.

Keywords: *Homeroom teacher, Albanian education system, teacher roles, pre-university education*

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Integration of artificial intelligence in teaching practice in basic education

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One of the fundamental transformations in 21st-century teaching remains the use and integration, within contemporary education, of technological developments in general and of Artificial Intelligence in particular. This study examines the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into teaching practices in basic education, by analyzing the ways in which it is used by teachers, the challenges they encounter, and its impact on their professional development. In a context where accelerated digital transformation is increasingly influencing educational systems, the use of AI is emerging as a tool with high potential for improving the quality of teaching, as well as enhancing students' performance and learning outcomes. The study is based on a mixed-method research approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data collected from approximately 40 teachers across five lower secondary schools. The research instruments include structured questionnaires, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews, enabling the identification of concrete practices of AI use in the teaching process and the analysis of teachers' perceptions regarding its effectiveness. Preliminary findings indicate that teachers use AI primarily in supportive functions in teaching and, in a moderate manner, for lesson planning, the design of instructional materials, the preparation of tests and assignments, as well as for the development of curricular and cross-curricular educational projects. At the same time, the study highlights several challenges related to the lack of structured training, uncertainties regarding the ethical use of AI, and the need for institutional support. In conclusion, the study emphasizes that the sustainable and effective integration of Artificial Intelligence in teaching requires not only access to technology, but also continuous professional development of teachers and supportive institutional policies. The

contribution of this paper lies in providing an empirical insight from the Albanian context and in formulating practical recommendations for the effective use of AI in basic education.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, teaching, teacher professional development, basic education, innovation in education, education technology*

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The School as a Community Center towards the Role of Leadership and Teachersin Social and Educational Development

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In the context of rapid social, economic, and technological developments, education is facing the need to reconceptualize its role in society, moving from a traditional model of knowledge transmission towards an approach that promotes the development of life competencies and active community engagement. In this framework, the concept of an "intelligent society" is linked to the ability of individuals and institutions to use knowledge, technology, and collaboration in the service of sustainable and inclusive development (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2015). This paper aims to present a concrete practice of transforming the school into a community center, as a model that directly contributes to building such a society. The study is based on the experience of the 9-year school "Ismet Sali Bruçaj" in the area of Guci e Re, where through sustained collaboration between the school leadership and teachers, a series of extracurricular activities, cross-curricular projects, and after-school initiatives have been developed, oriented toward the involvement of students, parents, and the wider community. These activities have aimed not only at improving learning outcomes but also at developing social, civic, and professional skills, transforming the school into an open and functional space for the local community. From a theoretical perspective, the paper is grounded in approaches that emphasize the importance of transformational leadership in education, which creates conditions for innovation, collaboration, and institutional development (Fullan, 2014), as well as in constructivist learning theories, which consider the student as an active participant in the construction of knowledge through interaction and experience (Vygotsky, 1978; Dewey, 1938). Within this framework, the role of the school leader is seen as crucial in creating a supportive organizational culture, while the role of the teacher is related to implementing teaching practices that foster critical thinking, collaboration, and the functional use of technology. The study methodology is based on both qualitative and quantitative approaches, including direct observation of activities, the use of questionnaires with students, and the analysis of products created during the projects. The collected data show a significant increase in student engagement, improved collaboration among students, and greater involvement of parents and the community in school life. Additionally, the development of digital and communication skills is evident, which are essential for functioning in a modern society.

Keywords: *Community-centered, school, intelligent society, transformational leadership, community engagement, student engagement*

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Educational leadership and gender inequality in Albania: Structural Barriers and Access to Leadership

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Gender inequality in educational leadership remains one of the most persistent challenges of educational governance in Albania, despite the significant increase in women's participation in the education sector. Women constitute a substantial proportion of teaching and administrative staff; however, this numerical presence is not equally reflected in decision-making structures and leadership positions. Existing studies have largely explained this inequality through structural barriers and socio-cultural norms, but they have often overlooked how access to leadership is organized and operates in institutional practice. This article seeks to contribute to the understanding of this issue by shifting the analytical focus from representation to access. Drawing on quantitative and contextual analysis, the study identifies a persistent gap between the formal meritocratic framework and its actual institutional implementation. Professional advancement is influenced not only by formal criteria but also by operational dynamics and informal networks that shape visibility, opportunities, and career progression. The article argues that gender inequalities in governance stem not from a lack of participation, but from unequal access to both formal and informal structures of educational governance.

Keywords: *Gender inequality; educational leadership; Albania; educational governance*

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Artificial Intelligence in Secondary Education: Opportunities, Challenges, and the Future of Personalized Learning

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The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) is significantly impacting the transformation of pre-university education, especially at the secondary school level. This paper aims to analyze the role and potential of AI-based technologies in improving

the learning process for students in this category, focusing on personalizing learning, increasing engagement, and supporting teachers in classroom management. Through the use of intelligent platforms, AI enables the adaptation of learning materials according to the individual level and pace of secondary school students, helping to improve academic performance and develop critical skills. In addition, the automation of assessment and the analysis of learning data create opportunities for the early identification of difficulties and more effective pedagogical.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence (AI), Secondary Education, Personalized Learning, Adaptive Learning, Systems Educational, Technology Student*

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The Emotional Gap between Parents and Today's Youth. Some considerations on Educational leadership

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The emotional gap between parents and today's youth has become an increasingly significant issue in modern society. Rapid technological advancements, shifting cultural values, and evolving social norms have reshaped how young people think, communicate, and experience the world. As a result, many parents struggle to fully understand their children's emotional needs, perspectives, and challenges. This disconnects often leads to misunderstandings, reduced communication, and weakened family relationships. This paper explores the key factors contributing to the emotional divide between generations, including the influence of digital media, differences in upbringing, and changing expectations around identity, independence, and mental health. While parents may rely on traditional values and communication styles, today's youth are more likely to express themselves through digital platforms and prioritize emotional openness and self-expression. These differences can create barriers that hinder meaningful dialogue and mutual empathy. Furthermore, the study examines the impact of this gap on young people's well-being, including feelings of isolation, lack of support, and emotional distress. It also highlights the importance of active listening, emotional intelligence, and adaptability in fostering stronger connections between parents and their children. By identifying practical strategies to bridge this gap, such as improving communication skills, encouraging empathy, and embracing change, this research aims to promote healthier family dynamics. Ultimately, closing the emotional gap is essential for building trust, understanding, and resilience across generations in an ever-changing world.

Keywords: *Emotional gap, family dynamics, communication barriers, generational differences, parent-youth relationships, educational leadership*

TOWARD AN INTELLIGENT SOCIETY:
CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES
21ST ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL &
INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE

Thematic Session 01:
Culture, Arts, Public Sphere& Communication

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AI-Mediated Language Access and Communicative Inequality: A Study of Kurukh and Gondi

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Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly presented as a tool that can improve access to communication and language learning. This paper examines AI-mediated language learning and translation as a communicative process, with a focus on indigenous tribal languages such as Kurukh and Gondi. The central question of the paper is how AI functions as a mediator of language access and what forms of inclusion and exclusion emerge through this process. The paper is situated within the sociology of communication and draws on symbolic interactionism and the sociology of everyday life. It adopts a qualitative interpretive approach. The analysis is based on systematic observation of AI-assisted language interactions, supported by existing sociological literature on mediated communication and linguistic inequality. The analysis shows that AI tools can offer limited entry points into Kurukh and Gondi, such as basic word level translation and initial exposure to linguistic forms. However, these interactions are marked by significant constraints. Inadequate linguistic datasets, contextual inaccuracies, and frequent breakdowns in translation result in partial access to language. At the same time, they reinforce existing forms of communicative exclusion. The paper argues that AI does not overcome established linguistic hierarchies. Instead, it

reflects and reproduces patterns of linguistic visibility and marginality. Understanding AI within an "intelligent society" therefore requires attention to uneven communicative access rather than technological capability alone. By foregrounding language as a central aspect of communication, the paper contributes to sociological debates on AI, inclusion, and inequality.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, communication, language access, Kurukh, Gondi, inclusion and exclusion*

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The Role of Local Communities in Strengthening Social Cohesion and Citizen Integration – The Case of Kosovo

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This paper examines the role of local communities in promoting social cohesion and the integration of citizens in Kosovo, focusing on the normative framework established by Administrative Instruction (MLGA) No. 02/2019 on the organization and functioning of villages, settlements, and urban neighborhoods. The main research questions are: To what extent do local communities' structures contribute to strengthening social cohesion? How does citizen participation in local decision-making influence the social integration of marginalized groups?The theoretical framework is based on sociological theories of social capital (Putnam, Coleman), the theory of social integration (Durkheim), and community-based social work approaches, viewing the community as a key intermediary actor between the state and the individual.Regarding the methodology, this study is entirely qualitative and descriptive, combining four research approaches: a review of national and international academic literature on social cohesion and local governance; a legal analysis of the normative framework, including Administrative Instruction 02/2019, the Law on Local Self-Government, and other relevant acts; a content analysis of institutional documents, civil society reports, and national strategies; as well as desk research of secondary data from international and local organizations.The findings indicate that active communities with functional participation mechanisms demonstrate higher levels of interpersonal trust and civic engagement. However, the uneven implementation of Administrative Instruction 02/2019 creates structural gaps, particularly in the integration of minority communities and vulnerable groups. Active civil society emerges as a critical bridging actor between communities and institutions. The conclusions highlight the need for better alignment of social policies with local governance mechanisms, the strengthening of community capacities, and the institutionalization of inclusive decision-making as a prerequisite for sustainable social cohesion in Kosovo.

Keywords: *Social cohesion and social integration, local community, social work, local governance, Kosovo*

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Anatomy of Guru Culture: Explore Trajectory from Ashrams to Indian Jails

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Chandogya Upanishad says, 'Only the knowledge received from a teacher (Acharya) leads one to the goal The (4.9.3). 'The one who has a teacher will know the truth.' Gu means darkness of ignorance and 'ru' indicates the one who destroys. As per Mundaka Upanishad, the ideal guru has been described by the scriptures (Shruti) it means a person who have not only studied but also lives and acts according to the scriptures, means whose mind is always fixed on the Supreme God. The Sadhus and Swami Way of life represents a practice that involve austerity, celibacy, often communal living in groups called mathas. The paper explores the shift in the guru culture mentioned in the scriptures to self-indulgent lifestyle of a celibate man. The approach provides an understanding to legal procedures and system unfolded to capture such men in India. The study seeks to provide an overview of this enigmatic phenomenon by compiling a list of cases, and distinguishing between various forms of alleged abuse, crafting a typology of sexual predators. Examining the sources of conflict and social context to understand controversial men and their followers from the ashram to the Indian Jails.

Keywords: *Sexual predators, pedophiles, Ashram cultures, legal system, Indian jails*

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Academic Minir Dushi – a representative of Universal European Scientific Ideals

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In this modest paper, I will present some characteristic elements of the professional, scientific and political activity of the special scholar with extraordinary universal European dimensions, Academician Minir Dushi. Academician MinirDushi was and remains a leader of universal professional and scientific values in the field of geology, mining and mineral extraction. As is known, scientific creativity requires a lot of work, a lot of commitment and time, which Academician MinirDushi, with his diligence and work, has always excelled and was among the first professionals in Kosovo in the field of geology, mining and mineral extraction. Academician Dushi has made a very valuable contribution to our science and culture in the field of geology, mining and mineral extraction. As an author, Academician Dushi aimed to reflect the size and types of mineral deposits discovered during his work

as an engineer and mining expert, to determine the types and characteristics of Kosovo's mineral resources. The results and numerical data of the reserves of the deposits, researched by Academician Dushi together with specialised professional teams of the time were all based on reports, studies and projects compiled by scientific institutes, approved by the competent state bodies of the time of Kosovo and the former Yugoslav Federation. These results indicate the country's development opportunities in the future.

Keywords: *Academician Minir Dushi, mining, geology, mineral extraction, Kosovo*

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The Role of Modern Technology in Preserving Cultural Heritage and Promoting a Smart Society in Albania

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In the era of rapid technological and social transformation, preserving cultural heritage has become a critical challenge and opportunity for Albania. Albanian cultural heritage, including historical monuments, archaeological sites, traditional crafts, folklore, and intangible practices, represents a vital component of national identity and collective memory. Modern technology provides essential tools to document, conserve, and promote these cultural assets while fostering a smart, digitally empowered society. Techniques such as 3D scanning, digital archiving, high-resolution photography, virtual and augmented reality, and online platforms enable detailed recording, immersive experiences, and interactive access for both local communities and global audiences. Integrating these technologies into heritage preservation not only protects cultural assets but also promotes education, innovation, and public participation. Technology can be used to promote on social networks everything related to the history and culture of the country. This also affects the education of younger generation with the country's culture, history, art and tangible and intangible, rural and urban cultural heritage. In this way, cultural preservation becomes a driver of societal development, contributing to a "smart society" in which technology enhances civic engagement, knowledge sharing, and sustainable cultural tourism. By combining digital innovation with respect for tradition and authenticity, Albania can transform heritage conservation into a participatory and intelligent process. This approach ensures that cultural assets remain living, accessible, and inspiring resources, while simultaneously strengthening social cohesion, digital literacy, and sustainable development. Ultimately, leveraging modern technology to preserve cultural heritage represents a key pathway toward building a more intelligent, informed, and culturally resilient Albanian society. In a world where technology advances at a rapid pace, making people dependent on it, its effective use is also seen as a challenge. Therefore, it is important to educate the younger generations with the culture and traditions of Albania, making them more responsible and aware of what the culture of a country really represents.

Keywords: *Cultural heritage, tradition, education, technology, smart society*

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Human artistic intelligence and "AI" in the context of contemporary art

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This study investigates the relationship between human intelligence and artificial intelligence in contemporary artistic practice, asking how technological developments influence the creative process and the ways in which audiences perceive art. Drawing on historical examples from art history, the research situates contemporary digital tools within a long-standing dialogue between artistic creativity and technological innovation. The theoretical framework combines insights from Walter Benjamin and Marshall McLuhan, emphasizing the role of media and technology in shaping perception and aesthetic experience. Methodologically, the study employs a comparative historical analysis, examining key innovations such as the oil painting techniques perfected by Jan van Eyck and the sfumato technique developed by Leonardo da Vinci, alongside contemporary applications of artificial intelligence in visual arts. Secondary sources, including Ernst Gombrich's work on visual perception, inform the analysis of how technological tools mediate artistic representation. Findings suggest that technical innovations have consistently expanded the expressive potential of art without replacing human creativity. Similarly, artificial intelligence acts as a contemporary tool that enhances creative possibilities and reshapes modes of audience perception while preserving the central role of the artist. These developments demonstrate that AI can be understood as part of the historical continuum linking art and technology. In conclusion, this study highlights the continuity between past and present artistic-technological interactions and emphasizes the potential of AI to generate new aesthetic forms in the digital age, rather than serving as a threat to human creativity.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence, artistic creativity, art history, visual perception, technology*

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Artistic Literature and Cultural Education

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Fictional literature (the novel, poetry, drama) is not only an art form of cultural education that shapes values, identity, and social sensitivity. It is not a luxury, but a foundation for cultural education in the era of digitalization. Artistic literature has had and will continue to have a powerful impact not only on youth but on all age groups. It brings people happiness and aesthetic pleasure without any ulterior motive. Even Paul Valéry, who calls poetry a

game of words and conversations, does not use metaphors, but by this he understands the deepest essence of the word "poetry." (Borev 197). Artistic reality is constructed according to the laws of beauty. The recipient, that is, the reader, feels willingly involved and inspired by the writer'swork (a jointcreation). Aristotle defined art istic creation as an imitation of that which has been and still is; an imitation of that which is spoken and thought; and of that which ought to be. In this context, artistic literature bridges between past and present, strengthening identity and preserving a collective memory in a globalized world.

Keywords: *Artistic literature, collective memory, identity, cultural education*

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Intercultural Academic Communication: Integrating Auguste Comte's Positivist Methodology and Michael Byram's ICC Model for Enhanced Understanding

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As higher education becomes increasingly internationalized, academic environments now bring together diverse cultural perspectives, requiring more nuanced approaches to understanding communication across cultural boundaries. Variations in turn-taking, questioning styles, feedback practices, and non-verbal communication often lead to misunderstandings that can hinder effective knowledge exchange. The study employs a qualitative dual-method approach, integrating Auguste Comte's (1853) positivist observational methodology with Michael Byram's (1997) ICC model to analyze intercultural academic communication. Through systematic observation, measurable patterns such as participation frequency, use of silence, and interactional dynamics are recorded and analyzed. These behaviors are then interpreted through the ICC framework, linking them to culturally shaped knowledge, attitudes, and skills. By integrating empirical rigor with intercultural insight, the study enhances understanding of observable behavior and its underlying meaning, promoting clarity, inclusivity, and equitable participation. The findings demonstrate that effective academic communication depends not only on observable practices but also on the ability to interpret and adapt to cultural differences, offering practical benefits for students, educators, and institutions engaged in globalized education.

Keywords: *Intercultural communication, positivism, socialization, academic conferences, intercultural competence*

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Albanian films narratives and youth migration

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This paper attempts to look at the issue of youth migration from a non-traditional perspective. Cinematographic creations from 2010-2025, The Albanian (2010), Agon (2012), Uninvited (2016), Luaneshat e Kodrës (2021) and Alexander (2023), are considered, referring to the dominant elements in the narrative related to youth, migration, driving factors and the impact of decision-making. Interdisciplinarity presents the film as a public discourse, where components of the issue are articulated. The main research question is attributed to the demand for knowledge on "How has the portrayal of youth motivation to migrate changed?" Considering the main theories on migration, the paper is based on the push and pull theory and identity and acculturation, in an attempt to address different factors and perspectives, as well as ways of readjustment. Qualitative content analysis helped to analyze the events that drive decision-making, the decision on the destination, the role of the family and the prevailing emotional states. The need for survival, mental and institutional boundaries and not only physical ones, mentality and circumstances as determinants in the role of the family, identity crisis and myths about destinations, are the main findings portrayed, supported by the stage narratives.

Keywords: *Migration, youth, films, narratives*

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Compositional Techniques in the Musical Works of At Fan S. Noli

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This study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the compositional techniques in the musical works of At Fan S. Noli, examining them within an interdisciplinary framework that integrates musical analysis, intellectual history, and the Byzantine liturgical context. The methodological approach is based on structural score analysis, hermeneutic interpretation of musical material, and the positioning of these works in relation to their broader aesthetic and cultural traditions. At the melodic-modal level, a clear orientation toward Byzantine modal systems is evident, where scales function not merely as linear melodic frameworks but as organizing principles of musical discourse. Modality operates as both an identity marker and a structural element, creating tension between tonal stability and the intervallic flexibility characteristic of Eastern liturgical practice. From a harmonic

perspective, Noli's musical language operates in an intermediate space between functional tonality and a more archaic conception of sound. Traditional cadential patterns are often avoided in favor of harmonic stasis and free tonal gravitation, reflecting an aesthetic intention to preserve the contemplative and meditative character of the musical material. Formally, the orchestral works are shaped by a programmatic and narrative logic. Rather than adhering to rigid classical schemes, form emerges through processes of motivic transformation and thematic recontextualization, allowing for structural flexibility and a strong connection with extra-musical content. Orchestration reveals a conscious use of timbre as a structural category rather than a merely decorative element. Orchestral color plays a central role in shaping the semantic space of the work. In vocal compositions, the relationship between text and music is realized through natural declamation, where melodic lines closely follow the prosody of the language, enhancing expressive intensity. In conclusion, Noli's compositional techniques represent a synthesis of Byzantine tradition and Western compositional practices, resulting in a distinctive musical idiom. This synthesis reflects not only his artistic formation but also his multifaceted identity as a cleric, intellectual, and creator, positioning his work within a unique context in both Albanian and twentieth-century European music.

Keywords: *Compositional techniques; Byzantine modality; orchestration; text–music relationship; musical analysis; cultural identity*

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AI as a Mediator of Communication: Meaning, Translation, and Misunderstanding in the Digital Age

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The growing integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into contemporary communication is transforming how meaning is produced, interpreted, and transmitted across languages and contexts. This presentation examines AI as a mediator of communication, focusing on its role in shaping meaning-making processes in digital and public communication environments. Drawing on findings from a comparative study of Large Language Models and Machine Translation systems in English–Albanian translation across multiple text types, the discussion highlights how translation quality varies depending on genre. While AI systems often produce fluent and accessible outputs, they do not perform uniformly, particularly in handling context, pragmatics, and culturally embedded meanings. These variations have important implications for communication in education and professional settings. As users increasingly rely on AI tools, there is a growing need for critical awareness, ethical use, and user training. The presentation argues that AI is redefining the role of language users and may significantly reshape communication-related professions in the digital age.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, AI-mediated communication, machine translation, genre, meaning-making, low-resource languages*

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Cultural Expression as Political Voice: Rap, Youth, and the Transformation of the Public Sphere in Morocco

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This paper explores how Moroccan rap functions as a form of political expression within an evolving public sphere. It argues that cultural production becomes a key site where political grievances, identity struggles, and demands for recognition are articulated outside formal institutional channels. Drawing on political sociology and cultural analysis, the study conceptualizes rap as a medium through which youth negotiate visibility and challenge dominant narratives. The paper highlights how emotional narratives of marginalization and aspiration reshape the boundaries of political communication. It concludes that cultural fields play an increasingly important role in redefining political participation in contemporary Morocco.

Keywords: *Political Expression, Moroccan Rap, Youth Expression, Symbolic Resistance*

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The Impact of Social Media as Part of Digitalization on Youth Behavior and Communication

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This paper examines the impact of social media on the behavior and communication of young people, with a particular focus on their use and perception in the cities of Peja and Gjakova. Social media, as an increasingly widespread phenomenon, has transformed the way young people communicate, build relationships, and shape their opinions in everyday life. The research was conducted by combining two main methods: quantitative and

qualitative, through 100 questionnaires distributed to young people aged 15–25 and a focus group with 5 participants of different ages. The aim of this study is to identify the impact of social media on the behavior and communication of youth, as well as to analyze the time spent, preferences, and effects they have on their daily lives. The results show that most young people use social media daily and are aware of its influence, emphasizing that it affects both their way of thinking and communication. Differences are also observed between young people and adults in terms of use and perception, where youth are more oriented toward entertainment content and online interaction. The paper highlights that social media plays an important role in the lives of young people, bringing both benefits (information, communication, entertainment) and risks (time loss, influence on behavior and relationships). Therefore, a more conscious and educational use is recommended, with the involvement of parents and educational institutions in guiding young people.

Keywords: *Social media, youth, behavior, communication, impact*

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Music as a bridge of cultural dialogue: The case of DUO SKUPI

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This paper explores the role of music as a medium for intercultural dialogue and social cohesion in the Balkan context, focusing on the artistic work of Duo Skupi (flute and violin). The research addresses the question: how can musical performance contribute to strengthening cultural identity while simultaneously promoting intercultural understanding? The theoretical framework is based on concepts of cultural communication, music as a social practice, and the role of the arts in public space. The study applies a qualitative methodology, including analysis of concert performances, audience engagement, and repertoire selection, particularly arrangements of traditional Albanian and Macedonian songs. Findings indicate that music serves as an effective tool for bridging cultural differences, creating shared emotional experiences among diverse audiences, and fostering mutual respect. The performances of Duo Skupi, often supported by chamber ensembles, demonstrate how reinterpretation of traditional repertoire can revitalize cultural heritage while making it accessible to contemporary audiences, including younger generations. The study concludes that artistic initiatives such as Duo Skupi contribute not only to cultural preservation but also to the development of an "intelligent society," where art plays a

central role in communication, education, and social integration. The paper highlights the importance of supporting such projects within institutional and educational frameworks.

Keywords: *Music, intercultural dialogue, cultural identity, education, performance, Balkans*

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Language as Musical Material: A Linguistic-Musical Analysis of Lab Polyphony

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Lab polyphony represents one of the most profound and authentic forms of Albanian multipart singing, where music and language merge into an organic relationship that conveys a collective and irreducible identity. This paper examines how the Albanian language, in its dialectal form, functions within the structure of polyphony not merely as a linguistic carrier of meaning, but as a musical, rhythmic, and emotional element. Through an analysis of phonetic, morphological, and semantic characteristics, as well as the performative nature of collective vocal utterance, this study reveals how the dialect acts as both sonic material and cultural marker. It argues that Lab polyphony can be understood as a unique linguo-musical system, where the word becomes sound, and sound becomes word: a form of speaking through singing that embodies both memory and identity.

Keywords: *Lab polyphony, Albanian language, iso-drone, cultural identity, ethnomusicology, linguistic anthropology*

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Aesthetics in Institutional Art

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The lack of a ballet school in the city of Shkodra, and in the entire northern area, as well as the request of many parents that the state public school have a ballet-dance art sector, gave me the impetus to develop and present this ambitious project and at the same time realistic. Taking into consideration the author's experience and dedication, the author has time to work voluntarily in a project aimed at perfecting and increasing the quality of teaching and bringing it closer to contemporary standards, both in the music sector and in that of visual arts. As you know, Shkodra inherits the musical values of great colossus such as Çesk Zadeja, Tonin

Harapi, Pjetër Gaci, Gjon Kapedani, etc. and in that of figurative arts, it is protected by the art and culture of Indromeno, Lulan, Danish Jukni, etc. The "Prenk Jakova" Artistic High School, being the only art school in the Northern Area of Albania, which includes the District of Shkodra, The Great Highlands Puke, Lezha, through this project, which the author has been working on for years and with great effort the author managed to finish it, within a very short time it can reach contemporary European standards and the students who will qualify in this school will be ready to compete at all levels of contemporary schools. Within this project, the introduction of the art of classical dance, ballet, is also foreseen, with the expansion of which we enable the school "Prenk Jakova" to never have exhaustion in the registrations of the first cycles, in which our school has always had deficiencies. Allow the author to express her conviction that the ancient city of Shkodra deserves this project in aid of Albanian art and culture. Extending it to the primary cycles, the introduction of classical ballet dance gives the only art school for the northern area, longevity and a flow of enrollments and a flow of students in primary schools.

Keywords: *Re-establishment, Classical Ballet, painting classes, sculptures, digital methods, contemporary technology*

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Evaluating practice and role perceptions in school psychosocial services: principals vs professionals

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This study examines and compares school principals' and psychosocial support professionals' evaluations of actual practice and role perceptions in school-based psychosocial services. A mixed-methods design was employed to integrate quantitative and qualitative data and provide a comprehensive understanding of service provision within the school context. The quantitative component included a sample of 156 participants from the regional education office of Shkodra in Albania, comprising both school principals and psychosocial support professionals. Data were collected using two adapted instruments: the School Psychology Perceptions Survey (Gilman & Gabriel, 2004) and a scale assessing practices related to the promotion of positive behavior and mental health (McCaslin-Timmons, 2016). Both instruments were culturally adapted to the Albanian educational context. Data analysis included reliability testing (Cronbach's alpha), exploratory factor analysis to examine the construct validity of the adapted instruments, descriptive statistics, and correlation analyses. Group differences between principals and psychosocial support professionals were examined using independent samples t-tests (or non-parametric equivalents where appropriate), alongside effect size estimates. Additionally, regression analyses were conducted to explore the extent to which role perceptions predict reported practices.

The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews with participants from both groups. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes and to support the interpretation and integration of quantitative findings. The findings are expected to reveal both convergences and discrepancies between the two groups, offering insights into role clarity, alignment between perceived and actual practices, and implications for improving psychosocial service delivery in schools. The paper also offers policy recommendations for the improvement of school based psychosocial services.

Keywords: *School principals, school based psychosocial services*

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The Albanian Language in North Macedonia Following the Enactment of the Law on the Use of Languages (2018)

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The formal institutionalization of the Albanian language in North Macedonia represents a complex and historically contingent process, intrinsically linked to the broader trajectory of ethno-political formation and contestation among Albanians as a constituent, yet structurally fragmented, political community. This fragmentation—rooted in the territorial partition of Albanian-inhabited lands following the events of 1912 and further consolidated by the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s—has necessitated an ongoing and often contentious renegotiation of the ethno-political status of Albanians within the constitutional and institutional framework in North Macedonia. The enactment of the Law on the Use of Languages (2018) must be situated within a critical conjuncture of both domestic political realignment and international geopolitical repositioning. In particular, it coincides with the resolution of the long-standing name dispute through the Prespa Agreement and the country's subsequent accession to NATO, developments that collectively redefined the parameters of state legitimacy and external alignment. This paper advances the argument that the law's adoption was not merely a legal reform, but a politically negotiated outcome embedded within broader processes of state consolidation, identity reconfiguration, and international integration. Furthermore, the study critically interrogates the post-enactment period, characterized by shifting political dynamics that have generated systematic efforts to circumscribe, reinterpret, and, in certain instances, obstruct the effective implementation of the law. These tendencies have been operationalized through a complex interplay of legal challenges, administrative practices, and political contestation, often reflecting deeper tensions regarding state identity, power-sharing, and the limits of multicultural governance. Within this analytical framework, linguistic equality is conceptualized not solely as a normative legal principle, but as a central axis of democratic legitimacy and ethno-political stability. Its realization—or erosion—bears significant implications for the sustainability of interethnic relations and the broader project of state-building in North Macedonia.

Keywords: *Linguistic equality, Law on the Use of Languages, political context, ethnic identity*

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What Works in Preventing Labour Exploitation? The Criminal Justice Response in Romania

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Over the past decade, Romania has shifted from a predominantly migrant-sending country to an emerging destination for third-country workers, particularly from South and South-East Asia (Nepal, Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh). Their rapid socio-economic integration takes place within a broader European context characterised by labour shortages and increased transnational mobility. This specific dynamic generates vulnerabilities especially towards labour exploitation and human trafficking, wich rase a central question for criminal justice policy: what effectively works in preventing such offences in new destination states in Central and Eastern Europe? The study employs a mixed-methods design, combining analysis of the institutional framework and law enforcement practices, administrative data on residence permits and sectoral distribution, focus groups with migrant workers, employers and recruitment agency representatives, and assessment of victim identification mechanisms and inspection capacity. The findings reveal a gap between formal criminalisation and the effective enforcement of relevant regulations. Legal dependency on a single employer, indebtedness through recruitment fees, insufficient regulation of intermediaries and limited labour inspection capacity create conditions consistent with recognised indicators of human trafficking. Proactive victim identification remains limited, while criminal justice intervention is largely reactive. Romania's experience reflects broader challenges faced by European Member States in managing labour migration from third countries. The effectiveness of the criminal justice response depends on early identification, strengthened inspections and integrated inter-institutional coordination, ensuring that intervention becomes genuinely preventive rather than merely punitive.

Keywords: *Labour exploitation, human trafficking, criminal justice response, third-country nationals, migration governance*

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Transforming diaspora relations with the country of origin and its role in sustainable development: The case of Kosovo

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Within the framework of the topic, we analyze the transformation of diaspora relations with the country of origin from an integrated sociological and demographic perspective, focusing on the case of Kosovo and placing it in a broader comparative context. Drawing on theories of migration and transnationalism, the study argues that relations between diaspora and country of origin have evolved from linear and one-way models towards dynamic and multidimensional forms of social, economic and cultural interaction. In the international literature, authors such as Alejandro Portes and Peggy Levitt emphasize that modern migrants create "transnational social spaces", where identities, practices and resources circulate across state borders. In this context, the diaspora should not be seen only as a source of remittances, but as a complex actor that continuously builds and reconstructs ties with the country of origin. In the case of Kosovo, these processes are strongly influenced by the history of migration, especially during the 1990s and after the war (after 1999). The Kosovar diaspora is characterized by marked heterogeneity in terms of generations, educational level and integration in host countries. Therefore, "migration from Kosovo should not be seen only as an economic phenomenon, but as a social process that affects family structure, human capital and the overall development of society". In this context, first generations of migrants maintain stronger emotional and economic ties to the country of origin, while second and third generations display more diversified forms of belonging, often mediated by cultural identity and global networks. The sociological transformation of these relations is closely linked to the concept of social capital and transnational networks. The diaspora contributes to sustainable development not only through remittances, but also through the transfer of knowledge, innovation and the spread of democratic norms. However, its potential often remains untapped due to the lack of coordinated policies and effective institutional mechanisms. Well-structured and coordinated policies for diaspora engagement have the potential to significantly increase its impact on the economic, social and institutional development processes of countries of origin. The experience of countries such as Ireland and Israel demonstrates advanced models of diaspora mobilization, where it serves as a key actor in promoting investment, innovation and technological development. These cases offer valuable lessons for countries like Kosovo and Albania, which are characterized by high levels of emigration and strong transnational ties. In this context, the development of more comprehensive, long-term and harmonized policies between these two countries represents a strategic opportunity, taking into account their linguistic, cultural and identity affinities. Such a coordinated approach strengthens the impact of the Albanian diaspora on sustainable development and in building more effective transnational partnerships. In conclusion, the Kosovar diaspora represents an important development potential, but

requires a more integrated approach that takes into account its sociological and demographic dimensions. Only through a deep understanding of these dynamics can effective policies be designed that transform the diaspora from a traditional source of remittances into a strategic partner for sustainable development.

Keywords: *Diaspora, transnationalism, demographic structure, social capital, sustainable development, Kosovo*

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Intelligent society and emigration: Challenges of brain drain from Albania

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Intelligent societies derive their conceptual definition from advanced technological infrastructures such as artificial intelligence, digitalisation, innovation, and high-speed connectivity, alongside the consolidation of knowledge-based economies and the continuous enhancement of human capital. Within this framework, a pronounced dualism emerges between developed countries, characterised by the aforementioned dimensions and developing countries, such as Albania. This structural disparity gives rise to a corresponding dualism in migration patterns, particularly manifesting in the phenomenon of brain drain. This phenomenon unfolds through two principal dynamics: first, the pull factors exerted by intelligent societies, and second, the challenges generated by brain drain in the country of origin, alongside processes of brain circulation in host countries. The present study aims to analyse the primary driving forces behind the emigration of Albanian youth, who, within migratory flows over the past five years, are increasingly identified as part of a "brain drain" trajectory. Technology, access to information, and the attractiveness of intelligent societies constitute significant pull factors for Albanian youth. However, for Albanian society, this trend represents a substantial depletion of highly skilled human resources. The principal push factors underpinning this phenomenon are closely linked to economic conditions, pervasive insecurity, and a lack of trust in social institutions. The objective of this article is to examine the key determinants of youth emigration in Albania, as well as to assess the role of intelligent societies as a major pull factor shaping migration dynamics. To ensure a nationally representative measurement of the emigration potential among university youth, the study employs empirical data derived from a quantitative online survey (N = 1,010) conducted among Albanian university students across all seven public universities in the country. The data are analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26, applying a range of statistical techniques, including descriptive analysis, frequency distributions, and cross-tabulations.

Keywords: *Brain Drain, Intelligent Societies, Youth Emigration, Human Capital, Push and Pull Factors, Albania*

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Diaspora Voting and Democratic Legitimacy: A Comparative Analysis of Albania and Kosovo in the Light of Democratic Theory and Contemporary Practices

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The debate on diaspora voting rights has intensified in contemporary democracies, particularly in societies characterized by large-scale emigration. This paper provides a comparative analysis of Albania and Kosovo, situating these cases within the framework of classical theories of democracy (Aristotle, Rousseau, Locke, Montesquieu, Tocqueville). It examines both the similarities and the significant differences between the two cases. The study also adopts a broader comparative perspective by considering contemporary practices across various European countries (such as Israel, Switzerland, France, Finland, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Iceland), Latin America (including Chile, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic), as well as other parts of the world (such as Australia, Singapore, and South Africa). The paper contributes to the literature by offering a theoretically grounded and empirically informed comparative framework for assessing diaspora voting and its implications for democratic legitimacy in post-migration societies. Based on this analysis, the paper draws several important conclusions for Albania and Kosovo. It argues that, although diaspora voting is theoretically problematic from a territorial-democratic perspective, the case of Kosovo represents a historical and normative exception, whereas the case of Albania calls for a more limited and structured model of inclusion.

Keywords: *Diaspora; voting; democracy; Albania; Kosovo; political legitimacy*

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Leading Digital Schools: The Role of Smartboards and Teacher Competencies

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This paper explores the role of school leadership in driving digital transformation in education, with a focus on the integration of smart technologies and the development of teachers' digital competencies. In the context of rapid technological change and the growing influence of artificial intelligence, school leaders are required to adopt innovative strategies that support both teachers and students. The study is based on the experience of the "Selim Alliu" school in Albania, where concrete initiatives have been implemented throughout the academic year to enhance digital teaching practices. A central element of this transformation has been the use of smartboards in every classroom, which has enabled interactive teaching, the integration of multimedia resources, and a more engaging learning environment for students. The school leadership has actively supported this process by organizing targeted training sessions, encouraging peer collaboration, and providing continuous guidance for teachers in the effective use of digital tools. Despite initial challenges, such as varying levels of digital skills among teachers and resistance to change, the initiatives have led to visible improvements in teaching quality, student participation, and overall classroom dynamics. The findings highlight that strong and visionary leadership is essential for building a sustainable digital culture in schools. By aligning technological infrastructure with teachers' competencies, schools can better respond to the demands of the digital era and contribute to the development of an intelligent and future-oriented society.

Keywords: *School leadership, smart boards, digital competencies, innovation, digital education*

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Strengthening Parent–Teacher Collaboration in Upper Secondary Education: Implications for Adolescent Development and Academic Success

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Parent–teacher collaboration in upper secondary education constitutes a critical dimension of students' academic success and socio-emotional development, particularly during adolescence, a period marked by identity formation, increasing autonomy, and heightened vulnerability to academic and emotional challenges. This study aims to explore teachers' perceptions of the role and effectiveness of parent–teacher partnerships, focusing on their contribution to students' academic performance, motivation, self-discipline, and overall well-being. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study is guided by five research questions that examine: (1) teachers' perceptions of the importance of parent–teacher collaboration; (2) the forms, practices, and challenges of communication with parents; (3) the role of such collaboration in identifying and addressing students' academic and emotional difficulties; (4) its impact on student motivation, engagement, and self-regulation; and (5) effective strategies for strengthening this partnership. Data are collected through semi-structured interviews with upper secondary school teachers and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings are expected to reveal that consistent and meaningful communication between teachers and parents enhances early identification of student needs, facilitates coordinated interventions,

and fosters a supportive learning environment. Moreover, active parental involvement, when aligned with pedagogical practices, is likely to positively influence students' motivation, accountability, and behavioral outcomes. However, structural and relational barriers, such as limited parental engagement, time constraints, and communication gaps, may hinder the effectiveness of this collaboration. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for systematic, school-supported strategies to strengthen parent–teacher partnerships, highlighting their pivotal role in promoting holistic student development. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on educational quality and offer practical implications for policy and practice in secondary education contexts.

Keywords: *Parent–teacher partnership, adolescent development, academic motivation, socio-emotional well-being*

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Developing reading competence in the digital world

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This study addresses the issue of fostering young readers in grades 10–12 in the context of the digital age, focusing on the ways technology can be used to encourage a desire for reading. Given the dominance of digital media, the study aims to analyze pedagogical strategies that transform reading from an academic task into an engaging experience. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) How can sustainable readers be developed in upper secondary education? (2) Which strategies are most effective in connecting traditional reading with digital formats? The theoretical framework is grounded in Lev Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory of learning as a social process, in reading motivation theories (Guthrie & Wigfield), as well as in Manuel Castells' concept of digital culture, which emphasizes the transformation of ways of experiencing information in the network society. The methodology is qualitative and includes analysis of contemporary literature, comparison of international practices, and description of concrete strategies applicable in the classroom, as well as elements of pedagogical reflection based on teaching experience. The findings show that students develop greater interest in reading when they are given the opportunity to freely choose texts, engage in discussions and collaborative activities, and use digital tools such as audiobooks and interactive platforms, and when reading is connected to their personal and emotional experiences. In conclusion, the study emphasizes that digitalization does not pose a threat to reading, but rather an opportunity to reconceptualize it. Building young readers requires an integrated approach that combines motivation, social interaction, and the use of technology, transforming reading into a sustainable and meaningful practice in students' lives.

Keywords: *Reading, motivation, digitalization, literature, students*

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Albanian teachers' perceptions and familiarity with AI in education

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The aim of this paper is to examine the readiness of educators and educational leaders to adopt and effectively utilize Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools within educational settings. Though a comprehensive review of existing literature and an analysis of current practices, the study explores teachersë perceptions and levels of familiarity with AI technologies, as well as identifies gaps that hinder their integration into teaching environments. The findings underscore the necessity for educators to enhance their pedagogical performance and to adopt innovative instructional methodologies aligned with institutional requirements. Additionally, the results reveal that female educators demonstrate greater awareness of AI implementation in education, and that teachers employed in public education institutions exhibit higher level of interest in understanding and addressing AI-related needs, whether on an individual or institutional level. The research methodology emphasizes the importance of interventions aimed at increasing teachersë familiarity with AI tools and investigates the relationship between educators' perceptions and their knowledge of AI applications. The study highlights the critical need for ongoing training, workshops, and practical activities focused on AI concepts and their application across various disciplines. To fully realize the transformative potential of AI in education, collaborative efforts between institutions and teachers are essential to develop coherent curricula and to promote the integration of AI tools, ensuring that educators are equipped with the requisite skills and knowledge to facilitate effective implementation.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence tools, educational settings, teachersë professional development, AI literacy*

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The Importance of Emotional Intelligence in Student-Professor Communication

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Emotional Intelligence involves understanding and managing one's own emotions and being attuned to the feelings and needs of others. Emotional intelligence is critical in interpersonal relationships because it enables professionals to understand the emotional nuances of their audience and adapt their communication style accordingly. Research consistently highlights that individuals with high emotional intelligence have very good skills in managing their own emotions and in understanding those of others, which fosters better communication,

collaboration, and conflict resolution (Alhur A.A, 2025;1027). Emotional competencies—such as emotional regulation, empathy, and interpersonal communication—enable professors to create supportive learning environments that increase student resilience and engagement (Goleman, 2001). The quantitative study that included 85 students of the "Aleksandër Moisu" University of Durrës, in the fields of Teacher Education, Primary Education and Preschool Education, explored the students' perception on the role and importance of emotional intelligence in academic communication, especially in the student-teacher relationship. The findings show that students increasingly recognize the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) in building effective communication with teachers (91.6% of students), and an important element that directly affects the quality of this relationship. The results show the potential of emotional intelligence as a key factor for academic success and preparation for the labor market. For this reason, it is recommended that it be treated as an essential competence in university education, and that the university should offer specific training on emotional intelligence and communication skills.

Keywords: *Emotional Intelligence (EI), Higher Education, Motivation, Communication*

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Inclusion in higher education: From principle to best practice in Romania

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This current paper tries to highlight an example of good practice addressed to the inclusion of students and pupils with disabilities, carried out within a public university in Romania. During the period April-December 2025, a non-reimbursable funding project, from national Ministery of Education, was implemented addressed to students and pupils with disabilities, as well as to other students, teaching staff, administrative staff, and research staff involved in the educational process within the targeted university. The planned activities (counseling, tutoring, research, information, and workshops), the planned and achieved results, as well as the local social impact obtained as a result of the implementation of the project activities are presented. The main objective of the needs analysis carried out is: how students with disabilities evaluate accessibility, services and institutional support within the university. The sociological analysis is exploratory, to which 59 respondents from a total population of 78 students and graduates with disabilities from 2022 to 2025 responded. We used an online questionnaire applied through Google From, and the data were collected between June and October 2025. The main conclusions of the study: the university infrastructure (online and onsite) offers the right conditions for carrying out the learning-evaluation activity. The teaching and administrative staff has an open and receptive attitude to the needs of students with disabilities, provides additional answers and allocates appropriate time to resolve various cases. The research results can be used as a primary basis for large-scale studies at the level of the entire higher education system in Romania.

Keywords: *Disability students, Romania, university, inclusion, best practices*

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The role of communication in teaching and effective methods for its implementation

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Communication constitutes the core of the teaching–learning process, and in contemporary competence-based education the message must be practical, evidence-based, and persuasive. This requires thorough planning of teaching methodology and didactic techniques in order to achieve the objectives of the teaching–learning process and to enhance the effectiveness of instructional materials through communication. Teacher–student communication based on action ("learning by doing") encourages personal experience, fosters the development of students' individuality, and promotes their active engagement in learning. The teacher's role is inspiring and involves creating problem-based situations in which students activate their imagination, knowledge, experience, and creativity. The level of such activation depends directly on the way the message is delivered and on the quality of teacher–student communication. Open and continuous communication between teachers and students represents the foundation of successful educational relationships. Effective teachers are distinguished by their ability to convey information clearly, encourage feedback, stimulate open and critical thinking, and promote constructive debate. This significantly contributes to the development of sustainable theoretical knowledge and conscious practical skills among students. The advancement of educational technologies has enabled the use of innovative communication tools that keep teachers effectively connected with students throughout the entire educational process. The integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education has become a necessity, substantially improving the quality and attractiveness of teaching. The wise use of ICT, integrated within contemporary pedagogy, strengthens communication in the teaching–learning chain and responds to the demands of modern society for new competencies and skills.

Keywords: *Communication, information, teaching, learning, pedagogy, ICT*

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Education and knowledge in a sustainable environment, through digital literacy for transformation

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Education is the process of transmitting knowledge, skills, and character traits through structured learning within institutions or no formal and informal means of socialization. There are four principles of education according to Dewey: utility, interest, experience,

and integration. Considered a fundamental human right a key driver of sustainable environmental development, education as part of social policy significantly reduces poverty, improves health, and provides individuals with the stability to achieve their potential. Knowledge is an awareness of facts, a familiarity with individuals and situations, or a practical skill. Knowledge of facts, also called propositional knowledge, is often characterized as true belief that is distinct from opinion or guesswork by virtue of justification. There are 7 types of knowledge: Explicit Knowledge, Implicit Knowledge, Tacit Knowledge, Declarative Knowledge, Procedural Knowledge, Conditional Knowledge, and Conceptual Knowledge. There are 9 types of intelligence to use through education, and the IA is at the top of them nowadays. In my opinion, emotional and interpersonal intelligence are very important too to create potential. Our challenge is to develop 17th sustainable environmental objectives for our future country as part of BE in 2030, far away from the MSA of 2003. In Albania, there is a wide range of sources. As Bacon says ¨Knowledge is power, "which means education and understanding provide the capacity to make better decisions and achieve goals? Our educated students will use this power to reach development and transform our society as an EU part in 2030.

Keywords: *Education, individual, knowledge, IA technology, development*

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Volunteering as a Tool for Developing Civic Competences among Lower Secondary School Students

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Civic education and social responsibility have become central priorities in contemporary educational systems, particularly in efforts to promote active citizenship among young people. Within this context, volunteering is increasingly recognized as a meaningful pedagogical approach that connects classroom learning with real community engagement. This study examines the contribution of volunteer activities to the development of civic and social competences among lower secondary school students, focusing on students' perceptions and experiences. The research was conducted at "Ndre Mjeda" School in Shkodër as part of a school-based initiative developed in cooperation with local volunteer associations and community actors. Data were collected through questionnaires and focus group discussions with approximately 100 students from the upper grades of lower

secondary education. The study explored students' perspectives on how participation in volunteering influences their sense of civic responsibility, solidarity, and collaborative engagement within the community. The findings indicate that a large majority of students (87%) perceive volunteering as a meaningful experience that enhances their awareness of community needs and strengthens their capacity for cooperation and social participation. These results suggest that volunteering can serve as an effective complementary strategy within civic education in basic education. The study also underscores the importance of sustained partnerships between schools and civil society organizations in order to create authentic opportunities for student participation and the development of active citizenship.

Keywords: *Volunteering, civic competences, civic education, student experience, school–community cooperation*

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How Schools Construct Behavior: A Study of Handbook Language

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This study examines how institutional language constructs behavioral expectations in elementary schools through the lens of labeling theory. Schools do not simply respond to student behavior; they shape how behavior is understood through the language used to define and regulate it. Parent student handbooks function as formalized institutional texts, making them a key site for analyzing how discipline and moral expectations are communicated. This project analyzes twenty elementary school handbooks, including ten public and ten private Catholic schools across five major Texas cities. Disciplinary terms (violation, offense, discipline, punishment, consequence) and social emotional learning (SEL) terms (respect, responsibility, empathy, integrity, and community) were operationalized as measurable indicators of institutional language. Term frequencies were coded and analyzed using independent samples to tests to compare differences across school types. Findings show no statistically significant difference in disciplinary language between school types. However, private Catholic schools demonstrate significantly higher levels of SEL language. These results suggest that differences are not rooted in discipline itself, but in how behavior is framed. Rather than emphasizing rule enforcement, private Catholic schools frame students as moral actors responsible for maintaining community and institutional values. By treating language as data, this study shows how institutions construct behavior through communication. It contributes to the sociology of education by showing that institutional language functions as a structured mechanism of social control that shapes how behavior is interpreted and internalized.

Keywords: *Institutional language, social control, labeling theory, social emotional learning*

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Integrative Model of Natural Science Learning

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This paper addresses the need for a model that makes explicit and operational the relationship between content, Learning Outcomes (LO), learning situations, student action, and assessment within the framework of the Competence-Based Curriculum. It proposes an integrative model of science learning built on three core principles: learning content as a symbolic representation of the conceptual structure of scientific knowledge; the use of content by the student in situations for constructing NJ–AF–QND; and NJ–AF–QND as a conceptual structure reconstructed and used by the student through action in context. The model is organized as a functional architecture comprising scientific knowledge, scientific content, learning content, Learning Outcomes (LO), learning situations, student action, and Student Achievement (SA). These components interact within a cyclical process in which use in context constitutes the functional core of learning, while Student Achievement and assessment serve as mechanisms that make this use visible and regulate its quality through feedback. The paper offers a coherent and applicable model for organizing science learning, contributing to a clearer understanding of how content, use, and assessment can be functionally integrated in competence-based education.

Keywords: *Competence-Based Curriculum, conceptual structure, K–S–A, learning situation, Learning Outcomes (LO), Student Achievement*

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Enhancement of quality of life at a nursing home community in Tirana, Albania, subsequent to a 12-week outdoor walking exercise

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Background: Quality of life (QoL) is acknowledged as a significant outcome metric reported by older individuals residing in nursing homes. Evaluating the quality of life in

elderly adults is challenging due to discrepancies in data collection methods, particularly between surveys and self-reports which can result in incorrect evaluations of their actual quality of life and impede effective care planning. This study sought to investigate the psychometric features of the self-reported EQ-5D-3L, comprising the EQ index and the EQ visual analog scale (VAS), among nursing home residents and to examine its validity concerning the scales included in the comprehensive geriatric evaluation. Methods: The experiment included 12 weeks, incorporating a nature walking program conducted three times weekly, featuring a systematic increase in both distance and walking speed (steps per minute) from session to session. The questionnaire was administered at both the commencement and conclusion of the project to the experimental and control groups. The IBM SPSS Statistics 23 software was utilized for the statistical analysis of the data. The software provides an array of extensive tools for statistical analysis, data management, and visualization. Conclusions: Health Scale ($\chi^2 = 18.667$, $p = 0.002$) demonstrated substantial alterations, signifying an overall enhancement in health status for the experimental group post-intervention. The intervention positively affected most aspects of quality of life, including mobility, self-care, daily activities, anxiety, and overall health, with the exception of pain/worry. The results indicate that the intervention effectively enhanced specific dimensions of the quality of life for the older participants in this study.

Keywords: *Nature walking, nursing home inhabitants, life quality, EQ-5D-3L*

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The Role of Pilates in Enhancing Physical and Mental Health in the Context of an Intelligent Society

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Introduction: In recent decades, socio-economic transformations and technological advancements have contributed to an increasingly sedentary lifestyle and elevated levels of psychological stress. In this context, holistic physical interventions such as Pilates have gained significant attention in scientific literature. Pilates represents a system of exercises aimed at integrating neuromuscular control, coordinated breathing, and cognitive concentration. Methodology: This study is based on a literature review approach, analyzing scientific articles, meta-analyses, and empirical studies on the effects of Pilates on physical and psychological parameters. Sources were selected from indexed academic databases and examined through a comparative framework to identify key trends and scientific evidence. Results: Findings indicate that regular

Pilates practice is associated with significant improvements in flexibility, muscular strength (particularly core strength), postural stability, and reduction of musculoskeletal pain, especially in the lumbar region. Psychologically, evidence suggests reductions in stress and anxiety levels, along with improvements in cognitive functions such as concentration and body awareness. Discussion: The results support the conceptualization of Pilates as an effective biopsychosocial intervention. Its integration into the lifestyle of an intelligent society reinforces the importance of chronic disease prevention and the promotion of sustainable well-being. However, methodological variability among studies and the lack of standardized exercise protocols represent limitations that warrant further research. Conclusions: Pilates emerges as an evidence-based approach for enhancing both physical and mental health. It contributes to the development of a more aware, productive, and health-oriented society. Its implementation in public health policies and educational programs may have a significant impact on population well-being.

Keywords: *Pilates, physical well-being, mental health, neuromuscular control, flexibility, stress, intelligent society, holistic intervent*

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Tempo as Pedagogical Regulator: A Study on Music-Guided Physical Activity in Educational Contexts

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This study investigates the pedagogical role of musical tempo as a regulatory mechanism in physical education, with particular emphasis on movement synchronization with structured auditory stimuli. Grounded in the social sciences, the research examines how tempo variations (slow, moderate, fast) influence the intensity, coordination, and qualitative dynamics of physical activity. Musical tempo is conceptualized as an active pedagogical tool that structures motor behaviour and facilitates the integration of cognitive and kinaesthetic processes. An observational, practice-based methodology was employed, integrating rhythm-guided exercises into structured educational settings. The findings indicate that slow tempo supports balance, control, and recovery; moderate tempo enhances coordination and rhythmic stability; while fast tempo increases energy, agility, and cardiovascular engagement. Furthermore, music-guided physical activity contributes to improved motor coordination, intentional focus, and intrinsic motivation among learners. The study highlights the potential of tempo-based instruction to create inclusive and engaging learning environments, accommodating diverse ability levels across contexts. It concludes that musical tempo serves as an effective interdisciplinary

pedagogical framework for enriching physical education and supporting holistic learner development in contemporary educational practice.

Keywords: *Musical tempo, physical education, motor coordination, embodied learning, interdisciplinary education*

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From Decline to Departure: Higher Education Crisis and Student Brain Drain in Albania

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The paper analyses a phenomenon that has become increasingly concerning during the last decade of Albania's transition period: the brain drain of students and young people. The paper is structured into four main sections. The first provides an introductory overview of the concept of "brain drain" and examines the significant loss of human capital that Albania has experienced over more than three decades of transition. It highlights that one of the social groups most affected by this phenomenon has been the young people. The second section presents the research methodology of the study. It outlines the main research question: why do an increasing number of Albanian students choose to leave Albania to pursue their studies abroad? The paper identifies two main explanatory factors: the perceived deterioration in the quality of Albanian universities, and the attractiveness of opportunities created by globalization. The study employs a qualitative research method to examine the relationship between these variables. The subsequent section provides an overview of the higher education system in Albania, tracing its development from the communist period through the years of democratic transition. It points out that despite numerous reforms; the quality of the higher education system has deteriorated, in particular during the last decade. The analysis of the multi-faceted reasons for this decline is the subject of the next section. The paper concludes that the decline in the quality of universities, together with other factors, such as limited employment and career development opportunities, high levels of youth unemployment, a lack of meritocracy, and a widespread perception among young people that "there is no future" in Albania, has driven many students to seek educational opportunities abroad. This has been further facilitated by the increasingly "borderless world" created by globalization, offering mobility and greater opportunities for young people.

Keywords: *Brain drain, students, Albanian higher education, democratic transition, globalization*

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The role of artificial intelligence in the university system in Kosovo

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Rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming higher education systems by increasingly influencing teaching, learning, and academic management processes. This paper aims to analyze the role of AI in universities in Kosovo, focusing on its application in teaching processes, student assessment, academic administration, and scientific research. The study methodology is based on a literature review and a descriptive approach to existing practices in higher education institutions in Kosovo and comparable international contexts. Findings indicate that artificial intelligence significantly contributes to the personalization of learning, increased efficiency of teaching processes, and improved access to digital academic resources. It also provides advanced support for students through intelligent learning systems and assists in the automation of administrative university processes. In the field of scientific research, AI facilitates data analysis and accelerates result generation processes. However, its implementation is also accompanied by significant challenges, such as the lack of advanced digital infrastructure, varying levels of digital competencies among academic staff and students, as well as ethical issues related to the use of intelligent technologies in education. Furthermore, there is a need for the development of institutional policies to ensure the responsible use of AI in universities. In conclusion, the successful integration of artificial intelligence into higher education in Kosovo requires strategic institutional approaches, sustainable investment in technology, and continuous professional development of academic staff. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of AI in higher education and offers recommendations for sustainable educational policies in the digital era.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence, higher education, universities in Kosovo, digitalization, educational innovation*

Thematic Session 04:
Politics, Democracy, Integration and Law

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Silent delegitimization in hybrid democracy's identity, power, and moral capital in post-communist Albania

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This article examines mechanisms of silent delegitimization in hybrid democracies, with a particular focus on post-communist Albania. By integrating historical and sociological literature, gender studies, political philosophy, and political psychology, alongside reflective professional experience in civic and institutional engagement, the study argues that individuals characterized by strong moral integrity and autonomous identity frequently encounter institutional, social, and cultural forms of resistance without formal exclusion. The analysis addresses structural, identity-based, psychological, gendered, cultural, and historical dimensions of power, highlighting the role of women—particularly Muslim women—as agents in the construction of moral, cultural, and political capital. Community-based initiatives, including World Hijab Day, are interpreted as mechanisms of empowerment that transform identity and integrity into instruments of social and political participation.

Keywords: *Hybrid democracies, silent delegitimization, moral capital, identity, political participation, post-communist Albania*

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The Impact of Human Rights from the Development of Artificial Intelligence

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In recent decades, we have witnessed the fact that society and social relations are changing at a rapid pace. One of the reasons for this change is the development of artificial intelligence,

which has a particular impact on the issue of human rights. This development has become an ongoing trend that presents many challenges to law in general, and to public international law and constitutional law in particular. The issues that arise include: what the current normative situation is in the field of human rights and the potential problems that may emerge; the possible problems that may arise in the future; and the examination of these issues from the perspective of the current situation in Europe. Since legal and human rights issues are closely linked to the development of artificial intelligence, questions arise as to how they are being addressed, where the gaps in legislation lie, what the challenges are, and which human rights principles are most affected by this development. Taking into account the significance of the impacts of artificial intelligence technologies, particularly on individuals and vulnerable groups and their human rights, we reach the conclusion that this field requires continuous assessment and a flexible approach in order to reduce the risks and impacts that may affect human well-being. The most debated issues include: algorithmic transparency, vulnerabilities in cybersecurity, the lack of opportunities for contestation, negative effects on workers, issues of privacy and data protection, liability for damages, and the lack of accountability.

Keywords: *Human rights, artificial intelligence, human well-being, privacy, data protection*

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Rights in an Integrated Order: Equality, Access, and Legal Protection

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This paper examines how integrated legal orders recalibrate rights across multiple jurisdictions, focusing on the triad of equality, access, and legal protection. We theorize integration as a multilevel governance process that reshapes normative hierarchies and institutional competences, and assess its distributive and procedural implications. Drawing on comparative analysis of regional regimes and federal systems, we show that legal integration can enhance formal equality through harmonized standards while simultaneously generating access asymmetries via fragmented enforcement, jurisdictional complexity, and resource disparities. We develop a framework that links doctrinal convergence, institutional design, and remedial pathways, demonstrating that effective protection depends on three conditions: robust rights definition, interoperable enforcement mechanisms, and accessible remedies across levels. Empirically, we identify patterns of rights diffusion, judicial dialogue, and regulatory alignment, alongside persistent gaps affecting vulnerable groups. The paper advances a typology of integration effects on rights—equalization, displacement, and stratification—and proposes design principles for safeguarding substantive equality and meaningful access, including minimum enforcement baselines, cross-level accountability, and rights-sensitive harmonization. The analysis contributes to debates on the legitimacy and justice of integrated orders by clarifying how legal architecture mediates the promise of uniform rights and the realities of differentiated protection.

Keywords: *Integrated legal orders, Equality, Access to justice, Legal protection*

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Justice, Society, and Europeanization: A Sociological Analysis of Albania's Justice Reform and EU Integration

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This paper provides a sociological analysis of Albania's justice reform within the broader framework of European integration. Initiated through the 2016 constitutional amendments, the reform introduced structural changes such as the vetting of judges and prosecutors, the establishment of independent judicial councils, and the creation of specialized anti-corruption bodies like SPAK and Special Courts. From a sociological perspective, these measures represent more than legal adjustments—they signify a transformation of institutional norms, accountability mechanisms, and public trust in governance. The European Union's conditionality framework has acted as a powerful driver, embedding principles of rule of law and transparency into Albania's political and legal culture. However, the process reveals tensions between external normative pressures and internal resistance, reflecting the interplay of global standards with local socio-political realities. Empirical evidence from European Commission progress reports, Venice Commission opinions, and governance indicators demonstrates measurable progress in judicial independence and anti-corruption performance, alongside persistent challenges such as political polarization, resource constraints, and uneven norm internalization. This study argues that sustainable Europeanization requires not only formal compliance but also cultural and structural shifts that foster legitimacy and social cohesion. By situating justice reform within theories of institutional change and norm diffusion, the paper contributes to understanding how legal reforms intersect with societal transformation in transitional democracies.

Keywords: *Albania, Justice Reform, European Integration, Rule of Law, Sociological Institutionalism*

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Institutional Co-optation and the Diminished Political Efficacy of Post-Yugoslav Art

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This paper examines how institutional networks neutralize the political efficacy of post-Yugoslav art. It draws on theoretical works of Walter Benjamin, Jacques Rancière, Theodor Adorno, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Andrea Fraser to contrast guerrilla-style interventions with institutionally mediated practices of art. Through close readings and reception analysis of four case studies from three different artists—Lana Čmajčanin's Blank Maps, Adela Jušić's

the Sniper, and Marina Abramović's the Artist Is Present and Balkan Baroque—the study shows how critical intentions are transformed by exhibition events, biennials, galleries, and academic circuits into commodified aesthetic objects that primarily get exposed within elite, international audiences rather than the local publics they claim to engage. The paper argues that institutional visibility frequently operates as a neutralizing force: it repackages dissent as consumable form and abstracts specific historical grievances into universal narratives. Following Rancière, the paper asks whether such works succeed in interrupting the existing "distribution of the sensible," or whether they are reabsorbed into a sanitized cultural economy. Jušić's and Čmajčanin's interventions, while conceptually potent, largely circulate outside their intended communities; Abramović's move from raw endurance pieces to sanctioned reperformances exemplifies how radical practice is absorbed by the culture industry. Concluding, the paper restates the importance of art as a tool of political resistance, and insists on a reconfiguration of the artistic approach to avoid institutional capture.

Keywords: *post-Yugoslav art, institutional co-optation, political efficacy, commodification, distribution of the sensible*

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Repositioning UNDP in Afghanistan: Toward Intelligent and Adaptive Governance in Fragile Contexts

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This paper explores how the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) can be repositioned in Afghanistan to better respond to the country's complex and fragile governance environment. Despite decades of development efforts, Afghanistan continues to face deep institutional challenges, including limited state capacity, fragmented governance structures, and rapidly changing political conditions. In such contexts, conventional development approaches—often based on standardized frameworks and fixed planning models—have shown clear limitations. Building on the idea of an "Intelligent Society," this study argues for a shift toward more intelligent and adaptive forms of governance. It understands intelligent governance as the ability of institutions to learn, adjust, and respond effectively through the use of data, local knowledge, and continuous feedback. The paper critically examines UNDP's current strategies in Afghanistan and identifies key gaps in flexibility, contextual responsiveness, and institutional learning. While existing approaches emphasize important principles such as inclusivity and sustainability, they often struggle to translate these into practice in highly volatile environments. In response, the paper proposes a reoriented framework for UNDP that places greater emphasis on adaptive governance, decentralized decision-making and stronger engagement with local actors. It also highlights the supportive role of digital and data-driven tools in strengthening institutional responsiveness, without treating technology as a standalone solution. By situating Afghanistan within broader debates on governance and development in fragile settings, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions on how international

organizations can evolve to support more resilient, responsive, and context-sensitive systems of governance.

Keywords: *UNDP, Afghanistan, governance, fragile states, adaptive governance, intelligent society*

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Formal vs. Substantive Transparency: Evaluating Compliance with Albania's FOI Law

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Laws on access to information and information technology play an important role in ensuring that information is truly usable and accessible to citizens. Freedom of Information (FOI) is central to transparency, a human right, and an essential component of modern democracy. Through it, transparency is institutionalized, enabling citizens, civil society, and other stakeholders to have access to the decision-making and information produced and held by public bodies, thus preventing corruption and increasing accountability. In Albania, the right to information is guaranteed by the Constitution and regulated through Law No. 119/2014 "On the right to information", as amended. According to the Law, institutions must publish a wide range of information on their websites to ensure maximum access and reduce the need to provide information upon request. But do Albanian institutions comply with this legal obligation? This study uses national monitoring reports to assess the level of compliance with proactive transparency. Its findings suggest that compliance with the provisions of Law No. 199/2014 on proactive transparency, although improved over time, remains insufficient and largely formal rather than substantive.

Keywords: *FOI Law, Compliance, Transparency, Albania*

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Civil society according to Fehmi Agani

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During a politically complex period for Kosovo within the framework of Yugoslavia, the intellectual engagement of FehmiAgani constitutes a significant contribution to the

conceptualization of civil society. Through his writings and activities, Agani provides a profound analysis of the role of civil society as an essential intermediary between the individual and the state, particularly in circumstances marked by a lack of political autonomy and civil rights. This paper aims to summarize and interpret Agani's thought on civil society, situating it within both a historical and theoretical context. Drawing on his approach, civil society is understood as a space of resistance, organization, and articulation of collective interests, playing a key role in preserving identity and in the construction of democratic structures. At the same time, the paper offers a comparison between Agani's conceptualization and the development of civil society in Kosovo following the declaration of independence, highlighting continuities and changes in its function and influence. In this way, the study provides both a historical and conceptual outline of civil society in Kosovo, where the thought of FehmiAgani is presented as an integral and foundational element for understanding its evolution. This analysis seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of civil society in political and social processes within transitional contexts. The study employs a qualitative approach, based on the analysis of primary texts and writings of FehmiAgani, complemented by relevant secondary literature. It applies a historical and comparative method to contextualize his ideas within the Yugoslav period and post-independence Kosovo. Additionally, an interpretative framework is used to examine the conceptual development and contemporary relevance of civil society in his work.

Keywords: *Civil society, politics, centralization, democracy*

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Inclusive Recovery in Wartime: Public Participation Between Institutional Design and Practice in Ukraine

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The war in Ukraine has been ongoing since 2014, causing widespread destruction and profound transformations across multiple spheres of public life. Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 intensified these processes, placing Ukrainian society in a position where it must simultaneously defend itself against ongoing aggression, respond to immediate threats, adapt to rapidly changing conditions, and plan for long-term recovery. Recovery is therefore unfolding in the context of ongoing war, which distinguishes it from conventional post-disaster reconstruction: the risk of repeated destruction persists, security conditions remain uneven, and decision-making takes place under uncertainty and limited resources. In this context, post-disaster research consistently identifies inclusive recovery as a key condition for sustainable outcomes. Empirical studies show that participatory approaches contribute to more durable recovery processes and enhance communities' capacity to adapt to prolonged crises. They also demonstrate that well-developed horizontal interactions between public authorities and civil society strengthen community resilience in crisis settings. This paper examines the conditions for citizen participation in recovery processes at the local level in Ukraine. It combines analysis of legislative and regulatory frameworks governing public participation with a secondary analysis of quantitative and

qualitative sociological data collected since 2014. The IAP2 Ladder of Participation is used to map participation mechanisms across stages of recovery—from damage assessment to strategic and spatial planning—and across levels of engagement. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between formal participation mechanisms and informal practices. The findings reveal an imbalance between institutional design and practice. Although a wide range of participatory tools is provided for in legislation, they are concentrated at the planning stage and operate mainly at the level of consultation. Participation remains limited: around 30% engage with formal mechanisms, while only 8% report involvement in recovery processes. In contrast, nearly half of the population participates in grassroots initiatives. However, the level of cooperation between public authorities and civil society remains insufficient. These findings suggest that strengthening inclusive recovery requires not only formal frameworks but also support for grassroots initiatives and a shift from consultation toward collaboration across all stages of recovery.

Keywords: *Wartime recovery, inclusive recovery, public participation, civil society, grassroots initiatives, resilience*

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Is justice neutral? A gender perspective on the interpretation and application of law

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This paper examines the relationship between the constitutional principle of equality before the law and the reality of judicial practice in Albania, questioning whether justice operates in a gender-neutral manner. Although the Albanian legal framework has been progressively aligned with international standards and the European Union acquis, its interpretation and implementation often remain influenced by patriarchal norms and deeply embedded social biases. Through a qualitative analysis of judicial decisions in both criminal and civil law, the study explores how gender stereotypes shape judicial reasoning, particularly in cases involving domestic violence, sexual offences, and child custody. It addresses the broader question of whether the law functions as an instrument of emancipation or, conversely, as a mechanism that reproduces existing gender hierarchies. The analysis focuses on three key dimensions. First, it examines bias in testimony, highlighting how judicial language may place victims, primarily women, under moral scrutiny, thereby influencing the assessment of mitigating and aggravating circumstances. Second, it analyses judicial practice, demonstrating how concepts such as the "reasonable man" and notions of "honour" may contribute to asymmetrical outcomes shaped by cultural context. Third, it considers the role of legal education, emphasising the need for an intersectional approach in the training of judges and prosecutors to identify and address both explicit and implicit gender bias. The paper concludes that legal neutrality cannot be achieved solely through gender-neutral legislation. Instead, it requires gender-sensitive interpretation and application, supported by stronger

monitoring mechanisms and the integration of a gender perspective as a standard of due process, in line with Albania's European integration commitments.

Keywords: *Neutral justice, gender perspective, judicial practice, bias, Albania, stereotypes*

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Implicit bias in justiceThe Limits of the Principle of Neutrality and Gender Influence in Albanian Judicial Decision-Making

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This paper offers a critical examination of the principle of neutrality in justice, focusing on its interaction with gender dynamics in judicial decision-making in Albania. Grounded in theoretical debates on legal impartiality and the concept of implicit bias, the study explores whether, and to what extent, judicial reasoning and outcomes are shaped by underlying gender-based influences in the interpretation and application of legal norms. Methodologically, the research adopts a combined approach, integrating deductive reasoning with empirical analysis. It draws on statistical data from national institutions such as INSTAT, the High Judicial Council, the High Prosecutorial Council, and the Ministry of Justice, complemented by comparative international sources, including the European Institute for Gender Equality, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and the OECD. These quantitative insights are further enriched through qualitative analysis of judicial decisions and legal discourse, enabling the identification of recurring patterns of gender influence. The findings indicate that, notwithstanding the formal commitment to neutrality, judicial practice reveals the presence of subtle forms of gender bias. Such biases may be linked not only to entrenched social stereotypes but also to elements of individual cognitive and intellectual formation, indirectly shaping legal reasoning and adjudicative outcomes. They tend to manifest through gendered assumptions, selective evaluation of evidence, and inconsistencies in interpretative approaches. In conclusion, the paper underscores the practical limits of the principle of neutrality and advocates for the institutionalization of a gender-sensitive perspective within the justice system. It highlights the need for targeted judicial training, more robust data collection frameworks, and closer alignment with international standards on gender equality.

Key words: *neutrality in justice, implicit bias, judicial decision-making, judicial practice*

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Religion, Collective Behaviour, and Social Movements: Dynamics of Conflict and Violence in Modern Societies

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This study delves into the intricate ways in which religion influences collective behavior, conflict, violence, and social movements in modern societies. Contrary to common belief that religion is solely responsible for violence, recent research highlights its symbolic and relational significance within larger sociopolitical contexts (Goldstein & Reed, 2022). Three main inquiries guide this investigation: What circumstances escalate conflict due to religion? How do religious beliefs and stories shape the dynamics of movements? Can religion both incite violence and support peaceful mobilization? To address these questions, this study combines Collective Behavior Theory with Social Identity Theory to explore how religious group identities and moral frameworks impact both peaceful and violent collective actions (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). By synthesizing social movement literature and sociopsychological studies, the framework emphasizes the interplay between identity formation, collective grievances, and moral narratives that influence movement outcomes. Research findings reveal that collective identity and moral conviction play crucial roles in social movement participation and conflict dynamics. Methodologically, this study utilizes a comparative qualitative approach, analyzing documented instances of religiously motivated mobilization across various regions. By examining movement manifestos, media discussions, and academic analyses, the study enables a comparison of how religious discourse is utilized in both violent and nonviolent collective actions. The results suggest that religion exacerbates conflict when intertwined with exclusionary identity politics and perceived group threats. However, religious frameworks also offer moral frameworks that sustain nonviolent protests and justice-oriented mobilization. These findings support the idea that religion's impact on collective behavior is not inherently violent or peaceful, but rather influenced by contextual factors. In conclusion, this study advocates for a nuanced understanding of religion's role in collective behavior, emphasizing the need to consider processes and context in conflict and movement analyses, rather than simplistic explanations.

Keywords: *Religion, Collective Behavior, Conflict, Violence, Social Movements*

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Governing Religious Visibility: Neutrality, Terrorism, and Symbolic Integration in Contemporary Europe

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This article examines the regulation of religious symbols in European public institutions through the lens of constitutional law, human rights jurisprudence, and contemporary security governance. Focusing primarily on public education, it argues that disputes over religious symbols can no longer be understood solely as questions of secularism or freedom of religion. Instead, they must be situated within a broader post-2001 and post-2015 environment in which concerns about terrorism, radicalisation, migration, and social cohesion have profoundly reshaped the normative meaning of state neutrality. Adopting a socio-legal and comparative approach, the article analyses three emblematic cases: the German Kruzifix decision of the Federal Constitutional Court (1995), the Romanian Moise case (2006), and the landmark judgment of the European Court of Human Rights in Lautsi v. Italy (2009–2011). These cases are examined alongside more recent national developments in France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Québec between 2010 and 2024. Together, they reveal a gradual shift from a rights-based conception of neutrality toward a more deferential and context-dependent model, increasingly shaped by identity politics and preventive security rationales. The article shows that earlier jurisprudence, particularly the German Kruzifix decision, articulated a robust understanding of neutrality grounded in individual freedom of conscience and the heightened duty of the state in compulsory educational settings. By contrast, later cases—especially Lautsi—illustrate the growing reliance on the doctrine of the margin of appreciation, allowing states to accommodate majority religious traditions by reclassifying them as cultural or "passive" symbols. This doctrinal shift has significant implications for religious minorities, whose symbols are more frequently framed as active, political, or potentially disruptive. A central contribution of the article lies in highlighting the indirect yet structurally significant role of Euro-Atlantic security discourse in this evolution. Although NATO has no legal competence in matters of religious freedom, its strategic frameworks since 2010 have framed terrorism as a threat to democratic values, societal resilience, and internal cohesion. These narratives have permeated domestic political discourse and indirectly influenced how states justify restrictions on religious symbols in the name of integration, public order, and social stability. Courts, including the European Court of Human Rights, increasingly assess proportionality in an environment shaped by implicit security concerns, expanding state discretion without requiring concrete evidence of risk. The article argues that this convergence between security discourse and religious-symbol regulation risks producing a culturally selective version of neutrality. Majority religious symbols are normalised as heritage or identity markers, while minority symbols—particularly Islamic ones—are subject to heightened scrutiny. Such asymmetry undermines substantive equality and transforms neutrality into an instrument of symbolic governance within integration policies. The article contends that the governance of religious symbols constitutes a

critical test for contemporary European constitutionalism. Safeguarding pluralism and freedom of conscience requires courts and states to resist securitarian biases and to reaffirm neutrality as a principle of equal respect, rather than as a vehicle for cultural reassurance or preventive security.

Keywords: *Religious symbols, State neutrality, Terrorism, Integration, Pluralism*

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Theatre as a Social and Multimedia Laboratory: Overcoming Cultural and Religious Barriers in the Drama Club

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The dramatic laboratory is considered a potential method for updating the creative expression of students and for the development of their ability to decode dramatic texts, both classical and modern, but it is also regarded as an effective pedagogical and didactic strategy. The process of dramatization, accompanied by the method of reading, reflection and awareness, has stimulated other qualitative processes of mastering the material, such as language as a symbol; theatrical performance as performance and as body language; interaction and communication through respect for ethnic and cultural diversities. The aim of this paper focuses on how theatrical experience activates learning processes and strengthens and develops a variety of individual skills and competencies in function of the curriculum. In addition to theatre as an interpretative approach to text, knowledge from different disciplines, such as poetry, history, literature itself, physics, philosophy and mathematics, can be transformed into theatrical signs and meanings. The concrete object of the paper is the finding of ways in which dramatization, as a pedagogical, didactic and literary-artistic binomial, also appears in aspects of community life, where students, in group activities, overcome cultural and religious barriers. The results indicate that theatre coexists with other art forms and interdisciplinary themes, such as film, documentary, and reportage, as well as with technical processes including editing, subtitling, and audiovisual production, thereby making stage communication more interactive and engaging for both students and audiences. This coexistence emerges as a typical social and cultural experience. In this sense, the educational value of theatre goes beyond the communicative forms that produce it.

Keywords: *Theatre in Education, Dramatic Text, Dramatization, Theatrical Multimedia, Education, Socialization*

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Pluralism and Digital Religious Communication in Modern Albanian Society

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One of the most distinctive features of Albanian coexistence remains religious pluralism, which has historically embodied mutual understanding, tolerance, and social harmony as both cultural and identity-defining elements. This paper aims to demonstrate that the unique harmony among different religious communities in Albania is grounded in a broad foundation shaped by social, psychological, cultural, institutional, and historical factors. In the context of a rapidly evolving society moving toward digital communication and online interaction, interfaith dialogue is acquiring new and intriguing dimensions. It has become more accessible and performative, yet simultaneously exposed to emerging risks such as extremism, polarization, hate speech, and the fragmentation of religious authority. The Albanian model of accepting religious diversity, characterized by respectful coexistence and active interreligious interaction, remains an important social reference point and a valuable subject for broader academic inquiry across different geographical contexts.

Keywords: *Albanian religious tolerance, interfaith dialogue, digital communication, coexistence*

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Interreligious Environmental Education and Water Ethics for Societal Transformation in Albania

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This study explores how interreligious environmental education can contribute to societal transformation by addressing climate change, ecological inertia, and social fragmentation through shared ethical responsibility. The research raises three main questions: (1) How can religious teachings motivate environmental action beyond political or institutional approaches? (2) What role can water, as a sacred and shared resource, play in fostering interfaith cooperation? (3) How can teacher training and educational systems integrate environmental ethics in pluralistic societies such as Albania? The theoretical framework is based on Anthony Giddens' concept of ecological inertia, eco-theology, Islamic environmental ethics, Christian stewardship of creation, and interreligious dialogue theory. Water is used as both a symbolic and practical element because of its significance in ecological sustainability and religious traditions. The study also draws on transformative

learning theory and participatory approaches that promote awareness and collective reflection. Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative case-study approach based on educational workshops, interfaith initiatives, teaching materials, and institutional experiences in Albania, including cooperation among universities, religious communities, and civil society actors. Examples are analyzed from different faith communities and from interreligious platforms promoting environmental awareness. The findings indicate that environmental responsibility becomes stronger when framed not only as a policy obligation but also as a moral and spiritual duty. Religious narratives of stewardship, moderation, justice, and care for creation can mobilize communities and strengthen cooperation across differences. Furthermore, integrating environmental ethics into teacher training creates long-term impact by shaping future educators and citizens. The study concludes that interreligious environmental education offers a holistic pathway for societal transformation by linking sustainability, peacebuilding, and civic engagement. Albania represents a meaningful model where religious harmony can be leveraged to advance ecological responsibility and collective action.

Keywords: *Interreligious dialogue; environmental ethics; water sustainability; teacher training; Albania; societal transformation*

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Social Inequalities in Parental Leave Arrangements, Flexible Working Time, and Telework in Bulgaria: Insights from a Qualitative

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In the context of ongoing digitalization, the diffusion of flexible working time arrangements and telework reflects not only the changing nature of paid work but also the growing need for better reconciliation between employment and childcare among parents of young children. This paper aims to explore, through a qualitative approach, the specific characteristics of parental leave arrangements and the opportunities for parents' participation in employment in Bulgaria, with a particular focus on flexible working schedules and telework options. Data and Methods: The analysis is based on 15 in-depth interviews with mothers and fathers of young children, as well as 10 interviews with employer representatives from large companies. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify and interpret the main themes emerging from the interviews. The interviews with parents reveal several key themes related to their appreciation of flexible working time arrangements and telework, particularly during the early stages of a child's life. These options are especially important for mothers who choose to return to paid employment before the end of the parental leave. The findings highlight a tension between the demands of childcare and the persistence of traditional work schedules, alongside limited opportunities for remote work in Bulgaria. This tension generates significant challenges and anxieties for parents—especially mothers—during the period when children are very young. Flexible working time and telework are emphasized as important supportive measures within family-oriented policies in large companies. However, as tools for improving work–life balance, these arrangements are predominantly accessible to families with higher socioeconomic status. These points to existing socioeconomic inequalities in access to flexible employment, which is largely concentrated in sectors such as ICT and finance. The results of this qualitative study reflect both the lived experiences of parents with young children and the evolving business culture in Bulgaria, which is becoming more open to flexible work arrangements. At the same time, the findings underscore persistent socioeconomic inequalities—linked in part to occupational differences—that advantage higher-status families while limiting opportunities for others to successfully combine paid work and childcare.

Keywords: *Parental leave, flexible worktime arrangements, telework, parents, Bulgaria, qualitative study*

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The decrease of the Albanian family in times of depopulation social change

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Albanian family is undergoing one of the most challenges times due to its massive numbers of family members who are migrating or leaving the country. The society itself is manifesting massive change of cohesion since the population is shrinking and is the family. The depopulation is dramatic and the data from INSTAT support this theory. The aim of this paper is to shed lights on the effects that depopulation has on the Albanian family. We will employ qualitative and quantitative approach with data from INSTAT, with case studies of families in urban and rural communities. The bulk of the study will be the correlational paradigm, thus studying the effects of depopulation on the Albanian family.

Keywords: *Albanian family, depopulation, liquid society, immigration*

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The Interplay of Human Creative Intelligence and Musical Structure in Albanian Iso-Polyphony: The Case of Lefter Çipa in the Con

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The Interplay of Human Creative Intelligence and Musical Structure in Albanian Iso-Polyphony: The Case of Lefter Çipa in the Context of an Intelligent Society. This study explores the interplay between human creative intelligence and musical structure in Albanian iso-polyphony, focusing on the work of Lefter Çipa as a case study. Within the contemporary discourse on the relationship between human intelligence and artificial intelligence, the paper aims to highlight the uniqueness of human creative processes, which are organically manifested through the integration of poetic text and polyphonic musical structures. The methodology adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining literary and musicological analysis, alongside an examination of Çipa's corpus. Particular attention is given to poetic structure, syntactic organization, and their direct influence on melodic and rhythmic construction within polyphonic singing. The findings suggest that

Lefter Çipa's work represents a sophisticated form of both individual and collective human intelligence, which cannot be fully replicated by algorithmic models of artificial intelligence. The study emphasizes the importance of preserving and promoting this cultural heritage as a fundamental component of an intelligent society within the Balkan context.

Keywords: *Human intelligence, artificial intelligence, Albanian iso-polyphony, Lefter Çipa, cultural heritage*

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Emotional and social intelligence

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Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to recognize, control and evaluate personal and other emotions. Social intelligence is related to the ability to interact, communicate and cooperate effectively in social environments. Emotional and social intelligence are fundamental skills for personal and professional success. They help the individual to manage emotions, build healthy and balanced relationships, and increase the ability to lead, cooperate and manage conflicts. In the social aspect, it contributes to effective communication, tolerance and intercultural trust. Emotional and social intelligence are not innate, but skills that can be developed through self-reflection, professionalism and interpersonal awareness. Their development requires permanent commitment, having a direct impact on emotional management, empathy for the social environment, and the preservation of mental and biological health.

Keywords: *Emotions, self-reflection, mental health, self-esteem, empathy*

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Family Planning and Sustainable Sociodemographic Development in Kosovo

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Family planning is one of the main factors influencing demographic and public health policies, contributing to the creation of better conditions for family and social well-being. Contraceptive prevalence and unmet need for family planning are key indicators for measuring improvements in conditions of access to reproductive health, as defined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, under target 3.7. "By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning, information and education, and integrate reproductive health into national strategies and programmes

(UN, 2024). The purpose of this study is to analyze family planning in Kosovo, including the methods used and the factors that influence them, as well as to examine birth rates, mortality rates and demographic changes compared to the region. The study also aims to evaluate existing public policies and propose measures for sustainable demographic development. For the development of this study, official data from the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, UNFPA and WHO were used to identify and analyze the main trends in demographic developments in the last two decades in Kosovo. From the findings, we understand that awareness and health education are essential elements for the effective use of family planning methods. This situation directly affects the reduction of maternal mortality and babies, improving living standards and demographic trends in Kosovo.

Keywords: *Population, family planning, births, socio-economic development, demographic policy*

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From the Legacy of the Qiriazi Sisters to algorithms Gender emancipation in the digital age

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The transition from education as an emancipatory project in the early years of the Albanian state to a technology-mediated system in the digital age raises critical questions about the continuity of gender equality. The notion of digital technology as governed by mathematical logic - and thus ostensibly beyond the limits of human judgment - has become one of the most powerful narratives of our time. Yet, every algorithm inherits the DNA of the society that designs it. Drawing on the legacy of the Qiriazi Sisters and their contribution to girls' education as a form of social liberation, this study emphasizes that gender emancipation is neither a straightforward nor a linear process, but one shaped by historically contingent modes of organizing knowledge and power. Within this framework, the paper argues that digital transformation and the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in education are far from neutral processes; rather, they risk reproducing and amplifying gender inequalities, often in subtle and invisible ways. The central hypothesis is that, in the absence of a critical and gender-sensitive approach to the design and use of educational technologies, algorithmic systems may codify existing biases and indirectly influence girls' educational and professional trajectories. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the study combines a historical perspective with a critical analysis of contemporary discourse on digitalization in Albania. It identifies a gap between the rhetoric of inclusion and actual practices, where the gender dimension is frequently overlooked. In this regard, the study underscores the need to reconceptualize emancipation in the digital age by integrating gender-aware algorithmic justice into educational policies.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence; gender emancipation; education; algorithmic justice; the Qiriazi Sisters*

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Brothers, Sisters, and Sex Work Disclosure: Gendered Responses within the Family

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Due to social stigma, many sex workers conceal their work from family members and romantic partners for fear of rejection. Passing as a non–sex worker allows them to protect their social status; however, it also restricts access to support and may generate feelings of isolation. Within the family, siblings may constitute a relatively safe audience for disclosure. Drawing on an analysis of in-depth interviews with female sex workers in Poland, this paper examines a range of sibling responses to disclosure, from acceptance to rejection, as well as changes in siblings' attitudes toward a sister's involvement in sex work over time. It further explores differences between brothers' and sisters' reactions, including variations in both the degree of acceptance and the dynamics of sibling relationships. The paper identifies factors shaping post-disclosure relations, such as siblings' age and their perceived risk of experiencing courtesy stigma. Finally, it discusses situations in which disclosure leads to an expansion of siblings' social roles, for example through assisting in concealing sex work from other family members or through joint engagement in sex work.

Keywords: *Sex work, siblings, stigma, family, qualitative research*

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Socioeconomic stress and quality of life in families in Kosovo

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This paper addresses the impact of socioeconomic stress on the quality of life of families in Kosovo, an issue of particular importance in the context of the country's social and economic development. Based on empirical data, institutional reports and contemporary scientific literature, the analysis focuses on the main factors that contribute to the increase in socioeconomic stress, such as high unemployment, insufficient income, economic insecurity and limited access to social and health services. The study highlights that these factors directly affect the psychological well-being of individuals, increasing levels of anxiety, depression and family tensions. Furthermore, socioeconomic stress negatively affects family stability, interpersonal relationships and the emotional and educational development of children. In many cases, families face difficulties in meeting basic needs, which further worsens the quality of life. The results of the analysis also show that the lack of effective

social policies and support mechanisms deepens social inequality and limits opportunities for economic mobility. In this context, the paper proposes concrete measures to improve public policies in Kosovo, including increasing investment in employment, expanding social protection schemes, improving access to education and health services, and strengthening support programs for families in need. In conclusion, the paper emphasizes the need for an integrated and long-term approach to addressing socioeconomic stress, with the aim of improving the quality of life and overall well-being of families in Kosovo.

Keywords: *Socioeconomic stress, quality of life, family, unemployment, social welfare, Kosovo*

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Child marriage as a phenomenon in our society

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The family represents a fundamental social institution that plays a crucial role in social development and continuity. However, in many communities, child marriage remains a persistent social phenomenon with significant implications for individuals and society. This study aims to examine the prevalence of child marriage, the factors contributing to its occurrence, and its social consequences, with a particular focus on vulnerable communities. The study employs a mixed-method approach, combining secondary data analysis with quantitative data collection, as well as semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. A total of 60 participants, primarily from the Roma community, were included in the study. The findings reveal a high prevalence of early marriage, with 59 out of 60 participants reporting marriage or cohabitation before the age of 18. Furthermore, 55 respondents indicated that their unions were not legally registered. A significant proportion of participants (47%) had their first child before reaching adulthood. These findings highlight the persistence of informal marital practices and early parenthood within the studied community. The study also demonstrates that perceptions of marriage and family vary significantly among individuals, reflecting the influence of cultural, social, and economic factors. Overall, the results underline the need for targeted social policies and educational interventions aimed at reducing child marriage and supporting the integration of affected individuals into society.

Keywords: *Child marriage, family, community, society, minors*

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Genderization as a Social Phenomenon and Related Issues: The Need for Conceptual Clarification and Sociological Treatment

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This paper has been prepared specifically for the Student Session of the conference "Towards an Intelligent Society: Challenges and Opportunities" (2026). The central concept addressed is "genderization." The starting point was a survey indicating that over 80% of social science students had no knowledge of this phenomenon, while the remaining respondents (around 20%) demonstrated only partial or inaccurate understanding. The primary aim of the paper is to clarify the concept of genderization, understood as the process through which roles, norms, institutions, policies, and entire spheres of social life acquire a gendered character—that is, they are organized, interpreted, and function differently for men and women (as well as for other gender identities). Secondly, the paper distinguishes genderization from "gender socialization," which refers to how individuals learn gender roles through family, education, and media. The analysis shows that genderization operates primarily at the structural and institutional level, rather than the individual level. This is illustrated through cases such as the feminization of poverty, where women are disproportionately represented among the poor; gendered patterns of migration, reflecting different levels and forms of mobility for men and women; and the gendering of leadership, which involves differentiated expectations regarding how men and women should lead. These observations highlight the need for a more systematic sociological treatment of the phenomenon. The paper draws several conclusions across key domains: in education, the persistence of gender stereotypes in curricula and teaching practices that frame disciplines as "masculine" or "feminine"; in the labor market, the existence of gendered professions (e.g., nursing versus engineering); in public policy, formally neutral measures that produce differentiated gender outcomes (e.g., parental leave, pension systems); in leadership and language, the role of media and discourse in reproducing stereotypes (e.g., the "leader" as a masculine figure); and in technology and innovation, particularly artificial intelligence, where algorithms may reinforce gender biases. Most importantly, a proper understanding and treatment of genderization helps reveal that gender inequalities are not merely individual issues, but are embedded in the structures and functioning of society. This shifts the analytical

focus from "why individuals behave this way" to "how the rules and structures that shape such behavior are constructed." This paper contributes to the literature by proposing a clearer conceptualization of genderization as a distinct analytical category, differentiating it from gender socialization, and by highlighting its relevance for understanding structural inequalities in contemporary societies. Policy implications: The findings suggest the need for integrating gender-sensitive analysis into education, labor market policies, and technological development, in order to identify and mitigate structurally embedded gender biases and to promote more inclusive and equitable social systems.

Keywords: *Genderization process, gender socialization, gender stereotypes, gender inequality*

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Neuroticism, authoritarian parenting styles and academic procrastination among university students

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Academic procrastination is widely recognized as one of the most common behavioural challenges among university students and has been associated with various psychological and environmental factors. Previous research suggests that both personality traits and family socialization processes influence students' academic behaviors. Neuroticism, characterized by emotional instability, anxiety, and sensitivity to stress, has been linked to avoidance behaviors and difficulties in emotional regulation. At the same time, authoritarian parenting styles, defined by high levels of parental control and low emotional responsiveness, may affect the development of autonomy and self-regulation skills. The present study examines the relationship between neuroticism, authoritarian parenting styles, and academic procrastination among bachelor students at the University of Tirana. The study is grounded in personality theory and socialization perspectives that emphasize the interaction between individual psychological characteristics and family environment. A quantitative cross-sectional correlational design was employed. The sample consisted of 300 undergraduate students from five faculties of the University of Tirana. Neuroticism was assessed using the Big Five Inventory-10 (BFI-10), academic procrastination was measured using the General Procrastination Scale, and parenting styles were evaluated using the Parental Authority Questionnaire. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses. The findings revealed moderate levels of academic procrastination among students ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.39$). Neuroticism showed a statistically significant positive association with academic procrastination ($r = .205$, $p < .001$). Authoritarian parenting styles were also positively related to procrastination, both for mothers ($r = .141$, $p < .05$) and fathers ($r = .195$, $p < .001$). These findings highlight the combined influence of personality traits

and parenting styles in explaining academic procrastination among university students and contribute to the limited empirical literature in the Albanian context.

Keywords: *Academic procrastination, neuroticism, authoritarian parenting, university students, personality traits*

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Transforming ECE through Leadership and Artificial Intelligence in Curriculum Implementation toward an Intelligent Society

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This paper examines the role of educational leadership in transforming early childhood education through the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the implementation of the Early Childhood Education Curriculum Package in Kosovo, within the context of building an Intelligent Society. The study focuses on how leadership in preschool and school institutions influences the effective implementation of curriculum documents, including the curriculum framework, developmental standards, and teaching, assessment, and learning environment guidelines. Based on an analytical and conceptual approach, the paper explores the interaction between leadership capacities and the potential of Artificial Intelligence to support personalized learning, monitor children's developmental progress, and enhance pedagogical decision-making. In particular, it highlights the role of educational leaders in creating the institutional, professional, and ethical conditions necessary for the integration of emerging technologies in early childhood education. Within the broader context of transformation toward an Intelligent Society, early childhood education is positioned as a foundation for the development of cognitive, emotional, and social intelligence. The study argues that the effectiveness of curriculum implementation depends not only on curriculum documents themselves but also on the quality of educational leadership and institutional readiness for technological innovation. Finally, the paper provides recommendations for policymakers and educational leaders regarding capacity building and the development of sustainable models for the pedagogical integration of Artificial Intelligence in early childhood education.

Keywords: *Early Childhood Education, Educational Leadership, Artificial Intelligence in Education, Curriculum Implementation, Intelligent Society, Educational Innovation*

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Security Dimensions of Albania's European Integration: Globalization, Border Management, and Regional Cooperation in Turbulent Times

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European integration is reshaping security governance in candidate countries, creating complex interdependencies between national sovereignty and supranational frameworks. Albania's convergence toward EU security standards occurs within a volatile environment characterized by hybrid threats, irregular migration, and transnational crime. This research examines the security dimensions of Albania's integration trajectory, analyzing how globalization intersects with national security imperatives and EU approximation requirements. This study investigates three interconnected areas: transformation of Albania's security institutions in alignment with European standards, border management challenges within Schengen approximation, and regional security initiatives affecting Albania's strategic positioning in Euro-Atlantic frameworks. Employing institutional analysis and policy evaluation methodologies, the research draws on official documents, legislative reforms, and semi-structured interviews with security practitioners and policymakers conducted between 2023 and 2025. Findings reveal tensions between rapid institutional adaptation and slower transformation of organizational cultures within security institutions. While Albania has achieved significant legislative progress in border control, anti-corruption, and justice reform, implementation gaps persist. The research demonstrates that Albania's security integration is shaped by EU requirements, NATO obligations, and bilateral partnerships demanding flexible, multi-level governance approaches. The analysis highlights how small states navigate competing security demands in an era of geopolitical fragmentation. This research contributes to understanding the securitization of integration processes and the interplay between globalization, regionalization, and national security governance in transitional democracies.

Keywords: *European integration, security sector reform, border management, Albania, regional cooperation, transnational threats*

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From Standardization to Singularity: Children, Youth, Identity and Education in Late Modern Society

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Inspired by Andreas Reckwitz's work: The Society of Singularities (2020), which argues that late modernity is marked by a shift from a "logic of the general" to a "logic of the particular," this paper explores how this transformation reshapes the lives of children and youth, with particular attention to family and education. As singularity becomes a dominant social logic, identity formation is increasingly framed as a continuous project of self-creation and performance, requiring young people to present themselfes as unique and recognizable. Recognition thus becomes unstable and competitive, encouraging the cultivation of individuality and personal branding rather than the mere acquisition of skills. In this context, self-realization is transformed from a personal aspiration into a social obligation, often generating anxiety, insecurity, and a persistent sense of insufficiency. The paper argues that the logic of singularities also produces new forms of inequality among youth, as success becomes more closely linked to cultural capital, such as creativity and visibility; thereby widening divides between culturally privileged and culturally disadvantaged groups. Education systems may unintentionally reinforce these dynamics by emphasizing creativity, critical thinking, and personalized learning, despite unequal access to the resources required to develop and display uniqueness. Methodology: the paper combines a theoretical analysis of the concepts of "singularity" and "generalization" with empirical evidence on contemporary youth lifestyles and educational practices. It concludes by highlighting the need for coordinated efforts across education, family, and broader society to ensure more equitable conditions for young people to develop and express their uniqueness.

Keywords: *Logic of singularity; logic of the general; inequality; cultural capital; youth; education*

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From Chaos to Opportunity: A Multiple Intelligences Framework for Organizational Resilience

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This paper examines the resilient leadership of micro-entrepreneurs in the service sector in Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico, as a process of mobilizing diverse forms of human intelligence in the face of highly turbulent contexts. Based on a qualitative study of in-depth interviews with five entrepreneurs with over twenty years of experience, the study analyzes the meanings they attribute to resilience, as well as the decisions and practices they implement to sustain their businesses in the face of economic, health, social, and security crises. The findings show that resilient leaders simultaneously activate intelligences described by Gardner's theory—particularly intrapersonal, interpersonal, logical-mathematical, and existential intelligence. The study also reveals the role of spiritual intelligence, expressed in the construction of meaning, personal faith, ethical values, and hope as driving forces for persistence, as well as a strong orientation toward the meaning of work as a moral responsibility to colleagues and the community. Furthermore, it is observed that these leaders develop situational and humanistic leadership models, adjusting their management style to respond to the emotional and operational needs of their followers. In this way, resilient leadership functions as an integrating system of multiple intelligence that allows for the maintenance of organizational functioning within environments characterized by turbulence, violence, and uncertainty. In conclusion, resilient leadership in micro-enterprises providing services exemplifies how an intelligent society is built upon the balanced activation of different human intelligences, combining strategic thinking, emotional intelligence, ethics, spirituality, and relational capital. This study provides evidence for designing business strengthening programs that integrate the development of these intelligences, enhancing the adaptive capacity and sustainability of micro-enterprises in the face of future challenges.

Keywords: *Multiple intelligences, resilient leadership, organizational resilience, turbulent environments, uncertainty*

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When Algorithms Manage People: Worker Agency and Collective Action against Platform Control in Brazil

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Ride-hailing platforms govern their workers through algorithmic systems that set pay, assign rides, and enforce discipline - often without any human manager in the loop. This paper asks what happens when workers start pushing back. Drawing on the Brazilian case, where platform labor expanded fast alongside growing precarity, the study focuses on the Breque dos Apps (2020) - a national work stoppage by delivery and ride-hailing drivers that became one of the most visible episodes of collective mobilization among platform workers in the Global South. The theoretical framework brings together scholarship on Uberization and precarity (Antunes, Abilio, Kalleberg), algorithmic control (Rosenblat, Grohmann et al.), moral economy as a bridge between lived experience and collective action (Thompson, Scott), and frame theory applied to social movements (Snow & Benford, Tarrow, Tilly). The study adopts a two-phase design. The first phase consists of content analysis of social media communications, manifestos, and public documents from the Breque dos Apps movement. The second phase involves semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15–20 ride-hailing drivers in Brazil (fieldwork May–June 2026). Data will be analyzed through narrative thematic analysis. Three questions drive the inquiry: which aspects of algorithmic control drivers experience as unjust; how individual grievances translate - or fail to translate - into collective demands; and what the Breque dos Apps reveals about the tension between algorithmic governance and workers' agency in the Global South.

Keywords: *Platform labor, algorithmic control, collective action, precarity, justice narratives, Breque dos Apps, Global South*

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Statistical Analysis of the Effectiveness of Training in Public Administration: The Case of Albania

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Increasing capacities in public administration constitutes an essential factor for the effective functioning of institutions in order to meet the standards related to the European integration

process. In this context, the continuous professional development of public servants is considered a key instrument for improving the quality of public services, increasing institutional efficiency and strengthening administrative decision-making. In Albania, the Albanian School of Public Administration (ASPA) plays a central role in the design and implementation of training programs for public administration. Through a wide range of training activities and the continuous updating of curricula, this institution aims to address the growing needs for professional development, closely linked to administrative reforms and the approximation of Albanian legislation to the Acquis communautaire of the European Union. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in training requests, both from public institutions and from civil servants themselves. This trend reflects the growing importance of training as a mechanism for improving performance and adapting to new administrative and institutional requirements. In this context, the use of performance indicators constitutes an important tool for assessing the effectiveness of training programs. These indicators enable the analysis of the relationship between the demand for training, the provision of training programs and the results achieved in terms of participation and professional development. The purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of the training programs developed by the Albanian School of Public Administration during the period 2022–2025, based on the analysis of key performance indicators. The study aims to identify key trends, analyze the effectiveness of the implementation of training activities and assess their impact on increasing the capacities of public administration.

Keywords: *Statistical analysis, training, public administration, effectiveness, professional development*

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Development of the city under the pressure of an intelligent society

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Rapid technological development and global urbanization have brought profound transformations in the way modern cities are organized and function. The concept of an intelligent society is closely linked to the use of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence and data analysis, to improve the quality of urban life. This paper will analyze the intelligent society from the perspective of urban sociology, examining the social, economic, and cultural impacts of this transformation. Through a theoretical and analytical approach, the study explores how smart cities influence social relationships, power structures, and civic engagement. An intelligent society is not only a technological concept, but also a social reality that involves transformations in how people interact, organize, and participate in public life. In this context, urban sociology provides an important perspective for understanding these changes by analyzing their effects on social structures, urban identities, and power relations. The transformation of cities in the era of the intelligent society will be examined, where technology, digitalization, and new social demands exert continuous pressure on urban planning. Urban development is no longer merely a matter of physical infrastructure, but a complex process that integrates technological innovation, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion. Through literature review methods and various examples, the paper addresses the main challenges of contemporary cities, as well as the opportunities that smart cities offer for more efficient and sustainable development.

Keywords: *City, intelligent society, urbanization, and human*

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The implementation of the merit principle in the civil service As a Key Factor for Enhancing Administrative Capacities

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The paper entitled "The Implementation of the Merit Principle in the Civil Service as a Key Factor for Enhancing Administrative Capacities" is significant for the theory of administrative law, as it is developed from the observational perspective of a civil servant directly confronted with the mismanagement of human capital within public administration. Using a comparative approach, the study examines the main models of civil service, particularly the career-based model and the position-based model. However, its primary focus is the analysis of civil service models in Albania, as well as the evaluation methods applied in recruitment procedures for civil servants. In a highly politicised context, the implementation of the merit principle in the civil service is a key factor in public administration reform. Nevertheless, it remains vulnerable to politicisation and weak governance practices. The topic is highly relevant, as Albania's aspiration to meet the standards required for European Union integration demands strong administrative capacities and the development of an intellectual elite characterised by integrity and professional competence. This is essential to address the challenges faced in building a genuine democratic state and a consolidated rule-of-law system in the service of citizens.

Keywords: *Civil Service, civil servant, merit principle, politicisation, competitive examination, centralised management, decentralised management*

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Wo men in the leadership and establishment of the written albanian press 1848-2024

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During the 19th century National Awakening, visionary intellectuals, most notably Sami Frashëri, conceptualized women's education as a fundamental catalyst for national emancipation and social modernization. Despite this early advocacy, the active integration of women into the public sphere and the professional press was long stifled by restrictive historical contingencies and traditional socio-cultural structures. This study provides a

critical analysis of the evolution of women's roles within the Albanian press, grounded in an extensive longitudinal documentary analysis. Utilizing the Registry of the Written Albanian Press (1848-2024) as its primary empirical framework, the research examines the transition of women from peripheral contributors to central editorial leaders. The analysis is structured across three transformative epochs: the foundational years (pre 1944), the socialist era (1945-1990), and the contemporary democratic period (1991-2024). A primary focus of this paper is the institutional "turning point" following the Declaration of Independence. Specifically, it highlights the pioneering leadership of Parashqevi Qiriazi and the establishment of "Ylli i Mëngjesit" (The Morning Star), the first periodical in the Albanian language to be both founded and directed by women. The study further explores the paradox of the socialist period, where numerical participation increased under state mandated gender quotas while remaining ideologically constrained, and concludes with the post 1991 paradigm shift. In this final era, women emerged as autonomous founders and executives of independent media outlets within Albania, Kosovo, and the diaspora. By synthesizing these historical stages, the paper illustrates the broader trajectory of women's empowerment and their significant impact on the shaping of Albanian public discourse.

Keywords: *Gender leadership; Albanian journalism; Media history; Diaspora press; Institutionalization of the press*

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The impact of empathy on the quality of services provided by social professionals in Kosovo's Institutions

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Empathy constitutes an essential element in the professional practice of social workers, directly influencing the quality of services provided to persons in need. In the context of social institutions in Kosovo, the role of empathy becomes even more important due to the complexity of social problems and the vulnerability of the groups being treated. This paper aims to analyze the impact of empathy on the interaction between social professionals and service beneficiaries, as well as on improving their well-being. From the perspective of social

sciences, empathy is seen as a skill that enables a deep understanding of the experiences and needs of individuals, helping to build relationships of trust and respect. This ability influences the way social professionals assess cases, make decisions and provide personalized support. In this context, the quality of services is not only related to technical or administrative aspects, but also to the human dimension of care. The paper also addresses the challenges that social professionals face in daily practice, such as high workload, lack of resources and the need for continuous training in the development of emotional skills. These factors can affect the level of empathy and the effectiveness of social interventions. For this reason, the importance of integrating empathy into professional training and institutional policies is emphasized. In conclusion, the study argues that empathy is a key component for increasing the quality of social services in Kosovo institutions. Its promotion through education, training and institutional support can contribute to the provision of more humane, more effective and more oriented services towards the real needs of individuals.

Keywords: *Empathy, social professionals, quality of services, social institutions, people in need, social welfare, Kosovo*

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Academician Pajazit Nushi's vision for the development of Albanian university Institutions

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Academician Pajazit Nushi (1931–2015) is among the prominent personalities of Albanian education, culture and science in Kosovo. He is a psychologist, university lecturer, politician and academic with extraordinary influence on the development of Albanian scientific and institutional thought. PajazitNushi's scientific creativity is rich and very important. He has published works, psychological, didactic studies and professional articles. The academician has made a great contribution to the establishment of some of the most important educational institutions of pre-university and university education. His commitment to the establishment of higher education institutions and especially to the development of the University of Pristina is notable. PajazitNushi's vision for the development of university institutions constitutes one of the most important contributions to Albanian educational and scientific thought of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. At the center of his interests is the idea that the university should be not only a space for the transmission of knowledge, but also a dynamic center of scientific research, innovation and the formation of the intellectual elite. In his opinion, the development of university institutions is closely related to the construction of a qualitative, independent and integrated educational system in contemporary European trends. He supported the implementation of academic standards, which should be based on the high professional preparation of staff and the continuous advancement of teaching programs. According to him, the university should function as an organism open to reforms, adapting to scientific

and technological developments, but at the same time preserving cultural and national identity. In the scientific works of Academician Nushi, important scientific topics have been addressed, as is also included in the titles of his works. The life work of Academician PajazitNushi is Lexicon of Psychology, volume I, ASHAK, Prishtina, 2014 and Lexicon of Psychology, volume II, ASHAK, Prishtina, 2014.

Keywords: *Academician Nushi, psychology, pedagogy, university, education, culture, science*

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Reflections and Professional Perspectives of Vocational School Leaders in Kosovo: Empowering Professional Development through Pedagogical Training, the Case of Deputy Principals

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Vocational school leaders are currently facing several curricular and legal changes, as well as rapid technological developments and demands of connecting schools to the labor market and professional practices. School principals should not only remain administrators, but as leaders they must be able to follow sustainable development trends. This study aims to examine the experiences of deputy principals in vocational schools in Kosovo. For this purpose, the following research questions were proposed: (1) What are the experiences of school deputy principals in school management? (2) In what ways do school deputy principals apply their expertise in school leadership and management? Using semi-structured interviews as instruments, the study identifies both the achievements and challenges in the process, focusing on vocational school leadership. Concrete experiences from the practice of management, leadership and administration, derived from the professional reflections of school leaders, have been analyzed through thematic analysis, through which four themes have been identified. The study findings reveal that school deputy principals face numerous challenges during the process of school management. According to their opinions, these challenges stem from inadequate working conditions, the strong influence of the social and political context on education, as well as a significant lack of expertise in managing diverse situations in school. In this regard, study participants also emphasize the need for further professional development, including training programs or workshops, closely aligned with real-world contexts. This study contributes to the advancement of understanding the role of effective vocational school leadership in Kosovo to encourage ongoing career professional development.

Keywords: *Educational leadership, school management, vocational education, progressional training, pedagogical training*

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The elective affinity between digital platforms and logistics: AI, gamification, and discipline

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This contribution aims to analyze the elective affinity between digital platforms and logistics as a defining feature of platform society. Such affinity goes beyond the technical integration of platforms into distribution systems and concerns the sharing of common ordering principles, such as the full visibility of processes, the continuous organisation of flows, the algorithmic management of decisions, and the reduction of frictions through predictive devices. When applied to social practices, these principles produce forms of discipline based on the continuous orientation of conduct. This elective affinity is examined through the case study of Pokémon Go, a mobile augmented reality game developed by Niantic, which since 2016 has encouraged millions of users to move through urban space by means of goals and in-game rewards, making movements and interactions with places traceable. Geospatial data and images collected also through Niantic's applications have been used to build infrastructures for mapping, visual positioning, and automated navigation, potentially applicable to urban logistics and robotic delivery systems. In light of this, the paper argues that gaming platforms can become a privileged environment for making users' participation in the construction of logistical infrastructures possible, acceptable, ordinary, and repeatable. The case thus invites a broader reflection on how seemingly recreational digital environments contribute to organizing social action according to logistical rationalities.

Keywords: *Digital platforms; Logistics; Gamification; Discipline*

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The impact of artificial intelligence and the disappearance of professions: between globalization and the labor market

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Artificial Intelligence has nowadays become an indispensable tool toperform most of the tasks in daily life. Since the birth of industrialism, technology has taken an ever-increasing leap in improving people's lives. But this change has led to the fading of

professions, where previously they were physically performed by humans, now they have been replaced by sophisticated machines that are capable of doing twice the work of humans. The purpose of this paper is to examine and analyze the impact that Artificial Intelligence has on modern contemporary society. As well as to provide a micro and macro social overview of some of the professions that have faded due to the development of artificial intelligence. The objectives of this paper are to describe and analyze how professions have changed over time due to the development of technology. The study methodology is based on the use of the qualitative method by focusing on secondary sources of literature review. These types of study sources were chosen precisely because they allow a more in-depth theoretical framework to be included. In this context, Albanian and foreign authors were considered. At the end of the paper, it is concluded that artificial intelligence has significantly influenced the change in the labor market and the creation of new professions. The importance of this study lies in highlighting the intervention of technology in human life and in changing professions. This paper can also be a modest help to researchers and young professionals.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Substitution, Professions of the Future, technology*

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Intelligent Society for Whom? Power, Inequality, and the Human-Artificial Intelligence (AI) Divide: A Sociological Analysis

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) is being hailed and widely promoted as a means to improve collective well-being, productivity, governance, and human development. Yet when intelligence is conceptualized at the societal level, a critical question arises: who benefits from this intelligence? Under rubric of this question, this paper argues that the transition toward an "intelligent society" is not merely technological progress but a deeply political and stratified process shaped by power relations, structural inequality, and institutional design. The analysis integrates four major sociological frameworks: Marxist political economy, Weberian rationalization, Bourdieu's theory of capital, and Foucault's concept of power/knowledge to interrogate the social foundations of AI. From a Marxist perspective, AI is embedded within capitalist accumulation, concentrating ownership and data control among corporate and state elites. A Weberian lens reveals the intensification of algorithmic rationalization and bureaucratic governance. Through Bourdieu, AI generates new forms of digital or algorithmic capital that reinforce existing class advantages. A Foucauldian approach highlights AI as a regime of knowledge that enables surveillance, classification, and normalization. Synthesizing emerging research on algorithmic bias and global disparities in AI development, the paper demonstrates how AI capabilities, access, and control are unevenly distributed across class, education, and the digital divide scholarship. This produces what is termed cognitive stratification, whereby AI amplifies the capacities of already privileged groups while marginalizing others. The paper concludes that without democratized governance, public investment in AI literacy, and redistributive technological policies, AI risks deepening structural inequalities rather than advancing collective well-being.

Keywords: *Intelligent, political, governance, knowledge, well-being*

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Arbëresh communities in Italy within the context of migration, cultural transformation, and contemporary modernization processes

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The Arbëresh represent one of the oldest Albanian Diasporas in Europe, with migrations occurring in several waves between the 15th and 18th centuries. They represent a singular instance of maintaining distinct linguistic, cultural, and religious features, historically marked by geographical and social isolation in rural and mountainous regions of Southern Italy. These communities have undergone substantial changes and losses in their social structures and cultural practices over the 20th and 21st centuries due to modernization, internal migration, and the effects of globalization. This study examines how depopulation, migration and exposure to prevailing cultural and linguistic norms have redefined identity and a sense of belonging. This analysis integrates diaspora studies, social history, and cultural analysis within an interdisciplinary framework. Cultural resilience, institutional support, and local activism has led to the creation of new forms of preserving, transmitting, and expressing cultural elements. The transformation reflects broader sociological processes affecting historical Diasporas in contemporary Europe, as Arbëresh communities move beyond cultural erosion to redefine their identity within new modern social contexts.

Keywords: *Arbëresh, Cultural identity, Social transformation, Cultural resilience*

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Superstitions, customs and rituals of childbirth among Albanians and their roots in previous historical periods

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The birth of a child is one of the most important moments related not only to the fact of the birth of an individual in society, but also to the continuity of life. It is a great joy for the family because it has to do with the increase and enrichment of the family. Starting from the great desire to renew life, but also to have descendants, the Albanian people, like other peoples, have created various customs and rituals, which accompany different moments of the birth of a child. In fact, the customs and rituals of birth begin with the marriage of the couple, where on the wedding day rituals and customs are performed with the desire

to have fertility. By exploring the superstitions, customs, and rituals of childbirth among Albanians, this paper engages in a detailed elaboration of the importance and values that the birth of children has had and continues to have as an important event, a joy for the married couple, the family, and the wider kin. In this paper, superstitions, customs and rituals will be examined in three important aspects before birth, birth and after the birth of the child. Of course, these customs and rituals are carried out with specific purposes. Also highlighted will be rituals on pregnancy, folk medicine, the forty-day period after birth, baptism and relationships with godparents, naming, various practices to protect the child from evil forces and other rituals related to the child's good fortune. Of course, this paper presents a challenge to trace the origin, identity and antiquity of beliefs, customs and rituals of childbirth. Despite the archaic inherited forms of these rituals, there may be similarities with other cultures within the Balkans, but also beyond. For the realization of this paper, descriptive and analytical methods were used. Using the technique of using bibliographies, studies and articles of Albanian and foreign researchers, qualitative data were reviewed, consulted and interpreted to identify issues related to superstitions, customs and rituals of childbirth among Albanians.

Keywords: *Childbirth, beliefs, customs, rituals, heritage, antiquity*

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Fehmi Agani - Sociologist, Intellectual, and Political Leader

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This paper seeks to explore Fehmi Agani's contributions to sociology, political thought, and peacebuilding, reaffirming their relevance for contemporary challenges in Kosovo's governance and interethnic dialogue. Fehmi Agani stands as one of the most influential figures in Kosovo's modern history, embodying the rare synthesis of intellectual rigor and political pragmatism. As a sociologist, philosopher, and academic leader, Agani laid the foundations for critical thought and institutional development in Kosovo's higher education system. His scholarly work on democracy, nationhood, and self-determination provided a theoretical framework for Kosovo's peaceful resistance movement during the 1990s. Politically, Agani was a co-founder and chief strategist of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), advocating for non-violence and dialogue in a time of escalating conflict. His role in international negotiations, including the Rambouillet talks, underscored his commitment to a democratic and inclusive future for Kosovo. Agani's assassination in

1999 marked a profound loss, yet his legacy continues to inspire academic and political communities as a visionary who combined intellectual depth with national engagement.

Keywords: *Kosovo, Sociology, Democracy, Peacebuilding, Intellectual Leadership*

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A review of Albanian and Arbëresh personalities of Italy in the work 'Lexicon of Psychology' by Academician Pajazit NUSHI

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The paper based on the work "Lexicon of Psychology" (2014) by Academician Pajazit Nushi presents an overview of Albanian and Arbëresh personalities in Italy, who contributed to various fields of knowledge and left their mark while preserving their cultural identity and affirming a scientific and literary output that communicates both with their ancestral roots and with the present, reflecting their life and identity throughout the centuries. Sixteen years ago, when the Explanatory Dictionary of Psychoanalysis (2010) by Academician Nushi was published, it was received with particular interests it conveyed the multifaceted development of world psychoanalysis and was of great importance for the Albanian language at that time. It paved the way for the compilation of the Lexicon of Psychology in two volumes with improvements and additions both in terms of the terminological corpus and the language lexicon, incorporating a series of substantial revisions. Through an encyclopedic overview of several personalities, such as L. Tomeu, Gj. Gazulli, M. Maruli, P. Bogdani, Th. Kavalioti, J. De Rada, G. Bukola, S. Frashëri, G. Beltoja, etc., this Lexicon embodies a model of intercultural dialogue as a means of survival, awareness, and meaningful engagement with the world, not only for simple linguistic and extra linguistic reasons, but also due to the compiler's rare professional and scholarly dedication.

Keywords: *Explanatory Dictionary of Psychoanalysis, Lexicon of phychology, terminological corpus, cultural identity, Albanian language lexicon*

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The formation of interpersonal relationships in the era of the digital society

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In contemporary times, the era of the digital society has profoundly transformed the ways in which individuals interact, create connections, and build interpersonal relationships. This paper aims to analyze precisely these aspects the processes, models, and emerging dynamics involved in the formation of interpersonal relationships within the context of widespread use of technology, social networks, and virtual communication. Through this study, the primary objective is to identify how digital platforms influence the development of trust, intimacy, social interaction, and the overall quality of relationships between individuals. The relevance of conducting this study in Albania is closely connected to the rapid increase in the use of digital technologies, particularly during the last decade, where a significant portion of interpersonal communication has shifted online, involving all age groups. In Albania, where migration, urbanization, and socio-economic changes have reduced traditional face-to-face interactions, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and other networks have become the main tools of social engagement. The study aims to understand how these developments influence the formation of new relationships, the maintenance of existing ones, and the ways in which young people and adults construct their social identity in an increasingly digitalized reality. The expected results will contribute to the academic literature on social transformations in the digital era and support institutional actors, educators, and Albanian researchers in better understanding the challenges and opportunities that accompany these changes in interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: *Interpersonal relationships, digital society, virtual communication, social networks, social identity, digital technology*

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Social discrimination and its impact on the social integration of individuals in the community: A study on experiences and perceptions

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Social discrimination in everyday life remains a significant challenge for cohesion and social integration in modern communities. Individuals may face various forms of discrimination based on social status, ethnicity, gender, age, or other social factors, which can negatively affect their sense of belonging and social participation. Understanding individuals' experiences and perceptions of discrimination is essential for developing policies and strategies that promote equality and social inclusion. This study aims to examine individuals' experiences and perceptions of everyday discrimination and to assess its impact on social integration within the community. Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire via Google Forms. The questionnaire included items on personal experiences with discrimination, social perceptions, and the level of social integration, as well as demographic variables (age, gender, education level, and employment status). Data were analyzed using statistical methods to identify the relationships between experiences of discrimination and social integration. Findings indicate that a considerable portion of individuals experience discrimination in various everyday situations, which is associated with lower levels of belonging and social participation. Negative perceptions of discrimination also influence how individuals interact with others and affect their level of social integration.

Keywords: *Social discrimination, experiences of discrimination, social perceptions, social integration, community, social inclusion*

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Toward an Intelligent Society: Challenges and Opportunities in Contexts of Structural Fragility

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The growing discourse on the "intelligent society" often emphasizes technological advancement, digital transformation, and data-driven governance as defining features of modern progress. However, such perspectives risk reducing intelligence to technical capacity, overlooking the deeper structural and social conditions that sustain resilient societies. This paper reconceptualizes the intelligent society as a multi-dimensional system

grounded not only in knowledge and innovation but also in legitimacy, institutional coherence, and social alignment. Drawing on historical patterns of systemic breakdown and contemporary debates in governance and development, the study argues that societies fail not merely due to lack of capacity, but because of misalignment between authority, trust, and social organization. Apparent strength; seen in formal institutions or administrative systems; can conceal underlying vulnerabilities when governance becomes detached from the lived realities of citizens. In such contexts, declining trust weakens participation and undermines the system's overall intelligence. Conversely, alternative and often informal forms of organization may emerge, demonstrating that intelligence is not exclusive to formal institutions but can develop wherever there is coherence between values, purpose, and collective action. The paper further examines the challenges and opportunities in building an intelligent society, emphasizing inclusive governance, structural balance, and adaptive capacity. It concludes that a truly intelligent society is defined not by technological sophistication alone, but by its ability to align knowledge, legitimacy, and social trust, thereby sustaining resilience in the face of complexity.

Keywords: *Intelligent Society, Legitimacy, Structural Fragility, Governance, Social Cohesion*

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Intelligent Society and Mental health: Challenges and Perspectives in Clinical Psychology

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Introduction: The rapid development of digital technology and the integration of artificial intelligence into everyday life are contributing to the shaping of what is known as the "intelligent society". This transformation has profound impacts not only on social and economic structures, but also on the psychological functioning of individuals, making mental health a key component of analysis within clinical psychology. Purpose: This paper aims to critically analyze the challenges and perspectives that the intelligent society presents for clinical psychology, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach between technological advancement and the preservation of professional ethics and patient well-being. Through an interdisciplinary perspective, the study contributes to the understanding of the role of the clinical psychologist in an increasingly digitalized and complex environment. Methodology: This study has a quantitative, descriptive-

correlative and cross-sectional nature, with the aim of analyzing the relationship between the use of technology in the intelligent society and the mental health of individuals, data will be collected through a structured questionnaire that measures the variables in question. Sample: consists of participants, selected through the convenience sampling method, including a heterogeneous population according to age and profession, consisting of students, teachers, health personnel. Results: It is expected that the results will highlight both the challenges and the potential of technology in improving mental health services, including telepsychology and digital interventions.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence, clinical psychology, intelligent society, mental health*

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Integrating Digital Security Education to Mitigate Student Abduction Risks in Nigeria: A Policy and EdTech Approach

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Educational institutions in Nigeria and many other countries have been hotspots of insecurity challenges. There have been increasing reports of school abductions, disruption of school activities, heightened anxiety among students, management, the communities in recent times; and the existing security architecture in the country have proved ineffective. Between 2014 and late 2025, over 1,880 pupils kidnapped and not fewer than 184 killed in northern states in Nigeria. Hence, the paper is anchored on routine activity theory developed by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson. The study employed systematic review of existing literature through PRISMA template; wherein fifty (50) articles were retrieved from reputable journal base such as: Doaj, Scopus, Google Scholar, Elsevier, Sage, Taylor & Francis. Thereafter, the documents were analysed using interpretive analytical method. The paper revealed that while traditional forms of abduction, such as familial kidnapping, suicide bombing posed serious threats; the increasing digitalization of society has precipitated Boko Haram and ISWAP with the use of drones and modern mediated risk equipment as a replacement to their early techniques; and that openness of schools to spasm, absence of guardianship, non-existence of digitalized environment, mass out of school children and other related drivers of insecurity are prelude to incessant attacks. Also, the paper identified a need for integrated with digital risk awareness and strategic intelligence to defeat insurgencies and enhance digitalized security education

to students, teachers and the school administrators. The paper concluded that incessant closure of schools is not the cure to Boko Haram's and ISWAP, the study recommended all-encompassing strategic measures for both government and school management to include; deployment of technology driven surveillance, infusing staff and students' digital education on safety in the curricula, collaboration between security agencies and host communities and advocacy for an improved and more coordinated government intervention.

Keywords: *Student Abduction, Insecurity, Digital Education, Surveillance, School Administrators*

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Behavioral Approach to the Penitentiary System

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The behavioral approach is a research perspective on leadership and institutional management, as it focuses on the behaviors of individuals and their impact on organizational performance. This approach, implemented in institutions such as the penitentiary system, of a closed, hierarchical and sensitive nature, operates on the principle that human behavior is learned and can be changed through structured interventions. The research aims to analyze how the behavioral models of leaders and staff help improve discipline, security and rehabilitation of convicts, providing concrete tools for modifying criminal behavior. The application of positive reinforcement techniques, behavior modification and social modeling contribute to the creation of an organizational and ethical climate that is safe, cooperative and productive. Also, the use of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has an impact on reducing deviant behaviors, increasing emotional and social control, and is quite effective in the process of rehabilitation and resocialization of prisoners. Combining with other approaches that address social and psychological factors has a positive impact. Leadership that applies the behavioral approach increases motivation, accountability and cohesion within the penitentiary staff, influences the reduction of tensions and the improvement of crisis management. The approach contributes to a sustainable, ethical and productive institutional environment, where behavioral change is seen as the key to personal and organizational transformation. The approach that combines effective leadership with cognitive-behavioral interventions constitutes a powerful strategy for reducing recidivism and improving public safety.

Keywords: *Behavioral Approach; Prison Leadership & Management; Positive Reinforcement; Resocialization & Organizational Ethics*

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Determinants of Well-being among Youth in Kosovo: A Structural Equation Modeling Approach

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Subjective well-being is determined by many factors that are known to interact complexly. This study aims to identify and evaluate the main determinants of the Well-being variable among youth in Kosovo analyzing factors such as Resilience, Physical activity, mental health app use, mental health literacy, and psychological distress. A sample of N=372 youths (aged 18–25; M_{age}=20.55) completed online questionaries. Data were analyzed through a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach using the Jamovi software. The model demonstrated an excellent fit ($X^2(6) = 6.69$, p=.350; CFI =.989; TLI =.961; RMSEA =.018; SRMR =.026). Path analysis revealed that Well-being is directly and positively determined by mental health app use (β=0.152, p=.004), Resilience (β=0.146, p=.002), and Physical activity (β=0.110, p=.034). Also, mental health literacy (β=−0.109, p=.040) and psychological distress (β=−0.142, p=.007) showed a significant negative determining effect on Well-being. In addition, there is a determining indirect role of Family Income on Well-being through full mediation by Resilience (β=0.029, p=.039). Overall, the model successfully explained 11.1% of the variance in Well-being (R^2 =.111). The findings confirm that Well-being among youth in Kosovo is a multidimensional phenomenon determined by a range of direct and indirect factors. This model shows that this network of variables (especially mental health app use, Resilience, and the main indirect impact of Family Income) should be considered when developing future strategies and studies for this age group.

Keywords: *Well-being, youth, mental health app use, mental health literacy, psychological distress, Resilience*

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Women's movement in post-communist Albania: Western influence and the rise of civil society

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The collapse of the communist regime in Albania in the early 1990s marked a critical juncture for the reconfiguration of gender relations and the emergence of civil society. In contrast to the state-socialist model of women's emancipation—often characterized as "top-down" and instrumentalized (Eisenstein, 1993)—the post-communist women's movement developed

within a pluralistic and increasingly transnational framework. It drew heavily on Western feminist paradigms, particularly liberal and rights-based approaches emphasizing gender equality, individual agency, and social justice (Walby, 1997). Women's associations were among the first non-governmental organizations to emerge in Albania, positioning themselves as key actors in the democratization process. Supported by international donors and networks, these organizations facilitated the transfer of institutional models, advocacy strategies, and discursive frameworks aligned with global feminist agendas. Their interventions addressed critical issues such as legal reform, gender-based violence, political representation, and women's economic participation. This paper examines the early formation and evolution of the women's movement in post-communist Albania, focusing on the interaction between imported Western frameworks and local socio-cultural realities. Using a qualitative and interpretive approach, it analyzes how these organizations negotiated legitimacy, adapted external models, and contributed to shaping public discourse and policy. The study argues that while Western influence was foundational in structuring the movement's agenda and practices, its long-term impact depended on processes of localization and contextual adaptation. This case highlights the tensions and synergies between global feminist norms and post-socialist transformations, contributing to broader debates on gender, civil society, and the diffusion of transnational ideas.

Keywords: *Post-communism, women's movement, gender equality, civil society, feminist theory*

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Insecticide residues in eggs as indicators of environmental contamination and food safety risk: a case study from Kosovo

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The presence of insecticide residues in food of animal origin represents a critical interface between environmental contamination and human exposure. In poultry production systems, insecticides are commonly used to control ectoparasites such as mites and lice; however, their improper or excessive application may contribute to environmental dispersion and subsequent accumulation in food products such as eggs. This study evaluates the occurrence of selected insecticide residues in eggs collected from laying hen farms in the Republic of Kosovo, providing insights into potential environmental and food safety risks. A total of 32 egg samples were analyzed for Carbaryl, Permethrin, and Tetrachlorvinphos (Rabon) using a modified QuEChERS extraction method followed by high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC). The results revealed that most samples were free from detectable residues, indicating generally controlled use of insecticides. However, Tetrachlorvinphos was detected in two samples at concentrations of 0.177 ppm and 0.083 ppm, suggesting

localized contamination events potentially linked to pesticide application practices within poultry housing systems. From an environmental perspective, these findings highlight the role of agricultural practices as potential sources of chemical contamination entering the food chain. Although the overall occurrence was low, the presence of residues exceeding expected background levels underscores the importance of sustainable pesticide management and environmental monitoring. In conclusion, continuous surveillance of pesticide residues in animal-derived food products is essential not only for consumer protection but also for assessing the environmental impact of agricultural chemical use. The study contributes to the limited data available for Kosovo and supports the development of integrated environmental and food safety policies.

Keywords: *Insecticide residues, eggs, environmental contamination, food safety, Kosovo*

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Oxidative stress and growth dynamics in egg-layer pullets following mercury exposure

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Mercury contamination in aquatic ecosystems represents a pervasive threat to avian health and commercial poultry viability. This study quantified the impact of a few weeks of mercury exposure (0, 50, 100, and 200 mg Hg/L, administered as $HgCl_2$) on the systemic oxidative profile and growth trajectory of ISA Brown pullets. Over a four-week exposure period, biochemical profiling showed a robust, dose-dependent escalation in lipid peroxidation across all treatment cohorts. In the maximum exposure group (200 mg/L), plasma malondialdehyde (MDA) reached 36.97 ± 0.91 μmol/L, a 110.2% increase over the control group ($p < 0.01$). This increase in oxidative stress was accompanied by a marked reduction in body weight across the treatment groups; the high-dose group exhibited a 51.2% reduction in final body mass (173.0 ± 8.5 g) compared to controls (354.7 ± 12.4 g). Our data revealed a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.91$; $p < 0.01$) between plasma MDA and weight gain, showing how mercury-induced oxidative stress directly interferes with the growth of the pullets. These results indicate that Hg-induced

toxicity necessitates a metabolic trade-off, where energetic resources are redirected toward repair and maintenance at the expense of growth. Consequently, plasma MDA is proposed as a sensitive diagnostic biomarker for identifying subclinical heavy metal toxicity and associated performance deficits in poultry production systems.

Keywords: *Mercuric chloride, ISA Brown pullets, lipid peroxidation, metabolic trade-off, weight gain, sublethal toxicity*

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The Impact of Money on the Construction of Individual Identity

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In the context of digital capitalism and advanced financialization, money has evolved from a transactional instrument into a structural mechanism that constructs and mediates individual identity. This paper provides an interdisciplinary analysis of the role of money in shaping subjectivity, integrating perspectives from economic sociology and contemporary political economy. Within this framework, the analytical concept of the triad of money is proposed: (1) money as economic capital determining access to resources and opportunities; (2) money as symbolic market capital producing social differentiation and legitimacy; and (3) money as an identity mechanism through which individuals construct and perform themselves within social and digital spaces. The study explores the interaction between capital, consumption, and self-perception under conditions of increasing inequality and technological transformation. In this regard, the analysis of Thomas Piketty (2014) demonstrates that unequal wealth distribution not only generates economic disparities but also structures the horizons of individual self-identification. This perspective is complemented by the identity economics framework of George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton (2010), which shows that economic choices are deeply embedded in identity norms and roles. Under digital capitalism, this relationship is further intensified in the analysis of Shoshana Zuboff (2019), according to which market mechanisms and digital technologies actively shape how individuals understand and perform their identities. The findings suggest that money operates as an intermediary structure between economic systems and subjectivity, producing identities that are both conditioned by structural inequalities and shaped through individual practices of consumption and self-presentation. The triad of money demonstrates that individual identity in contemporary societies emerges from a complex interaction between economic capital,

symbolic structures, and reflexive practices. In conclusion, money is conceptualized as not only an economic force but also an ontological and cultural one, reshaping modes of being and belonging in contemporary societies.

Keywords: *Money, individual identity, digital capitalism, identity economics, consumption, inequality*

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Tourism and Artificial Intelligence: Toward a Smart and Sustainable Travel Experience

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In an increasingly interconnected world, the tourism industry is undergoing a radical transformation driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI). This presentation analyzes how the integration of predictive algorithms, natural language processing chatbots, and Big Data analytics is redefining the entire tourism value chain. On one hand, AI offers unprecedented opportunities for personalizing the traveler experience and enhancing operational efficiency for businesses; on the other, it raises crucial challenges regarding data privacy and labor automation. The contribution further explores AI's role in promoting more sustainable tourism by managing visitor flows to prevent overtourism. The objective is to demonstrate that AI is not merely a technological tool, but a fundamental pillar for building an intelligent society and a competitive tourist destination in the global market.

Keywords: *Tourism; Artificial Intelligence; intelligent society; competitive tourist destination; tourism industry*

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Student mobility from rural areas and their impact on the development of sustainable tourism in Shkodra

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This study analyzes the mobility of students from rural areas toward the city of Shkodra and the implications of this phenomenon for the development of sustainable tourism. While student mobility has been widely examined in the context of education and urbanization, its role as a contributing factor to local economic and tourism dynamics remains relatively underexplored, particularly in developing regional contexts. The main objective of this

research is to assess the contribution of students with rural backgrounds to the tourism ecosystem of the city, as well as their potential role as active agents of sustainable development. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of university enrollment data over a ten-year period (2015–2025) with qualitative insights obtained through structured questionnaires administered to students originating from rural areas. The findings reveal a consistent increase in rural student mobility, accompanied by a growing level of participation in tourism-related economic activities, including seasonal employment, service provision, and cultural promotion. In addition, the results indicate a gradual increase in students' awareness of sustainable tourism practices throughout their academic experience. This positions students as potential intermediaries who can facilitate the transfer of knowledge and practices between urban tourism markets and their rural communities of origin. The study highlights the strategic role of higher education institutions in fostering regional development and emphasizes the importance of integrating student mobility into local tourism strategies. Overall, the research contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between education, mobility, and sustainable development in peripheral contexts.

Keywords: *Students, turism, rural backgrounds, academic experience, mobility*

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The role of social media marketing in shaping brand identity and economic growth

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This study investigates the role of social media marketing in shaping brand identity and its subsequent impact on economic growth. In the context of globalization and digital transformation, brands utilize social media platforms to construct narratives that resonate with diverse audiences. The research focuses on how branding strategies influence consumer perception, engagement, and market expansion, particularly in highly competitive digital environments. By analyzing case studies and market data, the paper identifies key factors that contribute to successful brand positioning and increased revenue generation. It further explores how algorithms, content personalization, and audience targeting enhance marketing effectiveness. Additionally, the study examines the socio-cultural implications of digital branding, including the creation of online communities and the reinforcement of consumer-brand relationships. The findings indicate that effective social media marketing not only enhances brand visibility but also contributes to broader economic development by stimulating demand and supporting entrepreneurial ecosystems.

The paper also highlights challenges such as information overload, declining organic reach, and ethical concerns related to data usage and consumer manipulation.

Keywords: *Social media marketing, brand identity, economic growth, consumer engagement, digital economy*

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Interreligious Eco-Ethics and AI: Shared Values for Digital Platforms Supporting Environmental Protection and Sustainability

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The accelerated integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into digital communication ecosystems is transforming how religious communities express and disseminate ethical commitments to environmental stewardship. This paper examines whether and how interreligious cooperation can inform the development of AI-enabled digital platforms that promote ecological protection and sustainability. It is guided by three core research questions: (1) What eco-ethical principles are shared across major religious traditions? (2) How can these shared values be operationalized within AI-driven digital infrastructures? (3) What risks do digital environments pose to the integrity of religious eco-ethical discourse? The study adopts a normative constructive theoretical framework, drawing on interreligious ethics, environmental philosophy, and principles of responsible AI. Methodologically, it employs qualitative comparative analysis of religious eco-ethical teachings alongside a conceptual modeling approach to explore their integration into AI systems. Findings indicate a significant convergence around key ethical principles, stewardship, justice, humility, and responsibility toward creation across diverse religious traditions. These shared values provide a robust ethical foundation for designing AI systems that foster ecological awareness and interfaith collaboration. However, the study also identifies critical risks, including algorithmic bias, the amplification of misinformation, and the fragmentation of religious narratives within digital spaces. The paper proposes a conceptual model for embedding interreligious eco-ethics into AI design and governance, emphasizing transparency, inclusivity, and ethical alignment. It concludes that while AI presents substantial opportunities for advancing interfaith ecological engagement, its effectiveness depends on deliberate ethical integration. This research contributes to ongoing debates by offering a structured framework for developing value-centered digital platforms that support sustainable collective action and responsible environmental stewardship in the digital age.

Keywords: *Interreligious Eco-ethics, AI-Governance, Stewardship, Environmental sustainability, Ecological protections*

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Azithromycin Adsorption on Coal Fly Ash: Kinetic and Mechanistic Study

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The presence of antibiotics in aquatic environments has become a growing environmental concern due to their persistence and potential impact on ecosystems and human health. In this study, the removal of Azithromycin from aqueous solutions was investigated using fly ash obtained from the Kosovo A thermal power plant as a low-cost adsorbent. The physicochemical properties of the fly ash were characterized by X-ray diffraction (XRD) and scanning electron microscopy coupled with energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (SEM–EDX). The results revealed that the material is predominantly composed of CaO (38.6%) and SiO_2 (25.5%), with spherical particle morphology and a heterogeneous surface structure. Batch adsorption experiments were conducted at an initial concentration of 25 mg/L and varying contact times (12–96 h). The maximum adsorption capacity was found to be approximately 0.0187 mg/g, with equilibrium reached within 24 h. Adsorption kinetics were analyzed using pseudo-first-order and pseudo-second-order models, where the latter provided an excellent fit ($R^2 = 1$), indicating that chemisorption is the dominant mechanism. The adsorption process is likely governed by a combination of electrostatic interactions, hydrogen bonding, and surface complexation involving metal oxides such as CaO, SiO_2, and Al_2O_3. Despite the relatively low adsorption capacity, the results demonstrate that raw fly ash has potential as an alternative adsorbent for antibiotic removal, although further modification may be required to enhance its efficiency.

Keywords: *Azithromycin, Fly ash, Adsorption, Wastewater treatment, SEM–EDX, Low-cost adsorbe*

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Environmental impact and tourism development in Albania

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The environment represents humanity itself. We are in constant contact with the environment. The Earth is our home, the only place where people obtain air, food, and other basic needs. Nature has gifted us a miracle; are we taking proper care of it? What are the negative effects that have led to environmental degradation? How has humankind

exploited the land in favor of its own interests? What are the types of environmental pollution? What preventive measures should be taken? How important is the environment in the development of the economy and tourism in our country? Protecting and caring for the environment is not only a social obligation, but above all an individual responsibility. The environment can live without us, but we cannot live without it. Albania is known for its beautiful tourist destinations. The interest of tourists and foreign visitors is focused on coastal, mountainous, historical, and cultural areas. Albania offers beautiful landscapes from north to south. Highlighting also historical and cultural cities destinations such as Gjirokastër, Berat, Butrint, Krujë, Tirana, Shkodër, etc., which are among the most sought-after destinations. As a Mediterranean country, Albania has all the opportunities to be ranked among other countries with developed tourism, but various economic, social, and political factors have hindered such development. How has tourism influenced the development of our country? What types of tourism does Albania offer? Which is the most frequently visited? How has tourism influenced the development of Albania's economy?

Keywords: *Environmental, tourism, economy, developmental*

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The intelligent society frontier focused on interdisciplinary perspectives on innovation, ethics, and human flourishing

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital technologies are rapidly reshaping education globally, including in the Balkan region. Countries such as Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia face both shared and distinct challenges in digital transformation, including a scarcity of infrastructure, teacher preparation, and access to technology. The concept of an "Intelligent Society" provides a framework for understanding how cognitive, emotional, social, and adaptive intelligences interact with emerging technologies to influence student well-being and educational outcomes. This literature review synthesizes regional and international research in educational psychology, drawing on key theoretical perspectives such as Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory, Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural approach, and Daniel Goleman's emotional intelligence framework. It critically examines how these theories are reflected in technology-enhanced learning environments across

the Balkans. Particular attention is given to non-cognitive skills—emotional intelligence (EQ), social intelligence (SQ), and adversity quotient (AQ)—and their role in shaping student interaction with AI-supported systems. The review identifies a lack of empirical research in Balkan classrooms and insufficient integration of socio-emotional learning into digital strategies. It also highlights ethical concerns, including data privacy and unequal access to technology, which risk deepening existing educational inequalities. The study stands for a human-centered, culturally responsive approach that aligns global theories with regional realities. It argues that balancing cognitive and non-cognitive intelligences is essential for enhancing resilience, inclusivity, and sustainable development in an emerging Intelligent Society.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence (AI), Intelligent Society, Emotional Intelligence (EQ), Digital Transformation in Education*

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The Impact of Intelligent Society on Economic Development in Kosovo and the Western Balkan Countries

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This paper analyzes the impact of the intelligent society on economic development in the Western Balkan countries, with a particular focus on Kosovo, emphasizing digital transformation, innovation, and human capital as the main pillars of the modern economy. The concept of an intelligent society has emerged as a new development model based on the use of technology and knowledge to improve economic and social performance. To carry out this research, a combined approach of quantitative and qualitative analysis has been employed, including a review of the literature from various authors. Based on these studies, in the Western Balkan countries, the increase in investments in digital infrastructure influences economic transformation by surpassing traditional factors. However, the countries of the region, including Kosovo, compared to EU countries, are still in the early stages of intelligent society development. Through this study, it is demonstrated that Kosovo has considerable potential to transition toward a knowledge-based economy but faces structural challenges such as a lack of investment in research and development (R&D), high youth unemployment, and the emigration of a skilled workforce. Through a theoretical and empirical approach, this paper argues that digitalization, innovation, human capital, and technological infrastructure in Kosovo and the Western Balkan countries contribute to economic growth, increased productivity, and improved public services.

Keywords: *Intelligent society, economic development, Western Balkans, Kosovo*

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The socio-psychological effects of cryptocurrence investment on individual well-being

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This paper explores the socio-psychological effects of cryptocurrency investment on individual well-being. With the increasing popularity of digital assets, individuals are engaging in high-risk financial activities that can significantly influence their mental and emotional states. The study focuses on how market volatility, speculative behavior, and online communities shape investor experiences and perceptions. Using behavioral analysis and survey data, the research investigates the relationship between cryptocurrency investment and stress, anxiety, financial satisfaction, and risk tolerance. It also examines the role of social media platforms, online forums, and peer influence in shaping investment decisions and emotional reactions. Additionally, the study considers the impact of sudden financial gains or losses on individual well-being. The findings suggest that while some investors experience increased financial optimism and a sense of empowerment, others face heightened stress, uncertainty, and emotional instability due to rapid market fluctuations. The paper emphasizes the importance of financial literacy, emotional regulation, and responsible investing practices in navigating the risks associated with cryptocurrency markets.

Keywords: *Cryptocurrency investment, well-being, financial psychology, risk behavior, mental health*

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Visitors' Engagement Factors with Augmented Reality Applications in Preserving the Heritage Terengganu Quran Manuscripts

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Augmented Reality (AR) is now playing a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage. It has been employed to make artefacts and cultural heritage environments accessible to the general public by utilising the real world as a substrate and augmenting it with computer-generated information. This paper discusses the application of digital technology, specifically augmented reality, in a mobile application for exploring ancient manuscripts in the cultural heritage gallery. This study evaluates the impact of AR in mobile applications on Visitor Experience (VX). The Terengganu Cultural Heritage Mobile Application (TCHMA) is an AR mobile application developed to showcase Terengganu Quran manuscripts in the cultural heritage gallery, considering all essential criteria for the unique characteristics of each artefact. A study involving 31 participants was conducted to assess visitor experience using the Museum Experience Scale (MES). The results indicated a positive experience score across all MES components, with engagement receiving the highest score, followed by knowledge and learning. The findings suggest that TCHMA, as an AR artefact, encompasses all four components and effectively creates an engaging experience for visitors. This study offers insights into the role of AR in representing artefacts and enhancing the visitor's experience when interacting with them.

Keywords: *Visitors' engagement, factors, augmented, reality*

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Instructional Leadership and Academic Efficacy: A Comparative Analysis of Secondary School Performance in Southern Malawi

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As we move toward an "intelligent society", the role of a school leader in Malawi must evolve. It is no longer enough to simply manage a building; true leadership now requires a deep, hands-on commitment to what is happening inside the classroom. This study looks at how active leadership directly shapes student success, using recent inspection data from the Shire Highlands Division to compare two very different institutional experiences. The contrast is striking. In a high-performing secondary school, a culture of consistent oversight helped students achieve an impressive 82% MSCE pass rate. Here, leadership is not distant; it is found in daily "morning caucuses", a supportive approach to delegation, and the meticulous checking of teaching records. On the other hand, a struggling school in the same region saw a declining pass rate, falling to 35%. This downward trend went hand-in-hand with a lack of basic instructional tools, such as lesson plans and recorded assessments. What we have learned is that "intelligent leadership" in schools with limited resources is about more than just paperwork. It is about using data to improve teaching and actively tackling tough social challenges, like high dropout rates and the performance gap between boys and girls. Ultimately, if we want our students to thrive in the 21st century, we must bridge the gap between school management and daily lesson planning. When leaders and teachers are in sync, the whole school moves forward.

Keywords: *Instructional Leadership, Educational Quality Assurance, National Education Standards (NES), MSCE Achievement, Malawi Education*

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Teaching and learning through Web platforms especially Esep eTwinning

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The rapid integration of digital technologies in education has transformed traditional teaching and learning practices, offering new opportunities for collaboration, creativity, and student engagement. This paper explores the role of web-based platforms in education, with a particular focus on the eTwinning initiative within the European School Education Platform (ESEP). eTwinning provides a dynamic virtual environment where teachers and students from different countries collaborate on joint projects, fostering intercultural understanding

and the development of 21st-century skills. The study highlights how the use of ESEP eTwinning enhances teaching methodologies by promoting student-centered learning, project-based approaches, and the integration of digital tools. Through participation in collaborative projects, students improve their communication, critical thinking, and digital competencies, while teachers benefit from professional development and the exchange of best practices across educational systems. Furthermore, the paper examines practical examples of classroom implementation, demonstrating how web platforms can support inclusive education and motivate learners by making learning more interactive and meaningful. Challenges such as technological access, digital literacy, and time management are also discussed, alongside strategies to overcome them. In conclusion, teaching and learning through web platforms like ESEP eTwinning represents a powerful approach to modern education. It not only enriches the learning experience but also prepares students and teachers to thrive in an increasingly connected and digital world.

Keywords: *Education, e-twinning, projects, AI use in Education, Collaboration*

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Algorithms and Deviance in the Digital Epoch

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The digital epoch is preceded by profound transformations across all spheres of society; therefore, this study focuses on examining algorithms and deviance by analyzing the impact of artificial intelligence on the formation, dissemination, and control of deviant behavior. The aim of the study is to assess how algorithmic systemsparticularly those embedded in digital platformsnot only reflect but also structure social norms, thereby influencing both the perception and the practice of deviance. Special attention is given to the role of artificial intelligence in mechanisms of social control. The study's methodology is based on a mixed-methods approach, including content analysis of social media platforms as well as a critical analysis of algorithmic policies. In addition, secondary data from international reports and existing studies will be utilized to compare different models of algorithmic intervention. Where necessary, survey research involving adolescent students will also be conducted to examine deviant behaviors and their engagement with digital platforms. The expected results of this study will have a dual role: on the one hand, they will reflect the contribution of recommendation and content-filtering mechanisms in preventing deviant behavior; on the other hand, they will highlight their function as powerful instruments of social control through the identification and limitation of such behaviors. Overall, the study aims to contribute to a critical understanding of the interaction between technology and deviance, emphasizing the need for ethical and transparent approaches in the development and use of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: *Deviance, social control, society, digital age*

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Advantages and Disadvantages of using Artificial Intelligence in primary schools

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Artificial intelligence is transforming the way societies function, strongly influencing even primary education. In Kosovo, where education is a national priority for social and economic development, the introduction of AI is seen as an opportunity for modernization, but it also raises important ethical, social, and economic dilemmas. This study examines the advantages and disadvantages of using artificial intelligence (AI) in primary education in Gjilan, focusing on two different contexts: an urban school and a rural school. Through a combination of theoretical analysis and empirical data, the research aims to understand the impact of AI on personalization of learning, student engagement, teacher support, and equity of access. The results show that in the urban school, 78% of students had regular access to digital devices and the internet, while only 42% of students in the rural school had similar opportunities. Similarly, 65% of urban teachers reported using digital tools in teaching, compared to 28% of teachers in the rural school. These differences highlight the risk of increasing digital inequality, but also the potential of AI to improve the quality of education when used with clear policies and teacher training.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Primary Education, Digital Equity, Personalizing Learning, Education Policies*

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AI Evaluation in EFL Teaching: Opportunities, Challenges and Implications

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Main skills in EFL teaching like critical thinking or adaptability are often neglected by standardized assessment. Simultaneously, assessment based on AI can provide more flexible feedback, assign grades automatically and offer guidance grounded in real data. This study looks into the role of AI in formative assessment. It is based on high school EFL classes in Albania and its effects on learning results. It looks into how AI tools affect student progress

in the main language skills: writing, speaking, and vocabulary. It also analyses teachers' opinions of AI assessment, including reliability, fairness and how blending AI with human judgment influences feedback. Employing a mixed-method approach, this research included 110 high school students of 10th and 11thgrades and nine English teachers from high schools in Elbasan. This study used questionnaires, classroom observationx and semi-structured interviews to collect data. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and qualitative data were thematically analyzed. Based on the provided results, AI-enhanced assessment increased student engagement, personalized learning approaches by enhancing the level of engagement and furthered the process of developing a deeper methodology for evaluating formative feedback. But its successful adoption hinges on teacher education, ethical awareness and the fine-tuning of AI with human judgment. The discussion regarding how to design more intelligent and equitable evaluation systems for EFL teaching is on the rise, with this study contributing to that discourse.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, EFLassessment, high school, formative assessment, automated feedback, language learning*

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The "Smart City" project and ethical implications: the case of Albania

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The classic philosophical debate on the relationship between freedom and security constitutes one of the fundamental issues of modern political philosophy, which takes on a new dimension in the era of digital technology and artificial intelligence. Smart City projects, already under development in Albania, promise increased urban efficiency and security, but at the same time raise serious ethical and democratic concerns. This study is based on theoretical and normative analyses, relying on the contribution of philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas. Through an interdisciplinary approach, perspectives from political philosophy, ethics and technology studies are combined to analyze the implications of the "Smart City" in the Albanian context. The analysis identifies three main ethical issues. (1). The risk of continuous surveillance and the creation of a culture of control, as analyzed by Foucault, in the concept of the panopticon. (2). The challenges related to the protection of privacy and individual autonomy from the use of personal data. (3). The reduction of democratic participation as a consequence of the delegation of decision-making to algorithms and technical experts. Although "Smart City" projects offer important benefits for urban development in Albania, they require a strong legal and ethical framework. It is essential to ensure transparency, citizen involvement and respect for fundamental rights to avoid abuses and increase public trust. The main challenge remains the balance between technological innovation and the preservation of values such as freedom, justice and human dignity.

Keywords: *Smart city, surveillance, technology ethics, data privacy*

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Moral Judgment without Memory? Experience, Historical Absence, and Student Narratives on AI in Albania

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This paper examines how university students in Albania conceptualize the limits of artificial intelligence (AI) in ethical decision-making, with particular attention to the role of experience and historically grounded judgment. Drawing on qualitative analysis of open-ended survey responses (N = 146), the study identifies recurring narratives that frame AI as lacking human experience, emotional depth, and developmental continuity. Building on theories of moral agency and collective memory, we introduce the concept of moral memory to interpret these findings. We argue that students' reluctance to delegate morally consequential decisions to AI reflects not only concerns about empathy, but also a deeper unease with its perceived ahistorical nature. By foregrounding the absence of lived past and social embeddedness in AI systems, the paper expands current debates on AI ethics beyond technical and procedural considerations. The findings highlight the importance of culturally situated understandings of moral judgment in shaping human–AI relations.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence Ethics, Moral Decision-Making, Moral Memory, Human Experience, Qualitative Research, Human–AI Interaction*

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The effects of AI chatbot feedback on EFL students' writing improvement

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The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in language education has expanded rapidly in recent years, offering new possibilities for supporting students' learning processes. In EFL classrooms, writing is considered to be one of the most challenging skills for students, and effective feedback is essential for their progress. AI chatbots have become tools that can provide automatic feedback on various aspects of writing, including grammar, vocabulary, and organization. This study examines the potential impact of AI chatbot feedback on EFL students' writing skills in Kosovo. The participants were required to write an initial essay,

after which an AI chatbot provided feedback and suggestions for further improvement and revision. Based on this feedback, students revised their texts and later completed a second writing task. By comparing students' performance across tasks, the study investigates changes in language accuracy, vocabulary use, and coherence. The findings provideinsights into the role of AI tools as supplementary resources that support writing development when combined with appropriate teacher guidance, ensuring that AI tools are used as supportive resources rather than replacements for traditional instructional practices.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence; AI chatbot feedback; EFL writing; automated feedback; writing improvement; technology-enhanced learning*

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Algorithmic Emotionality and the Transformation of Educational Experience

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The integration of artificial intelligence into educational contexts is reshaping both teaching practices and the dynamics of social interaction. Tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and other adaptive learning platforms offer immediate feedback and increasingly personalized learning experiences, adjusting rhythms and modalities of study. Yet, beyond the cognitive benefits, these technologies also intervene in the affective and relational dimensions of education, giving rise to what might be called algorithmic emotionality: a set of simulated and normatively oriented emotional responses that generate a predictable affective environment, consistently positive, empathetic, reassuring, and largely free of conflict. This contribution seeks to examine the mechanisms behind this form of algorithmic emotionality and the effects it may produce on both individual and collective levels. In this light, AI appears as a non-human social actor capable of influencing affective norms and "feeling rules" within educational settings, shaping subjectivity, critical thinking, and processes of socialization. The constant gratification and emotional predictability provided by algorithms may, over time, diminish learners' tolerance for frustration and their capacity to handle negative emotions, skills that remain essential to learning, personal growth, and authentic relationships. At the same time, new forms of inequality are emerging, not so much in terms of access to technology, but in relation to differing degrees of critical awareness toward algorithm-mediated affectivity: between those who recognize the simulated nature of interactions and those who unconsciously absorb their effects. The educational challenge ahead, therefore, lies in creating tools that nurture not only cognitive development but also emotional and relational competence. In this respect, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) offers a valuable

reference framework, aimed at fostering emotional awareness, managing difficult emotions, and cultivating genuine relational skills, counteracting the effects of algorithmic positivity and supporting autonomy, critical thinking, and active social participation.

Keywords: *Emotions, Artificial Intelligence, Learning, Integration*

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Reconnected project in Kosovo: applying artificial intelligence to resilience, mental health and well-being

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The Reconnected project, supported by the EU/Horizon Europe program, aims to address mental health issues experienced by vulnerable populations in Europe, including those in Kosovo (low socio-economic status). This presentation will describe how AI is used in the project and a literature review on the application of Reinforcement Learning in mental health, resilience and well-being. This project uses a digital support system based on an interactive Machine Learning algorithm that identifies personalized goals for micro-interventions aimed at enhancing psychological resilience. This project uses Micro-interventions through the Moodbuster application, who will leverage Reinforcement Learning techniques within a Machine Learning framework. There are three main Reinforcement Learning models to personalise the micro-interventions. Firstly, suggestion of relaxation toolbox exercises based on forecasting stress and trained before. Secondly, sending motivational messages (affirming, encouraging, informative) which will be rewritten to a target group with a Large Language Model and will allow to personalize and reduce repetition in messages. Thirdly, will select mode of delivery for micro-interventions (text, audio, and video) based on algorithm learning which format leads to best intervention adherence. This approach enables personalization of interventions to optimize user experience. Reinforcement Learning is increasingly being explored for mental health applications, including personalized therapies, treatment planning, monitoring, and early interventions. The Reconnected project aims to implement in practice the successful Reinforcement Learning paradigm, which naturally aligns with personalization algorithms in mental health care.

Keywords: *Reconnected, AI, resilience, mental health, well-being*

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Artificial Intelligence and Social Prestige: The Evolution of Technicist Culture

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Embracing the invitation to reflect on the concept of the "Intelligent Society" (Baltzersen, 2022), this contribution advances a systemic interpretation of the implementation of artificial intelligence within the fabric of contemporary society, recognising it as a developmental trajectory shaped by the dominant culture. It argues that the increasing expansion of the technological and digital sphere within the educational context stems from the significance attributed to technical knowledge in our society, as a contemporary manifestation of the process of rationalisation of reality initiated two centuries ago. Through an analysis of classical sociological literature, which traced the origins of the rationalisation of ways of knowing and controlling reality, focusing in particular on the contributions of Weber, Elias, and Simmel's concept of "objective culture", the discussion then turns to the perspectives of contemporary scholars such as Rosa, Nussbaum, and Lévy. These authors recognise the social relevance currently attributed to holders of technical knowledge, articulated within the technological domain. The competences possessed in this field, in fact, carry a high degree of symbolic capital and confer a particular status and a high level of social prestige, which are essential for the assumption of key roles within contemporary society. The presentation therefore seeks to reflect on the type of intelligence promoted by the values of contemporary culture, in contrast to other modes of engaging with reality that have become increasingly obscured, such as critical reasoning, strongly advocated by Heller, and the notion of deep attention proposed by Han.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence, rationalization, technicist culture, status differentiation*

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Medical Students in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Academic Overload and Emerging Burnout Risks

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Medical students find themselves navigating a laborious academic environment, one defined by cognitive overload and persistent stress. Yet beyond the challenges long documented in the literature, a newer and less examined pressure has begun to develop: the rapid and somewhat disorienting integration of AI into both healthcare practice and medical education. As societies move toward what some scholars have termed an "Intelligent Society," questions arise about what this shift means for individual well-being. The central argument of this study is that

AI occupies a dual role: simultaneously a promising innovation and, on the other hand, a genuine source of stress. Medical students are not only expected to master a curriculum that was already demanding before AI entered the scene; they are now also expected to keep pace with technological changes reshaping the very profession they are training for. The study is part of my ongoing doctoral research project examining quality of life among medical students enrolled at the University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Timișoara. Through a questionnaire, the research explores how three interrelated dimensions of intelligence shape students' experiences: cognitive (IQ), emotional (EQ), and adaptive (AQ). These explore how students manage vast amounts of complex information alongside AI integration, how they regulate emotional responses to uncertainty, including anxiety about future employability, and how well they adjust as AI continues reshaping their field. What emerges is a paradox: as artificial intelligence grows, the risk of individual overload may increase, challenging the assumption that technological progress automatically increases quality of life.

Keywords: *AI, medical students, burnout, quality of life, adaptability*

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Artificial Intelligence for Student Wellbeing: An Innovative Approach through a School-Based Chatbot

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In the context of rapid technological advancements and the transformation toward an "Intelligent Society," the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education presents significant opportunities to enhance student wellbeing. This study examines the use of an AI-based chatbot as a supportive tool for the emotional, social, and psychological wellbeing of students in a public high school in Albania. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data (student surveys) and qualitative data (interviews with teachers, parents, school leaders, and psychosocial staff), as well as direct observations within the school environment. The findings indicate that a considerable number of students experience stress, limited trust in psychosocial services, and hesitation to seek help, while demonstrating a clear willingness to use anonymous digital tools for support.In this context, the developed chatbot functions as an innovative platform providing immediate, anonymous, and personalized support, contributing to increased access to psychological counseling and legal information. The study argues that Artificial

Intelligence does not replace human intelligence, but rather complements it, strengthening emotional intelligence (EQ) and social intelligence (SQ) within the school environment. In conclusion, the paper highlights the potential of AI integration in education as a pathway toward building a more inclusive, aware, and wellbeing-oriented intelligent society.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, chatbot, student wellbeing, emotional intelligence, education, intelligent society*

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Artificial Intelligence in Children's Learning: Supportive Tool or Developmental Risk?

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The growing presence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in educational environments is transforming how children engage with knowledge, prompting renewed attention to its developmental consequences. Situated within discussions on digital transformation and intelligent societies, this study explores how AI-mediated learning influences children aged 7–12, a period marked by significant cognitive and socio-emotional growth. Drawing on developmental and socio-constructivist perspectives, including the contributions of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Howard Gardner, the research examines how immediate access to algorithm-generated responses shapes thinking processes, emotional reactions, and learning behaviors. A mixed-methods design was applied, integrating classroom observation, child-focused questionnaires, creative expression tasks, and scenario-based emotional assessments. The findings indicate a dual effect: while AI tools support rapid information access and increase engagement, they may also limit opportunities for deeper cognitive processing, reduce persistence in the face of difficulty, and weaken independent problem-solving strategies. Children frequently display a tendency to accept AI-generated answers without critical evaluation. In addition, the study underscores that digital interaction cannot replace human relational contexts essential for the development of empathy, emotional understanding, and social competence. The paper advances the argument that AI should be integrated as a guided and complementary resource, emphasizing the continued centrality of human interaction in fostering balanced and holistic child development.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, child development, socio-emotional development, critical thinking, learning processes*

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Advantages and Disadvantages of using Artificial Intelligence in primary schools

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Artificial intelligence is transforming the way society's function, strongly influencing even primary education. In Kosovo, where education is a national priority for social and economic development, the introduction of AI is seen as an opportunity for modernization, but it also raises important ethical, social, and economic dilemmas. This study examines the advantages and disadvantages of using artificial intelligence (AI) in primary education in Gjilan, focusing on two different contexts: an urban school and a rural school. Through a combination of theoretical analysis and empirical data, the research aims to understand the impact of AI on personalization of learning, student engagement, teacher support, and equity of access. The results show that in the urban school, 78% of students had regular access to digital devices and the internet, while only 42% of students in the rural school had similar opportunities. Similarly, 65% of urban teachers reported using digital tools in teaching, compared to 28% of teachers in the rural school. These differences highlight the risk of increasing digital inequality, but also the potential of AI to improve the quality of education when used with clear policies and teacher training.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Primary Education, Digital Equity, Personalizing Learning, Education Policies*

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Living with the Algorithm: Bonds, Ethics and Care in Smart Homes

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The spread of algorithmic systems within domestic spaces is profoundly reshaping the way we inhabit our homes, turning them into hybrid environments in which intimacy, care and responsibility are constantly renegotiated. What once appeared as a place of ontological security and meaningful relationships now emerges as a sociotechnical node where people, objects and digital infrastructures co-construct everyday practices and decision-making criteria. Drawing on the tradition of domestication studies and on insights from Actor–Network Theory, the transition toward AI homes does not seem to be a mere technological upgrade, but rather a deeper process of rewriting domestic ecologies. The underlying hypothesis is that automation does not genuinely lighten the work of care; instead, it

redistributes it, transforming inhabitants into ongoing coordinators of complex systems. At the same time, the growing datafication of domestic environments introduces new forms of vulnerability and raises questions about the transparency and proportionality of the data circulating within the intimate sphere. Within this scenario, several questions become central. How do social bonds change when the home is populated by non-human actors? In what ways does delegation to algorithms shape perceptions of autonomy, dependence or control? And what kind of ethics of inhabiting becomes possible when domestic life is structured by subtle forms of surveillance and opaque decision-making processes? This contribution proposes to interpret these transformations as an opportunity to rethink the relationships between people, objects and data, imagining forms of dwelling that do not relinquish the complexity of care and that, on the contrary, aim to restore resonance to everyday experience.

Keywords: *Algorithmic Domesticity, Ethics of Care, Smart Homes, Datafication, Human–Technology Relations*

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Psychosocial Factors of Adolescent Aggression: An Empirical Analysis of Family Conflict and Social Media

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This study aims to analyze the level of aggression in adolescents and identify the psychosocial factors that influence this phenomenon, with a particular focus on family conflict and the use of social networks. The research was conducted on a sample of 341 participants, using a self-report questionnaire with 20 items for measuring aggression (Likert 1–5). The data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, exploratory factor analysis and linear regression. The results showed that the level of aggression in the sample is relatively low to medium ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 0.69$). Correlational analysis revealed significant positive associations between aggression, family conflict, and time spent on social networks. Further, linear regression identified family conflict ($\alpha = .278$, $p < .001$) and social network use ($\beta = .263$, $p < .001$) as the main predictors, which together explain 17.7% of the variance in aggression. The findings suggest that aggression is a complex phenomenon that is significantly influenced by the family and digital environments, while demographic factors did not result as significant independent predictors. The study emphasizes the need for interventions aimed at emotional regulation and improving relationships in these two central contexts.

Keywords: *Aggression, family conflict, social networks, psychosocial factors, emotional regulation*

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Assessing AI Integration in Albania's Education System: A National Survey of Teachers and Institutions

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly transforming educational systems worldwide and plays a central role in the transition toward an emerging intelligent society. In Albania, however, the integration of AI into schools and universities remains uneven and insufficiently documented. This study examines the current state of AI integration in the Albanian education system by focusing on teacher adoption, digital skills, institutional readiness, and perceived barriers. The research is based on a quantitative survey conducted among teachers and academic staff across primary, secondary, and higher education institutions nationwide. Findings indicate that while more than half of respondents have experimented with AI tools, regular pedagogical use remains limited. Teachers primarily use AI for lesson planning, content generation, assessment support, and administrative tasks. Key barriers include insufficient digital infrastructure, lack of formal training, uncertainty regarding ethics and data privacy, and the absence of institutional policies. Significant disparities are observed between urban and rural schools and between higher education and pre-university institutions. The study argues that Albania is at an early but promising stage of AI adoption. However, uneven integration reflects broader structural inequalities that may influence the country's transition toward an intelligent society. The paper proposes a national framework focused on teacher training, infrastructure development, and ethical governance.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence; Albanian Education; Teacher Adoption; Digital Skills; Institutional Readiness; Intelligent Society*

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Aggression and Manipulation in Malignant Narcissism: Clinical and Practical Insights

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Malignant narcissism is an extreme manifestation of narcissism, where grandiosity, aggression, and manipulative tendencies converge, often leading to psychologically or physically harmful behaviors. Individuals with these traits create destructive relational

patterns, profoundly impacting those around them. This paper explores the core psychological and behavioral features of malignant narcissism, emphasizing the interplay between narcissistic personality disorder and antisocial tendencies. Through a review of clinical literature and illustrative case studies, key mechanisms of control, intimidation, and emotional manipulation are highlighted, revealing the subtle yet pervasive ways these individuals influence and harm others. The paper also examines the diagnostic and therapeutic challenges posed by denial, resistance, and high aggression levels, underlining the importance of targeted interventions, risk management, and victim support. By integrating clinical insights with practical considerations, this work offers strategies for mental health professionals to recognize, assess, and address malignant narcissistic behaviors effectively. Finally, it outlines directions for future research, including the development of standardized assessment tools, evidence-based treatment approaches, and ethical frameworks for handling high-risk cases. Understanding malignant narcissism in this light is critical for improving intervention, prevention, and support strategies in both clinical and social contexts.

Keywords: *malignant narcissism, aggression, manipulation, narcissistic personality disorder, clinical intervention*

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Physical Activity and Subjective Well-Being among Albanian Children: The Role of Material Deprivation and Socio-Demographic Characteristics

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Physical activity is considered an important factor in children's development and well-being; however, the influence of socioeconomic conditions on this relationship remains insufficiently explored in the Albanian context. This study aims to analyse patterns of physical activity and its association with subjective well-being among Albanian children according to socio-demographic characteristics and poverty status. Data were collected through self-report questionnaires from 2,345 children aged 10 and 12 attending public and private schools across all regions of Albania, within the framework of the international study *Children's Worlds – International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeB)*. The analyses revealed significant differences according to gender, age, and poverty status. Boys reported higher levels of physical activity compared to girls, while 12-year-old children were found to be more physically active than 10-year-olds. Children living in rural areas played outdoors more frequently than those in urban areas. One of the strongest findings was the linear relationship between poverty and physical activity: children from economically disadvantaged families reported the lowest levels of physical activity. Physical activity was positively associated with subjective well-being across all demographic groups; however,

the effect was stronger among children from poor families, suggesting a more important protective role of physical activity under adverse socioeconomic conditions. The findings highlight the need for policies and interventions that promote equal access to physical activities for children, particularly for the most socioeconomically vulnerable groups, considering physical activity not only as a matter of health, but also as a factor of well-being and social equality.

Keywords: *physical activity, subjective well-being, children, Albania, material deprivation, gender, social inequality.*

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ACCESSIBILITY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines accessibility for persons with disabilities in Albania from a human rights perspective, focusing on the gap between legal frameworks and their implementation in practice. Accessibility is considered a fundamental precondition for equality, non-discrimination, and full participation in society. The study applies a mixed-method approach combining secondary and primary data. The literature review includes analysis of national and international legal and policy documents on accessibility. Primary data are collected through semi-structured interviews with representatives of public institutions, structured questionnaires distributed to selected institutions, and focus groups with persons with disabilities. This approach enables a comprehensive assessment of both institutional perspectives and lived experiences. The findings reveal that although Albania has made significant progress in developing legislation aligned with international standards, implementation remains limited. Key barriers include lack of accessible infrastructure, insufficient use of adapted communication formats (such as Braille, easy to read and sign language), limited institutional knowledge, and weak monitoring mechanisms. Additionally, financial and human resource constraints further hinder effective implementation. The paper argues that accessibility should be addressed not only as a technical requirement but as a core human rights issue. The lack of accessibility constitutes a form of discrimination, restricting equal access to services and opportunities. The study concludes that improving accessibility in Albania requires stronger enforcement of legislation, enhanced institutional capacity, and greater involvement of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes.

Keywords: *accessibility, disability, human rights, inclusion, Albania*

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the implementation of accessibility for persons with disabilities in Albania from a human rights perspective. The research combines a review of legal and policy frameworks with empirical data collected through interviews, questionnaires, and a focus group with persons with disabilities. The findings indicate that Albania has made significant progress in developing a legal framework aligned with international standards, particularly following the ratification of the United Nation Convention for the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD). However, there is a clear gap between legislation and practice.

Key findings include that: (i) institutions demonstrate general awareness of accessibility obligations but lack detailed knowledge and practical implementation; (ii) physical accessibility remains limited, with most institutions failing to meet required standards; (iii) accessibility in communication and information is largely absent, particularly for persons with sensory and intellectual disabilities; (iv) financial constraints, lack of technical expertise, and weak monitoring mechanisms are major barriers to implementation; (v) persons with disabilities face significant challenges in accessing services and participating independently in society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Accessibility has increasingly been recognized as a fundamental component of human rights and social inclusion, particularly in relation to persons with disabilities. Within contemporary academic and policy discourse, accessibility is not merely understood as a technical or infrastructural concern, but as a multidimensional concept encompassing physical, social, institutional, and communication-related dimensions (Imrie & Hall, 2001; United Nations, 2006; World Health Organization, 2011; Shakespeare, 2013; Grech et al., 2024; Mohapatra, 2024; Reda, 2025).

A key reference point in the literature is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which establishes accessibility as both a general principle and a specific right (United Nations, 2006). According to the CRPD, accessibility is a precondition for the realization of other rights, including education, employment, health, and participation in public life. Scholars have emphasized that without accessible environments and services, persons with disabilities are systematically excluded from exercising their rights on an equal basis with others (Degener, 2016; Lawson, 2009; United Nations, 2022).

The concept of accessibility is closely linked to the social model of disability, which shifts the focus from individual impairments to societal barriers. As argued by Michael Oliver, disability should be understood as a product of environmental and attitudinal barriers rather than a purely medical condition (Oliver, 1990). Within this framework, the lack of accessibility is interpreted as a form of structural discrimination. This perspective is further reinforced by the CRPD Committee, which explicitly identifies the denial of accessibility as a violation of human rights (United Nations, 2014).

In addition to legal frameworks, the literature highlights the importance of universal design as a key strategy for achieving accessibility (Story et al., 1998; Connell et al., 1997; Persson et al., 2015; Hamraie, 2017; European Commission, 2021). Universal design refers to the creation of products, environments, and services that are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation (Mace, 1998; Connell et al., 1997; Iwarsson & Ståhl, 2003). This approach moves beyond reactive

accommodations and promotes proactive inclusion. Researchers argue that universal design is not only more inclusive but also more cost-effective in the long term, as it reduces the need for subsequent modifications (Steinfeld & Maisel, 2012; Burgstahler, 2021; Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, 2022; ISO, 2021).

Empirical studies in different national contexts reveal a persistent gap between legal standards and implementation. Despite the adoption of comprehensive legal frameworks, many countries struggle with enforcement, monitoring, and institutional capacity. Common barriers identified in the literature include limited financial resources, lack of technical expertise, insufficient awareness among public officials, and weak accountability mechanisms (Greve, 2009; Priestley, 2007; Bickenbach et al., 2018; Lawson & Beckett, 2021; United Nations, 2022; World Bank, 2021). These challenges are particularly pronounced in transitional and developing contexts, where institutional systems are still evolving (Mitra et al., 2021; Banks et al., 2022).

Another important strand of literature emphasizes the role of participation of persons with disabilities in policymaking and implementation processes. The principle of "nothing about us without us," widely discussed in disability studies, underlines the necessity of including persons with disabilities as active agents rather than passive beneficiaries (Charlton, 1998; Arnstein, 1969; United Nations, 2020; OECD, 2023). Research shows that policies are more effective and responsive when they incorporate the lived experiences and perspectives of the affected communities (Shakespeare, 2013; Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Goodley et al., 2021; United Nations, 2022).

Furthermore, recent scholarship has expanded the understanding of accessibility to include digital environments and information technologies. Digital accessibility has become increasingly important in ensuring access to public services, education, and employment. However, studies indicate that digital platforms often remain inaccessible, thereby reproducing existing inequalities in new forms (Jaeger, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the implementation of accessibility measures for persons with disabilities in Albania. The combination of secondary and primary data allows for a comprehensive analysis of both the normative framework and its application in practice.

The secondary data component consists of a systematic review of literature, including national and international legal and policy documents related to accessibility. Particular attention is given to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006), the domestic legal and policy framework (AP, 2015), and relevant interpretative instruments such as the UN General Comment on accessibility. This phase serves to establish the conceptual and legal foundations of the study and to inform the design of the empirical research instruments.

Primary data were collected through multiple methods. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants representing selected public institutions in order to assess institutional awareness, implementation practices, and challenges related to accessibility. Second, structured questionnaires were distributed through official communication channels to gather standardized data on institutional compliance and measures undertaken. Third, and critically, a focus group was conducted with persons

with disabilities, ensuring the inclusion of rights-holders' perspectives. The focus group consisted of 10 participants representing diverse types of disabilities, thereby enabling the study to capture a range of lived experiences and barriers in accessing services.

The study employed purposive sampling to identify institutions relevant to the implementation of accessibility measures. Data collection was conducted across four regions of Albania (Tirana, Korça, Elbasan, and Vlora). In total, 74 institutions were contacted of which 39 participated through in-depth face to face interviews, while 17 completed the online questionnaires. A proportion of institutions did not respond or provided incomplete information, requiring follow-up through electronic communication or telephone contact. The data collection process took place on December 2025- January 2026.

To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, the study applies data triangulation, comparing evidence from document analysis, institutional data, and the perspectives of persons with disabilities. Nevertheless, certain limitations are acknowledged, including non-response from some institutions, partial or inconsistent data, limited institutional knowledge on accessibility.

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal a significant gap between the existing legal framework on accessibility in Albania and its practical implementation. While institutions demonstrate a general awareness of their obligations toward persons with disabilities, the level of compliance with accessibility standards remains limited. The results are presented across four main dimensions: (i) institutional awareness and legal knowledge; (ii) physical accessibility; (iii) accessibility in communication and information; and (iv) institutional capacity and implementation barriers.

The triangulation of data from document analysis, institutional responses, and the perspectives of persons with disabilities provides a comprehensive understanding of accessibility as both a policy issue and a lived experience.

The analysis of the Albanian legal framework on accessibility indicates that the Law on the Inclusion and Accessibility of Persons with Disabilities (Law No. 93/2014) and its implementing by-laws, particularly Council of Ministers Decision (KM, 2015) No. 1074, dated 23 December 2015, represent an important effort to operationalize the standards of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at the national level. The law establishes accessibility as a central principle for the protection and promotion of rights, conceptualizing it in a comprehensive manner as the elimination of social, institutional, environmental, and infrastructural barriers. In turn, the Council of Ministers Decision further operationalizes this approach by defining specific obligations for public and private institutions, including the development of action plans, the establishment of timelines, and the creation of monitoring mechanisms.

Institutional Awareness and Knowledge of Legal Obligations: The findings indicate that most institutions possess a general awareness of their responsibilities regarding accessibility. All participating institutions reported some level of familiarity with the concept of accessibility and acknowledged their obligation to ensure access for persons with disabilities. However, this awareness remains largely superficial and not grounded in detailed knowledge of specific legal provisions.

Only a small proportion of institutions demonstrated familiarity with the specific legal instruments regulating accessibility, particularly the relevant Council of Ministers Decision (12%, n=7; KM, 2015). In most cases, institutional representatives were unable to identify specific obligations or explain how these should be implemented in practice. Instead, they referred broadly to general legislation within their sector, such as education or social services laws.

This gap between general awareness and specific legal knowledge has direct implications for implementation. Institutions that lack a clear understanding of their legal responsibilities are less likely to develop structured plans or allocate resources for accessibility measures. As a result, accessibility remains an abstract concept rather than an operational priority.

Physical Accessibility of Infrastructure and Services: Physical accessibility emerged as one of the most significant challenges identified in the study. The majority of institutions reported that their facilities do not meet accessibility standards or only partially comply with them. This finding was consistent across all regions included in the study. In practice, accessibility is often narrowly interpreted as the presence of basic physical adaptations, such as ramps. However, even these measures are frequently incomplete, poorly designed, or not maintained. For example, ramps may exist but do not meet technical standards, or they may not be accompanied by other necessary features such as accessible entrances, elevators, or adapted sanitary facilities.

Importantly, institutional responses reveal that physical accessibility is primarily understood in relation to persons with mobility impairments, particularly wheelchair users. Other forms of disability, including visual, hearing, and intellectual disabilities, are rarely considered in infrastructure planning. This limited understanding results in partial accessibility that excludes a large portion of persons with disabilities.

The perspectives of persons with disabilities reinforce these findings. Participants in the focus group consistently reported difficulties in accessing public buildings, navigating urban environments, and using public transport. Sidewalks, crossings, and public transportation systems were described as particularly inaccessible, limiting independent mobility and participation in daily activities.

Accessibility in Communication and Information: The study reveals significant gaps in accessibility related to communication and information. While legal provisions require the use of alternative formats, such as Braille, sign language, and simplified language, their implementation is extremely limited.

A minority of institutions reported using any form of adapted communication, and even in these cases, the measures were often minimal. The most common forms of adaptation included simplified written information and, to a lesser extent, enlarged text or audio materials. However, these were not specifically designed for persons with disabilities and did not follow established accessibility standards.

The use of sign language interpretation, Braille materials, and accessible digital content was rare. Many institutions reported having no experience or expertise in providing such formats. In some cases, institutional representatives stated that accessibility measures were not necessary because persons with disabilities rarely accessed their services directly, with family members or caregivers acting as intermediaries.

Participants in the focus group emphasized the importance of accessible communication for independent participation. They reported significant challenges in accessing information about public services, rights, and opportunities. In particular, persons with sensory and intellectual disabilities identified communication barriers as a major obstacle to inclusion. Overall, the findings demonstrate that accessibility in communication and information remains underdeveloped and is not integrated into institutional practices.

Institutional Capacity and Implementation Challenges: The study identifies several structural barriers that limit the implementation of accessibility measures. These barriers are interconnected and reflect broader challenges in institutional capacity and governance.

Financial limitations were the most frequently cited barrier. A majority of institutions indicated that they lack sufficient budget to implement accessibility measures. Even when accessibility is included in planning documents, it is often not prioritized during budget allocation processes. Several institutions reported that proposed accessibility investments, such as ramps or elevators, were not approved at higher administrative levels. This suggests that accessibility is not consistently recognized as a priority within public budgeting frameworks.

Another major challenge is the lack of technical knowledge and expertise. Institutional representatives frequently reported uncertainty about how to implement accessibility measures, particularly in relation to non-physical aspects such as communication formats. The absence of trained professionals and guidelines contributes to inconsistent and inadequate implementation. Without clear technical standards and support, institutions struggle to translate legal requirements into practical actions.

The findings also highlight the absence of effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Although the legal framework assigns responsibility for oversight, these mechanisms are not fully operational in practice. Institutions are not systematically monitored for compliance, and there are no consistent sanctions for non-implementation. As a result, accessibility requirements are often treated as optional rather than mandatory.

Limited Participation of Persons with Disabilities: The involvement of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes remains limited. Although they are recognized as key stakeholders, their participation in planning and monitoring accessibility measures is not systematically ensured. The focus group findings demonstrate that persons with disabilities possess valuable insights into accessibility barriers and potential solutions. However, these perspectives are not sufficiently integrated into institutional processes.

The inclusion of persons with disabilities through the focus group provides critical insights into the lived reality of accessibility. Participants emphasized that accessibility is not only a technical issue but also a matter of dignity, independence, and equal participation.

Key themes emerging from the focus group include: (i) *Limited independence*: Participants reported relying on others to access services due to physical and communication barriers; (ii) *Exclusion from public life:* Inaccessible environments restrict participation in education, employment, and social activities; (iii) *Lack of information*: Difficulty accessing information about services and rights was identified as a major challenge; (iv) *Perceived neglect:* Participants expressed a sense that accessibility is not treated as a priority by institutions.

These perspectives highlight the human impact of accessibility barriers and reinforce the need for a rights-based approach.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight a persistent gap between the legal framework on accessibility in Albania and its practical implementation. While the country has made considerable progress in aligning its legislation with international human rights standards, particularly following the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the results demonstrate that implementation remains fragmented and inconsistent.

One of the most significant issues identified is the discrepancy between institutional awareness and effective action. Although institutions report general awareness of accessibility obligations, this knowledge is often superficial and not translated into concrete measures. This finding is consistent with previous research, which emphasizes that awareness alone is insufficient without institutional capacity and accountability mechanisms (Priestley, 2007). The lack of detailed understanding of legal requirements contributes directly to weak implementation and reinforces the gap between policy and practice.

The study also confirms that accessibility continues to be narrowly interpreted, primarily focusing on physical infrastructure and, even then, only partially. This reflects a broader limitation identified in the literature, where accessibility is often reduced to architectural adaptations rather than understood as a multidimensional concept (Imrie & Hall, 2001). As a result, the needs of persons with sensory and intellectual disabilities are frequently overlooked, leading to incomplete and exclusionary practices.

From a human rights perspective, the findings support the argument that the absence of accessibility constitutes a form of structural discrimination (Degener, 2016). The experiences shared by persons with disabilities in the focus group demonstrate how barriers in infrastructure, communication, and information restrict their ability to participate fully in society. These findings reinforce the importance of adopting a rights-based approach to accessibility, as emphasized in international frameworks.

Another key issue is the lack of effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Although the legal framework assigns responsibilities for oversight, these mechanisms are not operationalized in practice. This aligns with broader findings in transitional contexts, where weak institutional capacity and limited resources hinder the implementation of social policies (Greve, 2009). Without enforcement and accountability, legal provisions remain largely symbolic.

The study further highlights the limited participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes. Despite being directly affected by accessibility policies, their involvement remains minimal. This contradicts the principle of "nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 1998) and reduces the effectiveness of policy design and implementation.

The findings suggest that improving accessibility in Albania requires a shift from a formal, compliance-based approach to a substantive, rights-based approach. This includes strengthening institutional capacity, ensuring effective monitoring, and actively involving persons with disabilities in all stages of policy development and implementation.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have several important implications for policymakers and institutional actors. First, there is a need to strengthen the implementation of the existing legal framework. This includes developing clear guidelines and standards for accessibility, as well as ensuring that institutions understand their specific obligations. Training programs

for public officials should be institutionalized in order to improve knowledge and technical capacity. Second, monitoring and enforcement mechanisms must be operationalized. Institutions responsible for oversight should be strengthened and provided with adequate resources to ensure compliance. The introduction of accountability measures, including sanctions for non-compliance, could significantly improve implementation. Third, accessibility should be integrated into public budgeting processes. Dedicated funding for accessibility measures is essential to move from policy commitments to practical outcomes. Accessibility should not be treated as an optional expense but as a legal and human rights obligation. Fourth, a broader understanding of accessibility should be promoted. Policies and practices should move beyond physical infrastructure to include communication, information, and digital accessibility. This requires the adoption of universal design principles and the development of accessible formats across all public services.

Finally, the participation of persons with disabilities must be ensured at all stages of policymaking and implementation. Their involvement is essential for identifying barriers, designing effective solutions, and monitoring progress. Strengthening collaboration between institutions and organizations representing persons with disabilities can enhance both the legitimacy and effectiveness of accessibility policies.

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PERSONALITY TRAITS AND DEVIANT BEHAVIOR IN ADOLESCENTS 15-18 YEARS OLD

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the relationship between personality traits and deviant behavior in adolescents is essential for both mental health and educational professionals. Personality characteristics such as impulsivity, neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience may influence the emergence of problematic behaviors during adolescence. Examining these traits can contribute to the early identification of risk factors and support the development of preventive interventions aimed at strengthening adolescents' social and emotional competencies. The present study aimed to explore the relationship between personality traits and deviant behavior among adolescents who have committed legal offenses and are currently serving sentences at the Rehabilitation and Reintegration Institute for Minors and Young People in Albania. A descriptive and correlational research design was employed. The sample consisted of 20 male adolescents aged 15–18 years. Data were collected using two self-report instruments aligned with the study variables: the Big Five Inventory (BFI-10), which assesses personality traits, and the Deviant Behavior Variety Scale (DBVS), which measures the frequency of deviant behaviors. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 25. Ethical standards of scientific research were strictly followed throughout the study. The findings revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between neuroticism and deviant behavior ($p = .019$; $r = .520$), indicating that higher levels of neuroticism are associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in deviant behaviors. In contrast, conscientiousness showed a moderate negative relationship with deviant behavior ($p = .029$; $r = -.489$), suggesting that adolescents with higher levels of

conscientiousness are less likely to exhibit deviant behaviors. These findings highlight the role of personality traits as important factors associated with deviant behavior. However, other contextual influences, such as parenting practices, should also be considered, as they play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' personality and behavioral patterns. Future research should include larger samples, longitudinal designs, and multiple sources of assessment (e.g., parents and teachers) while also considering moderating variables such as parenting styles, temperament, and socio-cultural context.

Keywords: *adolescence, personality trait, deviant behavior, minors in conflict with the law.*

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is considered one of the most challenging periods in human growth and development, as during this stage adolescents face significant physical, psychological, emotional, and social changes. As a period of such particular importance, numerous factors influence their behavior and actions. One of these factors is personality traits, which play a fundamental role in shaping children's behavior by significantly affecting how they adapt to their surrounding environment and social norms.

Specifically, children with certain traits such as impulsivity, aggressiveness, lack of emotional sensitivity, or a high need for stimulation are more likely to exhibit deviant behavior, especially when these traits interact with environmental factors such as a lack of parental support or negative peer influence. In this context, the present study aims to explore the importance of personality traits in deviant behavior among adolescents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adolescence and Deviant Behavior

Adolescence is a sensitive developmental period during which children/adolescents undergo significant physical, emotional, and psychological changes. These changes influence the way they perceive themselves and the world around them. During this stage, several fundamental needs emerge, such as the need for independence, identity formation, belonging, and privacy, among others. These needs may lead some adolescents toward experimentation that exceeds socially accepted norms.

Research indicates that deviant behavior in adolescence is often associated with identity exploration, peer pressure, lack of emotional regulation, and the influence of personality traits such as impulsivity and risk-taking tendencies. However, it is important to note that not every form of deviation represents pathology. In some cases, it may be understood as an internal signal reflecting the need for attention, guidance, and psychological support during this critical stage of identity formation.

Factors Influencing Deviant Behavior

Deviant behavior is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by a combination of biological, psychological, familial, and social factors (Hartney, 2025). At the individual level, personality traits such as impulsivity, aggressiveness, lack of empathy, and low self-control are among the most significant predictors of deviant behavior. If not addressed in a timely and appropriate manner, these traits may contribute to more severe antisocial behavior

(Li, 2023). Individuals with such characteristics often experience difficulties in emotional regulation and tend to respond inappropriately to frustration or social sanctions.

Family-related factors are also crucial. A lack of parental supervision, poor communication, authoritarian or neglectful parenting styles, and frequent family conflicts are directly associated with the emergence of antisocial behavior in children and adolescents (Manscalco, 2024).

During adolescence, peer groups assume a central role in shaping behavior. The pressure to be accepted and to feel a sense of belonging often drives adolescents toward behaviors that challenge social norms (Rydell & Brocky, 2024). Meanwhile, the broader socio-economic context and environmental conditions—such as poverty, unemployment, lack of developmental opportunities, and exposure to violence—can intensify feelings of frustration and contribute to the emergence of deviant behavior (Omorogiuwa & Omorogiuwa, 2017).

In this regard, the interaction between individual and environmental factors provides an essential foundation for understanding and preventing deviance, highlighting the need for a multidisciplinary approach in both the analysis and intervention of this phenomenon.

The Importance of Personality Traits in Deviant Behavior

In the context of adolescence—a period characterized by increased impulsivity and a strong need for belonging—certain personality traits, such as impulsivity, lack of empathy, and low levels of self-control, have been identified as strong predictors of deviant and antisocial behaviors (Li, 2023; Carvalho et al., 2023).

Rationale of the Study

Based on the above considerations, there is a limited number of studies in Albania that explore the importance of personality traits in deviant behavior among adolescents in conflict with the law. Therefore, the implementation of this study provides a broader perspective for understanding and gaining deeper insight into the relationship between these two variables, as well as the role of personality traits in explaining deviant behavior among adolescents.

Furthermore, issues related to deviant behavior among adolescents in Albania, as well as globally, should receive special attention not only from parents, teachers, and psychologists, but also from society as a whole. This is because such behaviors may, over time, develop into more severe forms of violence and antisocial conduct, including criminal activities within the community.

METHODOLOGY

Based on empirical studies, personality traits such as high neuroticism, extraversion, low conscientiousness, and low agreeableness have been found to be closely associated with antisocial, aggressive, and deviant behaviors (Jones et al., 2011). For this reason, the Big Five personality model can be useful in predicting tendencies toward risk-taking, disregard for social norms, and engagement in risky behaviors (Maldonado et al., 2019).

Moreover, low self-control and a strong tendency toward sensation-seeking are considered robust indicators of deviant behavior during adolescence (Manouchehri et al., 2025). In the Albanian context, many juveniles in conflict with the law, despite having committed criminal offenses (i.e., deviant behaviors), have faced and continue to face

significant individual challenges—such as psychological trauma, anxiety, fear of the future, insecurity, and insomnia—as well as familial and social difficulties.

Therefore, considering that the factors influencing deviant behavior among adolescents are numerous, this study aims to shed light on the relationship between personality traits, as conceptualized by the Big Five model, and deviant behavior.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between personality traits and deviant behavior among adolescents in conflict with the law within the penitentiary system in Albania. The specific objectives include:

- Identifying the predominant age of juveniles in conflict with the law who have engaged in deviant behavior;
- Identifying and examining a potential correlation between specific personality traits (as defined by the Big Five model) and deviant behavior;
- Determining which personality trait most strongly predisposes adolescents to increased deviant behavior.

The methodology employed in this study follows a structured and systematic framework designed to explore the influence of each personality trait on adolescents' predisposition to engage in deviant behavior. In light of the research objectives, a quantitative research design was considered the most appropriate, as it facilitates objective measurement and statistical analysis of the relationships between these variables. A correlational approach was adopted, as it enables the examination of the strength and direction of the relationships between personality traits and deviant behavior.

Sampling and Instruments

The study was conducted at the Institute of Juveniles and Young People in Kavajë. This institution was selected because it is the only facility in Albania that serves as a rehabilitation, counseling, and educational center for juveniles who have committed criminal offenses and engaged in deviant behavior. The target population consisted of male adolescents aged 14–18 who had engaged in at least one deviant behavior in their lifetime. All juveniles in conflict with the law who were present at the institution participated in the study, resulting in a total sample of 20 participants. A key inclusion criterion was that participants had to be between 14 and 18 years old.

Data for this study were collected תועצמאב two standardized self-report questionnaires adapted into the Albanian language for adolescents aged 14–18. Specifically, the "Big Five Inventory-10 (BFI-10)" developed by Rammstedt and John (2007) and the "Deviant Behavior Variety Scale (DBVS)" developed by Jessor and Jessor (1977) were used. These instruments were selected due to their established reliability in measuring the five major personality traits and deviant behavior among adolescents in conflict with the law.

The BFI-10, consisting of 10 items, was used to measure the traits of neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness. Additionally, the DBVS, consisting of 19 items, was used to assess deviant behaviors committed by adolescents in conflict with the law in Albania.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the research instruments, Cronbach's Alpha test was conducted. Values above 0.7 were considered acceptable for internal consistency of the instruments used in this study.

Following data collection, the information was processed and analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), a statistical software widely used in quantitative research. Descriptive statistics were initially used to summarize data related to age, place of birth, and family composition (i.e., living arrangements), thereby providing an overview of the sample characteristics.

To explore the relationships between personality traits and deviant behavior among adolescents, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted, offering insights into the strength and direction of these variables.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were strictly maintained. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the General Directorate of Prisons in Albania. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained before the distribution of the questionnaires. Confidentiality was ensured by keeping all responses anonymous in order to protect the identity of participants.

Study Limitations

The data for this study were collected through adolescents' self-reports, which may lead to inaccuracies due to misunderstandings or misreporting by participants, despite the fact that all questionnaire items were explained beforehand. Additionally, the use of specific self-report instruments may not be sufficient to fully capture the complexity of deviant behaviors and their associated factors.

Furthermore, the study was conducted within a limited time frame, which may not be sufficient to observe long-term changes in adolescents' behavior.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the relationship between personality traits and deviant behavior among adolescents aged 14 to 18 who are in conflict with the law in Albania.

Descriptive Statistics

The demographic characteristics of the adolescents were examined to better understand their family composition (i.e., living arrangements), age, and place of birth. Below are the results of the descriptive analyses related to age, family composition, and place of birth/residence of the sample, as well as the total scores of the items from both instruments used for data collection.

Age

The results indicated that approximately 45% of adolescents who engaged in deviant behavior were 16 years old. This finding suggests that adolescence is indeed a challenging developmental stage, during which parents, teachers, and other stakeholders working with this age group should exercise particular care in how they interact with and guide adolescents.

Family Composition

The results showed that the majority of adolescents (approximately 75%) reported living with both parents. Among the remaining participants, 5% lived only with their mother, 15% only with their father, and 5% with other individuals.

Distribution of Adolescents in Conflict with the Law in Albania

Most adolescents who engaged in deviant behavior were from the capital city, Tirana. This finding highlights the potential importance of the rural–urban context in adolescent development. The fact that most participants come from the capital suggests that factors such as cultural diversity, gender dynamics, peer influence, parenting styles, government policies, and other elements characteristic of a highly dynamic city like Tirana may shape behaviors that are sometimes perceived as taboo among adolescents in Albania.

Personality Traits

Descriptive statistics were also conducted to determine which personality traits were most prominent among adolescents in conflict with the law, based on the total scores of the Big Five Inventory (BFI-10). The results indicated that conscientiousness was the most dominant trait among the 20 adolescents ($M = 8.15$, $SD = 2.13$), followed by extraversion ($M = 7.80$, $SD = 1.70$), agreeableness ($M = 7.40$, $SD = 2.01$), openness to experience ($M = 6.85$, $SD = 1.95$), and neuroticism ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 2.46$). These findings provide further insight into which personality characteristics may explain adolescents' predisposition to engage in deviant behavior.

Deviant Behavior

Regarding descriptive data on deviant behavior, scores ranged from 0 to 19, with a mean of 6.85 ($SD = 5.53$). These results indicate that, overall, the level of deviant behavior in this sample is relatively low. However, the high standard deviation suggests a wide distribution of scores, indicating that while many adolescents may display relatively controlled behavior, a subgroup exhibits significantly higher levels of deviant behavior.

Relationship Between Personality Traits and Deviant Behavior

To assess the relationship between personality traits and deviant behavior, adolescents were asked to describe how they perceive themselves. Responses were measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The relationships between each personality trait and deviant behavior are summarized below.

Extraversion and Deviant Behavior

The results indicated no statistically significant relationship between extraversion and deviant behavior ($p = .072 > .05$). However, the correlation value of $r = -.411$ suggests a moderate negative relationship between the two variables, indicating that higher levels of extraversion are associated with a tendency toward lower deviant behavior.

Agreeableness and Deviant Behavior

The correlation between deviant behavior and agreeableness was $r = -.193$, indicating a very weak negative relationship. In practical terms, this suggests that as agreeableness

increases, deviant behavior tends to decrease slightly, although this relationship is minimal. Furthermore, the p-value ($p = .414$) exceeds the conventional threshold for statistical significance ($p < .05$), indicating that this relationship is not statistically significant.

Conscientiousness and Deviant Behavior

The results revealed a statistically significant relationship between conscientiousness and deviant behavior ($p = .029 \leq .05$). Specifically, there is a significant negative correlation ($r(20) = -.489$), indicating that higher levels of conscientiousness are associated with lower levels of deviant behavior among adolescents.

Neuroticism and Deviant Behavior

A statistically significant relationship was also found between neuroticism and deviant behavior ($p = .019 \leq .05$). More specifically, a significant positive correlation was observed ($r(20) = .520$), indicating that higher levels of neuroticism are associated with increased deviant behavior among adolescents.

Openness to Experience and Deviant Behavior

The results showed no statistically significant relationship between openness to experience and deviant behavior ($p = .863 > .05$). Additionally, the correlation coefficient ($r = -.041$) indicates a very weak negative relationship between the variables.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature, reinforcing the notion that personality traits—particularly neuroticism and conscientiousness—are among the primary factors influencing and explaining deviant behavior in adolescents, including those who have committed criminal offenses.

It is evident that psychoeducational interventions should begin at an early age. The way a child is raised and behaves within family and social environments should be carefully monitored by both parents and teachers in order to prevent deviant behaviors, with a strong focus on fostering positive personality development.

In light of these findings, and considering the relationship between personality traits and deviant behavior, it is recommended that educators, parents, and psychologists focus on the early identification and development of positive personality traits. Timely interventions that promote self-control, empathy, responsibility, and emotional stability are essential steps that can reduce the risk of problematic and deviant behaviors.

Additionally, it is important to create supportive family and school environments that encourage open communication and emotional engagement among young people. Social-emotional learning programs and training in emotional regulation and impulse control have demonstrated positive outcomes in preventing deviant behavior.

Finally, researchers and practitioners are encouraged to further explore the interaction between personality and environmental factors in order to develop personalized preventive strategies for adolescents at higher risk of engaging in deviant behavior.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study provide important insights into the role of adolescent development, particularly considering personality traits, in the occurrence of deviant behavior. In conclusion, the study suggests that higher levels of neuroticism increase the likelihood of adolescents engaging in deviant behaviors. Conversely, the more developed and pronounced the trait of conscientiousness is, the lower the likelihood that adolescents will engage in problematic, deviant, or delinquent behaviors.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, further research is needed, particularly focusing on moderating factors that influence adolescent deviant behavior. These include biological, social, economic, and cultural contexts, as well as additional variables such as temperament and parenting style.

Future studies should consider incorporating parental reports regarding the dominant personality traits of their children, with a focus on more specific characteristics. This would contribute to a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of the influence of personality traits on children's behavior.

Expanding the sample by including adolescents from diverse geographical areas and varying socio-economic backgrounds would enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide a broader perspective on deviant behavior.

There is a need for studies examining how inclusive education and awareness of the consequences of deviant behavior influence its prevention among adolescents. Such research would be highly beneficial in informing preventive strategies.

These recommendations may contribute to the development of more comprehensive and in-depth studies on deviant behavior and its influencing factors, thereby supporting the creation of more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Final Reflections

In conclusion, personality traits constitute a fundamental component in understanding and addressing deviant behavior among adolescents. It is important to emphasize that these traits should not be viewed solely as fixed characteristics, but rather as dynamic aspects that interact with life experiences and the social environment.

Reflecting on this relationship suggests that reducing deviant behavior requires more than punishment or social control; it necessitates the strengthening of positive personality traits through emotional education, the development of social skills, and psychological support.

In this regard, the focus should shift from merely reacting to problematic behavior toward fostering the development of a stable, conscientious, and empathetic personality, which forms the foundation for healthy psychological and social development in adolescents.

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THE NEW GAME OF THE EPISTEME IN THE POSTMODERN CONDITION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the conceptualization of modernity and postmodernity in the thought of Jean-François Lyotard, focusing in particular on the epistemic reversals that accompany the transition from the metanarratives of modernity to the plurality of postmodern narratives. Drawing primarily on *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, the paper analyzes Lyotard's position, in which modernity is understood as a project of the Enlightenment, grounded in rationality, universalism, and foundationalist claims for the legitimation of knowledge. From this perspective, modernity appears as an epistemic regime structured around large speculative and emancipatory narratives that aim at the unification of knowledge and the legitimation of historical progress. In contrast to this vision, postmodernity is defined by Lyotard as "incredulity toward metanarratives," marking a radical shift in the status of knowledge. The paper examines the postmodern condition in which knowledge is characterized by heterogeneity, fragmentation, and the pluralism of language games, as well as by the rejection of universal criteria of legitimacy. Particular attention is given to the impact of techno-industrial transformations and the commodification of knowledge, whereby the performative criterion and economic efficiency replace the scientific and emancipatory ideals of modernity. In this context, the analysis highlights the crisis of the legitimation of science and the transition from grand narratives (metanarratives) to "little narratives" (*petits récits*), which are localized and operate in an immanent form. Through an analytical and comparative approach, the paper argues that Lyotard's postmodern epistemology, although powerful in its critique of totalizing rationality, shifts attention toward social analysis via philosophical and linguistic reflection, opening new debates on knowledge, science, power, and politics in contemporary societies.

Keywords: *Postmodernity, modernity, metanarratives, legitimation, science, language games*

MODERNITY AS METANARRATIVE AND POSTMODERNITY AS NARRATIVE: EPISTEMIC SUBVERSION OF THE PERSPECTIVE OF KNOWLEDGE

The hypothesis behind Lyotard's argument is that the status of knowledge changes when societies enter what is known as the postindustrial era and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern era (Lyotard, 1984). But what is essential in this, is the question of the ownership of knowledge and authority: who controls the flow of knowledge and who has access to it? Now, "the relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produceand consume—that is, the form of value. Knowledge is and will beproduced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. (Lyotard,1984, 4). Consequently, Lyotard's argument on the change in the status of knowledge in the postmodern situation is read as a considerable shift from the way knowledge was conceived, particularly during modernity. In the work *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard identifies two main forms of grand narrative in modernity: speculation and emancipation. The former, the speculative grand narrative, describes progress through the development of knowledge, while individual ideas and discoveries are built toward a systematic whole that reveals the truth of human existence under the guidance of the speculative grand metanarrative. "True knowledge…is composed of reported statements that are incorporated into the metanarrative of a subject that guarantees their legitimacy " (Lyotard,1984: 35). In other words, the speculative grand narrative describes the progress and development of knowledge toward a systematic truth: a great unified theory in which our place in the universe will be understood. The grand narrative of emancipation, on the other hand, sees the development of knowledge as a driver of human freedom while emancipating humanity from mysticism and dogma through education; for this reason, "knowledge is no longer the subject, but in the service of the subject" (Lyotard, 1984: 36). In the historical sense, following the traces of Lyotard's analysis, Reinhart Koselleck emphasizes that modernity constructed a temporal regime based on progressive expectations and open horizons of the future (Koselleck, 1985), while Hans Blumenberg argues that modernity constituted a project of self-legitimation in the face of traditional authorities (Blumenberg, 1983).

However, in the postmodern situation, the interests of capitalism, technological development, and social development produced what Gianni Vattimo calls the "weakening of the strong metaphysical structures of modernity," in which claims to universal foundations of truth lose their normative authority (Vattimo, 1985). Consequently, in order to highlight the differences between modern forms of knowledge and the ways in which they are generated and transmitted in the postmodern situation, Lyotard analyzes them in terms of narratives: the ways in which the world is understood through the stories we tell about it by linking together different ideas, impressions, and events. Thus, our understanding of the world is composed of multiple different ways of discussing and experiencing it.

However, each of these forms of narration is based on a specific set of rules and procedures, which may be explicit or implicit. Lyotard calls the sets of rules that determine the legitimacy of particular forms of narrative "metanarratives" and argues that they provide criteria of evaluation and judgment in terms of legitimacy and truth independently. Thus, for example, the phrase "My friendship is like a rose with thorns" is legitimate in poetic

discourse because of its suggestive and symbolic qualities, but illegitimate as a description in botany, since the latter operates according to the rules of experimental verification and classification through taxonomy. But alongside metanarratives that legitimize knowledge and individual claims, Lyotard also introduces the concept of the grand narrative that constitutes the guiding principle of modernity. By bringing together all the different narrative and metanarrative forms of a given culture, grand narratives produce systematic accounts of how the world functions, how it develops throughout history, as well as the place of human beings within it. Put simply, grand narratives construct approaches to human society and social and historical progress. According to Lyotard, by linking together all the different narratives and metanarratives that constitute a culture, assigning them values and giving them a purpose, the grand narratives of modernity present an idea of the development of knowledge as a progress toward enlightenment and universal freedom. However, with the movement toward the postmodern, Lyotard argues that the nature and status of knowledge change. He sees the recent transformations in capitalism and the political systems that accompany them as destructive of the systematic or emancipatory aims of the grand narrative: "The project of modernity, he contends, is not forgotten or forsaken but liquidated " (Lyotard, 1992: 18). Consequently, the loss of all-encompassing grand narratives and their ideas of progress implies that the structures that legitimize knowledge also begin to lose their power and stability. And naturally, this leads to Lyotard's most cited argument: "I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard,1984: XXIV). He argues that the criteria that organize knowledge, that separate the legitimate from the illegitimate in each discipline, are no longer as compelling as they were when they formed part of a grand narrative of modernity.

POSTMODERNISM AS A NEW GAME OF KNOWLEDGE

The analysis of the techno-epistemic situation in the postmodern situation was presented in a particular way by Lyotard in his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. In this work, Lyotard understands the postmodern as "... the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (Lyotard, 1984: XXIII). Under the influence of Wittgenstein, Lyotard conceives the rules of the game by referring to the fact that "... each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put " (Lyotard, 1984:10). In this perspective, the autonomy and the locality of the rules of different regimes of knowledge (science, philosophy, religion, etc.) radically problematize the regime of knowledge. First, they criticize the supposed independence of nature or of thought from language and, second, the possibility, even in principle, of the unity of knowledge as culture. Lyotard opens his work by defining the field of his analysis: knowledge in computerized societies founded on economic, cultural, and political elements. He then unfolds a working hypothesis, which further clarifies the area of philosophical inquiry: "Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age" (Lyotard, 1984: 3). Thus, the computerization of some Western societies (we recall that Lyotard's analysis dates back to 1979) and, in general, the revolutions in information and communication technologies seem to determine the postindustrial (postmodern) condition according to Lyotard, characterizing it as a revolution with deep impact, analogous to the industrial revolution in modernity.

Furthermore, in the postmodern era, the national economies of developed Western states begin to shift toward a production based on information and services, producing a large-scale techno-industrial revolution. This revolution begins to radically transform the practice and the nature of knowledge, manifesting itself immediately in mathematics, the sciences, and new technologies, and then extending to the entire contemporary culture, including its economic, political, ethical, and aesthetic aspects. Precisely, the interconnection between the growth of new forms of information and communication technologies and the transformation of the nature and practices of knowledge and culture essentially implies what Lyotard characterizes as the 'postmodern condition'.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

Distrust toward metanarratives and the flourishing of language games

As the subtitle of Lyotard's work shows (A Report on Knowledge), the study of the postmodern condition constitutes a study of postmodern forms of knowledge, or of "...the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies " (Lyotard, 1984: XXIII). His observations on the social developments of the late twentieth century mainly follow the well-known scenario of the concerns of postindustrial society, as outlined by various scholars, where information replaces the production of material goods. Precisely at this moment, information becomes the key element of society around which power gravitates and from which it emanates. Scholars such as Manuel Castells emphasize exactly this atmosphere when he argues that power in contemporary societies derives from the control of information and communication networks (Castells, 1996). In this sense, knowledge now no longer appears as an instrument of emancipation, but as a strategic factor of power.

On the other hand, in this power–information relationship, knowledge begins to take shape as an informational commodity and science is forced to abandon its initial integrity, becoming an instrument in the hands of power. Therefore, as in Habermas's analysis, so too in Lyotard's account, modernity with its instrumental rationality has managed to dominate other forms of reason. However, this situation should not be confused with postmodern knowledge. The starting point of Lyotard's analysis is the disappearance of what he calls the 'metanarrative': thus, the critique appears more radical and deeper. According to him, it is suggested that these metanarratives or 'grand' narratives have been replaced by a large number of language games. These games range from 'models of discourse', that is, different forms of assertion – denotative, performative, prescriptive, etc. – which follow specific rules, through the discourses used by institutions and regimes of knowledge and up to large-scale narratives. Për pasojë, lojëra të tilla gjuhësore narrative mund të strehojnë elemente të tilla si "deontic statements prescribing what should be done with respect to these same referents, or with respect to kinship, the difference between the sexes, children, neighbors, foreigners, etc." (Lyotard 1984: 20).

On the other hand, in terms of their typology, language games determine what is "right" to be said and "to be done" in a given culture, and since they themselves are part of this culture. Therefore, each discursive game, within its own purpose and interest, determines in a self-referential way what is 'meaningful', 'permissible', 'legitimate', 'true', etc. However, this particular conception of the regime of knowledge seems to create what scholars such as Steven Best and Douglas Kellner have defined as 'pluralism and liberal

empiricism'. In a certain sense, Lyotard's celebration of plurality repeats the movements of pluralism and liberal empiricism. "His 'justice of multiplicities' is similar to traditional liberal pluralism which posits a plurality of political subjects with multiple interests and organizations. He replays tropes of liberal tolerance by valorizing diverse modes of multiplicity, refusing to privilege any subjects or positions, or to offer a standpoint from which one can choose between opposing political positions. (Best dhe Kellner, 1991: 174-175). This position, however, does not remain without tensions, since – as Ulrich Beck notes – advanced modernity produces risks that scientific knowledge itself is no longer able to fully control or legitimize (Beck, 1992). Thus, epistemic fragmentation is accompanied by a general feeling of structural insecurity.

The Crisis of Legitimation

In general, Lyotard's concept of 'language games' served as an effective weapon against all totalizing claims. Referring to his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard comments that the term 'postmodern' defines the condition of our culture where the main transformation identified is in the way forms of knowledge are legitimized. The issue of changes in the conditions of knowledge and social life is addressed through an analysis that emphasizes the increasing importance of language in a sociocultural and economic context transformed by the rise of the significance of information and communication. In its simplest form, Lyotard's thesis argues that the modern quest for legitimation through references to metadiscourses or appeals to grand narratives has become problematic. But the appearance of the postmodern condition of knowledge as distrust toward metanarratives is presented by Lyotard as the result of a complex process of sociocultural and economic development, in which mainly three factors prevail. The first concerns the development since the end of the Second World War of postindustrial techniques and technologies, which contribute to the shift of emphasis from issues related to the intrinsic value of forms of knowledge toward knowledge as a tool for optimizing the efficiency of the performance of different systems. The second factor identified is the regeneration of the capitalist mode of production in the form of "... a renewal that has eliminated the communist alternative and valorized the individual enjoyment of goods and services" (Lyotard, 1984: 38). But if the advent of consumer capitalism and the development of technology influenced the condition of knowledge, Lyotard argues that this has been possible only because of the presence of the third factor, namely "... the seeds of "delegitimation" and nihilism that were inherent in the grand narratives of the nineteenth century" (Lyotard, 1984: 38). Lyotard emphasizes that postindustrial technological transformations affected both scientific research and "...the way in which learning is acquired, classified, made available, and exploited" (Lyotard, 1984: 4). The conclusion of this condition is that such broad transformations also affect knowledge itself, which increasingly appears as a determinant of new research initiatives and directions, not to mention the funding and the computer language that translates research results. Lyotard states that "along with the hegemony of computers comes a certain logic, and therefore a certain set of prescriptions determining which statements are accepted as "knowledge" statements" (Lyotard, 1984: 4). Thus, in this process is also associated a shift in the principle of the legitimation of knowledge. One moves from narratives of self-legitimation and emancipation or speculative freedom (mainly philosophical and political forms) toward appeals to performance or techno-economic forms of legitimation. And

as this occurs, the process of the production and use of knowledge becomes increasingly subject to commodification. In other words, with the accelerated mercantilization of knowledge, scientific research has become ever more oriented toward the needs of clients, and knowledge is produced solely to be sold, evaluated for its exchange value. But legitimation through performance arises not only from the increasing articulation of technological innovation that develops from the moment science becomes a productive force within the capitalist mode of production, but it also grows from a process of delegitimation as an 'internal' crisis of scientific knowledge.

In particular, the crisis of science appears as a synonym for the growing problem of determinism, caused by an increasing knowledge of forms of instability. Lyotard comments that the crisis of legitimation affecting scientific knowledge, the signs of which have accumulated since the end of the nineteenth century, does not constitute the outbreak of a random spread of technological progress and the expansion of capitalism. On the contrary, it represents an internal erosion of the principle of the legitimacy of knowledge where, for Lyotard, unlike Durkheim, it cannot be resolved by itself or within the knowledge regime itself. For Lyotard, the 'initial' conditions have been burdened or further transformed by a series of major developments within the field of knowledge, such as the questioning of the boundaries of science and the collapse of the 'speculative hierarchy of knowledge'. This situation has facilitated the emergence of a postmodern condition of knowledge, where speculative forms of legitimation have become problematic. Therefore, knowledge now attains validity and legitimacy in a practical or prescriptive context, where "its distinguishing characteristic is that it grounds the legitimation of science and truth in the autonomy of interlocutors involved in ethical, social, and political praxis" (Lyotard, 1984: 39-40). As a consequence, the tension that appears densely in this context is that of the correspondence between a denotative statement that holds cognitive value and a prescriptive statement that contains practical value. In short, Lyotard argues that a descriptive statement can be 'true', but not necessarily, a prescriptive statement posed about it is 'right'. At this point, science "... has no special calling to supervise the game of praxis (nor the game of aesthetics, for that matter) ... science plays its own game; it is incapable of legitimating the other language games" (Lyotard, 1984: 40). Indeed, at this point the situation appears even more catastrophic and apocalyptic. In the situation of commodification and the logic of capitalist production, science cannot legitimize its knowledge without necessarily turning to a narrative or criterion foreign to it, outside of itself. "Scientific knowledge cannot know and make known that it is the true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative, kind of knowledge, which from its point of view is no knowledge at all "(Lyotard, 1984: 29). In this regard, the true object of Lyotard in the work *The Postmodern Condition* is to expose the legitimation of science and its crisis in the context of narrative in the postmodern situation. In this situation, science can no longer, as before, legitimize its knowledge "through a philosophy of history that interprets history as a process of emancipation." In the philosophical version, legitimation formerly (modernity) was ensured by 'a philosophy of history which interprets the process of history as the realization of reason in science, where the principle of universal knowledge functions as a legitimizing instance' (Honneth 1985). Lyotard argues that, above all, such legitimation has lost its power since speculative or humanist philosophy is forced to relinquish its legitimizing tasks. However, his true objective is not science itself, nor its transcendent status, but the principle of transcendent legitimation itself. According to him, it is performance, 'the best input/output equation' or instrumental reason that serves as the principle of this transcendent legitimation.

The Performative Criterion as Legitimation of Postmodern Knowledge

Precisely in this context, where philosophical and political legitimizing narratives have become problematic, performativity or 'context control' has influenced the form of legitimation. In postindustrial capitalism, there emerges an increasing appeal to performance, which within science enhances the ability to produce evidence and to be "right." As a consequence, the performative criterion becomes the dominant form of the legitimation of science, while normative and emancipatory criteria are set aside. This condition marks what Zygmunt Bauman describes as liquid modernity, where stable structures of knowledge, authority, and ethics dissolve into flexible, temporary, and short-term efficiency–oriented forms (Bauman, 2000).

On the other hand, in the scientific sense, since the 'empirical reality' provides the evidence in scientific reasoning, and also offers descriptions and claims of a legal, ethical, and political nature, all these games can be mastered by mastering this reality. This is precisely what technology performs. Conversely, technology is effectively reinforced if someone has access to scientific knowledge and decision-making authority. It is precisely here that the legitimation of knowledge by power occurs, where power does not imply only good performance, but also effective verification and sound judgments. This situation creates a circular logic in which power legitimizes science and law based on their efficiency, and this efficiency, in turn, is legitimized by the basis of science and law. At this point, legitimacy becomes self-legitimacy.

Furthermore, the promotion of performance has an impact both on the production and the transmission of knowledge. In relation to scientific research, there is an increasing observation of the funding of projects that optimize system performance and the abandonment of those that do not. And this perspective of science brings about a continuous chain of harmful consequences. Among them, one can mention the technocratic and bureaucratic control of scientific research and the political decision-making over it. But while the grand narratives (modernity) seek to draw knowledge into a single system, capitalism is satisfied with the fragmentation of knowledge as long as it develops and produces economic profit. As a result, the postmodern condition is that in which the demands of the capitalist economy prevail and the developments of knowledge are determined by the economic logic of markets and capital. "In the postindustrial and postmodern age, science will maintain and no doubt strengthen its preeminence in the arsenal of productive capacities of the nation-states" (Lyotard, 1984: 5). As a consequence, the most powerful states are those that have the greatest resources of knowledge, technology, and information compared to weaker states. And in light of this situation, Lyotard presents the main threat faced by postmodern society by reducing the evaluation of knowledge to a single criterion: efficiency.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis developed in this paper highlights the central importance of Jean-François Lyotard's thought for understanding the epistemic transformations that accompany the transition from modernity to postmodernity. By conceptualizing modernity as a project of the Enlightenment based on speculative and emancipatory metanarratives, Lyotard shows that the legitimation of knowledge in this era relied on universalist, rationalist, and foundationalist claims. However, the technological, social, and economic

developments of postindustrial societies have led to the erosion of these legitimizing structures, producing what Lyotard defines as "distrust toward metanarratives".

Postmodernity, in this sense, does not simply represent a historical phase after modernity, but a radical reconfiguration of the status of knowledge. Knowledge no longer appears as an instrument of universal emancipation, but as a fragmented field, composed of a multitude of language games that operate according to local and immanent rules. This epistemic pluralism, although it challenges the totalizing rationality of modernity, is also accompanied by new tensions, especially concerning the legitimation of science and its role in contemporary societies.

A crucial aspect of Lyotard's analysis is the shift of the principle of legitimation from philosophical and political narratives toward the performative criterion, where efficiency, optimization, and exchange value take precedence over truth and emancipation. This situation emphasizes the close connection between knowledge, power, and technology, transforming knowledge into a strategic commodity within postindustrial capitalism. In this context, Lyotard's thought remains relevant, as it opens critical horizons for reflecting on the limits of modern rationality, on epistemic pluralism, and on the political and ethical challenges that arise from the postmodern condition of knowledge.

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WORKER'S RIGHTS IN THE DIGITALB TRANSITION

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ABSTRACT

The digital transition represents one of the most significant transformations of the labor market in the 21st century, fundamentally changing the way work is organized and the relationships between employers and workers. The rapid development of technologies such as artificial intelligence, automation, robotics, and digital platforms has created new opportunities for economic growth, innovation, and flexibility in the workplace. However, these developments have also introduced considerable challenges regarding the protection of workers' rights and the provision of fair and equal working conditions. In this context, one of the most pressing issues is job insecurity, particularly for workers involved in the platform economy, who often lack full rights such as stable contracts, social protection, and legal safeguards. Furthermore, the use of digital technologies to monitor worker performance raises serious concerns about privacy and the protection of personal data. Another major challenge is the displacement of certain jobs due to automation, creating an increasing need for reskilling and continuous professional development. Additionally, the digital transition has affected the balance between professional and personal life, making it more difficult to separate working time from rest time, especially in the context of remote work. In this regard, the concept of the "right to disconnect" is gaining increasing importance in safeguarding workers' well-being. This study aims to analyze the impact of the digital transition on workers' rights by identifying key challenges and proposing measures to improve policies and legislation. In conclusion, it emphasizes that a fair and

inclusive digital transition requires cooperation among governments, employers, and workers in order to ensure a sustainable and equitable labor market for all.

Keywords: *Digital transition, workers' rights, platform economy, artificial intelligence, automation, privacy and personal data, workplace safety, remote work, reskilling.*

INTRODUCTION TO WORKERS' RIGHTS IN THE DIGITAL TRANSITION

In recent decades, rapid technological development has brought major changes in the way work is organized and how the global economy functions. This process, known as the digital transition, involves the increasing integration of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, automation, robotics, and online platforms into professional life. As a result, many traditional professions are changing or disappearing, while new forms of work are being created that require different skills than before. This transformation has affected not only the structure of the labor market but also the way relationships between workers and employers are built (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2022).

The digital transition is not only a technological development but also a broad social and economic process that affects almost every sector. The use of technology has increased efficiency and productivity, allowing many tasks to be completed more quickly and accurately. However, this development has also created new challenges, especially for workers who do not have the necessary skills to adapt to these changes. In this sense, the digital transition creates a divide between those who benefit from technology and those who risk being excluded from the labor market. In this context, the protection of workers' rights becomes a fundamental issue. Rights such as fair wages, workplace safety, privacy, and social protection must be guaranteed even under new digital working conditions. However, many new forms of employment, especially in the platform economy, do not offer the same level of protection as traditional employment. This creates a situation where workers are often more exposed to insecurity and lack of economic stability. For this reason, these rights must be adapted and strengthened according to the new reality (Council of the European Union, 2024).

One of the biggest challenges of the digital transition is its impact on workers' quality of life. Remote work and the constant use of technology have made the boundaries between professional and personal life increasingly unclear. Moreover, the use of digital tools to monitor employees has raised serious concerns about privacy and excessive control. These developments show that technological progress must be accompanied by protective measures to ensure workers' well-being. The aim of this study is to analyze in detail the impact of the digital transition on workers' rights and to identify the main challenges arising from this process. It also seeks to examine how policies and legislation can be adapted to ensure fair and equal working conditions in the digital era. In conclusion, this chapter serves as a foundation for further analysis in the following chapters, emphasizing the importance of creating a sustainable and inclusive labor market.

Impact of the Digital Transition on the Labor Market

The digital transition has had a deep and multidimensional impact on the labor market, changing how work is organized and how jobs are created. New technologies have enabled the automation of many processes, reducing the need for physical labor while increasing the demand for technological skills. As a result, some traditional jobs have disappeared or been

significantly transformed, while new technology-related professions have emerged. This has led to a global restructuring of the labor market (De Stefano, 2016).

One of the most important developments is the growth of the digital economy and online platforms, which have created new forms of employment. Platforms such as transport, delivery, and freelance services allow individuals to work flexibly and generate income independently. However, this type of work is often characterized by a lack of stable contracts and social benefits, creating insecure employment conditions. This shows that flexibility often comes at the cost of security.

Automation and artificial intelligence have significantly influenced employment structure by replacing repetitive and routine tasks with machines and intelligent systems. While this increases efficiency and reduces costs for companies, it also risks leaving many workers unemployed, especially those with low or medium skill levels. At the same time, demand for advanced digital skills has increased, creating a gap between labor market supply and demand.

Another important impact is the rise of remote work, which has become more common thanks to digital technology. This form of work offers flexibility and the opportunity to work from anywhere, reducing costs and increasing access to the labor market. However, it also brings challenges such as social isolation, lack of direct communication, and difficulties in time management. In addition, remote work is often associated with longer working hours and blurred boundaries between personal and professional life (European Commission, 2021).

Overall, the digital transition has created a more dynamic and flexible labor market, but also a more complex and uncertain one. Continuous changes require workers to constantly adapt and develop new skills in order to remain competitive. In this context, it is important that public policies and education systems support digital skill development and ensure protection for workers affected by these changes. Only in this way can a fair and sustainable transition be achieved.

Challenges and Protection of Workers' Rights in the Digital Era

In the digital era, the protection of workers' rights has become an increasingly complex issue due to rapid changes in the organization of work. While technology has created new opportunities for employment and professional development, it has also introduced new risks affecting workers' security and well-being. In many cases, existing laws are not updated to address these changes, leaving gaps in legal protection, especially in digital sectors.

One of the main challenges is job insecurity, which has increased significantly with the growth of the platform economy. Workers operating through apps or online platforms are often classified as self-employed and do not receive the rights of regular employees, such as social security, paid leave, or protection against unfair dismissal. This creates a new form of economic insecurity, where workers depend heavily on algorithms and market demand (ILO, 2021).

Another important challenge concerns privacy and personal data protection. Companies often use technology to monitor workers' performance by collecting data on their activities during working hours. This constant monitoring can violate privacy and create pressure on workers, negatively affecting their mental health. Therefore, clear limits must be established regarding the use of technology in the workplace.

A major issue in the digital era is also the lack of balance between work and personal life. Remote work and constant digital connectivity make many workers feel obligated to be available at all times. This leads to increased stress, fatigue, and in some cases health problems. The concept of the "right to disconnect" is becoming increasingly important in protecting workers' free time and well-being. In response to these challenges, it is necessary to implement concrete measures to strengthen workers' rights. This includes updating legislation, creating fair working condition policies, and promoting dialogue between employers and workers (OECD, 2019).

International organizations and governments must also cooperate to establish new standards adapted to the digital reality. Only through these efforts can technological progress be combined with social justice and protection for all workers.

LEGAL CHALLENGES AND THE PROTECTION OF WORKERS' WELL-BEING IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

The Legal Status of Platform Workers: Employee vs. Independent Contractor

One of the most contentious issues in the digital transition is the legal classification of individuals working within the platform economy, often referred to as the "gig economy." As the digital transition has accelerated, millions of workers globally have shifted toward platforms that provide transportation, delivery, and freelance services. However, this shift has exposed a significant gap in labor law: the distinction between a formal employee and an independent contractor. Most digital platforms categorize their workers as independent contractors to avoid the financial responsibilities associated with traditional employment, such as paying for social security, health insurance, and paid leave. This classification remains a central challenge because it strips workers of their fundamental labor rights while keeping them under the strict control of the platform's digital infrastructure (Huws, 2020).

The reality of platform work often contradicts the definition of independent contracting. While traditional contractors have the autonomy to set their prices and choose their clients, platform workers are usually subject to fixed prices and rigid performance standards set by algorithms. This creates a "hidden employment" relationship where the worker is economically dependent on the platform but lacks the legal protections that come with a standard labor contract. To address this, international legal frameworks, including recent directives from the European Union, are moving toward a "presumption of employment." This means that if a platform exercises a certain level of control over its workers, it must legally recognize them as employees. Ensuring a fair transition requires that the flexibility of digital work does not become a tool for labor exploitation or the erosion of social safety nets (OECD, 2019).

Algorithmic Management and the Right to Privacy

The integration of artificial intelligence into the workplace has introduced a new phenomenon known as algorithmic management. In the digital transition, the traditional human supervisor is increasingly being replaced by complex software and mathematical models that assign tasks, monitor progress, and evaluate performance in real-time. While this can increase operational efficiency, it poses severe risks to the rights of workers, particularly regarding transparency and dignity. Algorithmic management often operates

as a "black box," where workers are unaware of the specific criteria being used to judge their productivity or determine their pay. This lack of transparency can lead to arbitrary decisions, such as the automatic deactivation of a worker's account without a human review process or an opportunity for appeal.

Furthermore, the constant digital surveillance required to feed these algorithms raises profound concerns about the right to privacy. Wearable devices, keystroke logging, and GPS tracking have turned the workplace into an environment of perpetual monitoring. This level of oversight extends beyond what is necessary for business operations and can intrude into the personal boundaries of the worker. From a legal perspective, the protection of personal data—governed by standards such as the GDPR—must be strictly enforced to ensure that workers are not reduced to mere data points. Protecting workers' rights in the digital era means ensuring that technological monitoring is proportionate, transparent, and subject to human oversight, preventing the dehumanization of the labor process.

The Right to Disconnect and Mental Health Protection

As the boundaries between the physical office and the home continue to blur, the "right to disconnect" has emerged as a fundamental necessity for protecting workers' well-being. The digital transition has made it possible for employees to be reachable at any hour through smartphones, messaging apps, and cloud-based platforms. While this connectivity offers flexibility, it has also created a "culture of availability," where workers feel pressured to respond to professional demands during their rest periods and holidays. This constant state of alertness leads to significant psychological risks, including chronic stress, anxiety, and the phenomenon known as "burnout." Without clear legal boundaries, the digital workplace threatens the very essence of the eight-hour workday and the right to leisure.

To mitigate these risks, several jurisdictions have begun to formally recognize the right to disconnect as a statutory labor right. This principle asserts that workers should not face professional repercussions for failing to engage with work-related communications outside of their official working hours. Protecting this right is not only a matter of personal freedom but also a critical component of occupational health and safety (OSH). In the digital era, health and safety are no longer limited to preventing physical injuries in a factory setting; they now encompass the prevention of psychosocial hazards. A sustainable digital transition must prioritize the mental health of the workforce by re-establishing the wall between professional obligations and private life, ensuring that technology serves to enhance human life rather than consume it (Prassl, 2018).

Occupational Safety and Social Isolation in Remote Work

The rise of remote and hybrid work models represents one of the most visible shifts of the digital transition, bringing both opportunities and new forms of vulnerability. While working from home can reduce commuting stress and allow for a better work-life balance, it shifts the responsibility for a safe working environment from the employer to the employee. In a traditional setting, the employer is legally obligated to ensure ergonomic workstations and a safe physical environment. In the digital transition, however, the burden of maintaining a healthy workspace often falls on the individual, leading to potential long-term physical ailments. This shift requires a re-evaluation of how occupational safety laws are applied when the "workplace" is no longer a centralized location controlled by the employer (Vesselkov & Pye, 2022).

Beyond physical safety, remote work introduces the risk of profound social isolation and the erosion of collective bargaining power. The digital workplace can become a fragmented environment where workers are disconnected from their peers, making it difficult to organize, join unions, or engage in collective action.

This isolation weakens the position of the worker in negotiations with management, as the traditional "shop floor" solidarity is replaced by individual digital interfaces. To ensure that workers' rights are protected during the digital transition, policies must be developed to foster digital social spaces and support the modernization of labor unions. Ensuring that remote workers remain part of a collective community is essential for maintaining the balance of power and securing fair treatment in an increasingly decentralized global economy.

CONCLUSIONS

The digital transition represents one of the most transformative shifts in the history of the labor market, offering unprecedented opportunities for efficiency and flexibility while simultaneously challenging the foundational principles of workers' rights. Through the analysis conducted in this study, it is evident that the traditional legal frameworks designed for the industrial age are no longer sufficient to address the complexities of the digital era. The rise of the platform economy, the integration of algorithmic management, and the normalization of remote work have created a new reality where the boundary between protection and exploitation is increasingly blurred.

One of the primary conclusions of this research is that the legal status of workers must be redefined to prevent the erosion of social security. The current tendency of digital platforms to classify employees as independent contractors creates a "protection gap" that leaves a significant portion of the workforce vulnerable to economic instability. A fair digital transition requires a "presumption of employment" for those whose work is strictly controlled by digital systems, ensuring that flexibility does not come at the cost of basic human rights such as healthcare, fair wages, and retirement benefits.

Furthermore, the study highlights that the right to privacy and the right to disconnect have become essential pillars of modern occupational health and safety. As algorithms take over management roles, transparency becomes a democratic necessity within the workplace. Workers must have the right to understand and challenge the data-driven decisions that affect their careers. Simultaneously, the "right to disconnect" must be legally enforced to combat the rising tide of mental health issues and burnout associated with the 24/7 digital culture. Protecting the worker's time is not merely a matter of productivity, but a fundamental requirement for preserving human dignity and social well-being.

In conclusion, a sustainable and inclusive digital transition is only possible if technological progress is balanced with robust social justice. Governments, international organizations, and labor unions must collaborate to update labor codes and establish international standards that reflect the digital reality. The focus must shift from protecting specific "jobs" to protecting "workers" themselves, regardless of the platform or medium they use. Only by placing human rights at the center of technological innovation can we ensure that the digital future of work is one that benefits society as a whole, rather than a privileged few.

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MENTAL HEALTH, YOUTH AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING IN EDUCATION: PARENTING, IDENTITY AND RISKY BEHAVIOURS

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ABSTRACT

This analytical study examines how parenting practices and identity development shape youth mental health, social well-being, and risky behaviours within educational contexts. Adolescence is a critical period in which emotional vulnerability increases while identity exploration intensifies. Schools, as daily social ecosystems, play a decisive role in either buffering risks (through belonging, supportive relationships, and inclusive climate) or intensifying them (through exclusion, bullying, pressure, and weak adult support). The study analyzes key peer-reviewed findings to explain how family and school factors interact to influence outcomes such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, disengagement, truancy, aggression, substance-related behaviours, and unsafe digital practices. Methodologically, the article adopts an integrative literature review approach, focusing on empirical studies and theoretical frameworks from developmental psychology, educational psychology, and adolescent health. The analysis is guided by three core lenses: (1) parenting (warmth, monitoring, communication, consistency), (2) identity processes (identity clarity vs. confusion; belonging and self-concept), and (3) educational environment (teacher-student relationships, school climate, inclusion, peer norms). Findings across the reviewed literature suggest that supportive parenting and autonomy support are consistently linked to stronger self-regulation, higher school belonging, and lower engagement in risky behaviours. Conversely, harsh or inconsistent parenting, combined with negative school climate and identity uncertainty, tends to predict higher distress, lower academic engagement, and increased susceptibility to peer-driven risk-taking. The study concludes that youth well-being in education is best understood through an ecological, interactional view: parenting and identity development influence how students interpret school experiences, while schools can strengthen protective factors through inclusive practices, social-emotional learning, anti-bullying strategies, and effective parent-school partnerships. This article provides a

structured synthesis and educational recommendations to reduce risky behaviours and promote mental health through coordinated family-school action.

Keywords: *School Belonging; Parent–School Partnership; Identity Development; Risky Behaviours*

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence represents a critical developmental stage characterized by rapid biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes that significantly influence mental health and social well-being. During this period, young people engage in identity exploration while simultaneously navigating increasing academic demands and complex social environments. As a result, adolescents may experience heightened emotional vulnerability, making them more susceptible to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and behavioral difficulties (Steinberg, 2014). Within this context, understanding the factors that shape youth well-being has become a priority for both educational systems and public health research.

Among the most influential determinants of adolescent development are parenting practices and identity formation processes. Parenting plays a foundational role in shaping children's emotional regulation, self-concept, and behavioral patterns. Research consistently highlights that supportive parenting—characterized by warmth, open communication, consistent discipline, and appropriate monitoring—is associated with positive developmental outcomes, including higher self-esteem, better academic engagement, and reduced involvement in risky behaviors (Baumrind, 1991; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). In contrast, harsh, neglectful, or inconsistent parenting practices have been linked to increased psychological distress, lower social competence, and a greater likelihood of engaging in problematic or risky behaviors (Lamborn et al., 1991).

Simultaneously, identity development emerges as a central psychosocial task during adolescence. According to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, adolescents face the challenge of achieving identity coherence while avoiding role confusion (Erikson, 1968). A well-developed sense of identity contributes to emotional stability, resilience, and a clear sense of purpose, whereas identity confusion is often associated with vulnerability to peer pressure, low self-esteem, and maladaptive behaviors. Contemporary research further emphasizes the role of social belonging and self-concept in shaping adolescents' decisions, particularly within peer and school contexts (Kroger et al., 2010).

The educational environment, particularly the school context, plays a crucial role in either supporting or undermining adolescent development. Schools function not only as academic institutions but also as key social ecosystems where students form relationships, develop competencies, and construct their identities. Positive school climates—characterized by supportive teacher–student relationships, inclusivity, and a strong sense of belonging—have been shown to buffer against mental health risks and reduce engagement in risky behaviors (Wentzel, 2012). Conversely, negative school experiences, including bullying, social exclusion, and academic pressure, can exacerbate psychological distress and increase the likelihood of disengagement and harmful behaviors (OECD, 2019).

Importantly, adolescent outcomes cannot be fully understood in isolation; rather, they are shaped through the interaction of family, individual, and school-related factors. Ecological perspectives suggest that parenting practices influence how adolescents interpret and respond to school experiences, while school environments can either reinforce or counterbalance family influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This interactional approach highlights the need for integrated strategies that address multiple dimensions of adolescents' lives.

In this context, the present study aims to examine how parenting practices and identity development jointly influence youth mental health, social well-being, and engagement in risky behaviors within educational settings. By synthesizing findings from developmental psychology, educational research, and adolescent health studies, this paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of these interrelated factors and to offer evidence-based recommendations for promoting positive youth development and reducing risk within schools.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to explore the complex relationships between parenting practices, identity development, and youth outcomes within educational contexts. Specifically, it focuses on how these factors interact to influence adolescents' mental health, social well-being, and engagement in risky behaviours. Grounded in an ecological and developmental perspective, the study aims to address the following research questions:

- How do parenting practices (e.g., warmth, monitoring, and communication) influence adolescents' mental health and engagement in risky behaviours within school settings?
- How does identity development (identity clarity versus confusion) interact with the educational environment to shape students' social well-being and behavioural outcomes?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Developmental Psychology Perspectives

Developmental psychology provides a foundational framework for understanding how adolescents' mental health, identity formation, and behavioural patterns evolve over time. Adolescence is widely recognized as a transitional stage marked by significant cognitive, emotional, and social changes, during which individuals develop higher-order thinking skills, increased self-awareness, and a stronger need for autonomy (Steinberg, 2014). These developmental processes are closely linked to how young people interpret experiences within family and school contexts.

One of the most influential theoretical contributions is Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, which identifies adolescence as the stage of identity versus role confusion. During this phase, individuals actively explore values, beliefs, and social roles in order to develop a coherent sense of self (Erikson, 1968). Successful identity formation is associated with emotional stability and resilience, whereas identity confusion can increase vulnerability to peer pressure and maladaptive behaviours.

In addition, Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development highlights the emergence of formal operational thinking during adolescence, enabling abstract reasoning and hypothetical thinking (Piaget, 1972). This cognitive shift allows adolescents to reflect on their identity and future, but also increases their sensitivity to social evaluation and internal conflicts. Furthermore, social learning theory, proposed by Albert Bandura, emphasizes the role of observation and imitation in shaping behaviour, suggesting that adolescents learn behaviours—including risky ones—through interactions with parents, peers, and media (Bandura, 1977).

Together, these perspectives underline that adolescent behaviour is not random but shaped by the interaction between internal developmental processes and external social influences. Parenting practices, peer dynamics, and school environments all contribute to

shaping adolescents' developmental trajectories, particularly in relation to mental health and risk-taking behaviours.

Table 1: *Key Developmental Psychology Theories in Adolescence*

Theory	Key Scholar	Core Concept	Relevance to Study
Psychosocial Development	Erikson (1968)	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Explains identity formation and emotional stability
Cognitive Development	Piaget (1972)	Formal Operational Stage	Explains abstract thinking and self-reflection
Social Learning Theory	Bandura (1977)	Learning through observation	Explains influence of parents and peers on behaviour

Educational Psychology and School Climate

Educational psychology emphasizes the importance of the learning environment in shaping students' cognitive, emotional, and social development. The concept of school climate refers to the overall quality and character of school life, including relationships, teaching practices, organizational structures, and the sense of safety and belonging experienced by students. A positive school climate has been consistently associated with improved academic outcomes, better mental health, and reduced engagement in risky behaviours among adolescents (Cohen et al., 2009).

One of the central components of school climate is the quality of teacher–student relationships. Supportive and respectful interactions with teachers foster students' motivation, engagement, and emotional security. According to Robert Pianta, positive teacher–student relationships contribute to students' social adjustment and academic success by creating a sense of trust and support (Pianta, 1999). In contrast, distant or conflictual relationships may increase feelings of alienation and disengagement from school.

Another critical dimension is the sense of school belonging, defined as the extent to which students feel accepted, valued, and included within the school community. Research shows that students who experience a strong sense of belonging are less likely to exhibit behavioral problems and more likely to demonstrate prosocial behaviour and academic persistence (Wentzel, 2012). Conversely, environments characterized by exclusion, bullying, or discrimination can negatively affect students' self-esteem and increase the risk of anxiety, depression, and risky behaviours.

Peer norms and social dynamics also play a significant role in shaping behaviour within schools. Adolescents are highly sensitive to peer influence, and group norms can either reinforce positive behaviours or encourage risk-taking. Educational psychology highlights that inclusive school practices, clear behavioral expectations, and social-emotional learning (SEL) programs can promote positive peer interactions and reduce harmful behaviours (OECD, 2019).

Overall, the school environment functions as a critical context in adolescent development, interacting with family influences and individual characteristics. A supportive, inclusive, and well-structured school climate can act as a protective factor, enhancing students' well-being and reducing vulnerability to negative outcomes.

Table 2: *Key Dimensions of School Climate and Their Impact*

Dimension	Description	Positive Outcomes	Negative Outcomes
Teacher–Student Relationships	Quality of interaction and support	Engagement, trust, motivation	Disengagement, low motivation
School Belonging	Feeling accepted and included	Well-being, prosocial behaviour	Isolation, anxiety
Peer Norms	Influence of peer group behavior	Positive social behaviour	Risk-taking, peer pressure
School Safety & Inclusion	Safe and respectful environment	Emotional security, participation	Bullying, exclusion

Adolescent Mental Health Models

Adolescent mental health is a multidimensional construct influenced by biological, psychological, and social factors. Developmental and clinical research highlights that mental health during adolescence cannot be understood in isolation, but rather through integrated models that account for individual vulnerabilities and environmental influences. Among the most widely used frameworks are the biopsychosocial model, the risk and protective factors model, and the ecological systems approach.

The biopsychosocial model, originally proposed by George Engel, emphasizes that mental health outcomes result from the interaction of biological predispositions, psychological processes, and social contexts (Engel, 1977). In adolescence, biological changes such as hormonal fluctuations may increase emotional sensitivity, while psychological factors such as self-esteem and coping skills influence how stress is managed. Social elements, including family relationships and school experiences, further shape mental health outcomes.

Another important framework is the risk and protective factors model, which explains how certain conditions increase or decrease the likelihood of negative mental health outcomes. Risk factors may include family conflict, poor school climate, peer pressure, and identity confusion, all of which are associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and engagement in risky behaviours (Rutter, 2006). In contrast, protective factors—such as supportive parenting, strong school belonging, and positive peer relationships—can buffer against these risks and promote resilience.

Additionally, Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides a comprehensive lens for understanding adolescent mental health within interconnected systems, including family, school, and broader societal influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This perspective underscores that changes in one context (e.g., family stress or school climate) can directly or indirectly affect adolescents' psychological well-being.

Overall, these models highlight that adolescent mental health is shaped by dynamic interactions between internal and external factors. Understanding these frameworks is essential for designing effective interventions that address both individual needs and contextual influences within educational settings.

Table 2: *Key Adolescent Mental Health Models*

Model	Key Scholar	Core Concept	Relevance to Study
Biopsychosocial Model	Engel (1977)	Interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors	Explains multidimensional nature of mental health
Risk & Protective Factors Model	Rutter (2006)	Balance between risks and protective elements	Identifies factors influencing risky behaviours
Ecological Systems Theory	Bronfenbrenner (1979)	Multiple environmental systems influence development	Explains interaction between family, school, and society

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological systems theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding adolescent development within multiple, interacting environmental systems. According to this theory, individuals do not develop in isolation; rather, their growth is shaped by dynamic interactions between personal characteristics and contextual influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The model is structured into several nested systems. The microsystem includes immediate environments such as family, school, and peer groups, where direct interactions occur. Parenting practices, teacher–student relationships, and peer dynamics within this level have a direct impact on adolescents' mental health and behaviour. The mesosystem refers to the connections between these settings, such as parent–school collaboration, which can strengthen or weaken developmental outcomes. The exosystem includes broader social structures, such as parents' work conditions or community resources, which indirectly influence adolescents' experiences. Finally, the macrosystem encompasses cultural values, societal norms, and educational policies that shape expectations and opportunities for young people.

This theoretical perspective emphasizes that adolescent well-being and risky behaviours result from the interaction of these systems rather than a single factor. It highlights the importance of coordinated efforts between families, schools, and communities to promote positive development and reduce risks. Therefore, ecological systems theory provides a valuable lens for understanding how multiple contexts jointly influence youth outcomes in educational settings.

Parenting Practices and Adolescent Outcomes

Parenting practices are widely recognized as a central determinant of adolescents' psychological, social, and behavioural development. Research grounded in developmental psychology indicates that parenting styles characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and consistent discipline—particularly authoritative parenting—are associated with positive youth outcomes, including higher self-esteem, better emotional regulation, and stronger academic engagement (Baumrind, 1991; Steinberg, 2014). These practices create a supportive environment in which adolescents feel secure, valued, and guided, facilitating healthy identity development and social competence.

Parental monitoring and open communication also play a critical role in reducing adolescents' involvement in risky behaviours. When parents are aware of their children's activities and maintain open dialogue, adolescents are less likely to engage in substance use, delinquency, or other harmful behaviours (Lamborn et al., 1991). In contrast, parenting characterized by harshness, inconsistency, or neglect has been linked to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and behavioural problems, as well as lower academic motivation.

Moreover, the quality of the parent–child relationship influences how adolescents interpret external environments, including school experiences and peer interactions. Supportive parenting can act as a protective factor, buffering the negative effects of stress and adverse social conditions. Overall, parenting practices shape not only immediate behavioural outcomes but also long-term developmental trajectories, highlighting their importance in promoting adolescent well-being and preventing risk behaviours.

School Climate and Educational Environment

School climate and the broader educational environment play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' mental health, social development, and behavioural outcomes. School climate refers to the quality of interpersonal relationships, teaching practices, safety, and the overall sense of belonging experienced by students. A positive and inclusive school climate has been consistently linked to higher academic achievement, stronger engagement, and improved psychological well-being (Cohen et al., 2009).

One of the key components of school climate is the quality of teacher–student relationships. Supportive, respectful, and responsive interactions with teachers foster students' motivation, self-confidence, and emotional security (Wentzel, 2012). When students feel valued and understood, they are more likely to participate actively in learning and less likely to exhibit disruptive or risky behaviours. In contrast, negative relationships with teachers can contribute to disengagement and lower academic performance.

Additionally, a strong sense of school belonging is a significant protective factor for adolescents. Students who feel accepted and included within their school community tend to demonstrate better social adjustment and lower levels of anxiety and depression. Conversely, environments characterized by bullying, exclusion, and excessive academic pressure can increase psychological distress and vulnerability to risk-taking behaviours (OECD, 2019). Overall, a supportive educational environment serves as a critical context for promoting adolescent well-being and reducing negative developmental outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts an integrative literature review design to examine the relationships between parenting practices, identity development, school climate, and risky behaviours among adolescents. An integrative review allows for the inclusion and synthesis of diverse types of research, including empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and interdisciplinary perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). This approach is particularly appropriate for the present study, as it aims to connect findings from developmental psychology, educational psychology, and adolescent mental health research.

Unlike systematic reviews that focus primarily on narrowly defined research questions and strict inclusion criteria, the integrative review enables a broader exploration of themes and relationships across studies. It allows for the comparison of findings from qualitative and quantitative research, as well as the identification of patterns, contradictions, and gaps in the literature. The design also supports the development of a conceptual framework that integrates parenting, identity, and school-related factors within an ecological perspective.

The primary objective of this research design is to synthesize existing knowledge in order to explain how different environmental and individual variables interact to influence adolescents' well-being and behaviour. By combining theoretical insights with empirical evidence, the study seeks to provide a holistic interpretation of youth development within educational contexts and to generate practical implications for educators, parents, and policymakers.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The data for this study were collected through a comprehensive search of peer-reviewed academic sources. Major electronic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed journals, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), and PsycINFO were used to identify relevant literature. The search focused on publications in English and covered a time frame primarily from 2000 to 2024, while also including seminal earlier works that are foundational to the field, such as those by Erikson (1968) and Bronfenbrenner (1979).

Keywords used in the search process included combinations of terms such as "parenting practices," "adolescent mental health," "identity development," "school climate," "risky behaviours," "peer influence," and "educational environment." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were applied to refine the search and ensure relevance.

The inclusion criteria for selecting studies were as follows: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles, (2) studies focusing on adolescents aged approximately 10–19 years, (3) research examining at least one of the core variables (parenting, identity, school environment, or risky behaviours), and (4) studies providing empirical data or well-established theoretical contributions. Exclusion criteria included non-academic sources, studies focusing exclusively on clinical populations without relevance to educational contexts, and articles lacking sufficient methodological clarity.

This selection process ensured that the review was based on credible, relevant, and high-quality sources, allowing for a reliable synthesis of the literature.

Analytical Approach

The analysis of the selected literature followed a thematic synthesis approach, which involved identifying, organizing, and interpreting key themes across studies. Initially, the selected articles were carefully read and coded according to recurring concepts related to parenting practices, identity development, school climate, and risky behaviours. These codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories aligned with the study's conceptual framework.

The analysis focused on identifying patterns of relationships between variables, such as how parenting styles influence identity formation, or how school climate moderates the relationship between identity and behaviour. Both convergent findings (areas of agreement

across studies) and divergent findings (inconsistencies or contradictions) were examined to provide a balanced and critical interpretation of the literature.

Furthermore, the analysis adopted an ecological perspective, emphasizing the interaction between individual, family, and school-level factors. This allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how multiple influences shape adolescent outcomes simultaneously. The synthesis also considered contextual factors, such as cultural and educational differences, where relevant.

Overall, this analytical approach enabled the integration of diverse findings into a coherent narrative, highlighting key determinants of adolescent well-being and offering evidence-based insights for reducing risky behaviours and promoting positive development within educational settings.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Key Patterns and Trends

The findings of this integrative review reveal several consistent patterns regarding the relationship between parenting practices, identity development, school climate, and adolescents' mental health and behaviour. First, supportive parenting—characterized by warmth, communication, and consistent monitoring—emerges as a strong protective factor associated with positive psychological outcomes, higher academic engagement, and reduced involvement in risky behaviours. In contrast, harsh or inconsistent parenting is consistently linked to increased emotional distress, behavioural problems, and susceptibility to peer pressure.

Second, identity development plays a mediating role in adolescent outcomes. Adolescents with clear and stable identities tend to demonstrate higher self-confidence, better emotional regulation, and lower engagement in risk-taking behaviours. Conversely, identity confusion is associated with vulnerability to external influences, including negative peer norms and maladaptive coping strategies.

Third, the school environment significantly influences both well-being and behaviour. Positive school climates—characterized by supportive teacher–student relationships, inclusivity, and a strong sense of belonging—are associated with improved mental health and reduced risk behaviours. Negative school environments, including bullying, exclusion, and academic pressure, are linked to increased anxiety, disengagement, and behavioural issues.

Comparison with Existing Literature

The findings of this study are consistent with a wide range of existing research in developmental and educational psychology. The positive impact of authoritative parenting aligns with earlier studies that emphasize the role of parental warmth and structure in promoting adolescent well-being (Baumrind, 1991; Steinberg, 2014). Similarly, the role of identity development supports Erikson's (1968) theoretical framework, which highlights identity formation as a central developmental task during adolescence.

Furthermore, the importance of school climate identified in this review corresponds with research demonstrating that supportive educational environments enhance student engagement and emotional well-being (Wentzel, 2012; Cohen et al., 2009). The findings also align with ecological perspectives, which suggest that adolescent behaviour is shaped by the interaction of multiple systems, including family, school, and peer contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

However, some variations in the literature were noted. For example, while most studies emphasize the protective role of parental monitoring, some suggest that excessive control may limit autonomy and negatively affect identity development. Similarly, cultural differences influence how parenting practices and school environments are perceived and experienced, indicating the need for context-sensitive interpretations.

Implications for Education and Policy

The findings of this study have important implications for educational practice and policy development. First, schools should prioritize the creation of positive and inclusive learning environments that promote students' sense of belonging and emotional safety. This can be achieved through the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, anti-bullying strategies, and teacher training focused on building supportive relationships with students.

Second, strengthening parent–school partnerships is essential. Schools should actively engage parents through communication, workshops, and collaborative initiatives aimed at promoting consistent support for adolescents both at home and in school settings. Encouraging parenting practices that combine warmth with appropriate monitoring can significantly reduce the likelihood of risky behaviours.

Third, policymakers should consider integrating mental health support services within educational institutions. Providing access to school psychologists, counseling services, and early intervention programs can help identify and address mental health challenges before they escalate.

Finally, interventions should adopt an ecological approach, recognizing the interconnected nature of family, individual, and school influences. Policies and programs that address multiple levels simultaneously are more likely to produce sustainable improvements in adolescent well-being and behaviour.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be proposed to enhance adolescents' mental health, social well-being, and reduce engagement in risky behaviours within educational contexts.

First, schools should implement structured social-emotional learning (SEL) programs that focus on developing students' emotional regulation, self-awareness, and interpersonal

Table 4: *Summary of Key Findings and Implications*

Dimension	Key Findings	Implications
Parenting Practices	Supportive parenting reduces risk behaviours; harsh parenting increases distress	Promote parent education and involvement
Identity Development	Identity clarity linked to well-being; confusion linked to risk	Support identity exploration through guidance programs
School Climate	Positive climate improves mental health and engagement	Implement inclusive policies and SEL programs
Ecological Interaction	Multiple factors interact to shape outcomes	Develop integrated family–school interventions

skills. These programs can strengthen resilience, improve peer relationships, and support positive identity development. Additionally, schools should promote inclusive practices that foster a strong sense of belonging and ensure that all students feel valued and supported.

Second, strengthening teacher–student relationships is essential. Teachers should receive professional development training focused on communication skills, emotional support, and classroom management strategies that create a positive and respectful learning environment. Supportive interactions between teachers and students can significantly reduce disengagement and behavioural problems.

Third, parent–school collaboration should be actively encouraged. Schools can organize workshops, seminars, and regular communication channels to guide parents on effective parenting practices, including monitoring, communication, and emotional support. A consistent approach between home and school environments enhances adolescents' stability and reduces conflicting expectations.

Fourth, policymakers should invest in school-based mental health services, including counseling, psychological support, and early intervention programs. These services can help identify students at risk and provide timely support to prevent the escalation of mental health issues.

Finally, interventions should adopt an ecological approach, addressing not only individual students but also their family and school environments. Programs that integrate efforts across these domains are more effective in promoting long-term positive outcomes and reducing risky behaviours among youth.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the complex relationships between parenting practices, identity development, school climate, and adolescents' mental health and risky behaviours within educational settings. The findings highlight that adolescent well-being is shaped by the dynamic interaction of individual, familial, and environmental factors. Supportive parenting practices, particularly those characterized by warmth, communication, and appropriate monitoring, play a crucial role in fostering positive developmental outcomes. At the same time, identity development emerges as a central process influencing how adolescents perceive themselves and respond to social pressures.

The role of the educational environment is equally significant. Schools that promote inclusivity, positive relationships, and a strong sense of belonging serve as protective contexts that enhance students' well-being and reduce engagement in risky behaviours. Conversely, negative school climates characterized by exclusion, bullying, and excessive pressure can exacerbate psychological distress and behavioural problems.

Importantly, this study emphasizes the need for an ecological and interactional perspective. Adolescents' outcomes cannot be fully understood by examining single factors in isolation; rather, they result from the interplay between parenting, identity, and school context. This highlights the importance of coordinated efforts among families, schools, and policymakers.

In conclusion, promoting adolescent mental health and reducing risky behaviours requires integrated strategies that address multiple dimensions of young people's lives. By fostering supportive parenting, strengthening school environments, and encouraging

collaboration between key stakeholders, it is possible to create conditions that support positive youth development and long-term well-being.

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WELL-BEING AND TOURISM: A PARTICIPATORY STUDY ON MENTAL AND SOCIAL HEALTH IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional phenomenon that influences not only economic development but also the social and psychological well-being of host communities. This study examines the relationship between tourism and well-being, with a specific focus on perceived psychological well-being, as reflected in participants' narratives of emotional balance, life satisfaction, and work-related strain. A participatory, community-based research design was adopted to ensure the inclusion of local voices and lived experiences in the research process. Data were collected through four focus group discussions and 12 semi-structured interviews with local residents, tourism workers, and community stakeholders in selected tourism areas in Albania. The focus groups represented different tourism contexts, including coastal, rural, and protected areas, while interviews provided deeper insights into individual lived experiences. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to both positive and negative dimensions of tourism's impact on well-being. Findings indicate that tourism contributes to enhance social and subjective psychological well-being, primarily through increased social interaction, strengthened community cohesion, and improved life satisfaction associated with economic opportunities and local development. However, participants also reported experiences of perceived psychological strain, expressed through narratives of seasonal employment insecurity, work-related pressure, intensified workload during peak tourism periods, reduced rest time, and rising living costs. These experiences were consistently described as contributing to emotional fatigue and a reduced sense of balance in daily life. The study concludes that tourism has a dual and context-dependent impact on well-being, simultaneously generating social benefits and psychosocial pressures.

These findings highlight the importance of integrating mental and social well-being considerations into inclusive and sustainable tourism policies.

Keywords: *perceived psychological well-being, tourism, participatory research, qualitative study, mental health, Albania*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has evolved into one of the most significant global industries, contributing not only to economic growth but also to broader social transformations within host communities. Traditionally, tourism research has emphasized its economic contributions, including employment generation, income diversification, and infrastructure development. Well-being itself is a complex and multidimensional construct, encompassing subjective, psychological, and social dimensions. The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between tourism development and perceived psychological and social well-being among local communities in Albania. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how residents, tourism workers, and community stakeholders experience and interpret the impacts of tourism in their everyday lives, with attention to both its positive contributions and negative psychosocial pressures.

Research Objectives:

- To examine how tourism development influences perceived psychological and social well-being among local communities.
- To identify and analyze the positive and negative impacts of tourism, including economic benefits, social interaction, and psychosocial pressures.
- To explore how individuals in different tourism contexts (coastal, rural, and protected areas) experience and interpret the balance between the benefits and challenges of tourism in their everyday lives.

In the base of the study there are these research questions:

- How do local communities in Albania perceive the impact of tourism on their psychological and social well-being?
- What positive and negative effects of tourism are experienced by residents, tourism workers, and community stakeholders in their daily lives?
- How do different tourism contexts (coastal, rural, and protected areas) shape the way communities interpret and experience tourism-related well-being?

From an interdisciplinary perspective, tourism is closely linked to both sociology and psychology, as it involves dynamic interactions between individuals, social groups, and broader structural conditions. Sociological approaches conceptualize tourism as a social practice embedded in systems of meaning, identity, and power relations. Research in this area highlights that tourism can enhance positive emotions, life satisfaction, and a sense of well-being through increased income, social interaction, and exposure to new experiences (Filep & Deery, 2010; Nawijn, 2011). In the case of Albania, tourism has experienced rapid growth over the past decade, particularly in coastal, rural, and protected areas. This expansion has brought significant socio-economic changes, including increased employment opportunities, infrastructure development, and greater international visibility. At the same time, local communities are increasingly exposed to new forms of pressure, including seasonal labor dynamics, rising living costs, and shifts in social relations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

Several theoretical frameworks have been used to explain the relationship between tourism and well-being. One of the most widely applied is Social Exchange Theory (SET), which suggests that individuals evaluate tourism based on perceived benefits and costs (Ap, 1992). According to this perspective, residents are more likely to support tourism development when they perceive that its benefits outweigh its negative impacts. SET has been extensively used to explain residents' attitudes toward tourism and its perceived effects on quality of life. In parallel, psychological frameworks such as Subjective Well-Being (SWB) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provide valuable insights into how tourism affects individual well-being. SWB focuses on life satisfaction and emotional experiences (Diener et al., 1999), while SDT emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Tourism can support these needs by providing opportunities for income, social interaction, and personal development, but it may also undermine them through unstable working conditions and limited control over work environments. By combining these theoretical perspectives, researchers can better understand the complex and multidimensional nature of tourism's impact on well-being.

Tourism and Well-Being: Conceptualizing Well-Being in Tourism Research

The concept of well-being has become increasingly central in tourism research, reflecting a broader shift from purely economic evaluations of development toward more holistic and human-centered perspectives. Rather than focusing solely on income or employment indicators, recent studies emphasize the importance of understanding how tourism affects individuals' quality of life and overall functioning. In this context, well-being is typically conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that includes subjective, psychological, and social components (Diener et al., 1999; Keyes, 1998; Ryff, 1989). Two major theoretical approaches have been particularly influential in shaping well-being research. The first, subjective well-being (SWB), focuses on individuals' cognitive and affective evaluations of their lives, including life satisfaction and emotional experiences such as happiness (Diener et al., 1999). The second, often referred to as the eudaimonic approach, emphasizes optimal psychological functioning and self-realization, including dimensions such as autonomy, personal growth, and purpose in life (Ryff, 1989). Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how individuals experience and interpret changes in their living conditions.

Positive and Negative Impacts of Tourism on Local Communities

The literature consistently emphasizes that tourism generates a complex set of outcomes for host communities, particularly in relation to well-being. Rather than producing uniform effects, tourism development tends to create a combination of social, economic, and psychological consequences that vary depending on context, intensity of development, and the degree of local participation. On the positive side, tourism has been widely associated with increased employment opportunities, improved infrastructure, and enhanced community pride (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011; Woo et al., 2015). These outcomes can contribute to strengthening local economies and fostering a greater sense

of collective identity, particularly in communities where tourism becomes a central development strategy. Also, these benefits can strengthen social cohesion by fostering collective participation in tourism-related activities and promoting a shared sense of identity and purpose within communities. In addition to economic improvements, tourism also facilitates social interaction between residents and visitors, which can broaden social networks and encourage cultural exchange. Such interactions are often linked to increased openness, tolerance, and social integration (Kim et al., 2013). The literature also highlights that tourism may generate a range of negative effects that directly or indirectly influence well-being. Rapid tourism growth can lead to overcrowding, environmental degradation, rising living costs, and increased pressure on local resources, all of which may contribute to dissatisfaction and social tension within host communities (Sharpley, 2014; UNWTO, 2021). Furthermore, tourism-related employment is often characterized by seasonality, job insecurity, and demanding working conditions, which can contribute to stress and reduced quality of life (Jordan et al., 2013). From a labor perspective, tourism-related employment is frequently characterized by seasonality, job insecurity, and demanding working conditions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, participatory research design grounded in an interpretivist epistemological paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through individuals' lived experiences and meanings. The participatory orientation of the study ensures that local communities are not treated as passive subjects of research but as active contributors to knowledge production, aligning with principles of community-based participatory research (Cornwall &Jewkes, 1995). The study was conducted in selected tourism destinations in Albania, including coastal, rural, and protected areas: Vlora, Lezha, Gjirokastra, Përmet (Vjosa Valley), Vermosh, Tamara. These locations were purposefully chosen to reflect different typologies and intensities of tourism development, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of how contextual variation influences perceived well-being. Coastal areas represent high-density and seasonal tourism environments, rural areas reflect emerging and community-based tourism models, while protected areas represent nature-based tourism contexts with stronger sustainability orientations. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who have direct experience with tourism-related activities and can provide rich, in-depth insights into its impacts. The sample included local residents, tourism workers, and community stakeholders. In total, data were collected through four focus group discussions (In Vlora, Gjirokastra, Vjosa Valley and Tamara) and twelve semi-structured interviews in all areas of the study, ensuring a balance between collective and individual forms of expression.

FINDINGS

Positive Impacts on Psychological and Social Well-Being

Economic Opportunities and Conditional Life Satisfaction

Across all data collected, tourism was consistently framed as a crucial economic resource, particularly in areas with limited employment alternatives. Participants did not simply

describe tourism as beneficial; rather, they positioned it as necessary for maintaining household stability. As one respondent explained:

> "During the summer months, tourism is what keeps our family going. We earn in three months what we use for the rest of the year."; "In summer, everyone works. Even those who don't have jobs during the year find something to do because of tourism" (Focus group, coastal area).

This statement illustrates how tourism income is concentrated and relied upon as a primary survival mechanism, rather than a supplementary benefit. The emphasis on "three months" highlights the temporal concentration of economic activity and reinforces the seasonal nature of perceived stability.As one respondent reported: "It is not a stable job, but without tourism, we would struggle much more. At least we can plan some things for the family" (Interview, tourism worker): "Tourism gives us the chance to earn quickly, but only for a short time. The rest of the year is uncertain." (Interview, tourism worker).

Here, the participant explicitly acknowledges the instability of tourism employment, yet still frames it positively in comparative terms ("we would struggle much more"). This suggests that life satisfaction is constructed not through absolute improvement, but through relative comparison with worse alternatives. As one respondent explained: "Before tourism, many people were leaving the village. Now, at least some stay because they can work here." (Focus Group, rural area).

This quote expands the economic dimension into a broader social implication, linking tourism to reduced out-migration and local continuity. Economic opportunity here is interpreted not only individually but collectively, as contributing to community sustainability.

Social Interaction and Seasonal Cohesion

Participants frequently described tourism as increasing the intensity and frequency of social interaction. However, their accounts reveal that this interaction is not neutral—it is shaped by the rhythms and demands of tourism activity. As one respondent explained: "When tourists come, the village becomes active. People communicate more, even neighbors who don't usually talk." (Focus Group, protected area).

The phrase "becomes active" suggests that social life is perceived as dormant outside the tourism season, and activated through tourism presence. Interaction here is not continuous, but contingent on external stimuli.

> "Tourism makes us more open. We talk to strangers, we share our culture, and this changes how we see ourselves." (Interview, local resident).
> "During the season, we feel more united because everyone is working toward the same goal." (Focus Group, coastal area).

The emphasis on "the same goal" indicates that cohesion is functionally driven, emerging from shared economic activity rather than intrinsic social bonds.

Reframing Local Identity and External Recognition

Participants frequently linked tourism with a re-evaluation of their community's identity and value, triggered by interactions with tourists. According to a respondent:

> "We didn't see our village as something special before. Now tourists come just to experience what we have every day." (Interview, rural resident). "When foreigners appreciate our nature, it makes us feel proud and more responsible for it." (Focus Group, protected area).

Here, pride is directly linked to external appreciation, suggesting that emotional attachment is reinforced through recognition from outsiders, but also translated into a sense of responsibility. "Tourism has changed how we present ourselves. We are more aware of our traditions now." (Interview, community stakeholder). This indicates a more conscious and performative engagement with identity, where traditions are not only preserved but also strategically expressed in response to tourism.

Negative Psychosocial Impacts of Tourism. Work Pressure and Emotional Exhaustion

Participants consistently described tourism work as physically and emotionally demanding, particularly during peak periods. As an interviewer reports:

> "There are days when you don't sit down at all. You just keep working because there are always customers." (Interview, tourism worker).
> "In summer, there is no difference between weekdays and weekends. It is nonstop work." (Focus group, coastal area).
> "You have to be polite all the time, even when you are tired. That is the hardest part." (Interview, service worker).

These findings reveal a pattern of cumulative physical and emotional strain, where tourism work requires constant performance and emotional regulation. This contributes to psychological fatigue and reduces overall well-being despite economic gains.

Disruption of Daily Life and Relational Strain

Tourism was also described as reshaping daily routines and affecting personal relationships.

> "During the season, I don't have time for my children. I leave early and come back late." (Interview, parent).
> "We live differently in summer. Everything revolves around work, not life." (Focus group, rural area).
> "You earn money, but you lose your routine and peace." (Interview, local resident).

This quote encapsulates a clear trade-off narrative, where gains in one domain lead to losses in another.

Perceived Economic Pressure and Cost Inflation

Participants widely perceived tourism as increasing the cost of living.

> "Prices double in summer. Even locals struggle to afford things." (Focus group, coastal area)
> "Tourism benefits some people, but for others it just makes life more expensive. "Interview resident not working in tourism).
> "Rent, food, everything goes up because of tourists" (Focus group, urban/coastal mix)

These narratives reflect a perception of economic displacement, where tourism-driven price increases disproportionately affect those not directly benefiting from tourism income. This contributes to uneven well-being outcomes within the same community.

Inequality, Exclusion, and Emerging Social Tensions

Participants also highlighted disparities in access to tourism benefits, as in quotes below:

> "Some families have hotels and businesses, others have nothing. The difference is getting bigger." (Interview, local resident);
> "If you are not connected to tourism, you are left behind." (Focus group, rural area).
> "There is competition now, not always cooperation." (Interview, stakeholder).

These findings point to emerging intra-community inequalities, where tourism amplifies existing social and economic divisions. Perceived exclusion from tourism benefits may weaken trust and increase latent social tension, potentially undermining long-term community cohesion.

Tourism as a Source of Ambivalent Well-Being

Across all narratives, tourism is experienced as a dual system of gains and pressures. Participants did not describe tourism in absolute terms, but as something to be constantly balanced and negotiated. See the quotes below:

> "Tourism helps us live, but it also takes a lot from us." (Interview, tourism worker).
> "It is both good and difficult. You cannot say it is only one thing"; "Tourism gives us money, but it also takes our energy and peace" (Focus group).

These reflections demonstrate that tourism is experienced as an ambivalent and dynamic process, where individuals continuously weigh its benefits against its costs. Well-being in tourism contexts emerges as a relational and context-dependent experience, shaped by seasonal rhythms, economic dependence, and individual positioning within the tourism system. Rather than being uniformly positive or negative, tourism generates simultaneous and overlapping realities of benefit and strain.

This final synthesis reflects a clear coexistence of hedonic gains (income, satisfaction) and psychological costs (stress, fatigue). The data suggest that well-being in tourism

contexts is not linear but dynamically negotiated, shaped by seasonality, employment structure, and social positioning. This reinforces the need to conceptualize tourism impacts as relational and context-dependent rather than universally positive or negative.

RESULTS

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that tourism has a dual and context-dependent impact on psychological and social well-being among local communities in Albania. By integrating participants' lived experiences with the theoretical framework, the results reveal a complex interaction between economic benefits, social dynamics, and psychological outcomes. From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, the findings confirm that residents evaluate tourism through a continuous assessment of perceived benefits and costs (Ap, 1992). Participants clearly recognized the economic advantages of tourism, particularly in terms of employment opportunities and income generation. These benefits were closely associated with increased life satisfaction and a sense of improved living conditions, supporting previous studies that link tourism development with enhanced quality of life (Kim et al., 2013; Uysal et al., 2016). However, unlike purely economic interpretations, the present findings show that these benefits are often perceived as temporary and unstable, shaped by strong seasonality. This suggests that positive evaluations of tourism are conditional and may fluctuate over time depending on economic security and continuity. At the same time, the study highlights the importance of social well-being, particularly in terms of increased interaction, cooperation, and community engagement. Consistent with existing literature (Woo et al., 2015), tourism appears to strengthen social ties and foster a sense of collective identity, especially during peak seasons. However, the findings extend previous research by showing that this cohesion is often situational and temporary, emerging primarily in response to shared economic activity rather than long-term structural change. On the one hand, tourism enhances hedonic well-being, as reflected in increased life satisfaction, positive emotions, and improved material conditions (Diener et al., 1999). On the other hand, the study reveals significant constraints on eudaimonic well-being, particularly in relation to autonomy, work-life balance, and psychological stability (Ryff, 1989). Participants' narratives of stress, emotional fatigue, and loss of personal time suggest that while tourism may improve short-term satisfaction, it can simultaneously undermine deeper dimensions of well-being related to personal growth and meaningful life balance. The findings also resonate with research on emotional labor, particularly in service-oriented tourism work (Hochschild, 1983). Participants described the need to maintain positive interactions with tourists, indicating a continuous process of emotional regulation. This contributes to psychological strain and reinforces the idea that tourism-related employment involves not only physical effort but also significant emotional demands.

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GIRLS' AND WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN ALBANIA (1912-1939)

Trends, Inequalities, and the Development of Women's Agency

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the development of girls' and women's primary education in Albania during the period 1912-1939, combining descriptive statistical analysis with a theoretically informed interpretation. Drawing on enrolment data from selected academic years (1919-1920, 1926-1927, and 1935-1936), the study identifies trends in girls' participation and patterns of gender inequality across educational levels. The findings reveal a gradual increase in girls' enrolment over time, rising from approximately 10.7% in 1919-1920 to nearly 29.4% in 1935-1936. However, this expansion was uneven and did not translate into equal participation at higher levels of education, where girls remained significantly underrepresented. The analysis is framed through the capability approach (Sen, 2011), which emphasizes the distinction between formal access to education and the expansion of real opportunities. In this context, the findings suggest that while educational provision improved, structural and socio-cultural constraints limited the realization of women's agency. The study contributes to the understanding of the relationship between education, gender, and development by demonstrating that

increased access does not necessarily imply equal opportunity, particularly in historically constrained social contexts.

Key words: *girls' education; women's education; gender inequality; educational access; capability approach; women's agency; Albania; historical analysis*

INTRODUCTION

The declaration of Albania's independence in 1912 marked the beginning of a complex and multidimensional state-building process, in which education was widely regarded as a fundamental instrument for nation-building and social development (Nathanaili, 2025).

In a context characterized by high levels of illiteracy and the absence of a consolidated educational infrastructure, the establishment of a national education system represented a major challenge for state institutions (Fischer, 1984). Within this framework, the inclusion of girls and women in education emerges as a key dimension for understanding not only the development of the education system, but also broader social and cultural transformations in Albanian society. On the one hand, women's education was closely linked to modernization efforts and the need to strengthen the country's human capital. On the other hand, it challenged deeply rooted traditional norms that confined women primarily to the private sphere (Durham, 1909; Elsie, 2010).

In this study, the concept of women's agency is explicitly grounded in the capability approach developed by Sen (2011: 210-225). Within this framework, agency refers to an individual's ability to pursue goals that they value and have reason to value. Education is understood as a key capability that enables the expansion of such agency, by increasing individuals' opportunities to make meaningful choices and participate in social life. However, the presence of educational institutions or formal access to schooling does not automatically translate into the expansion of agency. As highlighted by Sen (2011: 17) a distinction must be made between formal opportunities and real freedoms. This distinction is particularly relevant in contexts where socio-cultural constraints, such as patriarchal norms, limit the effective use of available opportunities. In this way, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between education, gender, and development in the Albanian context.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study aims to analyse the development of women's educational rights in Albania during the period 1912-1939. The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the capability approach, which conceptualizes development as the expansion of individuals' real freedoms and opportunities rather than merely economic growth (Sen, 2011; Robeyns, 2017). Within this perspective, women are not viewed as passive beneficiaries of public policies, but as active agents capable of shaping their own life trajectories. Education plays a central role in this process, as it enhances individuals' capabilities and expands their opportunities for participation in social, economic, and political life (Nussbaum, 2000). However, the extent to which education contributes to the development of women's agency depends significantly on the broader socio-cultural context, particularly gender norms and institutional structures.

In societies characterized by strong patriarchal systems, women's access to resources, including education, is often mediated by social norms and power relations. Kandiyoti (1988) conceptualizes this dynamic as a process of "bargaining with patriarchy," where

women's opportunities are negotiated within existing gender hierarchies. Similarly, Walby (1990) emphasizes that patriarchy operates through both private and public structures, shaping women's access to education and participation in public life.

In the Albanian context, anthropological and historical studies highlight the persistence of gendered social structures that limited women's autonomy and participation beyond the domestic sphere (Durham, 1909; Fischer, 1984; Young, 2000; Elsie, 2010). These norms influenced not only everyday life but also educational access, where boys were systematically prioritized over girls. At the same time, state-building efforts and educational reforms created new institutional opportunities for expanding schooling (Vickers, 1999). However, the gap between formal policies and actual participation remained significant, reflecting a broader tension between institutional development and socio-cultural constraints.

From a capability perspective, this gap illustrates a situation in which formal educational opportunities exist, but are not fully translated into real freedoms for girls. Therefore, analysing girls' education in Albania during this period requires an integrated approach that combines statistical evidence with socio-cultural and institutional analysis.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive historical approach, combining statistical analysis with institutional and socio-cultural interpretation. The methodological design is informed by the capability approach, which emphasizes the distinction between formal opportunities and actual outcomes (Sen, 2011). This conceptual distinction is central to the analysis of girls' education in Albania during this period, where increased enrolment does not necessarily imply equal opportunities for educational progression.

Due to the fragmented nature of historical data, the analysis follows a selective and indicator-based strategy. Rather than relying on a continuous time series, the study focuses on specific academic years for which comparable data are available. The academic year 1919 -1920 is used as a baseline, as it provides detailed enrolment data disaggregated by gender and prefecture. The year 1926-1927 is included because it offers additional enrolment data disaggregated by educational level, enabling comparison between primary and secondary education. Finally, the academic year 1930-1931 is used to capture developments in educational infrastructure, particularly the expansion of schools and the presence of female teaching staff.

The analysis is structured around three main dimensions: (1) gender disparities in enrolment, (2) differences across educational levels, and (3) institutional development over time. Given the absence of consistent data across all years, trends are not interpreted as continuous statistical series but as indicative patterns based on available evidence.

Importantly, the capability approach informs not only the interpretation of results but also the selection of indicators. Enrolment data are used as a proxy for access to education, while differences across levels of education are interpreted as indicators of unequal opportunities for progression. Similarly, the expansion of schools and teaching staff is analysed as an institutional condition that may enable, but does not guarantee, the realization of educational opportunities for girls.

This integrated approach allows the study to move beyond a purely descriptive account and to interpret statistical patterns in relation to broader social and structural constraints.

The dataset used in this study is based on a previously published monograph by one

of the authors (Nathanaili, V., 2016). While the original work focused on the general development of the Albanian education system, the present article offers a new and joint analytical perspective by examining the data through the lens of gender inequality and the capability approach.

Research questions

- What was the extent of gender disparity in school enrolment in Albania in 1919-1920, 1926-1927 and 1935-1936?
- What patterns of inequality can be observed in girls' access to and progression within the education system?
- To what extent can the expansion of educational provision be interpreted as an expansion of real opportunities for girls and women in light of socio-cultural constraints?

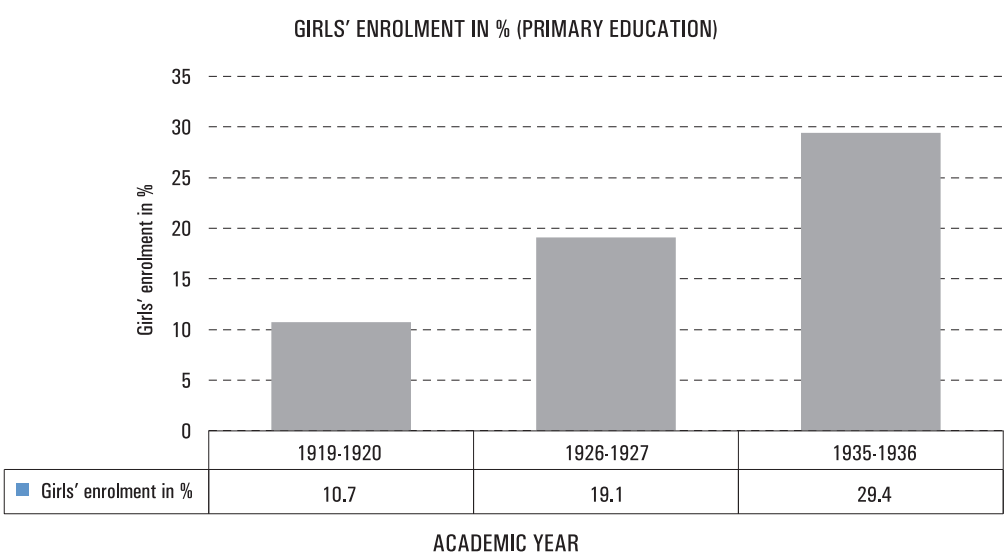
DATA AND DISCUSSION

Gender disparity in school enrolment in Albania in 1919-1920, 1926-1927 and 1935-1936

The analysis of enrolment data across the academic years 1919-1920, 1926-1927, and 1935-1936 reveals a clear upward trend in girls' participation in primary education in Albania (Figure 1). During the Austro-Hungarian administration (1916-1918), primary education was made compulsory for children aged 7 to 14, corresponding to a seven-year cycle, as reflected in early post-independence educational regulations. This structure was later revised through the Organic Law on Education (1929), which standardised primary education into a six-year cycle and redefined compulsory schooling for children aged 6 to 13.

In 1919-1920, girls represented approximately 10.7% of total enrolment, indicating extremely limited access to education. By 1926-1927, their participation in primary education increased to approximately 19.1% (5,092 girls out of 26,612 pupils), reflecting a significant expansion in access. This trend continued in 1935-1936, when girls accounted

Figure 1: *Girls' share of total school enrolment in Albania (1919-1920, 1926-1927, and 1935-1936)*



for approximately 29.4% of primary school total enrolment (15,612 girls out of 53,041 pupils). Although boys continued to constitute the majority of students, the increase in girls' participation over time suggests a gradual but substantial shift towards greater inclusion. Despite this progress, gender disparities remained evident, as girls consistently represented less than one-third of total enrolment. These findings indicate that the expansion of education in Albania during this period was accompanied by increasing, yet still incomplete, gender inclusion. Regional variations persisted in 1935-1936, with prefectures such as Korçë and Gjirokastër showing relatively higher levels of female participation, while others continued to exhibit more limited inclusion.

Patterns of inequality

While the increase in girls' enrolment over time indicates a positive trend, a closer examination reveals persistent and structured patterns of inequality within the education system.

a) Inequality in access

Although girls' participation increased between 1919 and 1936, they remained consistently underrepresented compared to boys, particularly beyond the primary level. This suggests that access was expanding in formal terms but remained uneven in practice. The data indicate a gradual increase in girls' enrolment; however, this expansion remained unequal, with girls continuing to be underrepresented relative to boys, especially at higher levels of education.

b) Inequality in progression

Where grade-level data are available, a clear pattern of attrition emerges: girls' participation declines significantly in higher grades. This indicates that even when access was secured, sustained participation was limited. A clear pattern of attrition is observed, with girls' participation decreasing across successive grades, pointing to structural barriers affecting their progression within the education system.

c) Inequality by type of education

The 1929 Organic Law on Education provides further evidence that the expansion of girls' education was shaped by gendered expectations.

> Article 65: In Female Normal Schools, the subjects listed in Article 63 are taught, with the exception of political economy, which is substituted by domestic economy and household work, along with manual work conducted through specialized methods of sewing, cutting, and embroidery.

By introducing a differentiated curriculum for female students, the law reinforced traditional roles, thereby limiting the extent to which educational expansion translated into equal opportunities. Girls were more likely to be enrolled in vocational or gendered forms of education (e.g., sewing, domestic skills), while boys were more present in academic tracks. This reflects a gendered structuring of educational opportunities. The distribution of girls across educational tracks suggests a gendered division, with girls more frequently channelled into vocational or domestic-oriented training, reinforcing traditional gender roles.

d) Hidden inequality

Even where quantitative indicators show improvement, underlying socio-cultural constraints continued to shape participation patterns, limiting the depth and impact of these gains. Thus, apparent progress in enrolment figures may conceal persistent forms of inequality embedded in social norms and expectations.

Expansion of educational provision and real opportunities

The expansion of education during this period can be analysed by distinguishing between formal provision and real opportunities, particularly in light of socio-cultural constraints. Evidence from the academic years 1937-1938 and 1938-1939 (Nathanaili, 2016, pp. 234-236) provides concrete indications of the expansion of literacy courses as a central priority of the Ministry of Education. According to the Ministry's report, these courses were implemented "for the first time on such a scale," with 30 courses for women (1,900 participants) and 96 courses for men (approximately 3,000 participants). However, the structure and content of these courses reveal important gender differences. While both men and women were included, women's courses, particularly those focused on manual work, were explicitly oriented towards domestic preparation. The curriculum included hygiene, childcare, household management, sewing (hand and machine), dress cutting, embroidery, knitting, and basic knowledge of diseases, especially epidemic ones. Furthermore, the involvement of midwives, doctors, and local figures in delivering lectures on everyday life and family-related issues indicates that these courses were designed not only to reduce illiteracy but also to shape women's roles as mothers and household managers. The stated aim of forming "careful mothers and emancipated women" reflects a specific model of female education that combined literacy with domestic responsibility.

Additional evidence from 1938 further illustrates how efforts to expand female education were closely intertwined with gendered expectations. Within the broader framework of anti-illiteracy initiatives, the Singer Sewing Machine Company requested permission from the Ministry of Education to use school classrooms during summer holidays to organise free sewing courses for girls and women (Nathanaili, 2016, p. 238). This request was officially approved by Minister A. Dibra, who, on 22 July 1938, issued a circular to education inspectors instructing schools to provide one or two classrooms for this purpose, under the condition that any damages would be covered by the company. While they expanded access to training opportunities for women, their content was explicitly oriented towards domestic and gender-specific skills. This indicates that institutional support for female education extended beyond formal schooling and involved cooperation with private actors, yet continued to reinforce traditional gender roles. Thus, even as educational provision widened, the nature of the opportunities offered remained shaped by prevailing socio-cultural expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

These findings suggest that, although educational provision expanded significantly in quantitative terms, the opportunities offered to women remained structured within clearly defined gender roles. While the proportion of girls in school enrolment increased significantly over time, this growth did not eliminate gender disparities. Girls remained consistently underrepresented, particularly at higher levels of education.

From a capability perspective (Sen, 2011), these findings highlight an important distinction between formal access to education and the expansion of real opportunities. The observed increase in enrolment suggests that educational provision improved over time; however, the limited progression of girls to secondary education indicates that these opportunities were not equally accessible in practice. In this sense, the expansion of schooling can be interpreted as a partial enhancement of capabilities, rather than a full realization of women's agency.

This gap between access and progression is further illuminated when considered in light of socio-cultural constraints. Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of "bargaining with patriarchy" provides a useful framework for understanding how women's educational opportunities may be negotiated within family and societal structures. In contexts where gender roles are strongly defined, girls' education, especially beyond the primary level, may be perceived as less necessary or even undesirable. As a result, even when schools are available, the decision to continue education may be constrained by social expectations and power relations within the household. The Albanian case reflects this dynamic. While state-building efforts and educational expansion created new institutional opportunities, these were embedded within a broader social context characterized by patriarchal norms. Consequently, the increase in girls' enrolment did not automatically translate into sustained participation or equal educational outcomes. The findings therefore suggest that the development of girls' education in Albania during this period should be understood as a process of partial and uneven inclusion. Educational expansion improved access, but structural and cultural barriers continued to limit girls' ability to fully benefit from these opportunities.

Overall, this study demonstrates the importance of combining statistical analysis with a theoretically informed interpretation. By integrating the capability approach with insights from gender theory, it becomes possible to move beyond descriptive trends and to better understand the underlying mechanisms shaping educational inequality.

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THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL LEADER IN CREATING A COLLABORATIVE CLIMATE, ATMOSPHERE, AND ENVIRONMENT IN THE SCHOOL. TALIS AS A TOOL FOR MEASURING SCHOOL CLIMATE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines democratic school leadership and governance through a comparative analysis between Albania and OECD countries, using evidence from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). The study explores how contemporary leadership models, school climate, and institutional autonomy interact to promote democratic governance in schools. The central hypothesis argues that aligning Albanian school leadership practices with TALIS-informed international standards can strengthen participation, transparency, and decentralization in school governance. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative meta-analysis of international literature, OECD TALIS data, and Albanian legal and policy documents, including the Law on Pre-University Education and official guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MAS), ASCAP, and IZHA. Findings indicate that while OECD systems demonstrate higher levels of distributed leadership and teacher participation, Albania continues to face structural and cultural constraints related to centralized decision-making. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aimed at enhancing democratic leadership and evidence-based governance in Albanian schools.

Keywords: *Democratic school leadership, TALIS, OECD, Albania, school governance, decentralization*

INTRODUCTION

School leadership has become a central pillar of educational quality and democratic governance in contemporary education systems. International research emphasizes that effective school leadership extends beyond managerial control to include participatory decision-making, professional collaboration, and the cultivation of a positive school climate (Leithwood et al., 2020). These dimensions are particularly relevant for countries undergoing systemic reforms, such as Albania, where decentralization and school autonomy remain ongoing policy objectives. School leadership has become a central concern in international educational research and policymaking, particularly in relation to school effectiveness, professional collaboration, and democratic governance. Contemporary leadership paradigms emphasize participation, transparency, and shared responsibility rather than hierarchical control (Leithwood et al., 2020). These principles are increasingly reflected in OECD policy frameworks and empirical instruments such as TALIS. In Albania, educational reforms over the past decade have sought to modernize school governance, strengthen leadership capacity, and enhance school autonomy within a centralized system. However, evidence-based evaluations of leadership practices and democratic governance remain limited. This study addresses this gap by comparing Albania's school leadership profile with OECD countries using TALIS as the primary analytical lens. This article investigates democratic school leadership through a **comparative Albania–OECD lens**, grounded in TALIS findings. It seeks to answer the following research question: To what extent do Albanian school leadership practices align with OECD standards of democratic leadership, as evidenced by TALIS data, and what policy implications emerge from this comparison?

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Contemporary Models of School Leadership

Current leadership theories emphasize distributed, instructional, and transformational leadership as dominant paradigms in effective school management (Bush, 2020). Distributed leadership promotes shared authority among school actors; instructional leadership prioritizes teaching and learning quality; transformational leadership focuses on vision, motivation, and professional growth (Hallinger, 2018). OECD evidence shows that these models are strongly associated with positive school climate and teacher collaboration.

Democratic and Contemporary Models of School Leadership

Contemporary literature identifies several leadership models closely associated with democratic governance. Empirical studies demonstrate that schools adopting these models exhibit higher levels of trust, teacher engagement, and institutional accountability (Harris & Jones, 2019). Based on contemporary literature, several leadership models are consistently associated with democratic and effective school governance:

DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Democratic school leadership refers to leadership practices that promote participation, dialogue, equity, and shared decision-making among school stakeholders (Gunter, 2016). Such leadership is closely associated with school climates characterized by trust, collaboration, and professional autonomy.

Democratic leadership does not negate accountability; rather, it redistributes authority and responsibility, fostering collective ownership of school goals (Harris & Jones, 2019).

a) Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership emphasizes the sharing of leadership roles among teachers and staff, reducing reliance on a single authority figure (Spillane, 2006). TALIS data indicate that OECD schools with higher levels of distributed leadership report stronger teacher collaboration and professional trust.

b) Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership focuses on improving teaching and learning through pedagogical guidance, feedback, and professional development (Hallinger, 2018). In democratic contexts, instructional leadership is exercised collaboratively, involving teachers in curriculum planning and evaluation.

c) Transformational Leadership

Transformational leaders articulate a shared vision, inspire collective commitment, and promote innovation (Bush, 2020). This model supports democratic governance by aligning individual motivations with institutional goals.

d) Participative Leadership

Participative leadership explicitly involves teachers and staff in decision-making processes, particularly regarding school development plans and internal policies (Leithwood et al., 2020). TALIS findings show that participative leadership correlates strongly with positive school climate indicators. Participative and Democratic Leadership, characterized by transparency, dialogue, and stakeholder involvement (Gunter, 2016).

School Climate as a Foundation for Democratic Governance

School climate encompasses relational, organizational, and cultural dimensions shaping daily school life. School climate refers to the quality of social relationships, institutional norms, and professional interactions within the school environment (Thapa et al., 2013). A positive climate supports collaboration, innovation, and democratic practices. Democratic school governance is characterized by transparency, participation, and shared responsibility among leaders, teachers, students, and parents (Gunter, 2016). International research confirms that positive school climate functions as both a condition and an outcome of democratic leadership practices TALIS data consistently show that schools with inclusive leadership report stronger professional collaboration and teacher autonomy (OECD, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts **meta-analysis** as its primary methodological approach. Meta-analysis allows for the systematic synthesis of existing research findings, enabling the identification of consistent patterns across multiple studies (Glass, 1976). The analysis synthesizes findings from:

- OECD TALIS 2018 data analytical reports and comparative indicators.
- Peer-reviewed international literature on school leadership, school climate and democratic governance.
- National legal and policy documents from Albania (Law No. 69/2012 on Pre-University Education; strategic documents of the Ministry of Education and Sports MAS, evaluation frameworks of ASCAP, and curriculum and leadership guidelines developed by IZHA).
  - Law No. 69/2012 *On the Pre-University Education System in the Republic of Albania* (as amended);
  - Strategic and regulatory documents issued by MAS;
  - Leadership and quality assurance frameworks developed by ASCAP and IZHA.
- Comparative studies on educational governance in transitional and post-socialist contexts.

Documents were analyzed thematically, focusing on leadership roles, decision-making authority, school autonomy, and governance mechanisms. The comparative dimension highlights similarities and differences between Albanian practices and OECD standards.

The analysis is structured thematically, focusing on leadership autonomy, decision-making, teacher participation, and accountability.

The analysis focuses on leadership practices, school autonomy, teacher participation, and governance mechanisms, comparing Albania's profile with OECD averages.

Selected studies were coded thematically according to leadership models, dimensions of school climate, and governance mechanisms. The synthesized findings were used to construct an integrative framework linking leadership effectiveness with democratic governance outcomes.

DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP MODELS AND INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICES

International evidence highlights several successful leadership practices aligned with TALIS outcomes:

- establishment of professional learning communities.
- shared instructional leadership teams.
- transparent evaluation and feedback mechanisms.
- participatory school development planning.

These practices are strongly associated with positive school climate and democratic governance (Leithwood et al., 2020). Their systematic adoption in Albania would support ongoing decentralization reforms and enhance institutional accountability.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE IN OECD COUNTRIES

OECD countries increasingly conceptualize school leaders as facilitators of learning and democratic governance rather than administrative supervisors. TALIS data indicate that principals in OECD systems enjoy higher levels of autonomy in staff development, curriculum adaptation, and internal organization, while teachers participate actively in school-level decision-making (OECD, 2019).

These systems emphasize accountability balanced with autonomy, where school leaders are responsible for outcomes but are empowered to collaborate with teachers and stakeholders. Democratic governance is institutionalized through professional learning communities, school boards, and participatory leadership structures.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE IN ALBANIA: POLICY CONTEXT

Legal and Policy Framework

The Albanian *Law on Pre-University Education* establishes school autonomy and defines the school principal as the key managerial and pedagogical leader. National policy documents issued by MAS emphasize decentralization, school-based management, and quality assurance. ASCAP frameworks focus on school self-evaluation and external evaluation, while IZHA provides professional standards and leadership-related guidance.

Legal and Institutional Framework

The Albanian Law on Pre-University Education defines the school principal as the key managerial and pedagogical authority, responsible for school administration, staff management, and educational quality. While the law formally promotes school autonomy, decision-making remains largely centralized.

The Law No. 69/2012 on the Pre-University Education System in the Republic of Albania, as amended, formally recognizes school autonomy, the role of the school principal, and internal quality assurance mechanisms. The law assigns principals responsibility for pedagogical leadership, human resource management, and collaboration with school boards.

Policy documents of the Ministry of Education and Sports (MAS), alongside the Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ASCAP) and the Institute for Educational Development (IZHA), emphasize leadership development, internal evaluation, and school-based improvement planning. These Institutions play a significant role in curriculum development, quality assurance, and professional standards, limiting schools' discretionary authority.

However, these documents coexist with centralized decision-making practices, limiting the practical implementation of democratic leadership.

Role of the School Principal

In practice, the principal's role in Albania is predominantly administrative, with limited scope for distributed or participatory leadership. This contrasts with OECD systems, where principals increasingly act as instructional and transformational leaders (OECD, 2019).

Challenges in Practice

Despite this normative framework, empirical evidence and national reports suggest that school leadership in Albania remains partially centralized. Decision-making authority is often constrained by administrative regulations, limited financial autonomy, and hierarchical governance structures. The role of the school principal is frequently dominated by administrative compliance rather than instructional and democratic leadership.

Comparatively, teacher participation in decision-making processes remains more limited than in OECD countries, affecting school climate and collaborative culture.

COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: ALBANIA AND OECD

The comparative analysis reveals a significant gap between formal policy and actual leadership practices in Albania. While OECD systems operationalize democratic governance through distributed leadership and professional autonomy, Albanian schools face structural and cultural constraints that limit these processes.

Aligning Albanian leadership practices with TALIS-informed OECD models would require strengthening principal autonomy, enhancing teacher participation, and embedding democratic governance mechanisms within school management structures.

TALIS-BASED COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: ALBANIA AND OECD COUNTRIES

TALIS and Its Relevance for Albania

TALIS provides internationally comparable indicators on instructional leadership, teacher collaboration, and school climate (OECD, 2019). Beyond data collection, TALIS serves as a methodological benchmark for policy development. In Albania, the adaptation of TALIS-informed indicators could enhance leadership training, support decentralization reforms, and promote democratic practices in school management.

TALIS 2018 data reveal several critical differences between Albania and OECD countries:

- **Teacher Participation:** OECD averages show significantly higher teacher involvement in school decision-making compared to Albania.
- **Instructional Leadership:** Albanian principals report lower engagement in pedagogical leadership activities.
- **School Autonomy:** Albanian schools exhibit limited autonomy in staffing, budgeting, and curriculum adaptation.
- **School Climate:** TALIS indicators suggest weaker perceptions of collaborative climate and professional trust in Albania relative to OECD norms.

These findings indicate that leadership practices in Albania remain closer to traditional managerial models, while OECD countries increasingly adopt democratic and distributed leadership styles.

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

TALIS results indicate that in OECD countries, principals frequently engage in classroom observations, teacher feedback, and professional learning leadership. Instructional leadership is perceived as a core function.

In Albania, despite legal provisions, principals' roles are predominantly administrative. Pedagogical leadership is constrained by bureaucratic obligations and limited decision-making autonomy, reducing alignment with TALIS leadership standards.

Leadership and School Climate in TALIS

TALIS conceptualizes school leadership through key dimensions: instructional leadership, distributed decision-making, teacher participation, professional collaboration, and school climate (OECD, 2019). In OECD countries, TALIS findings consistently show that principals act as pedagogical leaders who promote collaboration, feedback, and shared responsibility.

In contrast, TALIS-based literature identifies weaker levels of teacher involvement in decision-making in non-OECD or transitional systems, where leadership often remains administrative rather than instructional.

School Climate and Collaboration

TALIS findings associate positive school climate in OECD systems with trust, collaboration, and professional dialogue. Teachers report higher levels of collective efficacy and shared responsibility.

In Albania, policy documents emphasize collaboration, yet empirical observations and inspection reports suggest fragmented professional cultures and weak collaborative practices, limiting the development of a democratic school climate.

Leadership Autonomy and Decision-Making

TALIS results indicate that in OECD countries, school principals enjoy greater autonomy in areas such as curriculum implementation, staff development, and resource allocation (OECD, 2019). In contrast, Albanian school leadership operates within a more centralized framework, where key decisions remain regulated by central and regional authorities.

Although the Albanian legal framework formally recognizes school autonomy, TALIS-comparable indicators suggest limited practical implementation, particularly regarding teacher involvement in strategic decision-making.

Autonomy and Decentralization

OECD education systems typically grant schools operational autonomy within accountability frameworks. TALIS links such autonomy to leadership effectiveness.

Although Albanian legislation promotes decentralization, autonomy remains constrained by centralized staffing, curriculum control, and administrative procedures. This structural limitation affects leadership practices and democratic governance.

Teacher Participation, Collaborative Culture and Decision-Making

OECD TALIS data highlight higher levels of teacher involvement in school decisions, curriculum adaptation, and professional development planning. Such participation strengthens democratic governance and school climate.

OECD TALIS data reveal that over two-thirds of teachers in OECD systems report active participation in school decision-making processes. In Albania, national reports by ASCAP and IZHA highlight progress in professional learning communities, yet teacher participation in governance remains consultative rather than decisional.

By contrast, Albanian schools demonstrate limited teacher participation beyond formal structures. Decision-making remains top-down, with school councils and boards often functioning symbolically rather than substantively.

This discrepancy reflects a gap between policy intent and institutional practice, reinforcing the need for leadership models that actively promote democratic participation.

DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis confirms the central hypothesis: *democratic school leadership, supported by positive school climate and evidence-based policy instruments such as TALIS, is a critical driver of effective school governance*. TALIS evidence demonstrates that OECD systems with higher levels of participatory leadership achieve stronger collaboration, transparency, and institutional trust. While Albania has made legislative and policy advances, TALIS-based comparisons reveal persistent structural and cultural challenges related to centralization and limited stakeholder participation.

The comparative analysis supports also the study's hypothesis: democratic leadership practices and positive school climate are mutually reinforcing and essential for effective school governance.

The comparative analysis confirms the central hypothesis*: the gap between Albania and OECD countries lies not in policy discourse, but in the practical enactment of TALIS-informed leadership principles*. While Albanian legislation formally aligns with OECD values, implementation remains partial.

For Albania, aligning leadership practices with TALIS-informed models requires structural changes in governance, enhanced professional autonomy, and targeted leadership development programs.

The TALIS framework reveals that democratic governance requires not only legal autonomy, but also leadership capacity, trust-based school climate, and genuine teacher participation.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study demonstrates that aligning Albanian school leadership with OECD TALIS standards requires systemic change rather than isolated reforms. Democratic governance in schools depends on strengthening instructional leadership, expanding school autonomy, and fostering collaborative cultures.

This paper highlights the importance of contemporary school leadership in fostering a positive school climate and democratic governance. The TALIS framework offers valuable methodological and policy guidance for improving leadership practices in Albanian schools. Future research should incorporate national empirical data to further validate these conclusions and support evidence-based policymaking

This study underscores the need for a paradigm shift in Albanian school leadership toward democratic, participatory, and instructional models.

TALIS provides a robust empirical and methodological framework for guiding this transformation.

This study concludes also that aligning Albanian school leadership practices with TALIS-informed OECD standards can significantly strengthen democratic governance.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDE

- Expanding school autonomy in decision-making.
- reinforcing institutional autonomy through clear regulatory frameworks.
- strengthening leadership training focused on distributed and democratic leadership.
- Strengthening distributed and participative leadership practices.
- expanding teacher participation in school-level decision-making.
- Promoting a collaborative school climate as a governance priority.
- Aligning principal training programs with TALIS leadership dimensions.
- integrating TALIS indicators into national school evaluation systems.
- Embedding TALIS leadership indicators into ASCAP evaluation frameworks.
- Redefining the principal's role as instructional and democratic leader.
- Aligning decentralization policies with real operational autonomy

Future research should employ national empirical data to further validate these findings and monitor reform outcomes.

Future research should also incorporate national TALIS participation and school-level empirical studies to further validate these conclusions.

Future research should empirically examine TALIS participation data for Albania to further validate these findings.

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THE DETERMINANTS OF CREDIT RISK IN THE ALBANIAN BANKING SYSTEM FROM 2014 - 2025: AN ECONOMETRIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Credit risk management is a cornerstone of financial stability, particularly in bank-dominated economies like Albania. This study provides a comprehensive econometric analysis of the factors driving non-performing loans (NPLs) in the Albanian banking sector over an eleven-year period (Q1 2014 – Q4 2025). Utilizing quarterly time-series data from the Bank of Albania, the research employs an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model to evaluate the impact of both macroeconomic indicators and bank-specific variables on credit quality. The empirical results reveal that the NPL ratio, which reached a historic low of 3.8% by late 2025, is significantly influenced by the broader economic environment. GDP growth emerges as the most potent determinant, showing a strong negative correlation with credit risk, thereby confirming that economic expansion enhances borrower repayment capacity. Conversely, inflation and policy interest rates exhibit a positive and significant relationship with NPLs, suggesting that monetary tightening and rising costs of living increase the debt burden and elevate default risks. Among internal factors, the Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) is found to significantly mitigate credit risk, reinforcing the premise that well-capitalized institutions maintain stricter lending standards. The findings underscore a critical trade-off for regulators: while interest rate hikes are necessary to curb inflation, they simultaneously pose a threat to loan portfolio quality. The study concludes that maintaining robust capital buffers

and fostering stable economic growth are essential for safeguarding the resilience of the Albanian financial system. These insights serve as a vital guide for policymakers and bank managers in refining risk mitigation strategies.

Keywords: *Credit Risk, Non-Performing Loans (NPL), GDP Growth, Capital Adequacy, Albanian Banking System, OLS Regression.*

INTRODUCTION

The Albanian banking system, consisting of 11 private banks, is the cornerstone of the nation's financial architecture, accounting for nearly 90% of the entire financial system. Given the underdeveloped nature of its financial markets, the health and stability of these banks are critical for overall economic performance. A central challenge for any banking institution is the effective management of credit risk, which is the risk of loss arising from a borrower's failure to repay a loan or meet contractual obligations. Historically, the Albanian banking system has made significant strides in managing this risk. The NPL ratio, a key proxy for credit risk, has seen a remarkable and consistent decline, falling from a high of 24% in the first quarter of 2014 to 3.8% by the third quarter of 2025. This improvement reflects enhanced risk management frameworks and a more stable economic environment. However, recent economic shifts, including post-pandemic recovery, inflationary pressures, and subsequent monetary tightening, present new challenges. The surge in lending activity, particularly concentrated in booming sectors like tourism and construction, introduces potential vulnerabilities to unsystematic risk. This study aims to econometrically analyze the primary drivers of credit risk in the Albanian banking system. By examining the relationship between the NPL ratio and a set of carefully selected bank-specific and macroeconomic variables, we seek to provide empirical evidence on the factors that most significantly influence loan portfolio quality. The findings will offer crucial insights for bankers in refining their lending policies and for regulators in designing effective macroprudential measures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The determinants of credit risk, typically proxied by the Non-Performing Loans (NPL) ratio, represent a critical area of financial research. Scholarly inquiry generally bifurcates these determinants into macroeconomic (*external*) and bank-specific (*internal*) factors, a framework that allows for a holistic understanding of how systemic shocks and institutional policies interact to shape asset quality.

Macroeconomic Determinants

The prevailing consensus in the literature highlights the pro-cyclical nature of credit risk. GDP growth is widely regarded as the most influential external driver. As noted by Louzis, Vouldis, and Metaxas (2012) in their study of the Greek banking system, economic expansion enhances the real income of both households and corporations, thereby reducing the probability of default. Conversely, during economic downturns, declining disposable income leads to a surge in NPLs. This relationship is particularly vital in emerging economies like Albania, where Hysa and Kacerja (2015) and Xhabija (2017) have documented that GDP fluctuations are almost immediately reflected in the banking sector's health. The role of inflation remains a subject of intense debate. Classical theories, such as those discussed by Nkusu (2011), suggest that inflation can actually reduce the real value of outstanding debt, making it easier for

borrowers to repay (the "debt-reduction" effect). However, in transition economies, a different dynamic often prevails. As argued by Saba, Kouser, and Azeem (2012), high inflation often acts as a signal of macroeconomic instability, eroding purchasing power and increasing the cost of living, which ultimately diminishes the borrower's capacity to service debt. This purchasing power effect is frequently observed in the Albanian context, where price stability is a prerequisite for financial resilience. Furthermore, Akinsomi and Tchipev (2020) emphasize that interest rates are positively correlated with credit risk. Higher policy rates, intended to curb inflation, increase the debt-servicing burden on variable-rate loans, directly straining the financial health of debtors and leading to higher default rates.

Bank-Specific Determinants

Internal management and institutional characteristics are equally decisive. Capital Adequacy (CAR) serves as a primary indicator of a bank's ability to absorb losses. The "moral hazard" hypothesis, famously explored by Berger and DeYoung (1997), suggests that banks with low capital ratios have incentives to engage in riskier lending practices to maximize short-term returns. In contrast, well-capitalized banks tend to adopt more conservative credit-scoring models. This is supported by the recent work of Shingjergji and Bica (2025), who suggest that capital buffers in Albania have been a key factor in maintaining profitability and stability amidst regional volatility. The quality and composition of assets, often measured by the Loans-to-Assets (LTA) ratio, reflects a bank's risk appetite. While a higher LTA ratio might indicate a focus on core banking activities, Fofack (2005) warns that aggressive credit expansion without commensurate risk assessment is a leading indicator of future NPL surges. Additionally, the literature on the "too-big-to-fail" phenomenon suggests that bank size (*measured by total assets*) produces mixed results. Large banks may benefit from sophisticated risk management systems (Casu, Girardone, & Molyneux, 2015), but they may also take on excessive systemic risk due to perceived government guarantees (Demirgüç-Kunt & Detragiache, 1998). By synthesizing these diverse perspectives, this study applies these global and regional theories to the specific transition dynamics of the Albanian banking system from 2014 to 2025. It bridges the gap between historical deleveraging trends and the contemporary challenges posed by the post-pandemic economic shift.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This analysis utilizes quarterly time-series data sourced from the Bank of Albania for the period Q1 2014 to Q4 2025. This timeframe was chosen to capture the significant decline in NPLs and encompass various economic cycles. The dependent variable is the Non-Performing Loans to Total Loans ratio (NPL), which serves as the primary proxy for credit risk. The independent variables are selected based on the literature review and data availability:

- Bank-Specific Factors:
  - Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR): Measures a bank's capital relative to its risk-weighted assets.
  - Loans to Assets Ratio (LTA): Represents the proportion of a bank's assets tied up in loans.
- Macroeconomic Factors:
  - GDP Growth Rate (GDP_G): The annual percentage growth rate of real GDP.
  - Inflation Rate (INF): The annual consumer price index inflation rate.
  - Policy Interest Rate (INT): The key policy rate set by the Bank of Albania.

To analyze the relationships, this study employs an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model. The model is specified as follows:

$$NPLt = \alpha + \beta1*GDP_Gt + \beta2*INFt + \beta3*INTt + \beta4*CARt + \beta5*LTAt + \varepsilon t$$

Where:

- NPL_t is the Non-Performing Loans ratio at time t.
- α is the constant term.
- β1 to β5 are the coefficients for the respective independent variables.
- ε_t is the error term.

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics*

Variable	Mean	Median	Maximum	Minimum	Std. Dev.
NPL (%)	10.95	9.85	24.00	3.80	6.21
GDP_G (%)	2.85	2.90	5.50	-3.30	1.88
INF (%)	1.95	1.80	7.50	0.20	1.55
INT (%)	1.50	1.25	3.00	0.50	0.75
CAR (%)	17.50	17.60	19.20	15.80	0.95
LTA (%)	45.20	44.80	49.50	41.30	2.45

Prior to estimation, all variables were tested for stationarity using the Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) test to avoid spurious regressions. Variables found to be non-stationary were transformed into their first difference. A correlation matrix was also examined to check for multicollinearity, with no coefficients exceeding the problematic threshold of 0.8. Descriptive statistics for the variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the variables used in this study over the observed period. The NPL ratio shows a significant spread, with a mean of 10.95% and a maximum of 24%, eventually reaching a historical minimum of 3.80%. This wide range highlights the successful deleveraging and credit-cleaning efforts within the Albanian banking sector. Macroeconomic indicators show a stable yet varying environment; GDP growth averages 2.85%, while Inflation (INF) and Interest Rates (INT) show moderate means of 1.95% and 1.50% respectively. On the institutional side, the Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) remains high and stable (Mean: 17.50%), and the Loans to Assets (LTA) ratio indicates that banks maintain roughly 45% of their assets in credit. These statistics provide a robust empirical foundation for the subsequent regression analysis.

REGRESSION RESULTS AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The results of the OLS regression are presented in Table 2. The model demonstrates strong explanatory power, with an Adjusted R-squared of 0.824, indicating that the selected variables explain approximately 82.4% of the variation in the NPL ratio in Albania. The F-statistic is highly significant, confirming the overall robustness of the model.

Table 2: *Regression Results (Dependent Variable: NPL)*

Indep. Var.	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	P-value
Constant	15.672	3.145	4.983	0.000***
GDP_G	-1.853	0.412	-4.497	0.000***
INF	0.724	0.301	2.405	0.021**
INT	1.591	0.550	2.893	0.006***
CAR	-0.988	0.435	-2.271	0.029**
LTA	0.215	0.189	1.137	0.262

Model Diagnostic Statistics:

R-squared: 0.841

Adjusted R-squared: 0.824

F-statistic: 38.76

Prob (F-statistic): 0.000***

Notes: *, **, *** indicate statistical significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1% levels, respectively.

The empirical findings are largely consistent with economic theory and previous research:

- **GDP Growth (GDP_G):** The coefficient is -1.853 and is significant at the 1% level. This indicates a strong negative relationship: a one percentage point increase in the GDP growth rate is associated with a 1.85 percentage point decrease in the NPL ratio. This confirms that a healthy, growing economy is the most critical factor in improving borrowers' ability to repay their debts.
- **Inflation (INF):** The inflation rate shows a positive and significant relationship with NPLs (coefficient of 0.724). This suggests that in the Albanian context, higher inflation erodes household and corporate incomes in real terms, making it more difficult to service debt, thus leading to a higher incidence of non-performing loans.
- **Interest Rate (INT):** The policy interest rate has a positive and highly significant impact on NPLs. The coefficient of 1.591 implies that a one percentage point increase in the policy rate is associated with a 1.59 percentage point rise in the NPL ratio. This highlights the sensitivity of credit risk to monetary policy tightening, as higher borrowing costs directly increase the debt burden on borrowers.
- **Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR):** This bank-specific variable has a negative and significant coefficient of -0.988. This supports the hypothesis that better-capitalized banks are more resilient and follow more prudent lending standards, which translates into better loan portfolio quality and lower NPLs.
- **Loans to Assets Ratio (LTA):** This variable was found to be statistically insignificant, suggesting that the overall proportion of loans in a bank's asset mix does not, by itself, have a systematic impact on the aggregate NPL ratio during the study period.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the determinants of credit risk in the Albanian banking system from 2014 to 2025, using the NPL ratio as a key indicator. The econometric analysis revealed that both macroeconomic conditions and bank-specific factors play a crucial role in shaping the quality of loan portfolios. The main findings indicate that strong GDP growth is the most powerful determinant in reducing credit risk. Conversely, higher inflation and rising interest rates significantly increase NPLs, underscoring the banking sector's vulnerability to macroeconomic instability and monetary policy shifts. Among internal factors, a higher Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) is associated with lower NPLs, confirming that well-capitalized banks are better equipped to manage credit risk effectively. These results offer important implications. For policymakers, it emphasizes the need for stable, growth-oriented macroeconomic policies to ensure financial stability. For the Bank of Albania, it highlights the trade-offs involved in monetary policy decisions, as interest rate hikes aimed at controlling inflation can have adverse effects on credit quality. For commercial banks, the findings reinforce the importance of maintaining robust capital buffers as a primary defense against credit losses and of adopting dynamic risk assessment models that account for the macroeconomic outlook. A limitation of this study is the use of aggregate, sector-wide data. Future research could employ a panel data approach using individual bank data to provide a more granular analysis of how risk determinants vary across different institutions based on their size, ownership, and business models.

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WOMEN'S RIGHT TO PROPERTY AND INHERITANCE IN ALBANIA

The challenge between legislation and social reality

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ABSTRACT

This study adopts a socio-legal approach to examine the relationship between formal legal provisions (*de jure*) and their implementation in practice (*de facto*) concerning women's property and inheritance rights in Albania. While the legal framework, comprising the Civil Code, the Family Code, and constitutional guarantees, formally ensures gender equality, the extent to which these rights are reflected in judicial practice remains an open question. The research combines normative legal analysis with an empirical examination of case law from the High Court of Albania. Although the broader study is designed to cover the period 2014-2018, this paper presents preliminary findings based on decisions issued in 2015. Out of 521 civil decisions reviewed, only four cases (approximately 0.8%) involve women bringing claims to assert their property and inheritance rights. The analysed cases concern disputes over inheritance and family property relations, in which women act as claimants seeking recognition or recovery of their rights through judicial mechanisms. The findings show that the realization of these rights often requires formal legal action, including inheritance division, recovery claims, or challenges to prior legal acts. While the limited number of cases does not allow for causal conclusions, it points to the relatively

narrow empirical visibility of such claims within the analysed dataset and raises questions about the factors that shape access to judicial remedies. The paper contributes to ongoing discussions on the practical realization of gender equality in property rights.

Key Words: *women rights, inheritance, youth perceptions, Albania, gender, norms*

INTRODUCTION

Inheritance rights in Albania and other developing contexts have been identified as among the most systematically denied rights for women, while simultaneously representing one of the primary pathways through which women with limited resources can acquire property (Kola, 2025: 50). However, women's ability to claim these rights is often constrained by informal pressures, including stigma, family expectations, and limited access to legal knowledge and representation (Michael, 2025: 137). These constraints are closely linked to broader gender norms, which are socially constructed and transmitted through families, peer groups, and social institutions. Such norms are not only internalized by individuals but also actively reconstructed through everyday interactions, thereby shaping and reinforcing societal expectations. As a result, adherence to gender norms varies across individuals and contexts, while remaining embedded in power relations and continuously reproduced through interactions between men and women (Pulerwitz & Barker, 2008: 324-325).

Within this framework, women's access to resources, particularly property rights, becomes a critical dimension of their agency and well-being. Empirical evidence demonstrates that women's ability to earn income, access employment, own property, and participate in decision-making significantly enhances their overall well-being and social position (Sen, 2011: 213). Despite the formal recognition of women's inheritance rights in legal frameworks, a gap persists between law and practice. The effective realization of these rights depends not only on legislation but also on the accessibility of justice systems. In this regard, ensuring financial access to justice, through measures such as waiving court fees and strengthening institutional support, is essential for enabling women to claim their rights in practice (Berg et al., 2010: 15).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature consistently highlights a persistent gap between legal provisions (de jure) and their application in practice (de facto), particularly with regard to women's property and inheritance rights. This tension is deeply rooted in historical patterns shaped by customary law. The Kanun, as analysed by Elezi (2002: 118-125), was based on *agnatic principles*, whereby property was transmitted exclusively through the male lineage. Women were excluded from inheritance, as reflected in the normative rule that daughters did not inherit.

Plasari (2014: 67-75) characterises this exclusion as a form of "legal death" for women, limiting their economic role primarily to dowry. Despite legal modernisation, such cultural patterns continue to function as "invisible barriers" to gender equality (Leskaj, 2005: 42-45), influencing contemporary practices in both Albania and Kosovo (Hoti, 2011: 48).

In contrast, countries such as Greece demonstrate a more consistent application of formal civil law principles through the implementation of the Civil Code (*Astikos Kodikas*) (Karakostas, 2014) highlighting the specific challenges faced in post-socialist contexts.

At the normative level, the Albanian constitutional framework establishes equality as a core legal principle. Article 18 guarantees equality before the law, while Article 41

protects property rights. As noted by Omari (2010: 202–210), gender equality requires not only formal recognition but also active institutional enforcement. Vorpsi (2011: 154–160) further emphasises that property rights must be interpreted in harmony with constitutional equality, reinforcing the normative obligation to ensure non-discrimination.

LEGAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The institution of property represents a fundamental pillar of civil law systems. In Albania, although Law No. 7850, dt. 29 July 1994, the Civil Code of the Republic of Albania (Articles 149 et seq.) formally guarantees equality, its implementation continues to face resistance from entrenched customary norms.

Within the Civil Code, inheritance (*mortis causa*) is recognised as a derivative means of acquiring property (Article 316). However, as Nuni (2014, pp. 210-215) observes, women's ownership often remains "hidden" in practice due to the persistence of customary expectations. Although Article 360 establishes equal inheritance rights for first-order heirs (Ershini, 2012: 88-95), Article 390, which regulates the renunciation of inheritance, presents a significant challenge.

Mandro (2009: 205-215) notes that women frequently renounce their inheritance rights in favour of male relatives, often under social pressure rather than through genuinely free will. This raises concerns about the authenticity of consent, as emphasised by Semini (2016: 146-150), and illustrates the continuing tension between legal autonomy and social norms.

At the same time, the Family Code introduces important safeguards through the regime of legal community property (Article 76), ensuring joint ownership of assets acquired during marriage. As explained by Semini (2016: 143-155), this mechanism provides women with both a share of marital property and inheritance rights, thereby offering protection against economic marginalisation.

More recent developments, such as Law No. 110/2018 "On Notary" (Article 112), further strengthen these protections by requiring notaries to verify marital co-ownership in property transactions. This notarial control functions as an administrative safeguard, aimed at preventing discriminatory practices and ensuring the effective enforcement of women's property rights (Mandro, 2009: 212-218).

Overall, Albania has established a comprehensive legal framework promoting gender equality in property and inheritance rights. However, the persistence of customary norms continues to shape social behaviour, resulting in a structural gap between formal equality and lived reality. This interplay between legal reform and socio-cultural resistance remains central to understanding the limitations of gender equality in property relations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a socio-legal research approach, aimed at examining the gap between formal legal provisions (*de jure*) and their implementation in practice (*de facto*) in relation to women's property and inheritance rights. By combining legal analysis with empirical examination of case law, the study seeks to understand how statutory guarantees of equality are interpreted and applied in judicial practice.

The research is based on two complementary components.

- First, it includes an analysis of the legal framework governing property and inheritance rights in Albania, including the Civil Code, the Family Code, and relevant constitutional provisions. This normative analysis provides the basis for identifying the formal legal guarantees of gender equality.
- Second, the study undertakes an empirical analysis of judicial decisions published on the official website of the High Court of Albania. The dataset consists of cases from the period 2014-2018, selected based on their relevance to disputes related to property ownership, inheritance, and testamentary claims. Case identification was conducted through keyword searches using terms such as property, inheritance, and testament. Only decisions that were publicly accessible online were included in the analysis, ensuring transparency and replicability.

A key selection criterion was that the claimant (plaintiff) was a woman, allowing the study to focus specifically on how women assert and defend their property and inheritance rights within the judicial system. The analysis primarily considers cases of an administrative nature, particularly those involving issues of property registration and inheritance disputes. The selected cases were analysed through qualitative content analysis, focusing on several dimensions:

- the legal arguments presented by female claimants
- the interpretation and application of relevant legal provisions by the Court
- the reasoning underlying judicial decisions
- indications of the influence of customary norms or informal practices on case outcomes.

This methodological design enables the study to assess how women's rights are realised in practice, capturing the interaction between legal norms, judicial interpretation, and socio-cultural factors. Although the study is designed to cover the period 2014-2018, this paper presents preliminary findings based on the analysis of judicial decisions from 2015, as part of an ongoing research project.

Limitations

The study has certain limitations. It is restricted to decisions of the High Court and does not include cases from lower courts, which may capture a broader range of everyday disputes. In addition, the analysis is limited to decisions available online, which may not fully represent the entirety of relevant case law. Another limitation of this study lies in its current empirical scope, as the analysis is limited to judicial decisions from 2015. While the broader research design covers the period 2014-2018, the examination of subsequent years is ongoing and may provide a more comprehensive understanding of trends over time.

Research Question

To what extent do judicial decisions in Albania reflect the gap between formal legal equality (de jure) and its implementation in practice (de facto) in relation to women's property and inheritance rights?

Sampling

During the search conducted on the official website of the High Court, the initial pool of cases was systematically filtered. The analysis was ultimately limited to cases in which women appeared as claimants in property-related disputes, primarily involving other

family members. This refinement allowed the study to focus specifically on situations where women sought to assert property or inheritance rights in the context of intra-family disputes, often arising from gender-based exclusion. The cases are presented in chronological order, allowing for an analysis of how judicial approaches to women's property and inheritance rights have evolved over time.

Ethical Considerations

All cases are cited using anonymised references to ensure ethical standards and avoid the identification of individuals, despite their availability in public records.

FINDINGS: JUDICIAL PRACTICE AND GENDER EQUALITY

This section examines how the High Court of Albania has contributed to shaping judicial practice towards gender equality, particularly by addressing misinterpretations of property rights and the persistence of customary norms.

Unifying Decision No. 1, dated 6 January 2009 (Marital Co-ownership)

Unifying Decision No. 1 (High Court of Albania, 2009) represents a landmark development in the recognition of women's property rights within marriage. The case addressed a widespread issue whereby immovable property was often registered solely in the husband's name, leading to the exclusion of women from formal ownership. The High Court clarified that administrative registration does not determine ownership rights. Where property is acquired during marriage, it is subject to the regime of legal community property, and the spouse is recognised as co-owner *ex lege*. This decision has had significant implications in practice, enabling women to claim their share of property regardless of whether their name appears in official property certificates.

Decision No. 458 (16 April 2015): Sisters' solidarity in the face of denied property rights

This decision concerns the claim of three sisters for the division of inherited property left by their father. It represents a typical case illustrating how women often need to collectively assert their legal rights in order to secure their lawful share against other heirs or individuals holding property without legal title. The case highlights the importance of inheritance division claims as a legal mechanism for the realization of women's property rights.

Decision No. 590 (28 May 2015): Conflict within the female lineage

This case is particularly significant as it involves an inheritance dispute where both the claimants and the defendant are women. It illustrates the complexity of inheritance relations and demonstrates that women are increasingly active in defending their economic interests through formal legal channels, rather than relying solely on informal or customary arrangements within the family.

Decision No. 93 (19 February 2015): Inheritance as a historical and property process

The case focuses on the contestation of legal acts related to former owners' property. It is particularly relevant as it involves elderly women asserting their rights over family

land and property. The decision highlights how delays in property registration and institutional bureaucratisation disproportionately affect women heirs, complicating the realization of their rights.

Decision No. 137 (5 March 2015): Claiming inheritance after the death of the testator

This decision examines a claim for inheritance recovery (*petitio hereditatis*). It addresses the legal standing of a female heir to claim property held by others. The case demonstrates that legal recognition of inheritance rights does not automatically ensure effective possession, requiring further judicial action to secure actual control over the property.

Decision No. 00-2016-1736: Renunciation of Inheritance Rights

The case addresses the issue of renunciation of inheritance rights. The case concerned a woman who had formally renounced her share of inheritance in favour of her brother, but later sought to annul this declaration. The High Court held that such declarations may be invalid where they are made under conditions of error, misunderstanding, or social pressure, including pressures arising from family expectations. Importantly, the Court emphasised that the constitutional principle of gender equality (Article 18 of the Constitution) must prevail over practices that undermine women's rights. This decision highlights the Court's role in addressing the influence of informal norms on legal transactions.

Decision No. 00-2021-1250 (Hidden Property Titles and Inheritance)

This case highlights the interaction between marital property and inheritance. In this case, a woman claimed her 50% share of marital property following her husband's death. Her claim was contested by other heirs on the basis of insufficient documentation. The Court emphasised that the legal community property regime (Article 76 of the Family Code) constitutes a valid and independent title of ownership, equivalent to any formally registered title. The decision reinforces the obligation of notaries and judicial authorities to recognise the spouse's share prior to the distribution of inheritance, thereby strengthening the effective protection of women's property rights.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis reveals that out of 521 civil decisions issued by the High Court of Albania in 2015, only four cases (approximately 0.8%) involved women bringing claims to assert their property rights, indicating a very limited presence of such claims within judicial practice. The analysed cases consistently concern disputes over inheritance and family property relations. In all examined decisions, women act as claimants seeking the recognition or recovery of their property and inheritance rights. The cases further show that the realization of these rights requires judicial intervention, through mechanisms such as inheritance division, recovery claims, or challenges to prior legal acts. At the same time, the case law reflects the role of the Court in clarifying and reinforcing the legal framework governing women's property rights.

This limited presence highlights the relatively narrow empirical visibility of such claims

within the analysed dataset. While the data do not allow for definitive conclusions, this finding may reflect a range of underlying factors, including potential barriers to accessing the courts, the persistence of informal family arrangements, or broader socio-cultural dynamics shaping the assertion of property rights.

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BALANCING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION: TOURISM IMPACTS ON SOCIAL WELL-BEING IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Tourism has emerged as a key driver of local development, yet its influence extends beyond economic outcomes to shape the social and psychological conditions of host communities. This study investigates how tourism affects community well-being, with particular attention to how individuals describe and interpret their own emotional states, life satisfaction, and everyday pressures linked to tourism activity. A participatory qualitative research design was employed in order to prioritize local perspectives and ensure that lived experiences are central to the analysis. Empirical data were collected through five focus group discussions and 13 semi-structured interviews with residents, tourism sector employees, and local stakeholders in selected tourism destinations in Albania. The focus groups enabled discussion across diverse spatial contexts, including coastal, rural, and protected areas, while individual interviews allowed for more detailed exploration of personal experiences. The data were examined using thematic analysis to uncover dominant patterns in how tourism is experienced at the community level. The results show that tourism is commonly associated with improved community relations, increased social engagement, and a general sense of improved living conditions linked to expanded economic opportunities. At the same time, the study identifies important tensions, as participants describe pressures related to unstable seasonal employment, intensified workloads during peak tourist periods, limited recovery time, and rising costs of living. These conditions are frequently associated with feelings of fatigue, reduced balance in daily life, and emotional strain. Overall, the study demonstrates that tourism produces a complex and ambivalent impact on community well-being, generating both opportunities for social improvement and conditions that may undermine psychological comfort. The findings emphasize the need for tourism governance

approaches that more explicitly integrate social and mental well-being considerations into sustainable development strategies.

Keywords: *Sustainable tourism, community well-being, qualitative analysis, social impacts, rural development, emotional well-being*

INTRODUCTION

This study explores how tourism-driven economic development is experienced and interpreted in relation to processes of social inclusion and exclusion in local communities in Albania. By adopting a participatory qualitative approach, the study prioritizes local voices and lived experiences, aiming to capture how different social groups navigate, negotiate, and make sense of tourism-induced changes in their everyday lives.

The aim of this study is to examine how tourism-driven economic development simultaneously generates processes of social inclusion and social exclusion, with a specific focus on how these dynamics shape the social well-being of local communities in Albania. The study pays particular attention to how different groups within host communities experience unequal access to tourism benefits and how these inequalities influence everyday life and perceived well-being.

Research Objectives:

- To analyze how tourism development contributes to economic opportunities while simultaneously producing patterns of social inclusion and exclusion within local communities.
- To explore how experiences of social exclusion (e.g., unequal access to employment, benefits, and resources) influence social and psychological well-being among community members.
- To examine how residents, tourism workers, and local stakeholders across different tourism contexts perceive and experience inequality and differentiation in the distribution of tourism-related benefits.

Research Questions

- How do local community members experience and interpret tourism-related economic development in their everyday lives?
- In what ways do tourism dynamics contribute to perceived processes of social inclusion and social exclusion within host communities?
- How do different community groups (residents, tourism workers, and local stakeholders) describe the impact of tourism on their social well-being across different tourism contexts in Albania?

Tourism has become a key driver of local and regional development, particularly in areas where alternative economic opportunities are limited. While it is widely recognized for its contribution to income generation and employment, tourism also acts as a powerful social force that reshapes community structures, redistributes resources, and redefines patterns of inclusion and exclusion within host societies (Uysal et al., 2016; Sharpley, 2014; UNWTO, 2021). Early conceptualizations of tourism already emphasized its role in shaping social structures, identities, and interactions between groups (Cohen, 1972). More recent perspectives further highlight how tourism development can create differentiated social positions within the same community, where some groups gain

access to opportunities while others remain marginalized (Jordan et al., 2013). Research has shown that tourism development can both integrate and marginalize community members simultaneously, depending on their social and economic position (Sharpley, 2014; Moscardo, 2009. In Albania, tourism has expanded significantly over the past decade, particularly in coastal, rural, and protected areas. It has also introduced new forms of social differentiation, including uneven access to tourism employment, seasonal labor dependency, and disparities in the distribution of tourism benefits. These developments make Albania a relevant case for examining how tourism influences social inclusion and exclusion at the community level.

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

Theoretical Foundations

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical perspective that combines Social Exchange Theory (SET), the concepts of social inclusion and exclusion, and broader approaches on the social structuring of tourism. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how tourism simultaneously generates economic opportunities and socially differentiated outcomes within host communities. Social Exchange Theory (SET) has been widely applied in tourism studies to explain residents' attitudes toward tourism development. According to SET, individuals evaluate tourism based on a cost–benefit logic, whereby support for tourism depends on the perceived balance between benefits (e.g., income, employment opportunities) and costs (e.g., pressure, inequality, environmental impacts) (Ap, 1992; Andereck& Nyaupane, 2011). From this perspective, individuals who directly benefit from tourism are more likely to express positive attitudes, while those who experience fewer benefits or higher costs tend to be more critical. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from individual perceptions alone to the broader social structures that determine who benefits and who remains excluded. Taken together, these theoretical approaches allow for a multidimensional understanding of tourism as both an economic and social process, shaped by individual evaluations as well as structural conditions.

Tourism Development and Social Inclusion/ Exclusion

In contemporary research, tourism is no longer viewed solely as an engine of economic growth, but increasingly as a social process that produces differentiated outcomes within host communities. While tourism can stimulate local development through job creation, infrastructure expansion, and increased income flows, its benefits are not distributed evenly across populations (Sharpley, 2014; Uysal et al., 2016). Instead, tourism often interacts with pre-existing social and economic structures, reinforcing inequalities related to class, access to capital, and local power relations. Early work by Cohen (1972) emphasized that tourism is embedded in broader social systems and reflects structural dynamics between different groups. The concepts of social inclusion and exclusion provide a useful analytical lens for understanding how tourism impacts local communities. Social inclusion generally refers to the ability of individuals and groups to participate fully in economic, social, and cultural life, while social exclusion captures the processes that restrict such participation (Keyes, 1998). In tourism contexts, inclusion is often associated with access to employment, participation in decision-making, and the ability to benefit from tourism-related opportunities.

Social Exclusion and Well-Being in Tourism Contexts

The relationship between social exclusion and well-being has been extensively examined in sociological and psychological literature, emphasizing that exclusion from economic, social, and institutional resources negatively affects both subjective and psychological well-being (Levitas et al., 2007; Sen, 1999). Well-being is not only determined by material conditions but also by individuals' ability to participate meaningfully in social life and exercise agency within their environment.In tourism contexts, this relationship becomes particularly relevant, as development processes often create uneven access to opportunities. Individuals who are excluded from tourism-related benefits may experience lower life satisfaction, increased stress, and reduced perceptions of fairness, especially when they observe others benefiting within the same community (Diener et al., 1999; Kim et al., 2013). This comparative dimension intensifies the psychological impact of exclusion, as inequality becomes more visible and socially embedded. Moreover, exclusion in tourism settings is often associated with precarious employment conditions, limited upward mobility, and restricted participation in governance, all of which can undermine both social and emotional well-being (Sharpley, 2014; Moscardo, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative participatory research design to explore how tourism-driven economic development is experienced and interpreted in relation to processes of social inclusion and exclusion in local communities in Albania. The participatory orientation of the study is grounded in the principle that local communities are not merely passive subjects of research but active knowledge holders whose voices and experiences are essential for understanding social realities, particularly in contexts of development and inequality (Cornwall &Jewkes, 1995). The study was conducted in selected tourism destinations in Albania, including coastal, rural, and protected areas. This selection was made in order to capture variation in tourism development intensity, economic dependency, and social organization across different spatial contexts. Data were collected through five focus group discussions and thirteen semi-structured interviews. Participants included local residents, tourism sector employees, and community stakeholders who were either directly engaged in tourism activities or indirectly affected by tourism development. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to ensure the inclusion of individuals with relevant experiential knowledge of tourism-related changes in their communities (Patton, 2015). The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the final narrative. This analytical approach was selected due to its flexibility in identifying patterns across diverse qualitative data while maintaining a systematic and rigorous structure for interpretation. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process in accordance with the British Sociological Association (2017) guidelines. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by removing all identifying information from transcripts and reports. Participation was voluntary, and respondents retained the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of data from focus groups and interviews revealed four main themes related to how tourism is structured in the everyday lives of local communities: the expansion of economic opportunities and selective inclusion, social exclusion and internal differentiation within the community, working conditions and seasonal insecurity, and the transformation of social relations and perceptions of injustice.

Expansion of Economic Opportunities and Selective Inclusion

Participants widely recognized that tourism has created new economic opportunities, particularly through employment, small business development, and increased demand for local services. However, these opportunities were described as unevenly distributed and often dependent on prior access to capital and networks. Let`s see what is reported by the participants: "Tourism has brought more work, especially in summer. If you have a small business, you can do well" (FG2, coastal area).

At the same time, inclusion in tourism-related benefits was often described as selective, favoring those already positioned within the local economy.

> "Those who already had money or land managed to benefit. The rest only get seasonal jobs" (Interview 6, rural area).
> "Tourism has changed the village. There is more work now, especially in the summer season" (FG2, coastal area).
> "If you have a house or a small business near the tourist area, you can really benefit." (FG3, coastal area).
> "For some families tourism is a good opportunity, but for others it is only seasonal income" (Interview 4, rural area).
> "Those who invested early are now in a much better position than the rest" (Interview 6, coastal area).

While it expands economic opportunities, access to these benefits is mediated by structural factors such as ownership, investment capacity, and social connections. This aligns with the idea that economic inclusion in tourism is conditional rather than equal, reinforcing differentiated development outcomes within the same community.

Social Exclusion and Internal Differentiation within the Community

Participants frequently described tourism employment as unstable, intensive, and highly seasonal. While tourism generates income, it also produces cycles of overwork and inactivity. A strong theme emerging from the data is the perception of growing inequality and social differentiation within communities. Many participants emphasized that not all residents benefit equally from tourism development. Participant reported that: "there are families that earn a lot from tourism, and others who don't see any benefit at all." (FG1, coastal area). Some respondents explicitly described feelings of marginalization and limited access to opportunities:

> "If you are not connected or part of the right group, you are excluded from most opportunities." (Interview 9, protected area).

> "If you are not part of the business networks, you are basically outside the system." (Interview 9, protected area).
> "Tourism exists here, but it feels like it is for a few people only." (FG4, rural area)
> "We see tourists every day, but we do not see the benefits in our household" (Interview 8, rural area).

These narratives indicate that tourism contributes to internal social differentiation, reinforcing existing inequalities or creating new ones. Social exclusion is not experienced as complete absence from the tourism economy, but rather as partial or peripheral participation. This suggests a stratified community structure where inclusion and exclusion coexist, depending on access to economic and social capital, highlighting the emergence of internal stratification within communities. Social exclusion is not absolute but relational, reflecting unequal access to networks, resources, and opportunities. Tourism thus contributes to a differentiated social structure where inclusion and exclusion coexist, often within the same geographic space.

Working Conditions and Seasonal Insecurity

Employment in tourism was frequently described as unstable and highly seasonal. While participants acknowledged the importance of tourism income, they also emphasized the pressures associated with peak-season work and the lack of year-round stability. While tourism generates income, it also produces cycles of overwork and inactivity. As participants responded:

> "During the summer we work from morning until late at night, every single day." (FG3, coastal area).
> "You earn money in the season, but in winter there is nothing" (Interview 2, rural area)
> Others highlighted the emotional and physical strain associated with this work pattern.
> "You earn more during the season, but you are always exhausted. There is no rest" (Interview 3, rural area).
> "There is no stability. Every year is the same uncertainty" (Interview 5, coastal area)
> "It is very exhausting work, especially when the season is very busy" (Interview 7, rural area).

These findings show that economic inclusion through tourism is often accompanied by precarious labor conditions. Seasonal employment creates instability, fatigue, and limited long-term security. This highlights a key paradox: while tourism increases employment opportunities, it does not necessarily ensure stability or improved quality of working life.

Transformation of Social Relations and Perceptions of Injustice

Tourism was also seen as transforming social relations within communities, affecting trust, cooperation, and perceptions of fairness. Some participants reported increased competition and individualism. As a participant reports: "People have become more focused on their own business. There is less solidarity than before" (FG1, coastal area). Others, however, observed improved collaboration among those engaged in tourism: "During the tourist season, businesses cooperate more because they depend on each other." (Interview 7, protected area).

At the same time, perceptions of injustice were strongly present in the narratives, particularly regarding unequal distribution of benefits.

"Tourism exists in the village, but not everyone benefits from it" (FG4, rural area).
"It feels unfair because tourism is everywhere, but not everyone is profiting" (Interview 10, coastal area).
"People have become more competitive. Everyone is trying to survive in their own way." (FG1, coastal area).
"During the tourist season, there is more cooperation between businesses" (Interview 7, protected area).
"Before, the village was more united. Now there are clear differences between people" (FG2, rural area).

These contrasting views suggest that tourism reshapes social relations in both cohesive and divisive ways. While it can foster cooperation among economic actors, it can also weaken broader community solidarity by intensifying inequalities. Perceptions of injustice emerge as a central factor influencing how tourism is evaluated socially, often shaping attitudes more strongly than economic gains themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study demonstrate that tourism in local communities operates as a deeply ambivalent process, simultaneously generating opportunities for economic participation while also producing forms of social exclusion, labor precarity, and perceived injustice. One of the central contributions of the findings is the confirmation that tourism functions as a selective inclusion mechanism rather than an evenly distributed development force. While participants consistently acknowledged the expansion of employment and income opportunities, these benefits were not experienced universally. This aligns with Social Exchange Theory (Ap, 1992), which suggests that support for tourism depends on perceived cost–benefit balances. However, the present study extends this argument by showing that "benefits" themselves are structurally conditioned. Access is shaped by ownership, timing of investment, and embeddedness in local networks. A key finding is the emergence of internal social differentiation as a consequence of tourism development. Participants' narratives consistently highlighted a divide between those who benefit directly from tourism and those who remain marginal to its economic flows. This supports earlier research on social inclusion/exclusion in tourism contexts (Silver, 1994; Levitas et al., 2007), which argues that exclusion is not simply absence from participation but a relational condition shaped by access to resources and networks. In this study, social exclusion manifests in multiple interrelated forms, including limited access to tourism-related employment opportunities, lack of financial capital required for investment in tourism activities, weak or absent social networks that facilitate entry into the local tourism economy, and minimal involvement in decision-making processes that shape tourism development at the community level. An important contribution of the findings is the identification of a paradox: economic inclusion does not necessarily translate into social or psychological stability. A key finding of this study is the emergence of internal social differentiation as a direct consequence of tourism development, where participants' narratives consistently reveal a clear divide between those who are able to benefit directly from tourism-related economic opportunities and those who remain marginal to its economic flows. This observation is consistent with earlier research on social inclusion and exclusion in tourism contexts, which emphasizes that exclusion should not be understood

simply as absence from participation, but rather as a relational condition shaped by unequal access to resources, networks, and opportunities (Silver, 1994; Levitas et al., 2007).

The findings demonstrate that tourism generates new economic opportunities at the local level; however, access to these opportunities is uneven and systematically shaped by pre-existing structural conditions such as ownership, financial capacity, and embeddedness in social networks, consistent with broader sociological understandings of unequal access to capital and resources in development processes (Bourdieu, 1986; Cohen, 1972).

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CREATING A LEARNING, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT TO ENHANCE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ASSESSMENT IN HISTORY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops an integrated theoretical and didactic model for enhancing the effectiveness of assessment in history education through three interconnected pillars: a prosocial classroom climate, contemporary history didactics, and formative assessment. Drawing on the psychopedagogical foundations of prosociality—empathy, cooperation, mutual respect, emotional safety, and social responsibility—the study argues that the quality of assessment is closely related to the quality of the learning environment and interpersonal relationships in the classroom. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and synthetic approach. It integrates the theoretical foundation of published work on fostering prosociality in primary education, Jani Sota's history didactics, and contemporary scholarship on formative assessment, digital portfolios, self-assessment, and peer assessment. The paper also includes a vertical analysis of historical and prehistorical content from Grades 1–5 in order to trace the spiral progression of historical competence and prosocial competencies. The findings suggest that assessment in history becomes more authentic, reflective, and development-oriented when implemented within a classroom climate grounded in prosociality, inquiry-based learning, and democratic education.

Keywords: *Prosociality, history didactics, formative assessment, historical competence, historical empathy, critical thinking*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary educational discourse, assessment is treated as an essential component of the learning process, moving beyond the traditional conception of assessment as a simple mechanism for checking knowledge. From this perspective, it is understood as a dynamic and developmental process, closely connected to the way teaching is organised

and experienced. In the specific context of history as a school subject, where learning relies on the interpretation of events, the critical analysis of sources, the comparison of perspectives, and the construction of historical reasoning, the effectiveness of assessment is directly conditioned by the quality of the pedagogical climate and by the nature of the social relationships that are built in the classroom.

Research in the field of prosociality has consistently highlighted the role of such components as empathy, active listening, solidarity, and supportive presence in the construction of a psychologically safe and stable classroom climate. Such a climate influences not only the social dimension of student behaviour, but also the development of self-esteem, the strengthening of motivation to learn, and the improvement of academic performance. At the same time, history didactics conceptualises the teaching process as an ongoing, democratic, and inquiry-oriented interaction in which the learner assumes an active role in the construction of knowledge.

In this context, the central issue addressed by the present study concerns the need to move from a model of assessment focused primarily on the reproduction of factual knowledge toward an authentic approach to assessment that aims to measure and develop historical competence, critical thinking, historical empathy, and civic reflection.

The aim of this paper is to develop an integrated theoretical and methodological framework that combines prosociality as a psychopedagogical foundation, history didactics as a disciplinary foundation, and formative assessment as a developmental mechanism of learning. More specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research question: *How does the creation of a prosocial and democratic classroom climate influence the enhancement of assessment effectiveness in the subject of history?*

The novelty and original contribution of this study lie in the integration of the theoretical foundation developed in previous studies on fostering prosociality in primary education with the principles of history didactics and with contemporary approaches to assessment. At the same time, the paper takes into account the vertical progression of historical and prehistorical content from Grade 1 to Grade 5, thus offering an integrated and developmental perspective on the learning process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Prosociality as the psychopedagogical foundation of assessment

Prosociality represents an integrated system of behaviours, attitudes, and values aimed at the well-being of others and at improving the quality of social interactions within a group. This concept includes such dimensions as empathy, cooperation, tolerance, solidarity, active listening, and social responsibility (De Beni, 2000; Gjini, 2001; Roche, 1995). In the classroom context, these elements constitute decisive factors for the quality of the learning process and for the effectiveness of assessment practices.

A learning environment characterised by prosocial relationships creates favourable conditions for students' active involvement in the teaching and learning process. Students who feel accepted, respected, and listened to are more inclined to participate in discussions, articulate critical viewpoints, and engage in processes of self-assessment and peer assessment (Hoffman, 2000; Eisenberg, 1986). These processes are closely related to the development of socio-emotional competencies and to the formation of a stable academic identity.

From this perspective, a prosocial classroom climate directly contributes to reducing performance-related anxiety and strengthening students' sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). At the same time, it improves the quality of pedagogical feedback, which, when reflective and supportive, helps guide learning and supports students' continuous development (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Consequently, assessment is conceptualised as a formative process rather than as a mechanism of control, becoming a means of supporting both individual and collective progress.

History didactics as science and art

History didactics cannot be reduced to a linear process of transmitting factual knowledge; rather, it should be understood as an organic interplay between the scientific dimension of methodological organisation and the artistic dimension of pedagogical interaction (Sota, 2024). In this framework, the relationship between theory and practice constitutes a fundamental axis in which an understanding of the logic of historical development is combined with the teacher's capacity to transform content into meaningful experience for the learner.

From this perspective, learning history is achieved through active and inquiry-based approaches that include the critical analysis of historical sources, the use of problem-based questions, the development of argumentative debate, the comparison of perspectives, and the construction of cause-and-effect relationships (Wineburg, 2001; Seixas & Morton, 2013). These approaches aim to shift the focus from the mechanical reproduction of facts toward the construction of meaning, moving from description to interpretation and from event-centred learning to historical consciousness.

At the same time, history didactics regards this discipline as an important space for civic and democratic formation. Through the analysis of historical figures, institutions, and social processes, students develop not only historical competence, but also ethical judgement, a culture of debate, and respect for pluralism (Barton & Levstik, 2004). This approach directly connects history with civic education and with the development of the prosocial dimension of the individual.

Another essential element in this framework is the importance of the affective relationship between teacher and student, as well as the creation of a dialogic and inclusive classroom climate. Because history relies on interpretations and on diverse perspectives, it requires a learning environment characterised by emotional safety, active listening, and respect for different viewpoints (Vygotsky, 1978).

From this standpoint, history didactics functions as a bridge between prosociality and assessment: the more developed the pedagogical dialogue and classroom interaction are, the more authentic and profound the assessment of historical and civic competence becomes. Ultimately, history didactics should be understood as a discipline that contributes in an integrated way to the development of critical thinking, historical empathy, democratic awareness, and reflective capacity, thus positioning assessment as a mechanism serving student development.

Formative and authentic assessment in history

In contemporary didactic approaches, assessment in history is conceived as a formative and authentic process that aims not only to measure knowledge, but also to develop complex cognitive, social, and civic competencies. In this sense, assessment should be built on activities that require students' active engagement, such as the analysis of historical sources,

the writing of reflective essays, participation in argumentative debates, the use of role-play, the development of portfolios, including digital formats, and the use of analytical rubrics for structured assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998; OECD, 2019).

These forms of assessment are consistent with the principles of the "assessment for learning" approach, which places the learner at the centre of the process and treats assessment as a tool for supporting continuous progress (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Within this framework, special importance is also given to self-assessment and peer-assessment practices, which contribute to the development of reflective capacities and to students' awareness of their own learning process (Boud & Falchikov, 2007).

Moreover, authentic assessment in history is closely connected to students' ability to transfer knowledge to new situations, interpret diverse sources, and construct arguments grounded in historical evidence (Wineburg, 2001). This approach shifts the focus from the reproduction of information toward the construction of meaning and the development of critical thinking. However, the effectiveness of these assessment instruments and strategies is strongly conditioned by the classroom climate in which they are implemented. A learning environment characterised by prosocial relationships, mutual trust, and psychological safety significantly increases students' willingness to participate actively in assessment processes, accept feedback, and reflect on their progress (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). From this perspective, formative and authentic assessment becomes more credible, more inclusive, and more effective in supporting the development of historical competence.

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in a qualitative, interpretive approach with a theoretical and synthetic character, which is considered appropriate for analysing the relationships among the prosocial classroom climate, the principles of history didactics, the civic dimension, and the effectiveness of assessment. The choice of this methodological approach is directly related to the nature of the object of study, in which the focus does not lie on the statistical measurement of outcomes, but on the construction of an integrated conceptual model that is didactically applicable and supported by a broad theoretical, curricular, and reflective corpus (Creswell, 2014).

In this context, the methodology brings together several major analytical sources: *(1) the author's published study on fostering prosociality in primary education (Teferiçi, 2017); (2) the methodological contributions of history didactics (Sota, 2024); (3) the study on the progression of prosocial competencies in primary education (Teferiçi, 2026); and (4) the curricular contents of the fields of history, citizenship, and "Society and Environment" for Grades 1–5*. This combination of sources enables a multidimensional analysis and a deeper interpretation of the phenomenon under study.

Study design

The study design is analytical, interpretive, and integrative, oriented toward building a conceptual framework that organically connects four fundamental pillars:

- the psychopedagogical foundation of prosociality;
- the disciplinary foundation of history didactics;
- the vertical progression of civic education;
- contemporary approaches to formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2009; OECD, 2019).

This design enables the study to move from theoretical analysis to the modelling of concrete

implications for assessment practice, building bridges between abstract concepts and their implementation in the real classroom context.

Corpus of materials and sources

The corpus of analysis was intentionally expanded in order to ensure theoretical density and sufficient interpretive evidence. It includes:

- studies on fostering prosociality in primary education (Teferiçi, 2017), as the basis of the psychopedagogical dimension;
- the methodological material of history didactics (Sota, 2024);
- the study on the progression of prosocial competencies, which provides a developmental and normative framework for analysis (Teferiçi, 2026);
- the curricular texts and contents of history, citizenship, and the field "Society and Environment" for Grades 1–5;
- the international literature on formative assessment, digital portfolios, the use of analytical rubrics, and self-assessment practices (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

This diverse corpus of sources enables theoretical triangulation and increases the trustworthiness of the interpretation (Denzin, 1978).

Unit of analysis

The main unit of analysis in this study is the relationship between the prosocial classroom climate, historical-civic content, and students' performance in instruments for assessing historical competence. At a more detailed level, the analysis focuses on several key dimensions:

- the progression of historical and civic concepts across grade levels;
- the ways in which instructional topics contribute to the development of empathy, responsibility, and moral judgement (Hoffman, 2000);
- the transformation of these competencies into observable and assessable evidence;
- the teacher's role in creating a dialogic, reflective, and inclusive classroom climate (Vygotsky, 1978).

Analytical procedure

The methodological procedure was structured around a series of logically and conceptually interconnected steps:

- Theoretical analysis of the literature on prosociality, moral development, history didactics, and civic education.
- Vertical curricular analysis of the contents of Grades 1–5 in the fields of history, citizenship, and "Society and Environment."
- Interpretive synthesis of the findings with the results of the study on the progression of prosocial competencies (Teferiçi, 2026).
- Identification of implications for assessment practices in relation to students' developmental stages.
- Construction of an integrated didactic model in which history, citizenship, and prosociality are combined within a common assessment framework.

This procedure ensures internal methodological coherence, theoretical density, and a high degree of transferability to real teaching practice (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

VERTICAL ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL, CIVIC, AND PROSOCIAL CONTENT FROM GRADES 1–5

The construction of historical and civic competence in primary education develops progressively and spirally, based on the interaction of three complementary pedagogical pathways: the normative-institutional pathway of civic education, the affective-narrative pathway of language and literature, and the interpretive-identity pathway of history. This tripolar model is grounded in evidence from studies on the progression of prosocial competencies, which identify two parallel formative trajectories: affective internalisation through narrative and normative structuring through civic content (Teferiçi, 2026).

Within this interpretive framework, history in Grade 5 should not be conceived as an isolated starting point of historical competence, but as the culmination of a developmental process that begins in the early grades through the education of rules, belonging, empathy, and social responsibility. This approach is consistent with theories of moral development, according to which the transition from heteronomous respect for norms to autonomous reasoning is built through structured and reflective social experiences (Piaget, 1952; Kohlberg, 1984).

Grades 1–2

In Grades 1–2, such fundamental concepts as personal time, family, coexistence, and interpersonal relationships create the initial basis for understanding the relationship between the individual and the group, as well as the organisation of time. Civic education content, focused on rules, respect, and inclusion, contributes to the construction of the first normative structure, while narrative texts in the Albanian language foster the development of emotional sensitivity and empathy.

At this stage, the learner develops basic skills of social interaction and self-control, reflecting what the literature describes as a level of foundational empathy and relational responsibility (Teferiçi, 2026). This constitutes an indispensable basis for the further development of historical and civic competencies.

Grades 3–4

In Grades 3–4, one can observe an expansion of the student's cognitive and social horizon, as the focus shifts from personal experience toward the community and historical-cultural dimensions. Topics such as community, heritage, collective memory, traditions, and institutions contribute to the formation of a broader social and historical awareness.

At the same time, civic education consolidates the concepts of social role, collective responsibility, diversity, and active participation, supporting the transition from basic coexistence to democratic awareness. This development corresponds to the phase of normative-civic structuring and democratic awareness, in which the student moves from interpersonal interaction to structured participation in the community (De Beni, 2000; Teferiçi, 2026).

Grade 5

In Grade 5, the construction of historical competence takes on a more structured and systematic form through the analysis of historical sources, the understanding of cause-and-effect relationships, the study of historical figures, and reflection on civic identity. At this level, civic education contents focused on justice, equality, anti-discrimination, and democratic participation create a direct link between historical empathy and responsible civic action.

At this stage, the three formative pathways—narrative, norm, and historical interpretation—converge, producing what the literature describes as civic action grounded in ethical reasoning. This implies the student's ability to connect an understanding of the past with moral judgement and democratic decision-making in the contemporary context (Teferiçi, 2026).

Implications for assessment

This tripolar progression requires a reconceptualisation of assessment practices, moving beyond the narrow focus on factual knowledge and integrating the civic and prosocial dimensions of learning. In this framework, assessment strategies should be adapted to students' developmental stages:

- In Grades 1–2, priority is given to systematic observation, pedagogical feedback, and structured situations of coexistence, which make it possible to identify students' social and emotional development.
- In Grades 3–4, the emphasis shifts toward the use of portfolios, including digital formats, reflective journals, and tasks related to community memory, thus fostering reflection and social awareness.
- In Grade 5, the use of analytical rubrics, argumentative essays, historical source analysis, and debates on historical and civic dilemmas makes possible a deeper assessment of historical and civic competence (Black & Wiliam, 2009; OECD, 2019).

In this way, history and citizenship function as complementary fields that contribute to the development of critical thinking, democratic identity, and social responsibility, positioning assessment as a key mechanism in the development of historical-civic competence.

DISCUSSION: THE INTEGRATED DIDACTIC MODEL

The integrated didactic model proposed in this study is structured around five organically interconnected links:

- emotional safety and a prosocial classroom climate;
- argumentative dialogue and the development of critical thinking;
- historical and civic empathy;
- reflective and authentic assessment;
- civic reflection and democratic transfer.

These components form a functional chain in which each link nourishes and reinforces the others, creating a learning environment in which teaching, learning, and assessment are inseparable. From this perspective, assessment is no longer conceived as a process of verifying knowledge, but as a developmental mechanism that integrates the cognitive, emotional, social, and civic dimensions of learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

This model is grounded in constructivist and socio-cultural approaches to learning, which emphasise the importance of interaction, dialogue, and reflection in the construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). At the same time, it is consistent with contemporary approaches to history didactics, which regard this discipline as a space for the development of critical thinking, historical empathy, and civic awareness (Wineburg, 2001; Seixas & Morton, 2013).

Concrete teaching models for the education of prosociality

In order to move from the theoretical level to concrete classroom practice, this paper proposes a series of teaching models that operationalise the prosocial dimension within the teaching of history and citizenship. These models are inspired by applied approaches to studies on fostering prosociality and by contemporary practices of interactive teaching (Teferiçi, 2005; Boud & Falchikov, 2007).

- Model 1: Historical empathy through narrative
- *Topic*: Historical empathy through narrative
- *Aim*: To develop empathy, solidarity, and respect for historical experiences and sacrifices
- *Methods*: Reading and interpreting historical narrative, role-play, and reflective journaling
- *Prosocial dimension*: Empathy, solidarity, respect for others
- *Assessment*: Portfolio, including digital formats, and reflective journal

This model supports the development of historical empathy by enabling students to place themselves in the perspective of historical actors and to understand the complexity of human experience (Wineburg, 2001).

- Model 2: Civic debate and critical thinking
- *Topic*: Civic debate and the development of critical thinking
- *Aim*: To build argumentative skills, active listening, and tolerance toward different viewpoints
- *Methods*: Structured debate, analysis of historical-civic dilemmas, and group discussion
- *Prosocial dimension*: Tolerance, mutual respect, ethics of communication
- *Assessment*: Use of analytical rubrics to assess argumentation and cooperation

This model contributes to the development of a culture of debate and critical thinking by placing the learner in an active process of constructing and defending arguments (Seixas & Morton, 2013).

- Model 3: Moral dilemmas and democratic decision-making
- *Topic*: Moral dilemmas and decision-making in historical context
- *Aim*: To connect historical knowledge with ethical judgement and civic responsibility
- *Methods*: Problem-based questions, analysis of historical figures and situations, structured discussion
- *Prosocial dimension*: Civic responsibility, ethical reasoning, moral awareness
- *Assessment*: Reflective essays, self-assessment, and peer assessment

This model fosters the development of moral reasoning and democratic decision-making, drawing on the stages of moral development (Kohlberg, 1984).

Overall, these models demonstrate that integrating the prosocial dimension into the teaching of history is not only possible, but also necessary for the construction of authentic and developmental assessment. They transform the classroom into a dialogic and reflective space in which students develop not only historical knowledge, but also enduring civic and social competencies.

CONCLUSIONS

This study argues that the effectiveness of assessment in the subject of history is directly conditioned by the quality of the learning, psychological, and social climate within which the learning process develops. In this sense, assessment cannot be treated as an isolated technical act, but rather as a process closely linked to pedagogical interactions and interpersonal relationships in the classroom (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

The original contribution of this paper lies in the construction of an integrated didactic model with five functional links, in which the prosocial climate, argumentative dialogue, historical empathy, reflective assessment, and civic transfer are interwoven into a coherent mechanism for reconceptualising assessment in history education. This model shifts the focus from assessment as a measuring instrument toward assessment as a developmental, formative, and transformative process of learning (OECD, 2019).

At the practical level, the study suggests the use of a range of contemporary assessment strategies, including analytical rubrics, structured debates, reflective essays, peer assessment, and the use of students' digital portfolios. When implemented within a prosocial and supportive climate, these instruments contribute to increasing students' engagement, developing critical thinking, and strengthening historical-civic competence.

In summary, the study underscores the necessity of an integrated approach linking history didactics, civic education, and the psychopedagogy of social relationships, thereby positioning assessment as an essential component in the development of students' competencies rather than merely as an instrument for measuring their attainment.

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The role of education and artificial intelligence in youth labor market integration in Albania

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Abstract

In Albania, youth face significant challenges in accessing stable and meaningful employment, particularly in rural areas where educational opportunities and technological infrastructure remain limited (World Bank, 2022). This study examines how education, complemented by the strategic application of Artificial Intelligence (AI), can facilitate the integration of young people into the labor market by enhancing both employability and social inclusion (OECD, 2021). Adopting a mixed analytical approach based on literature review and empirical evidence, the study evaluates current educational frameworks, labor market dynamics, and the role of emerging AI-driven tools. The findings indicate a persistent mismatch between skills acquired through formal education and labor market requirements, especially in digital competencies (European Commission, 2023). AI-based solutions—such as intelligent career guidance systems, personalized learning platforms, and job-matching algorithms—demonstrate strong potential in bridging this gap and improving school-to-work transitions (UNESCO, 2021). Furthermore, the study highlights the social dimension of youth employment, emphasizing that equitable access to education and AI resources contributes to reducing regional disparities and promoting inclusive development (International Labour Organization, 2022). However, challenges related to digital infrastructure, institutional capacity, and unequal access to technology

continue to limit the effective implementation of AI in education and employment systems. The paper provides policy-relevant recommendations, including strengthening digital education, fostering collaboration between academia and industry, and promoting inclusive access to AI tools. These measures are essential for empowering youth and supporting the development of a more adaptive and inclusive labor market in Albania.

Key words: *Youth employment; Artificial Intelligence (AI); Education systems; Skills mismatch; Labor market integration; Albania*

INTRODUCTION

Youth in Albania face a challenging pathway to labor market integration, marked by persistent structural barriers and skills mismatches. According to the World Bank (2024), approximately 24% of young people aged 15–24 was classified as not in employment, education, or training (NEET), a rate exceeding the regional average. National data from INSTAT (2024) indicate that in the final quarter of 2024, the youth employment rate (15–29) reached 43.4%, up from 37.4% in the same period of 2023, while youth unemployment declined from 32.6% to 27.5%. Despite this modest improvement, youth unemployment remains structurally high, reflecting persistent inefficiencies in school-to-work transitions.

Demographic and migration dynamics have further reshaped Albania's labor market. The large-scale emigration of young and relatively well-educated individuals has increased demand for higher education while simultaneously creating labor shortages in key sectors. Nevertheless, Albania has made progress in expanding educational attainment. Upper secondary completion rates increased significantly from 42.5% in 2000 to approximately 82% in 2018 (World Bank, 2019), supported by reforms such as increased public investment and the expansion of vocational education programs.

However, international evidence highlights a persistent misalignment between education outcomes and labor market needs. The OECD (2021) notes that education systems in the region often fail to equip individuals with both foundational and advanced digital skills. Only 33.8% of adults in the Western Balkans possess basic digital skills, compared to 55.6% in the European Union (European Commission, 2023). This gap limits the adoption of emerging technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), with only about 5% of firms in the region using AI-based solutions (OECD, 2021). In this context, integrating education systems with AI-driven tools emerges as a critical policy priority. Based on secondary data from international organizations and national sources, this study adopts a descriptive analytical approach to examine how education and AI can enhance youth employability. Recent frameworks, such as those developed by the World Economic Forum (2023), emphasize the importance of digital and socio-emotional skills in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Accordingly, this paper provides evidence-based insights into how Albania can leverage education and AI to foster a more inclusive and adaptive labor market for its youth.

Challenges in Education and the Labor Market for Youth

A critical dimension of this study concerns the structural challenges in both the education system and the labor market that hinder youth integration in Albania (World Bank, 2024; OECD, 2021). These include a persistent mismatch between acquired skills and labor market demands, limited alignment between educational curricula and industry needs, and insufficient development of digital and AI-related competencies (European Commission, 2023). In

addition, regional disparities, particularly between urban and rural areas, restrict equal access to quality education and employment opportunities (International Labour Organization, 2022).

Weak school-to-work transition mechanisms and limited career guidance services further exacerbate youth vulnerability in the labor market (OECD, 2021). Addressing these interconnected challenges is essential for improving the effectiveness of education policies and ensuring that young people are better prepared for a rapidly evolving, technology-driven labor market (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Educational Disparities and Skills Gaps

Although notable progress has been achieved in the Albanian education sector, particularly in terms of secondary school completion rates, significant challenges persist regarding quality, equity, and alignment with labor market needs (World Bank, 2019). The education system has undergone substantial reforms over the past decades. In the 1990s, many vocational schools in rural areas were closed, leading to a sharp decline in vocational enrollment from approximately 72% in 1990 to 19% in 2002 (OECD, 2021). Following 2000, policy efforts gradually re-emphasized vocational education and training (VET), including the removal of restrictive entry barriers and the introduction of financial incentives for vulnerable students in 2009. As a result, participation in vocational education increased again to around 12% by 2016 (European Commission, 2023).

Despite these reforms, a substantial mismatch remains between educational outputs and labor market demands. Evidence from the World Bank STEP Skills Measurement Survey indicates that while firms in Albania do not report significant skill shortages among existing employees, they consistently face difficulties in recruiting young job applicants due to inadequate skills. The most frequently reported gaps relate to both technical (job-specific) competencies and soft skills, such as communication and teamwork. This mismatch reflects a structural disconnect between educational provision and labor market requirements, particularly affecting young jobseekers who often lack practical experience, thereby contributing to long-term unemployment and informal employment (International Labour Organization, 2022).

Skills deficiencies also contribute to higher rates of inactivity and migration among youth. According to the World Bank (2024), approximately 24% of young people aged 15–24 are classified as NEET, with higher vulnerability observed among women and rural populations. While overall secondary education completion rates are relatively high (around 82% in 2018), the OECD (2021) emphasizes that the relevance and labor market orientation of vocational and technical education remain limited. TVET programs are often perceived as insufficiently attractive and weakly connected to high-growth sectors, while training in digital, transversal, and future-oriented skills remains underdeveloped (World Economic Forum, 2023).

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO YOUTH LABOR MARKET INTEGRATION: DIGITAL DIVIDE, SKILLS GAPS, AND POLICY CHALLENGES IN ALBANIA

Infrastructure Gaps and Regional Inequalities

A key constraint in youth labor market integration in Albania is the persistent digital divide and regional inequality. Although investments in digital infrastructure have improved internet

coverage in urban areas, significant disparities remain, particularly in rural regions where young people often lack both access to adequate digital tools and the skills required to use them effectively. The World Bank (2024) highlights that such inequalities limit participation in online learning, digital training, and AI-based career development opportunities. This structural gap reinforces unequal access to education quality and increases youth vulnerability in peripheral areas. Addressing this challenge requires targeted investments in digital infrastructure, school connectivity, and inclusive digital literacy programs.

Education and Labor Market Alignment

Effective youth integration depends on aligning education systems with labor market needs. Albania has introduced reforms such as vocational education strategies and national employment frameworks aimed at improving this linkage (OECD, 2021). However, gaps persist in curriculum relevance, practical training, and digital skills development. The European Commission (2023) emphasizes that strengthening STEM education, work-based learning, and lifelong learning systems is essential for improving employability outcomes. International evidence from programs such as apprenticeship systems and structured career guidance models demonstrates that stronger school–business cooperation significantly improves school-to-work transitions.

Artificial Intelligence as a Support Tool

Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers transformative potential for addressing education and employment mismatches. AI-based systems can personalize learning, enhance career guidance, and improve labor market matching efficiency. According to the OECD (2023), AI is increasingly used in education systems for lesson planning, skill assessment, and adaptive learning. In Albania, over half of teachers have already experimented with AI tools, although many still lack sufficient training to use them effectively. This highlights the need for capacity-building and infrastructure investment.

Beyond education, AI can improve labor market integration by analyzing job market trends and connecting young jobseekers with relevant opportunities. Platforms using AI-driven matching algorithms can reduce information asymmetries and expand access to internships, training, and employment, especially for youth in rural areas. The World Economic Forum (2023) further emphasizes that AI and digital platforms are key enablers of future labor market transformation. *Policy Approaches and Best Practices.*

International experience shows that integrated youth employment policies significantly improve labor market outcomes. The Youth Guarantee initiative of the European Union represents a key example, ensuring access to education, training, or employment for young people (European Commission, 2023). OECD evidence suggests that such programs can reduce youth inactivity by around 20% when effectively implemented (OECD, 2021).

Successful models from countries such as Germany and Finland highlight the importance of dual education systems, apprenticeships, and strong collaboration between education institutions and employers. These approaches demonstrate that sustainable youth integration requires coordinated action among government, education providers, and the private sector. In the Albanian context, adapting such models alongside digital transformation and AI integration can significantly improve employability and reduce structural labor market gaps.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this study is built upon the Human Capital Theory, the Skills Mismatch Theory, and the Digital Transformation and AI Adoption Framework, which together explain how education and Artificial Intelligence (AI) influence youth labor market integration in Albania.

Human Capital Theory posits that investment in education and skills development enhances individual productivity and employability (OECD, 2021). In this context, education is considered a key driver of labor market outcomes. However, in Albania, persistent gaps between educational attainment and labor market needs suggest inefficiencies in the conversion of human capital into productive employment, particularly among youth (World Bank, 2024).

Complementing this perspective, the Skills Mismatch Theory explains unemployment and underemployment as a consequence of misalignment between the skills supplied by education systems and those demanded by employers. Empirical evidence from the Western Balkans indicates significant deficiencies in both technical and soft skills, especially among young labor market entrants, highlighting a structural disconnect between curricula and labor market requirements (International Labour Organization, 2022). This mismatch is further reinforced by limited vocational relevance and weak school-to-work transition mechanisms.

The Digital Transformation and AI Adoption Framework provides a more recent theoretical lens, emphasizing the role of emerging technologies in reshaping education and employment systems. AI-driven tools, such as adaptive learning systems, predictive labor market analytics, and intelligent job-matching platforms, can reduce information asymmetries and improve skills alignment (World Economic Forum, 2023). According to this framework, digital infrastructure and AI literacy become critical enablers of employability in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

In the Albanian context, these three theoretical perspectives converge to form an integrated framework in which education enhances human capital, AI optimizes skills matching, and institutional structures mediate the transition from education to employment. However, the effectiveness of this process is conditioned by structural barriers such as digital inequality, regional disparities, and limited institutional capacity (European Commission, 2023).

Overall, the framework suggests that improving youth labor market integration in Albania requires a simultaneous strengthening of education systems and strategic adoption of AI technologies to address structural inefficiencies and skills mismatches.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive research design to examine the role of education and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in youth labor market integration in Albania. The descriptive approach is considered appropriate as it allows for a systematic analysis of existing conditions, trends, and relationships between education systems, labor market dynamics, and emerging digital technologies without manipulating variables (OECD, 2021).

This methodological approach is consistent with previous research applying descriptive and comparative analysis of labor market indicators in Albania (Deda, Brajshori, & Krasniqi, 2020).

The research is based entirely on secondary data sources, ensuring a comprehensive and evidence-based analysis. Data were collected from internationally recognized institutions, including the World Bank, the International Labour Organization, the European Commission, the OECD, and the World Economic Forum, as well as national statistical sources such as INSTAT. These datasets include indicators on youth employment, NEET rates, education attainment, digital skills, and AI adoption.

The collected data were systematically reviewed, categorized, and comparatively analyzed to identify key patterns related to skills mismatch, educational disparities, digital divide, and labor market outcomes. Particular attention was given to temporal trends (e.g., changes in youth unemployment rates over time) and cross-regional comparisons, especially between Albania, the Western Balkans, and the European Union.

In addition, a thematic analytical approach was applied to synthesize findings from policy reports and academic literature. This allowed the identification of recurring structural challenges such as inadequate digital competencies, weak school-to-work transition mechanisms, and limited integration of AI in education and employment systems.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, no primary data collection was conducted. Instead, the use of triangulated secondary sources ensures reliability and enhances the validity of findings. The methodological approach enables a holistic understanding of how education and AI interact to shape youth employability in Albania and provides a strong empirical basis for policy-oriented recommendations.

Aim of the Paper

The main aim of this paper is to investigate the role of education and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in facilitating the integration of young people into the labor market in Albania (World Bank, 2024; OECD, 2021). Specifically, the study seeks to analyze how current educational systems contribute to the development of employability skills, and how AI-driven tools can enhance school-to-work transitions by reducing skills mismatches and improving access to employment opportunities (European Commission, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023).

In addition, the paper aims to identify structural barriers—such as digital inequality, regional disparities, and limited institutional capacity—that hinder effective youth labor market integration (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022; World Bank, 2024). By combining educational and technological perspectives, the study also aims to provide evidence-based policy recommendations for improving youth employment outcomes and promoting inclusive economic development in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (OECD, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2023).

Data Collection

This study is based on secondary data collection and adopts a qualitative–descriptive analytical approach. Data were gathered from multiple authoritative international and national sources to ensure reliability, validity, and comparability of findings (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2024).

The primary data sources include reports and datasets from the World Bank, International Labour Organization (ILO), OECD, European Commission, World Economic Forum, and the Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) (European

Commission, 2023; INSTAT, 2024). These sources provided key indicators related to youth employment, NEET rates, educational attainment, digital skills levels, and AI adoption in labor markets and education systems (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

In addition to statistical datasets, policy documents, academic literature, and strategic reports were systematically reviewed to complement quantitative indicators with qualitative insights (ILO, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2023). The collected data were organized and analyzed thematically, focusing on three main dimensions: (i) education–labor market alignment, (ii) digital skills and AI readiness, and (iii) structural barriers to youth employment (OECD, 2021; European Commission, 2023).

A comparative analytical approach was also applied to examine trends over time and differences between Albania, the Western Balkans, and the European Union (World Bank, 2024; European Commission, 2023). This triangulation of sources strengthens the robustness of the analysis and supports a comprehensive understanding of how education and AI interact in shaping youth labor market integration.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYTICAL FINDINGS

The analysis of secondary data reveals that youth labor market integration in Albania is shaped by three interrelated structural dimensions:

- labor market performance and youth unemployment trends.
- education–skills mismatch.

The emerging role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in addressing labor market inefficiencies. The findings are derived from a descriptive analytical synthesis of international and national datasets.

Youth Employment Trends and Labor Market Outcomes

Descriptive analysis of labor market indicators shows that although youth employment in Albania has improved moderately in recent years, structural vulnerabilities remain significant. According to INSTAT (2024), youth employment (15–29) increased from 37.4% in 2023 to 43.4% in 2024, while unemployment decreased from 32.6% to 27.5%. However, these improvements do not eliminate long-term structural fragility, as NEET rates remain high compared to EU averages (World Bank, 2024). The World Bank (2024) further reports that approximately 24% of youth are NEET, indicating persistent exclusion from both education and labor markets. This reflects weak school-to-work transition mechanisms and limited absorption capacity of the formal labor market.

Education–Skills Mismatch

The descriptive analysis confirms a persistent mismatch between education outcomes and labor market needs. OECD (2021) highlights that education systems in Albania and the Western Balkans fail to provide adequate digital and soft skills required by employers. Similarly, European Commission (2023) data show that only 33.8% of individuals in the region possess basic digital skills compared to 55.6% in the EU. Employers consistently report difficulties in recruiting young workers due to insufficient technical and transversal skills (ILO, 2022).

This mismatch is particularly evident in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and ICT competencies, which are increasingly demanded in modern labor markets.

Digital Divide and AI Readiness

The analysis also reveals a significant digital divide between Albania and EU countries. Limited digital infrastructure and unequal access to technology reduce youth participation in online education and AI-driven training systems (World Bank, 2024). OECD (2023) indicates that while AI adoption in education is growing, institutional readiness remains low.

Only a small percentage of firms in the Western Balkans (approximately 5%) use AI-based tools (OECD, 2021), limiting the transformation of labor market processes such as recruitment, training, and job matching.

Role of Artificial Intelligence in Labor Market Integration

Descriptive evidence shows that AI has strong potential to improve youth labor market integration. According to the World Economic Forum (2023), AI-driven systems can enhance job matching, predict labor market demand, and support personalized learning pathways. UNESCO (2021) further confirms that AI improves educational personalization and lifelong learning outcomes.

However, implementation remains limited due to lack of infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, and weak institutional coordination (European Commission, 2023).

Table 1: *Youth Labor Market Outcomes, Skills Mismatch, and AI Integration: Evidence from Albania*

Dimension	Indicator	Albania/Region Findings	Source	Interpretation
Youth Employment	Youth employment rate (15–29)	43.4% (2024), increase from 37.4% (2023)	INSTAT (2024)	Moderate improvement but structural weakness persists
Youth Unemployment	Youth unemployment rate	27.5% (2024)	INSTAT (2024)	Still high compared to EU averages
NEET Rate	Youth not in employment, education or training	~24%	World Bank (2024)	High exclusion from labor market
Digital Skills	Basic digital skills coverage	33.8% WB vs 55.6% EU	European Commission (2023)	Significant digital divide
Skills Mismatch	Employer-reported skill gaps	High in soft & technical skills	OECD (2021); ILO (2022)	Structural mismatch persists
AI Adoption	Firms using AI technologies	~5% in region	OECD (2021)	Very low AI integration
AI in Education	Use of AI tools in education	Emerging but limited capacity	OECD (2023); UNESCO (2021)	Early-stage adoption
Structural Barrier	Rural–urban digital gap	High inequality in access	World Bank (2024)	Regional disparity remains strong

Source: World Bank, 2024; INSTAT, 2024; OECD, 2021, 2023; European Commission, 2023; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022; UNESCO, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2023). Authors' elaboration based on secondary data synthesis & Authors.

Descriptive Analysis and Interpretation of Key Indicators

The descriptive analysis presented in Table 2 provides an integrated empirical overview of youth labour market conditions, the education system, and the diffusion of digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Albania within a broader regional context. The secondary data synthesis reveals a dual pattern characterized by modest macroeconomic improvements alongside persistent structural constraints in the school-to-work transition process (INSTAT, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

Youth Employment and Unemployment Dynamics.

The data indicate that the youth employment rate (15–29 years) increased from 37.4% in 2023 to 43.4% in 2024 (INSTAT, 2024). This upward trajectory reflects a gradual improvement in labour market absorption capacity, partially driven by economic expansion and the increasing dominance of the service sector. However, from a structural perspective, this improvement remains limited in scope, as it is not accompanied by a proportional enhancement in job quality or long-term employment stability.

Despite this positive trend, the youth unemployment rate remains elevated at 27.5% (INSTAT, 2024), significantly exceeding EU benchmarks. This persistent gap suggests that the labour market continues to exhibit constrained absorptive capacity and structural inefficiencies, particularly affecting cohorts with secondary and tertiary education. Consequently, employment growth appears to be quantitatively driven rather than qualitatively transformative, failing to resolve underlying structural bottlenecks.

NEET Population and Social Exclusion

The NEET rate, estimated at approximately 24% (World Bank, 2024), signals a substantial level of social and economic exclusion among young people. This indicator is particularly critical as it captures not only unemployment but also disengagement from education and training systems. From a developmental standpoint, elevated NEET levels reflect weaknesses in institutional school-to-work transition mechanisms and insufficiently effective active labour market policies (World Bank, 2024).

In the long run, sustained NEET prevalence increases the risk of structural marginalisation, skill depreciation, and irreversible human capital loss, thereby undermining both individual employability and aggregate productivity potential.

Digital Skills Divide

A pronounced digital skills gap is evident, with only 33.8% of individuals in Albania and the wider regional context possessing basic digital competencies compared to 55.6% in the European Union (European Commission, 2023). This substantial divergence highlights a structural digital divide that significantly constrains youth participation in the emerging digital economy.

From a descriptive analytical perspective, digital skills represent a core determinant of employability in contemporary labour markets. Consequently, limited digital literacy operates as a binding constraint on productivity, employability, and access to technology-driven labour market opportunities, including AI-enabled occupations.

Skills Mismatch and Labour Market Inefficiency

Evidence from OECD (2021) and the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022) confirms the persistence of a significant skills mismatch, particularly in both technical competencies and transversal skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. This misalignment indicates that the education system is not fully aligned with evolving labour market demand structures.

Descriptively, this mismatch constitutes one of the primary explanatory factors for youth unemployment, generating a structural paradox whereby job vacancies coexist with a shortage of adequately skilled candidates. This inefficiency reflects both curriculum rigidity and limited employer–education system coordination.

Artificial Intelligence Adoption in Labour Market and Education

AI adoption in the Albanian and regional labour market remains at an early stage, with approximately only 5% of firms integrating AI-based technologies (OECD, 2021). This low penetration rate indicates that digital transformation remains incomplete and uneven across sectors, with limited diffusion of automation and data-driven decision-making systems.

In the education sector, AI utilisation is still emerging, albeit gradually expanding (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2021). However, this early-stage adoption is constrained by insufficient institutional readiness, limited teacher training, and inadequate digital infrastructure. As a result, the transformative potential of AI in enhancing personalised learning and career guidance remains largely underutilised.

Structural and Regional Inequalities

One of the most significant structural findings is the persistent urban–rural divide in access to digital infrastructure and educational resources (World Bank, 2024). Rural areas continue to experience limited connectivity, reduced access to digital tools, and fewer opportunities for skills development, thereby reinforcing long-term spatial inequalities. From a descriptive standpoint, these disparities function as a reinforcing mechanism of labour market exclusion, significantly constraining the ability of rural youth to compete in digitally intensive labour markets and fully participate in the knowledge economy.

Synthesis of Descriptive Findings

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that Albania is undergoing a dual transitional process:

- Gradual improvement in youth employment indicators.
- Persistent structural rigidities in education, digital skills formation, and technological adoption.

While the labour market shows signs of partial stabilisation, deep-seated mismatches between labour supply and demand, combined with limited AI integration, continue to constrain sustainable development outcomes.

From a policy-oriented perspective, these findings underscore the necessity of integrated reforms spanning education system modernisation, digital infrastructure expansion, and active labour market policies. Such interventions are essential to accelerate youth integration into a knowledge-based and technology-driven economy (European Commission, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023; OECD, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides a comprehensive descriptive analysis of the role of education and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in shaping youth labor market integration in Albania. The findings reveal that, despite moderate improvements in key labor market indicators, youth employment outcomes remain constrained by deep-rooted structural inefficiencies. While the increase in youth employment rates and the decline in unemployment suggest partial labor market recovery, these trends are not sufficient to offset persistent vulnerabilities, particularly high NEET rates and limited job quality (INSTAT, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

A central conclusion of the study is that the Albanian education system continues to exhibit a significant misalignment with labor market demands. The persistent skills mismatch—especially in digital and transversal competencies—represents a critical barrier to effective school-to-work transitions (OECD, 2021; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022). This structural gap is further reinforced by limited integration of practical training and weak collaboration between educational institutions and employers.

Moreover, the study highlights a pronounced digital divide, both in terms of individual competencies and infrastructural access. The relatively low level of basic digital skills compared to the European Union average constrains youth participation in the digital economy and reduces their employability in increasingly technology-driven labor markets (European Commission, 2023). This challenge is particularly acute in rural areas, where limited connectivity and access to digital resources exacerbate regional inequalities (World Bank, 2024).

Artificial Intelligence emerges as a transformative yet underutilized tool in both education and labor market systems. Although AI has the potential to enhance personalized learning, improve career guidance, and optimize job matching processes, its adoption remains at an early stage due to institutional, infrastructural, and capacity-related constraints (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2021). Similarly, the low level of AI integration within firms limits productivity gains and slows the overall pace of digital transformation in the labor market (OECD, 2021).

Overall, the study concludes that Albania is undergoing a dual transition: a gradual quantitative improvement in labor market indicators alongside persistent qualitative and structural challenges. Without targeted and integrated policy interventions, these structural barriers are likely to continue limiting the effective integration of youth into a modern, knowledge-based economy (World Economic Forum, 2023; European Commission, 2023).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the empirical findings and international best practices, this study proposes a set of integrated and policy-oriented recommendations aimed at enhancing youth labor market integration in Albania:

Strengthening Digital and AI-Integrated Education Systems

A fundamental priority is the modernization of the education system through the integration of digital skills, STEM disciplines, and AI-related competencies across all levels of education. Curricula should be updated to reflect evolving labor market demands, with a particular emphasis on coding, data literacy, and problem-solving skills (European Commission, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023). Expanding access to digital learning tools, especially in rural areas, is essential for reducing inequalities.

Enhancing Teacher Training and Institutional Capacity

Effective implementation of digital and AI-based education requires substantial investment in teacher training and institutional capacity-building. Continuous professional development programs should equip educators with the skills necessary to utilize AI tools and digital platforms effectively (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2021). Strengthening school infrastructure and ensuring access to modern technologies are critical preconditions for successful digital transformation.

Promoting AI-Driven Career Guidance and Labor Market Matching

The establishment of AI-supported career guidance systems can significantly improve school-to-work transitions by providing real-time labor market information and personalized career pathways. Such systems can reduce information asymmetries and better align individual skills with labor market demand (World Economic Forum, 2023; OECD, 2021). Universities and vocational institutions should integrate data-driven career services into their institutional frameworks.

Strengthening Education–Industry Linkages

Closer collaboration between educational institutions and the private sector is essential for reducing skills mismatch. Expanding work-based learning opportunities, including internships, apprenticeships, and dual education systems, can enhance practical skills and employability (OECD, 2021; European Commission, 2023). Public–private partnerships should be actively promoted to ensure that training programs are aligned with industry needs.

Addressing Regional and Social Inequalities

Targeted policies are required to reduce urban–rural disparities and promote inclusive access to education and employment opportunities. Investments in digital infrastructure, connectivity, and community-based training programs are crucial for ensuring that youth in disadvantaged regions are not excluded from the digital economy (World Bank, 2024; ILO, 2022). Gender-inclusive policies and support for vulnerable groups should also be prioritized.

Expanding Lifelong Learning and Active Labor Market Policies

Developing a comprehensive lifelong learning framework is essential for adapting to rapidly changing labor market conditions. Governments should incentivize continuous training through subsidies, tax incentives, and public programs aimed at upskilling and reskilling young workers (OECD, 2021). Active labor market policies should be strengthened to support transitions into employment, particularly for NEET populations.

Improving Monitoring, Evaluation, and Data Systems

Finally, strengthening data collection and monitoring mechanisms is critical for evidence-based policymaking. Key indicators such as youth unemployment, NEET rates, and digital skills levels should be systematically tracked to evaluate policy effectiveness (World Bank, 2024; European Commission, 2023). The integration of AI in policy monitoring systems can further enhance decision-making efficiency and responsiveness.

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Institutional readiness for gender equity: a policy-to-practice analysis of Albania's digital and reproductive rights for youth

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Abstract

Albania is currently navigating a dual transformation involving rapid economic digitalization and an evolving social landscape for youth. While national frameworks like the Digital Albania initiative and the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021 to 2030 signal a commitment to progress, a notable gap remains between high level policy and the daily realities faced by young women. This study investigates the intersection of economic digital integration and sexual and reproductive health rights to understand how institutional structures influence the empowerment of the next generation. **Core** Research Questions: How do legislative frameworks integrate gender specific protections for youth entering the gig economy and technology sectors? To what extent do institutional barriers within the public health sector impede the digital delivery of reproductive health education for adolescents? Methodology and Findings: This research employs a Structural Institutionalist Framework, utilizing a Qualitative Policy Audit and the Delphi Method. The study systematically reviews national employment and health strategies from 2020 to 2025, complemented by expert consultations with 30 key stakeholders, including members of the Women's MP Alliance and civil society leaders**.** Findings indicate that Albania's digital agenda remains largely gender blind, failing to account for the specific precarity faced by young women in remote or tech-based work. Additionally, a disconnect between the Ministry of Health and digital education initiatives has led to fragmented sexual and reproductive health information. However, the study identifies that existing Parliamentary Committee structures hold significant potential to champion gender responsive digital budgeting. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations: Legislative

compliance with international standards is insufficient without dedicated mechanisms to monitor digital gender trends. The authors recommend the creation of a cross sectoral Youth and Gender Digital Taskforce to bridge the operational gap between security, health, and labor ministries. By prioritizing institutional reform over individual data collection, Albania can create a more resilient environment for future women leaders.

Keywords: *Albania, digital, gender, equality, youth*

INTRODUCTION

Albania is undergoing a period of rapid transformation characterized by accelerated digitalization and shifting socio-economic realities for youth. National policy frameworks, including the Digital Agenda of Albania 2022–2026 (Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy, 2022) and the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021–2030 (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2021), signal a strong institutional commitment to technological advancement and gender equality. Despite this progress, a persistent gap remains between policy aspirations and the lived experiences of young women, particularly at the intersection of digital labor markets and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR).

The expansion of the gig economy and technology-driven sectors has reshaped employment patterns, offering new avenues for economic participation while simultaneously introducing new forms of vulnerability. Young women increasingly participate in digital labor markets; however, these opportunities are often accompanied by informality, lack of social protection, and limited regulatory oversight. At the same time, digital infrastructures have the potential to transform access to reproductive health information and services, yet institutional barriers continue to constrain their effective use.

This paper examines how Albanian legislative and policy frameworks addressing digitalization incorporate, or fail to incorporate, gender-specific protections for youth entering emerging labor markets. It further explores the extent to which institutional fragmentation within the public health and education systems limits the digital delivery of reproductive health education to vulnerable adolescents. By situating these issues within Albania's broader European integration trajectory, the analysis argues that the gap between policy and practice reflects deeper structural disconnections across institutional domains rather than isolated implementation failures.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a structural-institutionalist approach, emphasizing that policy outcomes are shaped by institutional arrangements, administrative coordination, and governance structures rather than policy intent alone. A qualitative research design was employed, combining two complementary methods.

Qualitative Policy Audit:

A systematic review of key national strategies and legislative frameworks related to employment, digitalization, and public health (2020–2025) was conducted. The analysis focused on identifying gaps in gender integration, particularly within digital policy domains and budgeting processes.

Modified Delphi Method:

Two rounds of structured consultations were conducted with 30 stakeholders, including policymakers, members of the Women's Parliamentary Alliance, public health officials, and civil society representatives. This method enabled consensus-building on institutional barriers, policy priorities, and feasible reform pathways. This combined approach allowed for both document-based analysis and expert validation, strengthening the reliability of findings and ensuring alignment with current policy debates.

RESULTS

Gendered Dynamics in the Digital Labor Market

The findings reveal a significant mismatch between educational attainment and labor market outcomes for women in Albania. Despite higher rates of university participation among women, they remain underrepresented in high-value digital and technological sectors (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2023). Instead, they are disproportionately concentrated in low-paid, service-oriented, and often informal roles within the digital economy. This pattern reflects a broader structural issue in which the expansion of digital labor markets has not been accompanied by adequate regulatory frameworks. The absence of a clear legal definition for platform workers contributes to the exclusion of many young women from social protection systems, including health insurance and social security. Informality further obscures their participation, reinforcing economic vulnerability and limiting upward mobility (INSTAT, 2024). The data also highlight a persistent "glass ceiling" in digital sectors, where women face barriers to advancement into technical and managerial positions. These dynamics suggest that digitalization, in its current form, risks reproducing rather than reducing gender inequalities.

Fragmentation in Digital Reproductive Health Access

The analysis identifies a critical disconnect between digital development initiatives and the delivery of reproductive health education. Institutional coordination between the education and health sectors remains limited, resulting in fragmented and inconsistent provision of SRHR information. Health education is not systematically integrated into the national curriculum, and digital SRHR initiatives are largely implemented through short-term, donor-funded projects led by non-governmental organizations (Save the Children, 2024). While these initiatives provide valuable services, their reliance on external funding undermines sustainability and limits nationwide reach. Evidence indicates that despite widespread digital engagement among youth, awareness of essential reproductive health services remains low. This suggests that existing digital platforms, including national e-government systems, are underutilized for health communication. The lack of integration between digital tools and health services prevents young people, particularly young women, from translating digital access into improved health outcomes.

Institutional Gaps and "Paper Compliance"

A central finding of the study is the prevalence of "paper compliance," whereby Albania has adopted comprehensive legal and policy frameworks aligned with European standards, yet lacks the institutional mechanisms required for effective implementation and monitoring

(European Commission, 2024; European Commission, 2025). While gender equality policies are formally established, the availability of sex-disaggregated data remains limited, particularly in digital labor sectors (INSTAT, 2023). This constrains the ability of institutions to track progress and design evidence-based interventions. Furthermore, gender-responsive budgeting practices are largely absent from digital and innovation sectors, indicating a disconnect between financial planning and policy commitments (UN Women Albania, 2025). These gaps reflect broader institutional fragmentation, where responsibilities are distributed across multiple agencies without effective coordination. As a result, policies addressing digitalization, employment, and health operate in parallel rather than as an integrated system.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that Albania's progress in aligning legislative frameworks with European Union standards represents an important step toward gender equality, but remains insufficient in the absence of strong institutional integration and accountability mechanisms. The persistence of structural fragmentation across digital, labor, and health sectors limits the capacity of policies to translate into meaningful outcomes for young women. Addressing these challenges requires a shift from formal compliance toward systemic reform. Strengthening cross-sectoral coordination is essential to bridge existing policy silos. Establishing a dedicated mechanism—such as a Youth and Gender Digital Taskforce—would enable the alignment of digital governance, labor protections, and public health strategies, ensuring a more coherent policy approach (Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2023; YMCA Europe, 2024). Legal reforms are also necessary to recognize and regulate digital platform work, extending social protections to individuals engaged in freelance and gig-based employment (International Labour Organization, 2023). Without such measures, the expansion of digital labor markets will continue to reproduce patterns of precarity and exclusion. At the same time, the institutionalization of digital reproductive health services within national platforms is critical for improving access and reducing stigma. Integrating SRHR information into government-led digital systems would ensure that services are accessible, reliable, and sustainable beyond the lifecycle of donor-funded projects. Enhancing data systems represents another key priority. The development of comprehensive, sex-disaggregated data within digital and labor sectors would support more effective monitoring and evidence-based policymaking. Similarly, expanding gender-responsive budgeting to include digitalization and innovation sectors would align financial resources with policy objectives. Ultimately, Albania's digital transformation presents both risks and opportunities. Without deliberate intervention, digitalization may reinforce existing inequalities. However, with integrated and gender-responsive governance, it has the potential to advance inclusion, equity, and access to essential services. The transition toward integrated gender-responsive digital governance is therefore essential. By embedding gender considerations into institutional structures and policy implementation processes, Albania can move beyond nominal compliance and ensure that its digital future supports the rights and well-being of all young people, particularly women navigating increasingly complex socio-economic environments.

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POLITICAL CULTURE AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF CITIZENS - STATE RELATIONS IN ALBANIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF TRUST PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRATIC HABITUS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between citizens and the state from a sociological perspective, focusing on the role of political culture in shaping institutional trust, civic engagement, and democratic habitus in a transitional context such as Albania. Drawing on qualitative analysis and existing empirical evidence on political attitudes and behaviour, the study suggests that democratization should be understood not only as an institutional transformation but as a broader social process grounded in practice, norms, and perceptions. The findings indicate that limited institutional trust, low civic engagement, and an underdeveloped democratic habitus contribute to an imbalanced relationship between citizens and the state. Furthermore, the legacy of the communist regime and ongoing transitional challenges have shaped ambivalent attitudes toward democratic values. This study contributes to ongoing debates by emphasizing the importance of a socially grounded understanding of democratic consolidation, extending beyond institutional frameworks to include cultural and everyday social dynamics.

Keywords: *Political culture; Albania; Civic participation; Democratic habitus; Institutional trust*

INTRODUCTION

Transition in Albania related to the process of democratization should be interpreted not just as a set of institutional, political, and social changes, but also as a fundamental structural transition involving multiple areas of society-social, cultural, and normative structures among others. In this context, democratization should not be measured only institutionally; the achievement of democratic norms requires the active participation of citizens in terms of their attitudes, actions, and behaviour patterns, along with the proper functioning of political institutions. As evidenced by the results of the baseline research, the process of democratization in Albania also faced many obstacles due to the political culture. Currently, the sociological dimensions of democratization are extensively emphasized. For example, Christian Welzel (2013) argues that, apart from institutional transitions, democratic development depends also on emancipation of citizens and their civic engagement (Welzel, 2013). In this regard, it is possible to refer the notion of "fragile democracies" to decscibe context in which deficiences in institutional trust and social capital limit citizens' percepition of the state as a representative body (Inglehart & Norris, 2019).

These theoretical approaches have special relevance for the context of Albania, which features a combination of institutional reform and the emergence of a new political culture. Social theory suggests that the citizen–state relationship is much more than just the formal relationship established by law because it consists of practical interactions of citizens, as well as their beliefs and social practices. It is important to consider a number of factors that influence citizen–state relations, namely; trust in political institutions and their representatives; active participation of people in the political process, as well as their decision–making, and a certain of set of norms and values that serve as the foundation of democracy and justify the existence of the political system (Van der Meer, 2017). According to contemporary studies on post–communist countries, weakness in at least one of the above dimensions results in problematic citizen–state relations, which manifest themselves in such social issues such as political apathy, distrust, and limited participation in politics (Norris, 2011). In this regard, Albania can be regarded as a country where democratization has been hindered by the discrepancy between formal institutions and real-life practices.

Despite these insights, there is limited research that systematically examines how political culture shapes citizen-state relations in the context of Albania. In particular, the interaction between institutional trust, civic participation, and democratic habitus remains underexplored as an integrated framework of analysis. The current research aims to explore the role of political culture in influencing the reconfiguration of the relationship between citizens and the state in Albania. Specifically, this study focuses on three main dimensions, which include the notion of institutional trust as the basis of political legitimacy, civic participation as an aspect of democratic culture, and democratic habitus as the reproduction democratic values and norms within the framework of social practices. In doing so, the study aims to elaborate on the sociological nature of democracy in Albania, viewed not only as an institutional system but also as a developing social practice.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: POLITICAL CULTURE AND DEMOCRATIC HABITUS

Political culture refers to a key sociological framework for understanding democracy, characterized by a set of values, norms, attitudes, and beliefs that shape how individuals relate to political institutions and process. Traditionally, the study of political culture has been

closely associated with citizens' perception of the state and their level of political engagement, as conceptualized by Almond and Verba (1963). Contemporary approaches have further developed this perspective by emphasizing the role of social practices and the internalization of norms and values in shaping political behaviour (Inglehart, 1997; Welzel, 2013).

In this context, the concept of democratic habitus, drawing on Pierre Bordieu (1990), provides a useful analytical lens for understanding how democratic norms and values become internalized within individuals and reproduced through everyday social practices (Bourdieu, 1990). Democratic habitus reflects the incorporation of principles such as equality, participation, and civic responsibility into individual disposition, shaping patterns of behaviour and engagement in the public sphere. Building on these theoretical perspectives, this study adopts analytical framework that examines the relationship between citizens and the state through three interconnected dimensions: institutional trust, understood as the foundation of political legitimacy; civic participation, as an expression of democratic engagement; and democratic habitus, as the internalization and reproduction of democratic norms and values. These dimensions are analytically linked, as levels of trust influence participation, while both are shaped by and contribute to the development of democratization as a socially embedded process, extending beyond institutional analysis to include cultural and behavioural dynamics.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study adopts a qualitative research approach, focusing on a systematic review of the existing literature concerning political culture and democratization processes, combined with analysis of secondary empirical data derived from international surveys that examine individual's attitudes and values, and analysis of documents related to sociopolitical changes in Albania, conducted within the framework of three main criteria, namely institutional trust, civic engagement, and attitudes toward democracy, which are considered critical determinants of the citizen-state relationship. In this regard, it is important to stress that a sociological analytical perspective is employed, where democracy is understood as a process shaped by social interaction. The data are interpreted through a qualitative analytical approach, focusing on the identification of patterns and relationships among the selected dimensions.

TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS

An essential aspect of the citizen-state relations is the level of institutional trust. As empirical studies show, the Trust in Governance 2023 study indicates the status of political pasties (25.5 per cent) and parliament (29.1) among the least trusted institutions. The courts and the prosecution also demonstrate low levels of trust (UNDP, 2024).

At the same time, according to the same report, perceptions of corruption are high, with 81.5per cent of citizens seeing it as widespread or very widespread in the country. These figures point to a notable divide between institutions and citizens and challenge their effectiveness and legitimacy. Within a sociological approach, a lack of trust in institutions affects democracy by limiting the links between individuals and institutions and reducing their readiness to participate in civic life (Rothstein, 2011). This attitude leads to indifference and distrust regarding democratic procedures, indicating that citizens perceive the state as a distant entity rather than as a representative structure.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

A component of civic culture is represented by the level of civic participation, understood as individual involvement in public life and decision-making processes (Almond & Verba, 1963). In the Albanian context, the level of civic participation is limited to voting, shows low engagement with civil organizations, and implies sporadic mobilizations over public issues. According to empirical data, participation in civic and voluntary groups is limited, and concrete actions of public engagement are constrained. Only 12 per cent of citizens reported signing petitions, 7 per cent took part in street protests, and only 4 per cent participated in radical activities, including boycotts (AidData, 2021). These data suggest that while there is a certain interest in politics, it does not translate into practical actions of participation.

This disconnect between interest in politics and active participation implies that the level of civic participation is passive, and it is driven by specific circumstances rather than consistent interest in the political sphere. From sociological perspective a low level of social capital limits civic participation, meaning that people respond only in certain situations, especially when they are crisis-oriented or related to personal interest (Putnam, 2000). Such a pattern negatively impacts democratic development by reducing the possibility of active civic participation in decision-making processes.

DEMOCRATIC HABITUS AND CULTURAL CONSTRAINS

Democratic habitus has formed through a variety of factors, including the legacy of communism, a lack of a stable tradition of democratic practices, and a prolonged period of transition in the social and political spheres (Offe, 1996). These elements have created barriers to developing an active democratic habitus, thus limiting the formation of an active civic identity.

As empirical studies show, trust in institutions is low, and civic participation in public matter is constrained. These patterns mean that democratic practices are still evolving and that the civic identity remains in the process of formation, suggesting a fragile political culture. Moreover, people do not rely on democratic values to guide their actions and attitudes. Research conducted in Albania has demonstrated that political attitudes and behaviour feature a pragmatically-based rationale because people perceive the distant citizen-state relations and ambivalent political culture in which democratic practices are accompanied by scepticism toward institutions (European Commission, 2023).

TRANSFORMATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CITIZENS AND THE STATE

The above–mentioned issues have led to certain configurations of the relationship between citizens and the state, characterized by social distancing, mistrust, and weak civic participation. Empirical findings confirm that these trends persist in the current context, as indicated by the results of the Trust in Governance 2023 study, where trust in major institutions remains low, with only 29 per cent of citizens expressing confidence in Parliament and 25 per cent in political parties, while trust in the courts and prosecution is similarly limited (Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2024).

At the same time, a majority of citizens (over 59per cent) perceive the government as non-transparent, while 62per cent consider it non-accountable. These figures point to a deficit of institutional legitimacy and suggest that, instead of cooperative engagement, a passive and sceptical attitude toward institutions prevails, with citizens feeling socially distant from decision-making process.

Such dynamics indicate that mistrust and low levels of participation undermine the effectiveness of democratic control (Dahl, 1989). Furthermore, the high perception of corruption (over 81 per cent) exacerbates these challenges and negatively affects social cohesion (UNDP, 2024).

DISCUSSION

From the discussion, it is concluded that the democratization process in Albania should not be understood merely as a result of institutional reform, but as an intricate process that requires fundamental changes in both culture and society. Important factors such as social trust, degree of civic engagement, and acceptance of democratic principles become vital elements in defining relations between citizens and the state (Kalemi, 2024). Based on this theoretical perspective, a vicious cycle can emerge, where distrust leads to lack of participation, which in turn further undermines democratic development. It becomes difficult for a democratic habitus to be fully consolidated within such a cycle.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the article suggests that political culture is an essential factor in influencing and developing the relationship between citizens and the state in Albania. The lack of a well-developed democratic habitus of democracy prevents the establishment of effective democratic processes, implying that for democracy to function, there must be social and cultural stability.

In such a context, democratization requires efforts that extend beyond institutional reforms, addressing changes at the social and value levels.

To this end, the article highlights the need for improving civic education to increase public participation, enhancing transparency and accountability in institutions to rebuild citizens' trust, and involving citizens more actively in shaping their relationship with the state.

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FOUNDATIONS OF A LIFE IN ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

The Career Trajectory of Prof. Luljeta Bozo

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the career trajectory of Prof. Luljeta Bozo as a pioneering woman in civil engineering in Albania. Using a qualitative case study approach based on document analysis and a semi-structured interview conducted in 2022, the study explores her contributions to geotechnical engineering and her role in shaping women's participation in science. The findings highlight how early academic excellence, particularly in mathematics and physics, combined with institutional pathways, enabled her entry into a traditionally male-dominated field. Drawing on existing research on gender and STEM, the paper situates her trajectory within broader patterns of gender inequality, while also emphasizing the importance of female role models in strengthening women's confidence and engagement in scientific disciplines. The analysis further connects this individual case to broader structural dynamics, including evidence that developing contexts may display narrower gender gaps in STEM participation. The case of Albania during the socialist period provides a relevant illustration, where state policies expanded women's access to higher education, partly in response to workforce demands. The findings suggest that women's participation in STEM is shaped not only by individual ability and institutional support, but also by wider policy frameworks and socio-economic conditions. In this regard, the study underscores the importance of early engagement with science education. As argued by Nathanaili (2024), the foundations of scientific interest must be established from the earliest stages of education in order to support more inclusive and sustained participation in STEM, particularly among girls.

Keywords: *Women in engineering; STEM education; gender barriers; role models; Albania*

INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) has been widely recognized as a key dimension of social and economic development. However, gender disparities in STEM education remain a global concern. Although more girls are enrolled in school than ever before, they continue to face structural barriers that limit their participation in scientific fields. Women represent only around 35% of STEM graduates worldwide, a figure that has remained largely unchanged over the past decade (UNESCO, 2026). In this context, examining individual trajectories of women who have succeeded in traditionally male-dominated fields becomes particularly important and provide valuable insight into the structural and cultural conditions shaping access to scientific professions. This paper focuses on the case of Prof. Luljeta Bozo, one of the first women in Albania to pursue a career in civil engineering. Her professional path offers an opportunity to examine the intersection between gender, scientific development, and socio-political context.

CONTEXT: ENGINEERING AND GENDER IN ALBANIA

Until the mid-1960s, civil engineering in Albania was largely a male-dominated profession. The entry of women into this field was limited, reflecting broader gender norms and structural barriers in access to technical education and professional opportunities. At the same time, the socialist system promoted women's participation in education and employment, creating conditions that, at least formally, supported women's entry into scientific professions.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the career trajectory of Prof. Luljeta Bozo as a woman in engineering. The analysis is based on a combination of document analysis and a semi-structured interview. Documentary sources include biographical data, institutional records, and professional documentation, including a curriculum vitae provided directly by Prof. Bozo, which are used to reconstruct key stages of her academic and professional development.

These materials are complemented by a semi-structured interview conducted with Prof. Bozo, which provides additional insight into her personal experiences, professional challenges, and perspectives on women's participation in engineering. The interview was conducted in 2022 at Prof. Bozo's private residence, in a quiet and familiar setting that facilitated open and reflective discussion. The meeting had been arranged in advance, and the interview materials were shared with the participant prior to the interview. The interview was conducted by one of the authors (Dr. Nathanaili) and followed a semi-structured format. The setting contributed to a comfortable and focused exchange, supporting detailed reflections on professional experiences and career development.

The data are analysed thematically, focusing on key dimensions such as career development, institutional context, gender-related challenges, and professional contributions. This combined approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the interaction between individual trajectory and broader socio-historical conditions.

Career Trajectory - Based on the CV, biographical data, institutional records, and professional documentation

Prof. Bozo's career began in 1965 at the Polytechnic University of Tirana, at a time when civil engineering in Albania was a male-dominated field. As one of the first women to enter this profession, her trajectory reflects broader processes of gender boundary crossing

in technical disciplines. Her academic development was shaped by both institutional constraints and opportunities, including the interruption of studies in the Soviet Union and their continuation in Albania. Her early research focused on construction materials, later evolving into a long-term specialization in geotechnics, particularly in soil behavior and structural stability. The following section provides a summary of the academic and professional profile of Prof. Luljeta Bozo, based on her curriculum vitae as provided by the author, biographical data, institutional records, and professional documentation.

- ***Academic Titles and Honors.*** Prof. Luljeta Bozo obtained her PhD in 1981 and was awarded a Doctorate in Philosophy in 1984. She was granted the title of Full Professor in 1994. In 2011, she became a member of the Albanian Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 2018, she was granted the title of Professor Emeritus, in recognition of her long-standing academic and professional contributions.
- ***Publications:*** Prof. Bozo academic output includes: 3 monographs, 30 books in engineering, 3 teaching manuals, 6 national research projects and 72 scientific articles, conference papers, and international presentations.
- ***Supervision and Mentorship:*** Prof. Bozo has supervised 11 doctoral dissertations, 35 Master's theses and over 100 undergraduate engineering theses. She has also served as an external reviewer for 65 doctoral and Master's theses.
- ***Scientific Activity.*** Prof. Bozo scientific activity includes participation in 3 government-funded research projects; organization and leadership of 12 training courses; organization and leadership of 14 international scientific conferences and symposia; membership in scientific committees in over 10 countries; research in geotechnical engineering, including slope stability, retaining structures, and foundation deformation; contribution to the development of technical standards for design and implementation; membership in scientific councils of the Ministry of Construction and the University of Tirana; membership in academic senates and councils of several institutions, including the Faculty of Civil Engineering (University of Tirana), Polis University, and others; member of the National Committee on Large Dams; Engineering Projects.
- ***Her professional work includes the design of:*** Multi-storey buildings (8–12 floors); Educational facilities; Infrastructure projects; Various geotechnical support structures.
- ***Teaching Activity:*** Prof. Bozo has taught 23 courses in geotechnics, environmental engineering, and planning at both undergraduate and graduate levels. She has lectured at Faculty of Civil Engineering, University of Tirana; Epoka University; Polis University; State University of Tetovo. At the Faculty of Civil Engineering (University of Tirana), she has held several leadership roles, including: Vice-Dean, Head of the Department of Structures, Head of the Geotechnical Sector, Chair of the Professors' Council, Chair of the Didactic Council
- ***She has also served as:*** Director of the ALTEA Laboratory and President of the Albanian Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Insights from the Interview

As Prof. Bozo recalled in the interview, she excelled as a high school student, particularly in physics and mathematics, which facilitated her initial opportunity to pursue undergraduate studies in architecture in the former Soviet Union. However, following the interruption of diplomatic relations between Albania and the Soviet Union, she returned to Albania and continued her studies at the Polytechnic University of Tirana, specializing in civil engineering.

Her early scientific work focused on the production of light construction materials, a process that required extensive effort both on site and in the laboratory. Reflecting on this period, she noted humorously:

> I spoke to the structural elements as if they could understand me, urging them to resist at least until the completion of technical testing (Interview, 2022).

From 1968 onward, her academic focus shifted to "Building Construction, Basis and Foundations," a field concerned with ensuring the structural stability of buildings, particularly in relation to seismic resistance. Over time, she became one of the key figures contributing to the development of geotechnical engineering in Albania. In parallel with her research, Prof. Bozo was actively involved in teaching, delivering courses such as Soil Mechanics, Foundation Techniques, and Building Construction. Her long-term commitment to both teaching and research contributed to the training of multiple generations of engineers. As she recalled,

> colleagues referred to me as a "bookworm," reflecting her strong dedication to studying and academic work (Interview, 2022).

The period leading up to the completion of her doctoral work in 1981 was shaped by two key factors: the geotechnical characteristics of Tirana's clay soils and the broader context of the Cold War. The widespread construction of bunkers and underground structures during this period created practical opportunities for field research, enabling easier access to soil samples. As she described,

> "Relatively simple tools and field access allowed me to conduct extensive empirical work across different construction sites" (Interview, 2022).

In 1985, Prof. Bozo specialized in rock mechanics at a leading laboratory in Paris. From that point until 1993, she served as a member of the Scientific Council of the Ministry of Construction, contributing to research and policy discussions on critical engineering and environmental issues, including seismic risk, soil stability, erosion, landslides, coastal dynamics, and infrastructure vulnerability. As she described in the interview, she follows a highly structured work routine, noting that she "checks emails only in the morning and goes through them one by one."

Throughout her academic career, she also held several leadership positions at the Faculty of Civil Engineering, including Vice-Dean and Head of Department. Her contributions were instrumental in the establishment of a geotechnical engineering profile within civil engineering education in Albania, formally introduced in 2005.

ANALYSIS: GENDER, SCIENCE, AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Breaking Gender Barriers

Existing research suggests that girls tend to disengage from STEM disciplines during middle and high school (Dasgupta & Stout, 2014). Against this pattern, the case of Prof. Bozo represents a notable divergence, as she demonstrated strong performance

Figure. Prof. Luljeta Bozo during field excursions to major construction sites (*Photo courtesy of Prof. Luljeta Bozo*)

in mathematics and physics during this formative period. This contrast highlights the importance of early academic achievement and sustained engagement in supporting women's participation in STEM fields.

Prof. Bozo's subsequent entry into civil engineering further reinforces this trajectory, representing an early example of women entering a traditionally male-dominated profession in Albania. Her career illustrates how individual academic excellence, combined with institutional pathways, enabled access even in a context where gender norms remained influential.

This case can be situated within broader and more recent efforts to expand women's participation in technical and scientific fields in Albania. Contemporary initiatives increasingly link capacity building with policy reform. For example, a UNDP report notes that 208 participants, 79 percent of whom were women, took part in specialized training programs covering areas such as climate modelling, environmental economics, climate budgeting, and stakeholder engagement (UNDP, 2026).

Scientific Contribution and Practice

Engineering in the Albanian context was closely linked to practical outcomes, where professional credibility depended on performance in real construction environments. As reflected in her own account, "I spoke to the structural elements as if they could understand

me…" (Interview, 2022), her work demonstrates a strong engagement with the material and technical dimensions of engineering practice. Her contribution to geotechnics, particularly in foundation engineering and soil analysis, positioned her among the key figures in the development of this field in Albania.

Evidence from her professional record, including the curriculum vitae provided by the interviewee, indicates that this close connection between academic expertise and practical application was further reinforced through her involvement in working groups and expert consultations with state institutions, particularly before the 1990s. During this period, academic professionals were actively engaged in addressing technical challenges in collaboration with ministries and public enterprises. In the post-1990 period, such forms of engagement appear to have declined, reflecting a broader shift in the relationship between academia and state institutions. This trend contrasts with the continued development of Prof. Bozo's professional expertise, which expanded significantly over time. Evidence from the interview and professional record suggests that her expertise was mobilized more visibly during periods of crisis, for example, following major earthquake events, when she was called upon to provide expert assessments of building safety (Interview, 2022). This pattern indicates a more episodic rather than systematic use of academic expertise in public decision-making, raising questions about the continuity of knowledge transfer between universities and state institutions.

Professional Identity and Role Model

Beyond her technical work, Prof. Bozo played an important role in academic and institutional development through teaching, supervision, and leadership positions. Her long-term involvement in higher education contributed to the training of new generations of engineers.

Beyond her individual trajectory, her long-term role as a faculty member also reflects a broader dynamic identified in the literature. As noted by Dasgupta and Stout (2014), the presence of female faculty can increase female students' confidence and strengthen their identification with STEM disciplines. In this sense, Prof. Bozo's academic career can be understood not only in terms of scientific contribution, but also as a form of representation that reinforces women's visibility in engineering and role model.

Her career also spans two distinct periods, before and after 1990, each characterized by different institutional and socio-political conditions. Despite these differences, a consistent element is her role in supporting and motivating women to pursue education and professional careers.

CONCLUSIONS

The case of Prof. Luljeta Bozo illustrates how individual dedication, professional competence, and institutional engagement can contribute to both scientific development and social change. Her trajectory reflects broader dynamics of women's participation in engineering, highlighting both progress and ongoing challenges. In this sense, her role extends beyond individual achievement, contributing to the visibility of women in a traditionally male-dominated field and reinforcing the importance of role models in shaping future generations.

The findings of this study can also be interpreted in light of broader cross-national research, which suggests that developing countries often display narrower gender gaps in mathematics and science compared to more economically developed contexts (Perez-Felkner et al., 2020). The case of Albania during the socialist period provides a relevant illustration of this dynamic. While Prof. Bozo's trajectory clearly reflects individual academic excellence, it was also shaped by state policies that actively promoted women's participation in higher education, particularly in technical fields. These policies were not driven solely by gender equality considerations, but also by the need to expand the skilled workforce. As a result, women's participation in scientific disciplines increased significantly, in some cases leading to higher female representation in fields such as physics during the early 1980s.

These findings suggest that access to scientific careers is shaped not only by formal equality, but also by the interaction between policy frameworks, institutional opportunities, and social context. In this regard, the case of Prof. Bozo highlights the importance of both structural conditions and individual agency in supporting women's participation in STEM.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of early engagement with science education. As argued by Nathanaili (2024), the foundations of scientific interest must be established from the earliest stages of education, including at the preschool level. Early exposure to science can help prevent later disengagement, broaden access, and support more inclusive pathways into STEM, particularly for girls.

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND AGING IN ALBANIA: CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL INCLUSION AMONG OLDER ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the barriers to adopting digital and AI technologies among older adults in Albania. Using a qualitative approach based on a literature review and semi-structured interviews with 12 participants (experts and older users), the study explores structural, technological, and socio-psychological factors influencing digital inclusion. Findings indicate that the digital divide is multidimensional, encompassing limited access to technology, low digital skills, lack of institutional support, language barriers, and trust-related concerns. Among these, the absence of Albanian-language support and low confidence in digital systems emerge as key obstacles to AI adoption. The study is theoretically informed by digital divide frameworks and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), providing insights into technology adoption in low-resource digital contexts. The study highlights the need for an integrated approach combining technological innovation with training programs and institutional support to enhance digital inclusion among older adults. Overall, the research contributes empirical evidence from an under-researched context and provides practical implications for policymakers and designers of digital services aimed at aging populations.

***Keywords**: aging, older adults, digital divide, artificial intelligence, accessibility, digital inclusion*

INTRODUCTION

Rapid technological developments, driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI), have significantly transformed everyday life by providing innovative solutions across multiple sectors. For older adults, these technologies offer opportunities to enhance independence, improve quality of life, and increase access to healthcare, social services, and transportation systems while reducing care costs and social isolation (European Commission, 2020). Despite these benefits, the adoption of AI technologies among older adults remains challenging. Many older individuals face limited digital skills, low confidence, and difficulties adapting to rapidly changing technologies. AI is often perceived as complex or unfamiliar, which may generate uncertainty and resistance. Although digital tools are becoming more user-friendly, empirical evidence on their real impact among older adults remains limited, particularly in developing contexts. In Albania, research on how older adults perceive, access, and use AI-based technologies is still scarce. Important issues such as language barriers, institutional support, digital trust, and privacy concerns remain underexplored.

Importance of the Study: Population Aging and Digitalization

This topic is increasingly relevant due to two parallel trends:

- Population aging: Albania, like many countries, is experiencing a growing older population, increasing demand for health and support services.
- Accelerated digitalization: Public and private services are rapidly moving online, which risks excluding older adults who lack digital skills or access.

AI technologies already demonstrate practical benefits, from voice assistants that support medication adherence to telemedicine services that provide remote healthcare. However, unequal access may deepen existing social inequalities.

Structural and Psychological Barriers

Previous studies show that technology adoption among older adults is often hindered by lack of confidence, need for continuous support, cognitive limitations, and low digital literacy (Anderson & Perrin, 2017; Friemel, 2016). In Albania, these barriers are reinforced by limited training opportunities and insufficient digital inclusion programs. Usability is another major challenge. Devices and applications are often not designed according to inclusive design principles, creating frustration and reducing motivation to use them (Czaja & Lee, 2007). Privacy and cybersecurity concerns also influence willingness to engage with digital services.

Aim of the Study

This study aims to examine the main barriers affecting the adoption and use of AI technologies by older adults in Albania, with particular focus on structural, technological, and socio-psychological dimensions of digital inclusion. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- assess the digital skills and capacities of older adults;
- examine the role of guidance and continuous support in technology adoption;
- evaluate the impact of device usability and design;
- explore challenges in accessing digital information and services;
- analyze trust, privacy, and security concerns related to AI use.

The study also contributes empirical evidence from the Albanian context, which remains underrepresented in digital aging research.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the main barriers affecting the adoption of digital technologies and AI by older adults in Albania?
- RQ2: How do socio-demographic and contextual factors influence digital inclusion?
- RQ3: How are AI-based tools, particularly voice technologies, perceived by older adults?
- RQ4: What are the main policy implications for promoting digital inclusion?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Structural and Psychological Barriers to Technology Adoption

Existing literature suggests that older adults face multiple barriers in adopting digital technologies. According to Anderson and Perrin (2017), the most common obstacles include low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, and the need for continuous assistance during device setup and use. This digital divide is further reinforced by limited digital literacy and age-related cognitive or physical constraints (Friemel, 2016).

In the Albanian context, these challenges may be intensified by the limited availability of structured training programs and targeted support initiatives. Prior studies emphasize that training and guided learning are essential for increasing confidence and sustained technology use among older adults (Tsai et al., 2015).

Usability also remains a critical issue. Czaja and Lee (2007) argue that technological innovation should follow principles of inclusive design, ensuring accessibility, simplicity, and intuitive interaction for older users. In addition, many older adults experience difficulties navigating online environments and identifying reliable digital information sources (van Dijk, 2020). Privacy and cybersecurity concerns further reduce willingness to engage with AI-enabled services (Anderson & Perrin, 2017).

Digital Equality and the Aging Paradox

Digital equality in the era of Artificial Intelligence should no longer be viewed solely as access to devices and internet connectivity. Rather, it should be understood as the capacity for meaningful and functional participation in digital society.

Van Dijk (2020) conceptualizes the digital divide as a dynamic, multi-level phenomenon consisting of three dimensions:

- Physical access – availability of devices and internet connection.
- Skills access – cognitive and technical competencies required to use digital tools.
- Outcome access – the ability to translate digital use into tangible benefits such as improved health, economic security, and social participation.

For older adults, these inequalities often accumulate over the life course. Friemel (2016) notes that limited exposure to technology during working age creates structural disadvantages later in life. This creates an "aging paradox": the population group that could benefit most from assistive AI technologies is often the least able to adopt them.

AI Technologies in Healthcare and Ageing

Artificial Intelligence is increasingly transforming geriatric care by shifting healthcare from reactive to predictive models. AI-based systems can analyze biometric and behavioral data in real time, helping identify risks such as falls, medication non-adherence, or cardiovascular irregularities before they become critical.

For older adults in Albania, where distance from specialized healthcare centers and transport limitations remain important barriers, telemedicine and remote monitoring may provide valuable alternatives. These technologies can reduce the need for stressful travel while improving continuity of care.

Voice User Interfaces (VUIs), such as Alexa or Siri, are particularly relevant for older adults because they reduce reliance on keyboards, screens, and complex navigation processes (Czaja & Lee, 2007). However, the limited support for the Albanian language creates a new form of linguistic inequality, excluding many older users from the most intuitive digital tools currently available.

The Digital Divide: Key Dimensions

Research indicates that the digital divide among older adults is multidimensional and interconnected (Anderson & Perrin, 2017).

Cognitive barriers and technology anxiety. Many older adults report low technological self-efficacy and fear damaging devices or making irreversible mistakes. Such anxiety is a strong predictor of non-use.

Usability and interface instability. Frequent software updates and changing interfaces may create confusion and frustration. Tsai et al. (2015) note that stability and predictability are especially important for maintaining user confidence among older populations.

Cost and infrastructure. In Albania, digital exclusion is also linked to economic inequality. The cost of high-speed internet, smartphones, and smart devices may disproportionately affect pensioners and low-income households.

Developed Countries Compared with Albania

Many developed countries, particularly in Scandinavia and North America, are implementing "Aging in Place" models through smart homes, wearable monitoring systems, and digitally integrated care services. These initiatives aim to support independent living while reducing institutional care needs.

By contrast, Albania still faces more fundamental challenges related to access, training, and digital readiness. The European Commission (2020) highlights that digital inclusion of vulnerable groups is essential for social cohesion. For Albania, this implies moving beyond administrative digitalization toward people-centered digital support systems.

Equality of Access and Benefits

Technology for older adults should be viewed not as an end in itself, but as a tool for improving well-being across several dimensions.

Health and safety. AI-based reminders can support medication adherence, hydration,

and nutrition. Fall-detection sensors integrated into smartwatches or home systems can alert relatives or emergency services rapidly. Reducing social isolation. Smart technologies help maintain communication with family members, particularly in migration contexts such as Albania. Video calls and social platforms may reduce loneliness, depression, and cognitive decline.

Active participation and digital citizenship. Equal digital access means that older adults should be able to independently access public services, request documents, or pay bills through platforms such as e-Albania. Without targeted digital education, there is a risk of creating a new group of functionally excluded digital citizens despite formal legal rights. However, existing literature has largely focused on high-income contexts, leaving limited evidence on how these frameworks apply in lower digital maturity environments such as Albania.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, considered appropriate for examining complex social phenomena such as technology adoption among vulnerable groups, where variables are not easily measurable. The primary aim is to generate an in-depth understanding of subjective experiences, perceived barriers, and the specific needs of older adults in relation to Artificial Intelligence (AI) within the Albanian socio-cultural context.

Research Design and Two-Phase Approach

To strengthen the validity of the findings, the study was structured in two complementary phases, enabling data triangulation.

Phase One: Theoretical and Contextual Review - The first phase involved a systematic review of contemporary literature and an analysis of relevant national strategic documents, including policies related to digital transformation. This phase helped identify knowledge gaps and informed the development of the interview guide. The conceptual framework was particularly informed by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which emphasizes perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use as key determinants of technology adoption.

Phase Two: Empirical Field Research - The second phase consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews. This phase enabled the examination of theoretical assumptions within the Albanian context and provided rich qualitative data explaining the reasons behind technology adoption, hesitation, or rejection among older adults.

Sampling, Participant and Data Saturation

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The final sample included **12 participants**, divided into two groups:

- **Experts (n = 8):** geriatric physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and researchers with more than five years of experience working with older adults. Their perspectives were important for assessing the medical, ethical, and technical feasibility of AI-based interventions.
- **Older adults (n = 4):** active users of digital technologies who participated as key informants regarding practical usage challenges, language barriers, and cognitive limitations.

Data collection followed the principle of **theoretical saturation** (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), continuing until no substantially new themes emerged. According to Guest et al. (2006), this sample size is adequate for focused qualitative studies.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview guide consisting of seven open-ended questions, allowing flexibility in exploring emerging themes. The interview instrument was pilot-tested with two experts prior to data collection. Interviews were conducted in settings convenient for participants, lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, and were audio-recorded with informed consent to ensure transcription accuracy.

The data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis, following these steps:

Independent initial coding by two researchers to enhance objectivity;

Grouping of codes into broader themes (e.g., barriers, facilitators, benefits, and needs);

Review by a third researcher to ensure consistency and reliability of interpretations.

Research Rigor and Ethical Consideration

To ensure scientific quality, the study followed the four trustworthiness criteria proposed by Houghton et al. (2013):

- **Credibility:** use of direct participant quotations;
- **Transferability:** detailed description of the Albanian context;
- **Dependability:** transparent documentation of the research process (audit trail);
- **Confirmability:** use of pseudonyms and efforts to minimize researcher bias.

Throughout the study, ethical principles were fully respected, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation.

Focus on AI

An important component of the study was the exploration of the potential use of an AI-based voice chatbot for medication management among older adults. The proposed tool was conceptualized as a conversational agent integrating Albanian-language natural language processing. Interview questions examined participants' perceptions of usability, trust, privacy, and technological self-confidence, highlighting the balance between potential benefits—such as increased independence—and perceived risks.

RESULTS

The findings are presented according to the four research questions and reveal that digital exclusion among older adults in Albania is multidimensional, shaped by economic, educational, linguistic, and trust-related factors.

Main Barriers to Technology Adoption (RQ 1)

The study findings indicate that the digital divide in Albania operates at two main levels: **access barriers** and **skills barriers**.

At the first level, most participants (**10 of 12**) identified the cost of devices and internet services as a major obstacle limiting access to technology. For many older adults, purchasing modern smartphones or maintaining internet subscriptions was perceived as financially burdensome relative to pension income.

As one participant stated: "*Even if I wanted to use it, a good phone is too expensive for me. The internet also costs money, and I do not use it every day*." *(P1, 68 years old, female)*

At the second level, the findings show that even when access is available, effective use remains difficult. A recurring theme was technology anxiety, linked to complex interfaces and the lack of Albanian-language support in many digital platforms.

Another participant explained: "*When I open the applications, I understand nothing. They are in English, and I am afraid I might do something wrong*." *(P8, 66 years old, male)*

These findings suggest that digital inequality is not limited to physical access, but also involves the ability to use technology confidently, safely, and meaningfully.

Socio-Demographic and Contextual Factors (RQ 2)

The analysis identified several factors influencing digital inclusion, including living arrangements, geographic location, and educational level.

One of the most significant factors was living alone. Older adults living independently appeared more vulnerable to digital exclusion due to the absence of family support, which often functions as an informal source of digital assistance.

One participant noted: "*If my son is not here, I do not know how to do these things. He always helps me*." *(P3, 66 years old, female)*

Clear differences also emerged between rural and urban areas. In rural settings, technology use was generally limited to basic communication functions, while urban participants reported greater exposure to and interest in digital services.

A rural participant stated: "*I only use the phone to talk to my children abroad. I do not need anything else.*" *(P1, 68 years old, female)*

Educational level also emerged as an important facilitating factor. Participants with higher levels of education demonstrated greater willingness to explore and learn new technologies.

Perception of Artificial Intelligence and Voice Technologies (RQ3)

One of the most significant findings concerns the critical role of language in the adoption of AI-based technologies. All participants stated that they would be unlikely to use AI tools unless these systems communicated in Albanian.

As one participant explained: "*If it does not speak to me in Albanian, I cannot use it. I do not understand what it is telling me*." *(P2, 72 years old, male)*

Beyond language barriers, the study identified low levels of trust in emerging technologies. Participants expressed concerns regarding privacy, data security, and possible monitoring or misuse of personal information.

One participant stated: "I do not know where my information goes. I am afraid someone may use it in ways I do not know." *(P7, 73 years old, female)*

These findings indicate that trust is a central determinant of willingness to adopt AI technologies among older adults.

Summary of Main Themes

Thematic analysis identified several core dimensions of digital exclusion and inclusion among older adults in Albania.

Theme	Description
Access barriers	High costs of devices and internet services limit access to digital technologies.
Skills deficit and technology anxiety	Limited digital skills and fear of making mistakes reduce confidence.
Living alone and lack of support	Absence of family assistance increases vulnerability to exclusion
Rural - urban differences	Rural users rely mainly on basic communication functions; urban users engage more with digital services.
Education as facilitator	Higher educational attainment increases readiness to adopt technology.
Language barriers in AI use	Lack of Albanian-language support restricts adoption of AI tools.
Trust and privacy concerns	Data security fears and afraid of typing something wrong reduce willingness to engage with digital services.
Need for structured training	Participant emphasized the need for continuous and step-by-step support.

Overall, the results confirm that digital inclusion among older adults requires more than access to devices; it also depends on affordability, digital skills, localized language support, trust, and sustained assistance.

DISCUSSION

The findings support existing literature on the digital divide, confirming that exclusion is shaped not only by access, but also by skills, confidence, and meaningful use (van Dijk, 2020). Consistent with Anderson and Perrin (2017), technology anxiety and lack of guidance remain important barriers for older adults.

However, the Albanian context highlights an additional critical factor: language. Unlike international studies where voice interfaces are considered broadly accessible (Czaja & Lee, 2007), this study shows that the absence of Albanian-language support turns AI technologies into an additional barrier, creating a mismatch between system design and user needs. The findings confirm TAM assumptions, particularly that perceived ease of use remains a decisive factor among older adults, but extend the model by showing that language accessibility acts as an external determinant in low-resource contexts.

Trust also emerged as a key issue. Concerns regarding privacy and data security reduce willingness to adopt new technologies, particularly where institutional transparency is perceived as limited.

Overall, the study reveals a contradiction: as health and daily support needs increase with age, the ability to use digital tools may decline. Therefore, bridging the digital divide is not only a technical issue, but also a social and ethical challenge requiring coordinated policy responses.

The findings suggest that overcoming digital exclusion requires integrated and long-term interventions, including:

- strengthening institutional support for older adults;
- developing AI tools and interfaces in the Albanian language;
- providing continuous digital training programs;
- improving affordability, accessibility, and usability of devices and services;
- promoting trust through clear privacy and security standards.

Participants emphasized the need for sustained guidance rather than one-time assistance. For this reason, digital transformation strategies should place vulnerable older users at the center of policy and service design.

LIMITATION

This study has several limitations. First, the relatively small sample size (n = 12) limits statistical generalization, although it is appropriate for exploratory qualitative research focused on depth of understanding. Second, participants had at least minimal exposure to technology, which may not fully reflect the experiences of older adults who are completely digitally excluded. Third, the study is situated within the Albanian socio-economic and infrastructural context; therefore, transferability to other countries should be made cautiously. Finally, as interviews were the primary data collection method, findings may reflect subjective perceptions despite efforts to ensure methodological rigor.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable exploratory insights into an under-researched population group

CONCLUSION

This study examined the barriers affecting the adoption of digital and AI technologies among older adults in Albania. The findings indicate that the digital divide is multidimensional, encompassing access, digital skills, trust, and the capacity to derive meaningful benefits from technology.

In particular, language barriers, limited institutional support, and low trust in emerging technologies significantly constrain digital inclusion. These results underline the need for an integrated approach that combines technological innovation with social support and inclusive public policies.

From a practical perspective, the study provides recommendations for policymakers and service providers, including the development of Albanian-language technologies, continuous digital training programs, and supportive digital infrastructures tailored to older adults. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes empirical evidence from an under-researched context and extends current discussions on aging, artificial intelligence, and digital inequality. Future research should build on these findings through larger samples, comparative studies, and mixed-method approaches in order to generate broader and more generalizable evidence. This study addresses this gap by situating AI adoption within a post-transition European context characterized by uneven digital infrastructure and limited gerontechnology research. This study contributes by providing empirical evidence from a low-digital-inclusion context and by highlighting the role of language as a critical barrier in AI adoption among older adults.

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THE ROLE OF INSURANCE AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN REDUCING RURAL POVERTY

A Path Toward Financial Resilience and an Inclusive Intelligent Society

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ABSTRACT

Rural poverty remains a persistent and multidimensional challenge, particularly in developing economies such as Albania. It is associated not only with low-income levels, but also with structural constraints, demographic changes, limited access to financial instruments, and high exposure to external shocks. This study explores the role of insurance and artificial intelligence (AI) in enhancing financial resilience and reducing vulnerability in rural areas. Insurance serves as a fundamental mechanism for risk transfer and income stabilization, while AI introduces new capabilities for data-driven decision-making, improved risk assessment, and more efficient service delivery. The integration of these two elements creates opportunities for expanding financial inclusion and developing more adaptive and accessible insurance models, particularly for rural populations. Using a qualitative and analytical approach, the study combines theoretical insights with practical considerations, emphasizing the importance of aligning technological innovation with local socio-economic conditions. The findings suggest that while insurance and AI have significant potential to reduce rural poverty, their effectiveness depends on supporting factors such as digital infrastructure, institutional capacity, and financial literacy. The study concludes that sustainable poverty reduction requires a holistic and integrated strategy, combining financial tools, technological advancement, and policy interventions to create long-term economic resilience and inclusive development.

Keywords: *rural poverty; insurance; artificial intelligence (AI); financial resilience; financial inclusion; digital transformation; risk management; inclusive development*

INTRODUCTION

Rural poverty is a complex phenomenon shaped by structural, economic, and social constraints. In Albania, rural areas continue to face challenges related to limited infrastructure, restricted access to financial services, and strong dependence on agriculture.

This dependence increases exposure to climate risks, market volatility, and seasonal income fluctuations. Consequently, rural households often operate in fragile economic conditions where even minor shocks can lead to long-term financial instability. At the same time, global economic transformation has introduced new tools for addressing poverty. Artificial intelligence and digitalization have reshaped financial systems, enabling more efficient decision-making and improved service delivery. In parallel, insurance systems have evolved as essential mechanisms for risk management and financial protection. This paper examines how the integration of insurance and AI can provide a more effective and sustainable approach to reducing rural poverty in Albania, emphasizing the importance of combining technological innovation with local socio-economic realities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between poverty and risk exposure has been extensively explored in economic literature. Scholars emphasize that vulnerability to shocks, rather than income alone, defines poverty in rural contexts (World Bank, 2020). According to FAO (2019), rural households are particularly exposed to agricultural and climate-related risks, which significantly affect their income stability. The literature also points to the importance of digital-first and asset-light models in expanding access to financial services in underserved areas. Cloud computing, software-as-a-service (SaaS), and platform-based ecosystems can reduce operational costs while improving scalability and outreach (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). In the context of rural poverty reduction, such digital infrastructures may enable insurers and financial service providers to reach low-income rural households more efficiently, overcoming traditional barriers such as high physical infrastructure costs, geographic isolation, and limited institutional presence.

Insurance has been identified as a key mechanism for risk transfer, allowing individuals to mitigate the financial impact of unexpected events (OECD, 2021). Microinsurance has gained increasing attention as a tool for supporting low-income populations, particularly in developing countries (Churchill & Matul, 2012). However, its success depends on accessibility, affordability, and trust. Studies suggest that lack of financial literacy and institutional support often limits adoption in rural areas (Swiss Re Institute, 2020). Empirical evidence from development economics suggests that exposure to risk can significantly hinder investment in productivity-enhancing technologies.

Giné and Yang (2009) show that reducing production risk through insurance increases farmers' willingness to adopt improved agricultural inputs. This highlights the broader role of insurance not only as a risk transfer mechanism but also as an enabler of economic transformation. In this context, the integration of artificial intelligence into insurance systems can further enhance risk assessment and targeting, potentially increasing the effectiveness of such interventions in rural and resource-constrained settings.

Artificial intelligence has transformed the financial sector by enabling predictive analytics, automation, and improved risk modeling (OECD, 2021). In insurance, AI supports underwriting, pricing, and claims processing, improving efficiency and reducing operational costs. Despite these advancements, research on the combined role of insurance and AI in addressing rural poverty remains limited, particularly in smaller economies such as Albania (World Bank, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach, combining literature review, secondary data analysis, and contextual evaluation. Academic sources, institutional reports, and international case studies were examined to identify key trends and theoretical frameworks. The research process includes three stages. First, theoretical foundations were established through analysis of existing literature on poverty, insurance, and AI. Second, empirical insights were derived from global practices and comparative studies. Third, findings were adapted to the Albanian context, ensuring relevance and applicability. This approach allows the study to bridge theory and practice, offering a comprehensive understanding of how insurance and AI can contribute to rural poverty reduction.

RURAL POVERTY IN ALBANIA

Rural areas in Albania are characterized by structural challenges such as limited financial inclusion, low insurance penetration, and high exposure to environmental risks. Agriculture remains the primary economic activity, yet it is highly vulnerable to climate variability and market instability. Households often rely on informal financial mechanisms, which provide limited protection against shocks. Furthermore, low levels of financial literacy and awareness reduce participation in formal financial systems, including insurance. These conditions create a cycle of vulnerability, where economic shocks lead to reduced income, limited investment capacity, and continued poverty. Addressing these challenges requires integrated solutions that combine financial tools, technological innovation, and policy support. In addition, rural poverty in Albania is closely linked to structural transformation challenges and demographic shifts. Migration trends, particularly among younger populations, have reduced the available labor force in rural areas, limiting productivity and innovation capacity. This demographic imbalance further weakens local economies and reduces the potential for sustainable development. Moreover, limited access to credit markets and formal financial institutions constrains entrepreneurial activities and investment in modern agricultural practices. As a result, rural households often remain trapped in low-productivity cycles. Addressing rural poverty therefore requires not only financial tools such as insurance, but also broader development strategies that enhance market access, infrastructure, and human capital, including the establishment of systems for the accreditation of prior experiential learning, which enable individuals with non-formal and work-based learning to access higher education and improve their socio-economic prospects (Nathanaili and Drenofci, 2025).

Role of Insurance

Insurance plays a critical role in reducing vulnerability by transferring financial risk from individuals to institutions. In rural contexts, agricultural insurance and microinsurance provide essential protection against risks such as crop failure, livestock loss, and natural disasters. Beyond risk transfer, insurance contributes to income stabilization and encourages investment. When individuals feel protected, they are more likely to engage in productive activities, improving long-term economic outcomes. However, the effectiveness of insurance depends on accessibility and trust. In many rural areas, barriers such as cost, lack of awareness, and institutional limitations reduce adoption. Therefore, expanding insurance coverage requires targeted strategies that address these challenges and promote financial inclusion.

Furthermore, insurance can act as a catalyst for financial inclusion by integrating rural populations into formal economic systems. When individuals participate in insurance schemes, they become more visible to financial institutions, increasing their access to credit and other financial services. This creates a positive feedback loop where risk protection enables investment, and investment supports income growth. In this context, index-based insurance products have emerged as innovative solutions, particularly in agriculture, where payouts are triggered by measurable indicators such as rainfall or temperature. These products reduce administrative costs and moral hazard, making them more suitable for rural environments. However, their effectiveness depends on accurate data and strong institutional frameworks.

Role of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence enhances the insurance sector by improving efficiency, accuracy, and accessibility. Through data analytics and predictive modeling, AI enables more precise risk assessment and pricing, reducing information asymmetry. In rural areas, AI can analyze climate data, satellite imagery, and agricultural patterns to design tailored insurance products. This improves relevance and effectiveness, particularly for farmers facing climate-related risks. AI also streamlines claims processing, reducing delays and increasing trust. By automating processes and improving transparency, it enhances user experience and encourages participation in insurance systems.

Beyond operational efficiency, artificial intelligence also enables the development of more inclusive and adaptive insurance models. Machine learning algorithms can identify patterns in large datasets, allowing insurers to design products tailored to the specific needs of rural populations. For example, AI-driven platforms can provide real-time risk assessments based on weather forecasts, soil conditions, and market trends, helping farmers make informed decisions. Additionally, mobile-based AI applications can improve access to insurance services in remote areas, reducing geographical barriers. However, the adoption of AI also raises concerns related to data privacy, digital literacy, and technological inequality, which must be addressed to ensure equitable outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The integration of insurance and AI offers significant potential for reducing rural poverty, but its success depends on broader socio-economic conditions. In Albania, challenges such as limited digital infrastructure, low financial literacy, and institutional fragmentation may hinder adoption. Additionally, technological solutions must be adapted to local contexts. Rural communities possess valuable knowledge and practices that should be integrated into modern systems. A purely technological approach may not be effective without considering social and cultural dimensions. Therefore, a balanced strategy that combines innovation with local adaptation and institutional support is essential for achieving sustainable results.

Policy Implications

Policy interventions play a crucial role in facilitating the integration of insurance and AI in rural development. Governments should focus on expanding microinsurance programs, investing in digital infrastructure, and promoting financial education. Public-private partnerships can support innovation and scalability, while regulatory frameworks should encourage the adoption of new technologies. Targeted subsidies and awareness campaigns

can further increase participation. Such measures are essential for creating an enabling environment that supports inclusive growth and reduces rural poverty.

Another critical dimension is the interaction between technological innovation and institutional capacity. While AI offers powerful tools for improving efficiency and accessibility, its impact depends heavily on governance structures and regulatory frameworks. In contexts where institutions are weak or fragmented, the benefits of technological advancements may not be fully realized. Therefore, strengthening institutional coordination and investing in human capital are essential components of any strategy aimed at integrating insurance and AI into rural development. This highlights the need for a holistic approach that combines economic, technological, and policy interventions.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight that rural poverty is not merely a consequence of low income, but a result of persistent vulnerability to economic, environmental, and structural risks. This aligns with Dercon's (2005) argument that poverty is closely linked to households' exposure to risk and their limited ability to cope with shocks. In this framework, insurance mechanisms act as tools for risk transfer, while artificial intelligence strengthens risk assessment, prediction, and service delivery, thereby contributing to more resilient and inclusive financial systems. The integration of insurance and AI creates new opportunities for building financial resilience and promoting inclusive development. By enabling better risk assessment, faster claims processing, and more tailored financial products, these tools can significantly improve the economic stability of rural households. However, their effectiveness depends on several critical factors, including digital infrastructure, institutional capacity, financial literacy, and public trust.

In Albania, addressing rural poverty requires a coordinated and multi-dimensional approach. Policymakers must focus on expanding access to microinsurance, investing in digital technologies, and strengthening regulatory frameworks. At the same time, efforts should be made to improve financial education and raise awareness about the benefits of insurance.

Ultimately, the combination of insurance and artificial intelligence should not be viewed as a purely technological solution, but as part of a broader development strategy. Sustainable poverty reduction depends on the integration of economic, technological, and social policies that empower rural communities and create long-term opportunities for growth and resilience.

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Citizen participation and its impact on social policies

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Abstract

Democracy should not be limited to periodic elections or the guarantee of individual liberties; it requires active and continuous citizen engagement in decision-making, giving them the opportunity to influence policies that affect daily life directly. This perspective aligns with the literature on participatory democracy, which holds that citizens should be permanent actors in the political process, not just beneficiaries of rights. This study aims to analyze citizen participation in the formulation and implementation of social policies at the local level, focusing on the municipalities of Patos, Mat, and Elbasan. The study is based on a qualitative methodology, suitable for exploring and deeply interpreting social phenomena, particularly the interactions between citizens and institutions. Findings show that, despite the existence of formal mechanisms for transparency and citizen participation, the real influence of citizens remains limited. Local institutions have developed structures and procedures for public information and consultation, supported by various communication channels, but these mechanisms remain largely procedural and do not ensure effective participation. The results highlight the need for mechanisms that enable substantial participation and genuine co-decision-making. The study emphasizes the need for an integrated approach that strengthens transparency and accountability mechanisms, develops effective feedback channels, institutionalizes the role of civil society, and enhances citizen capacities.

Keywords: *Democracy, citizen participation, social policy, information, local governance*

INTRODUCTION

In a democratic society, demands for greater access to information and for social policies grounded in more careful and systematic analysis are becoming increasingly important and frequent. Scholars in policy sciences and policymakers are generally divided into two main groups. One group advocates for strengthening the analytical or scientific component of policymaking, giving it greater weight in the process while reducing the influence of the political component. According to this perspective, the key steps in policymaking resemble those of any scientific process: first, the problem is identified and defined; second, possible solutions are explored; third, alternative solutions are carefully assessed; and finally, a decision is made. Proponents of this view argue that policymaking is primarily an intellectual rather than a political process (Cenko & Tarifa, 2016).

The extensive body of theoretical literature on democracy, together with best practices from established democratic systems, should serve as a foundation for fostering a more substantive and structured theoretical debate in Albania. Such a debate would contribute to the expansion of the public sphere, the strengthening of civil society, and, above all, the consolidation of democratic practices, which are often weakened or undermined by those who, as Huntington notes, "are elected to lead democracy."

Democracy implies the establishment and consolidation of the rule of law, accountable institutions, respect for the separation of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, and the protection of civil and political liberties for all citizens. These include the freedoms of speech, publication, assembly, and organization, which are essential for political debate, the conduct of free elections, and the protection of minority rights. As Seymour Martin Lipset observed, "new democracies must be institutionalized, consolidated, and legitimized" (Tarifa & Krisafi, 2020).

However, the consolidation of democracy is not solely linked to the establishment of formal institutions; it also requires the active involvement of citizens in decision-making processes. According to Robert A. Dahl, the fundamental elements of democracy are political equality and citizen participation. Local democracy represents a key arena where representative and participatory democracy intersect: the former is associated with electoral processes and institutional functioning, while the latter involves the engagement of civil society and interest groups in policymaking.

Citizens primarily exercise power indirectly through representative democracy. This means that they elect representatives who are mandated to adopt laws and political decisions, thereby managing public affairs. In an ideal representative democracy, decision-making power rests with a group of individuals who derive their legitimacy from voters. The electoral mandate grants them responsibility for governance and legitimizes their actions as representatives of the people. In carrying out their duties, representatives are supported and advised by professional and non-partisan officials (Renwick & Swinburn, 1980).

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to analyse citizens' perceptions of their involvement in the design and implementation of social policies at the local governance level. It also seeks to examine the factors associated with citizens' non-participation in these processes, as well as to identify how such non-involvement influences the definition of citizens' needs and priorities in social policy development.

In this context, the study addresses the following research questions: what factors influence citizens' non-participation in local decision-making processes, and what barriers hinder their participation in promoting sustainable decision-making at the local level?

The methodological approach is based on semi-structured and in-depth individual interviews conducted with representatives from different levels of local government. These include executive representatives (mayors and/or deputy mayors), municipal council representatives (chairpersons, secretaries, or council members), and municipal administration representatives (information right coordinators, public notification and consultation coordinators, or heads of departments such as budget, finance, social services, and public procurement). Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews, with a total of 21 interviews conducted across the three municipalities included in the study. All data and participants were treated with strict confidentiality. Participants were informed in advance of the purpose and nature of the study to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Participation was based on informed consent, provided voluntarily and knowingly by each respondent.

STUDY FINDINGS

Role of Community Structures and Other Actors

> *"Municipalities need to strengthen the capacities of administrators operating at the level of administrative units and urban neighbourhoods, enabling them to serve as a direct and trustworthy voice of the community, as well as effective representatives of the municipality in the field. Enhancing their professional and communication capacities is essential to improve interaction between citizens and institutions, ensuring that community needs and concerns are clearly articulated and systematically conveyed to decision-making processes".*

The strengthening of community-based structures represents a key factor in increasing citizen participation. These structures, together with civil society organisations, academia, and particularly young people, can contribute to improving communication between citizens and institutions. In this context, collaborations with international organisations such as UNDP and USAID have supported the measurement of citizen perceptions and the formulation of policy recommendations. However, the main challenge remains the sustainability of these interventions and the strengthening of institutional capacities over time.

The analysis shows that local governance in Albania, illustrated through the cases of Mat Municipality and Elbasan Municipality, is in a phase of institutional transition. Important steps have been taken toward greater transparency and citizen participation; however, these developments have not yet translated into substantial influence on decision-making processes. Despite the existence of participatory mechanisms, key challenges remain related to moving beyond formal participation, strengthening citizen trust, and enhancing the role of civil society as a mediating and influencing actor.

At the same time, territorial inequalities and limitations in financial and institutional capacities continue to affect the effectiveness of public policies and the ability of institutions to respond to citizens' needs. This situation highlights the need for a more integrated and inclusive approach, in which cooperation among public institutions, civil society, academia, and communities enables not only the expansion of participation but also the improvement of its quality and the real impact on decision-making processes.

Structural and Financial Constraints in Decision-Making

"Regarding budgetary programmes, we should not limit ourselves solely to infrastructure as an institutional priority, but rather consider all budget programmes as part of an integrated system of transparency and accountability. These programmes constitute the main mechanisms for reporting institutional performance, reflecting how public resources are allocated and used across different sectors such as social services, education, economic development, and infrastructure."

Budgetary constraints have a direct impact on the quality and scope of public services, affecting the ability of local institutions to respond to citizens' demands in areas such as infrastructure, social services, and economic development. In this context, a significant gap often emerges between citizens' expectations and the actual capacity of institutions to intervene, particularly when expressed demands exceed the legal competencies of the municipality. For instance, issues related to road infrastructure or large-scale investments may fall under the responsibility of other institutions, requiring inter-institutional coordination that is often insufficient in practice.

In the absence of clear and structured communication regarding these limitations, citizens may not fully understand institutional boundaries and respective responsibilities, which can lead to misunderstandings and negative perceptions of local authorities. This situation directly affects institutional trust and may reduce citizens' motivation for further participation, as the process may be perceived as formalistic and lacking real influence on problem-solving.

From an analytical perspective, these structural and financial constraints should not be viewed solely as obstacles, but also as factors that call for improvements in local governance approaches. Increasing budget transparency, clearly explaining institutional limitations, and defining responsibilities across different levels of governance can contribute to more realistic management of citizens' expectations. Furthermore, strengthening inter-institutional coordination mechanisms and advocating for deeper fiscal decentralisation represent important steps towards enhancing municipal capacity to address community needs.

In this sense, addressing these constraints requires an integrated approach that combines institutional capacity-building, increased transparency, strengthened public communication, and expanded fiscal autonomy, thereby creating more favourable conditions for more effective decision-making and more informed and meaningful citizen participation.

Advanced Governance Models: The Case of Elbasan Municipality

"Elbasan Municipality serves as a promoter of participatory budgeting, implementing a form of prior consultation through public hearings. The Mayor holds meetings in all six urban neighbourhoods and twelve administrative units, where the draft budget for the upcoming year is presented and citizens' concerns are collected. For each issue raised, minutes are recorded, and all requests are formally documented, ensuring transparency and full traceability of the process. Subsequently, citizens' concerns are discussed and individually voted on, reflecting an effort to ensure active community involvement in budgetary decision-making".

Elbasan Municipality represents a more advanced model of local governance, particularly in terms of transparency, citizen participation, and intersectoral cooperation. Engagement in

the international Open Government Partnership (OGP) initiative has played an important role in institutionalising the principles of open governance, creating a structured framework for improving transparency, accountability, and citizen participation practices.

The more effective functioning of these mechanisms in Elbasan can be explained by several key institutional and practical factors. First, the presence of strong political and administrative commitment to open governance has created a conducive environment for implementing such initiatives. When local leaders view participation and transparency as strategic instruments rather than formal obligations, governance mechanisms are more likely to function effectively.

Second, the establishment of structures such as Working Groups and Open Forums has enabled the institutionalisation of participation, transforming it into a structured and sustainable process rather than an occasional consultation exercise. These platforms function as co-creation spaces where different stakeholders—including civil society organisations, media, academia, and activists—contribute to public policy formulation, thereby improving the quality of decision-making through diverse perspectives and better identification of community needs.

Another important factor is the use of innovative tools, such as the Citizen Trust Index. This instrument represents a step forward in measuring and understanding citizen perceptions, using digital methods that make the process more accessible and inclusive. Through this mechanism, the municipality not only collects data but also analyses social dynamics, identifying patterns of participation and public perception. The results have also highlighted gender differences in participation, with women being more active in digital formats than in physical meetings. This suggests that traditional participation methods may be constrained by social, cultural, or practical barriers such as family responsibilities, mobility limitations, or social norms. Digital formats, in contrast, offer a more flexible and accessible alternative, contributing to broader inclusion and reducing such barriers.

Another key reason for the effectiveness of these mechanisms lies in the development of trust between institutions and citizens. Increased transparency, continuous communication, and genuine inclusion in decision-making processes create a positive feedback loop: the more citizens feel heard and involved, the greater their trust and willingness to participate. This, in turn, further strengthens the effectiveness of the established mechanisms.

Overall, the case of Elbasan Municipality demonstrates that the success of open governance mechanisms does not depend solely on their formal existence, but on how they are embedded in institutional practice, the level of political commitment, the use of innovative tools, and the capacity to address social and cultural barriers to participation. This model shows that when these elements are consistently integrated, local governance can evolve towards a more inclusive, effective, and citizen-oriented approach.

Collaboration with Civil Society and the Role of Intermediary Actors

"Regarding the participation of men and women, practical experience has revealed a significant challenge, particularly in rural areas, where the inclusion of women often requires more structured intervention. In this context, collaboration with civil society organisations such as 'Forumi i Gruas', 'Vizion OJF', and 'Në dobi të gruas' has proven to be an effective practice. These organisations play an important role in identifying, organising, and empowering women's groups in rural communities" (Case: Elbasan Municipality).

Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a critical role in local governance, even when they are not directly involved in decision-making processes. Their function extends beyond service delivery; they act as intermediaries between citizens and institutions, strengthening civic participation and ensuring that community needs are reflected in public policies. In this regard, the impact of CSOs is not only measured by the number of projects they implement, but also by their ability to mobilise citizens, articulate concrete demands, and exert constructive pressure on local institutions.

Through such collaboration, institutions coordinate with civil society to establish women's groups and develop their capacities, enabling them to participate actively in participatory budgeting processes. Training and support initiatives help women articulate their needs more effectively and contribute more meaningfully to public discussions and decision-making processes. This approach demonstrates that gender inclusion is not merely about physical presence in meetings, but requires deliberate capacity-building interventions and the creation of conditions that empower women to actively engage in issues affecting their lives. In this way, cooperation with CSOs becomes a key mechanism for improving the quality of participation and ensuring more gender-responsive budgeting.

From an analytical perspective, the role of CSOs is twofold: first, as service providers, complementing or addressing gaps in local government capacities; and second, as advocacy and monitoring actors, ensuring that municipal policies and decisions align with the real needs of communities. Organisations such as "OAZI", which supports children with disabilities, for example, have the capacity not only to deliver services, but also to identify policy gaps, raise awareness among local authorities, and propose changes in local development strategies. This role is particularly important in areas where citizens may feel insecure or stigmatised in expressing their needs, such as domestic violence or the protection of vulnerable groups.

However, the analysis of Mat Municipality shows that the influence of CSOs often remains limited due to several factors. Their limited participation in municipal council meetings and decision-making processes reduces their ability to exert institutional influence and shape public policies. As a result, cooperation is often perceived more as operational collaboration (service delivery) rather than as a strategic partnership in policy formulation. This reveals a gap between the formal and substantive capacity of civil society to influence decision-making.

Another important dimension relates to the role of social administrators at the level of administrative units, who act as bridges between communities and the municipality. They facilitate the collection of information on citizens' needs; however, challenges in rural areas—such as geographic dispersion, lack of infrastructure, and limited resources—make this interaction more difficult and often unequal. In the absence of adequate institutional and financial support, the capacity of both CSOs and administrators to influence decision-making remains constrained.

This analysis suggests that CSOs have significant potential to strengthen citizen participation and ensure that decision-making better reflects community needs, but this potential is not automatically realised. It requires an institutional framework that integrates CSOs into decision-making processes, enhances transparency, ensures continuous dialogue among actors, and utilises their advocacy and monitoring capacities. Only in this way can cooperation between civil society and local institutions shift from a formal arrangement to a meaningful instrument for inclusive and citizen-driven governance.

In practical terms, this implies the development of continuous consultation mechanisms with CSOs, their involvement in the design of local plans and social policy initiatives, and their role as monitors of policy implementation. Such an approach not only improves the quality of decision-making but also strengthens public trust and helps bridge the gap between formal and substantive participation.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY

- The findings from the three local government units (Patos, Mat, and Elbasan) indicate that, despite the existence of formal mechanisms for transparency and citizen participation, substantial participation and the real influence of citizens in decision-making remain limited. Local institutions have developed structures and procedures for public information and consultation, supported by various communication channels; however, these mechanisms remain largely procedural and do not ensure effective participation.
- The case of Elbasan Municipality demonstrates that advanced local governance is achieved not merely through the existence of formal participatory mechanisms, but through their meaningful institutionalisation and consistent application in practice. Participatory budgeting, structured public consultations, and the use of innovative tools such as the Citizen Trust Index illustrate a governance approach that combines transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement in a systematic way.
- Civil society and institutional cooperation play an important role in improving local governance, yet they remain limited and fragmented. Civil society organisations contribute to mediating between citizens and institutions and supporting vulnerable groups, but they are not systematically integrated into policy-making processes. Similarly, institutional cooperation is influenced by administrative capacities, transparency levels, and communication mechanisms, which often remain constrained.
- Key challenges identified include the lack of effective coordination among actors, financial limitations, low levels of mutual trust, and the absence of clear cooperation mechanisms. These challenges restrict the influence of non-governmental actors and negatively affect the quality of public policies.
- The study highlights the need for an integrated approach that strengthens transparency and accountability mechanisms, develops effective feedback systems, institutionalises the role of civil society, and enhances citizen capacities. Only through such a transformation can citizen participation and institutional cooperation move from a formal level to becoming substantive instruments of democratic and inclusive governance.
- Civil society has significant potential to enhance citizen participation and improve the responsiveness of local governance. However, this potential is only fully realised when supported by strong institutional frameworks, sustained political commitment, and effective coordination mechanisms. Without these conditions, civil society engagement risks remaining fragmented and insufficient to ensure a meaningful transition from formal to substantive participation in local decision-making.

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SYNERGY BETWEEN E-FISCALIZATION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Towards an Intelligent Tax Administration

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the synergy between e-fiscalization and Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a transformative framework for modern tax administration. While e-fiscalization enables real-time digital reporting of transactions and generates large volumes of structured data, AI provides the analytical capacity to process and interpret it effectively. The research explores how integrating these technologies enhances financial transparency, strengthens compliance, and reduces tax evasion, particularly through advanced techniques such as machine learning, network analysis, and data mining. The paper adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining comparative analysis of tax performance indicators before and

after the implementation of e-fiscalization with a case study focused on the Albanian tax system. Secondary data from institutional reports and international organizations are utilized to assess improvements in efficiency and risk detection. Findings suggest that AI-driven systems significantly improve the targeting of tax audits, enable real-time identification of fraudulent transactions such as fictitious invoicing schemes, and enhance taxpayer services through automated assistance tools. However, the study also identifies critical challenges, including data quality limitations, algorithmic transparency concerns, and cybersecurity risks. These issues highlight the necessity for robust regulatory frameworks and ethical guidelines governing AI deployment in public administration. The research concludes that the integration of AI into e-fiscalization systems represents a strategic necessity rather than a technological option, positioning tax administrations to move from reactive enforcement toward proactive, data-driven governance.

Keywords: *e-fiscalization, artificial intelligence (AI), tax administration, tax compliance, fraud detection, digital transformation*

INTRODUCTION

The tax administration system has undergone substantial transformation in recent years, largely driven by the implementation of digital fiscal reforms. The introduction of the e-fiscalization system in 2021 marked a pivotal shift in how Albanian economic transactions are recorded, monitored, and reported. This reform fundamentally altered business operations and reshaped the interaction between taxpayers and the tax authority, establishing a more transparent and technology-driven fiscal environment.

The primary objective of the e-fiscalization system was to ensure the real-time transmission of transactional data to a centralized online platform, thereby enabling the tax administration to access accurate and up-to-date information on business activities. Despite initial challenges faced by businesses, particularly in technological adaptation, investment in new equipment, and changes in operational procedures, the transition process was facilitated by targeted training and continuous institutional support. As a result, a relatively successful integration of the system was achieved across various sectors of the economy. Post-implementation evidence suggests that the e-fiscalization reform has yielded significant positive outcomes. Notably, there has been an increase in tax revenues collected by the General Directorate of Taxation, alongside a rise in contributions to social and health insurance schemes (Cani & Kolaj, 2023). Furthermore, value-added tax (VAT) revenues have shown considerable growth. These developments indicate that the system has contributed to reducing informality and tax evasion, while simultaneously strengthening the monitoring and control capacities of the tax administration (Cani *et al.,* 2023).

One of the key advantages of the e-fiscalization system lies in its ability to provide tax officials with real-time access to centralized business data, including daily transaction records. This capability has enhanced the efficiency of compliance assessment processes, allowing authorities to identify potentially non-compliant taxpayers more effectively. In instances where irregularities are detected through remote monitoring, targeted field inspections can be conducted to verify and address issues related to tax evasion or inaccurate reporting.

While tax administration personnel possess the expertise necessary to detect irregularities, the increasing volume and complexity of data present significant analytical challenges. In this context, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) emerges as a critical

advancement. AI-driven systems have the potential to process large datasets with high speed and precision, enabling the identification of patterns, anomalies, and risks that may not be readily observable through traditional methods. Consequently, tasks that would typically require extensive time and human effort can be executed more efficiently and accurately. Behavioral factors such as perceived usefulness, ease of use, and user attitudes significantly influence the acceptability of e-fiscalization systems, suggesting that the effectiveness of AI-driven tax solutions depends not only on technological advancement but also on taxpayer behavioral adaptation and trust (Cani *et al*., 2025).

The synergy between e-fiscalization and artificial intelligence represents a promising pathway toward the development of intelligent tax administration. By enhancing data transparency, strengthening predictive capabilities, and enabling real-time risk assessment, AI integration can further reduce tax evasion and improve compliance monitoring. Ultimately, this convergence of digital fiscal tools and advanced analytical technologies has the potential to transform tax administration into a more proactive, efficient, and data-driven system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into digital tax systems has emerged as a critical area of scholarly and policy interest, particularly in enhancing the efficiency, transparency, and intelligence of modern tax administrations. Recent literature highlights that the deployment of AI, Big Data analytics, and investigation techniques represents a new frontier in tax compliance enforcement. These technologies enable tax authorities to detect anomalies, reconstruct fraudulent transactions, and streamline tax investigation and audit processes with significantly greater accuracy and operational efficiency (Akpobari Fabeke Mbea, 2025). Such advancements are particularly relevant in digital fiscal environments, where the volume and complexity of transactional data require advanced computational capabilities.

From a theoretical perspective, AI is widely understood as a system capable of simulating human intelligence and cognitive functions, including reasoning, interpretation, inference, and learning (Mikalef & Gupta, 2021). This conceptualization is highly relevant to tax administration systems, where decision-making processes increasingly rely on intelligent systems capable of identifying patterns, predicting risks, and generating evidence-based insights. In this regard, AI significantly enhances the speed and quality of decision-making, enabling institutions to respond more effectively to operational and compliance-related challenges (Wang et al., 2019). The literature indicates that institutional support, trust, and technological readiness are key determinants of the successful adoption of e-fiscalization systems, which in turn establish the necessary foundation for the integration of Artificial Intelligence into tax administration systems (Cani et al., 2025).

In the field of public finance and taxation, AI has been increasingly recognized as a transformative tool for improving tax compliance, fraud detection, and taxpayer services. AI applications in tax administration contribute to more effective compliance monitoring, the detection of tax fraud, and the enhancement of taxpayer support services through automated assistance and real-time data processing (OECD, 2025). AI systems support tax authorities in both detecting and preventing fraudulent activities while simultaneously improving the quality and accessibility of taxpayer services (Pires, 2024).

The literature also underscores the complementary role of other emerging technologies in strengthening tax compliance behavior. Artificial intelligence, machine learning,

and blockchain technologies significantly improve compliance outcomes by increasing transaction traceability, reducing opportunities for manipulation, and reinforcing trust in digital tax ecosystems (Belahouaoui & Alm, 2025). This perspective aligns closely with the objectives of e-fiscalization systems, which are designed to ensure real-time reporting and verification of business transactions.

More broadly, digitalization has been identified as a fundamental driver of transformation in tax administration. Digital technologies enhance monitoring, enforcement, and public service delivery by enabling more integrated and data-driven administrative systems (Gupta, 2017). In the public sector context, AI further strengthens this transformation by facilitating automation, predictive analytics, and improved decision-making processes (Sun & Medaglia, 2019). These capabilities are particularly valuable in e-fiscalization frameworks, where tax authorities must continuously monitor large-scale transactional flows and assess compliance risks in real time. Moreover, digitalization of the tax landscape has been shown to enhance transparency, efficiency, and fairness in tax collection processes, thereby creating a more suitable environment for the application of AI-based tools for improved compliance monitoring and fraud detection (Cani et al., 2024).

Beyond operational improvements, AI also holds significant potential for supporting tax policy design. AI can assist in the development of tax policies that better balance equity and economic efficiency through advanced simulation and predictive modeling tools (Zheng *et al*., 2020). This policy-oriented application broadens the role of AI from administrative enforcement to strategic fiscal governance.

Nevertheless, literature also raises important concerns regarding the governance implications of AI integration in tax administration. Those are key issues related to transparency, accountability, algorithmic fairness, and data governance (Ubaldi et al., 2019). These concerns are especially relevant in systems that rely heavily on automated decision-making, where institutional trust and legal compliance must be safeguarded through robust regulatory and ethical frameworks.

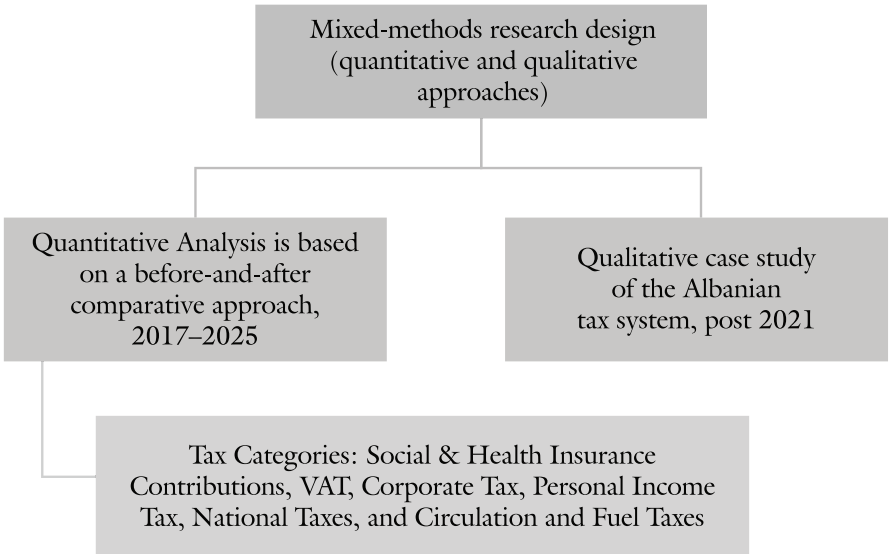
The existing literature strongly supports the view that integrating e-fiscalization systems with artificial intelligence can significantly enhance the effectiveness of tax administration. This synergy creates the foundation for an intelligent tax administration model characterized by real-time monitoring, predictive compliance control, improved taxpayer services, and stronger institutional governance.

METHODS AND RESULTS

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive assessment of the synergy between e-fiscalization and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in enhancing tax administration performance. The methodological framework is structured around two main components: (i) a comparative quantitative analysis of tax revenue indicators, and (ii) a qualitative case study of the Albanian tax system following the implementation of e-fiscalization in 2021.

The quantitative analysis is based on a before-and-after comparative approach, examining the evolution of key tax revenue categories over the period 2017–2025. This time frame allows for the evaluation of trends across four years before the implementation of e-fiscalization (2017–2021) and four years following its implementation (2021–2025). Such a design enables the identification of structural changes in revenue performance potentially attributable to the digital fiscal reform.

Figure 1: *Methodology framework*



(Source: Author's processing)

The analysis focuses on the following main Tax Categories: Social and Health Insurance Contributions, Value Added Tax (VAT), Corporate Income Tax, Personal Income Tax, National Taxes, and Circulation and Fuel Taxes. Graphical visualization techniques are used to illustrate revenue dynamics and to highlight structural shifts in tax collection patterns (Figure 2). This approach allows for a clear identification of post-reform acceleration in revenue growth and improved consistency in tax collection. Also, the study employs a comparative and interpretative analytical framework. This integrated approach allows for a more robust evaluation of the effectiveness of e-fiscalization and its potential amplification through AI technologies.

The empirical analysis of tax revenue indicators over the period 2017–2025 reveals a clear and consistent upward trend across most revenue categories, particularly following the implementation of e-fiscalization in 2021. The comparative assessment between the pre-fiscalization period (2017–2020) and the post-fiscalization period (2021–2025) highlights significant structural improvements in tax collection performance. Revenues from social and health insurance contributions increased steadily from 82.8 mld lekë in 2017 to 94.1 mld in 2020, reflecting gradual growth before e-fiscalization. However, a more pronounced increase is observed after 2021, reaching 172.5 mld in 2025, representing more than a twofold increase over the study period. This trend suggests improved reporting accuracy and reduced informality in employment declarations. VAT revenues exhibit some volatility in the pre-fiscalization period, particularly a decline in 2019 (26 billion ALL), followed by a recovery in 2020. After the implementation of e-fiscalization, VAT revenues show a significant and continuous increase, rising from 30.4 mld in 2021 to 68.7 mld in 2025. This substantial growth reflects enhanced transaction traceability and real-time reporting, which are critical features of the e-fiscalization system. Corporate income tax revenues display moderate fluctuations before e-fiscalization, declining to 28.4 mld in 2020.

Figure 2: *Revenue Growth 2017-2025, before and after e-fiscalization*

(Source: Author's processing based on the annual report of GDT)

In contrast, the post-fiscalization period is characterized by a strong upward trend, with revenues increasing to 58.7 mld in 2025. This indicates improved monitoring of business activities and a reduction in profit underreporting.

Personal income tax shows considerable variability before 2021 but follows a clear growth pattern afterward. Revenues increased from 43.8 mld in 2021 to 82.7 mld in 2025, representing one of the most significant relative increases among all categories. This suggests strengthened compliance in income declaration and improved integration of payroll reporting systems. National taxes remain relatively stable throughout the study period, with only a modest increase from 12.4 mld all in 2017 to 18.5 mld all in 2025. Although growth is less pronounced compared to other categories, a gradual upward trend is still evident after fiscalization. Revenues from circulation and fuel taxes show moderate growth over time, increasing from 15.2 mld all in 2017 to 24.2 mld all in 2025. The trend is relatively stable, indicating that these taxes are less sensitive to fiscalization reforms and more influenced by external factors such as consumption patterns and fuel prices.

The results provide strong empirical evidence that the implementation of e-fiscalization in 2021 has had a positive and substantial impact on tax revenue performance in Albania. The observed post-reform trends indicate a transition toward a more efficient, transparent, and data-driven tax administration system. Furthermore, the magnitude and consistency of revenue growth suggest that the integration of advanced digital tools, potentially enhanced through Artificial Intelligence, can further strengthen compliance and optimize tax collection processes. While the observed improvements can be largely attributed to e-fiscalization, the findings strongly support the argument that Artificial Intelligence represents the next critical layer of transformation. The large volume of real-time data generated by fiscalization systems creates both an opportunity and a challenge: while data availability increases, the complexity of analysis also rises. In this

context, AI technologies, such as machine learning, anomaly detection, and network analysis, can significantly enhance the effectiveness of tax administration by:

- Identifying hidden patterns of tax evasion
- Enabling predictive risk assessment
- Automating audit selection processes
- Improving taxpayer services through intelligent digital interfaces

The transition observed in the Albanian case, from fragmented and reactive enforcement toward integrated and proactive compliance management, is consistent with the broader literature on digital transformation in public finance. E-fiscalization provides the necessary data infrastructure, while AI offers the analytical capability to fully exploit this data.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that the implementation of e-fiscalization in Albania has generated a significant and sustained improvement in tax revenue performance, particularly in the post-2021 period. The empirical evidence indicates not only higher revenue levels across key tax categories but also enhanced stability, transparency, and consistency in tax collection. These outcomes suggest a substantial reduction in informality and tax evasion, driven by real-time reporting and improved monitoring capabilities.

Beyond its direct fiscal impact, the study highlights the strategic importance of integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into e-fiscalization systems. While e-fiscalization establishes the necessary digital infrastructure for data collection, AI provides the analytical capacity required to transform this data into actionable insights. This synergy enables tax administrations to shift from traditional, reactive enforcement approaches toward proactive, predictive, and data-driven governance. However, the transition toward intelligent tax administration is not without challenges. Issues related to data quality, algorithmic transparency, and cybersecurity must be carefully addressed through robust regulatory frameworks and institutional safeguards. Ensuring ethical and accountable use of AI remains critical for maintaining public trust and system integrity.

The findings support the view that integrating e-fiscalization and AI is a strategic imperative for modern tax systems. The Albanian case provides empirical evidence that digital transformation, when effectively implemented, can significantly enhance compliance, improve revenue mobilization, and lay the foundation for a more efficient and intelligent tax administration.

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PUBLIC HISTORY BEYOND ACADEMIA: ROLES, DIMENSIONS AND IMPACT ON SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines public history as an interdisciplinary field that extends beyond the traditional boundaries of academia, focusing on the ways in which history is produced, interpreted, and communicated within the public sphere. The main aim is to highlight the key dimensions of public history, including its conceptualization and scope, as well as its close relationship with cultural heritage. Furthermore, the study explores the role of communities in shaping historical narratives, emphasizing the importance of participatory approaches and the involvement of non-academic actors in the production of historical knowledge. Particular attention is given to the role of historians in the public sphere, analyzing the transformation of their function from producers of academic knowledge to mediators of historical communication for broader audiences. In addition, public history is considered as an important tool for fostering civic awareness and constructing collective identities. In the context of contemporary developments, the study also addresses the challenges and opportunities associated with the digital environment, highlighting the impact of virtual platforms on the ways in which the public engages with the past. In conclusion, the study argues that public history represents a fundamental component in bridging historical knowledge and society, contributing to the democratization of history and strengthening public dialogue about the past.

Keywords: *Public history; public sphere; cultural heritage; community; civic engagement; civic awareness; digital history; historical communication; historical narratives; collective identity*

INTRODUCTION

History is not confined within the boundaries of universities but extends broadly into the public sphere. Public interest in the past is expressed through various forms, such as audiovisual media, cultural tourism, local history, and reading practices. In this sense, this chapter aims to analyse the relationship between these widespread forms of engaging with history and academic historical scholarship, which has been the main focus of discussion so

far. In contemporary discourse, this field is commonly referred to as "public history." A key question arising in this context is whether this form of history undermines scholarly rigour or whether it should instead be seen as an essential dimension of a shared historical culture.

In the Albanian context, especially after the 1990s, the relationship between academic and public history has gained particular importance. The transition period was accompanied by a re-examination of historical narratives and the opening of public debate on past events, figures, and processes. Institutions such as the State Archives of Albania, the Institute of History, and the National History Museum have played a significant role in this process by providing documentation, exhibitions, and scholarly studies that have given the public broader access to historical sources.

Unlike international cases, where debates about the past have often taken a legal form, as in the well-known case between David Irving and Deborah Lipstadt, in Albania the public impact of history has mainly been expressed through academic discussions, scholarly publications, and media debates. These debates have focused on sensitive issues such as the communist period, historical figures, and the interpretation of key events in national history.

This situation demonstrates that public history encompasses all channels through which the past is interpreted and communicated outside university settings, contributing to the construction of a broader historical culture. However, this field is characterised by a diversity of approaches and interpretations that do not always align with the standards of academic research. For this reason, it is possible to identify several distinct forms of public history, each with its own influence on how history is understood and used in the public sphere.

THE SCOPE AND CONCEPTUALISATION OF PUBLIC HISTORY

First of all, public history can be understood as an inclusive category encompassing all forms of representing the past in the public sphere and across various media (Ashton & Kean, 2009; Kean & Martin, 2013). In the Albanian context, this includes material heritage such as monuments and historical buildings, as well as the ways in which history is presented in the print press, literary works, film, television broadcasting, and increasingly in digital platforms (Lowenthal, 2015; Jordanova, 2000). In this sense, public history refers to any form through which the public constructs perceptions of the past, regardless of the level of scholarly accuracy or the professional status of those producing these representations (Zelizer, 1995).

A second dimension of public history places the community itself at the centre of attention. In Albania, particularly after the 1990s, there has been a noticeable growth in interest in local and family history, where individuals and social groups not only consume history but also contribute to its construction through personal memories, documents, and testimonies Kodra, 2012; Portelli, 1991). This approach gives public history a democratic character, transforming it into a process in which communities actively construct and interpret their own past, in relation to identity and collective experience (Frisch, 1990).

In a third sense, public history implies the role of professionals in supporting and guiding these processes. In Albania, institutions such as the National History Museum, the Institute of History, and the Institute of Cultural Monuments play an important role in this regard through exhibition curation, scholarly research, and the preservation of cultural heritage (Duka, 2007; Pollo & Puto, 1981). In this context, academic historians

act as experts and advisors, contributing to the maintenance of scholarly standards and to the accurate interpretation of historical sources (Tosh, 2015).

On the other hand, the development of public history as a distinct professional field is more firmly established in other countries, such as the United States of America, where since the 1970s it has been institutionalised as a separate discipline, creating new employment opportunities for historians outside universities, including museums, historical parks, and heritage organisations kulturore (Kelly, 1978; Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998). This development serves as a useful point of reference for the Albanian context, where the field is still in the process of consolidation.

Finally, public history also includes the activities of professional historians who directly address the wider public through publications, media engagement, and participation in public debates. In Albania, this form has become increasingly visible through popularised scholarly publications, television programmes, and discussions on historically significant contemporary issues (Evans, 2001). In this sense, public history also functions as a civic resource, contributing to the development of a critical attitude towards both the past and contemporary developments.

The role of academic historians within public history remains variable and depends on its specific form. In some cases, they are only marginally present, while in others they constitute the main source of scholarly authority (Samuel, 1994).. In the Albanian context, this role is still evolving, reflecting the challenges and opportunities associated with the development of a sustainable and inclusive historical culture.

PUBLIC HISTORY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Much of the discourse on public history is articulated in terms of "cultural heritage," which represents one of the most significant dimensions for understanding its scope and social function (Smith, 2006; Graham et al., 2000). The concept of cultural heritage has a much earlier and broader origin than public history itself. During the nineteenth century, it played an important role in shaping national consciousness across European countries, including the Albanian context, drawing on elements such as popular traditions, folklore, and the development of national culture (Sota, 2012). In the twentieth century, this concept became more narrowly focused on the conservation of material heritage, particularly the built environment and historical monuments (Ibid).

In Albania, especially after the 1990s, the concept of cultural heritage has undergone a significant expansion (Duka, 2008). On the one hand, it continues to be associated with what is considered "high culture", such as monumental architecture, objects of particular historical value, and established cultural traditions. On the other hand, there has been a clear process of democratisation of heritage, whereby local communities increasingly seek recognition and representation of their specific cultural identities (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). In parallel, cultural heritage has become more closely integrated into economic development strategies, particularly through cultural tourism, which has broadened public access but has also introduced the risk of reducing heritage to a purely commercial function (Ashworth, 2011).

Despite these developments, cultural heritage maintains a close connection with history, although the selection of what is represented is not always neutral. In many cases, the displayed objects and buildings belong to the wealthier and more elite strata of

society, reflecting more the history of power than that of everyday life (Bennett, 1995). This tendency is partly explained by the greater likelihood of such structures surviving over time, as well as by the ways in which historical narratives are constructed within the public sphere publike (Samuel, 1994).

A fundamental component of cultural heritage in Albania is the museum sector. The origins of museums are linked to private elite collections, but over time they evolved into public institutions (Sota, 2023). The establishment of the Muzeu Arkeologjik i Vlorës on 8 October 1936 marked an important step in this process, introducing the model of the public museum with broader access for audiencës (Ibid). Nevertheless, for a long time, the role of the public remained limited in relation to the selection and interpretation of exhibitions.

Following the Second World War and especially during the post-communist period, museums increasingly began to reflect on the role of the public and the need for broader social inclusion (Sota, 2023). The development of social history contributed to the expansion of museum themes, incorporating aspects of everyday life, women's history, workers' experiences, and various social groups (Ibid). In this context, consultation with communities has become increasingly important in shaping exhibition policies and constructing museum narratives.

In the 1990s, several local museums were established in urban areas in Albania as part of efforts to preserve and promote cultural heritage during the transition period (Duka, 2008). A significant example is the Muzeu Historik Kombëtar, which, although founded in 1981, was re-conceptualised and further enriched during this period in order to respond to new social and historical realities (National Historical Museum of Albania, n.d.). Tiranë. Overall, these initiatives aimed to strengthen the cultural identity of communities and to raise public awareness of the importance of history and local heritage.

HISTORY IN AND FROM THE COMMUNITY: PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES

Public history departs significantly from the traditional model of professional expertise in cases where it is developed in collaboration with non-professional actors (Frisch, 1990; Ashton & Kean, 2009). This approach is linked to well-known developments in contemporary historiography, which, since the late twentieth century, have increasingly promoted the inclusion of communities in the historical research proces (Portelli, 1991; Ritchie, 2015). In the Albanian context, especially after the 1990s, this tendency has been reflected in the growing interest in local history and in initiatives based on research conducted by community members themselves (Kodra, 2012). Today, emphasis is increasingly placed on collective research, which combines various methodological approaches and seeks to construct a more inclusive narrative of the past.

Within this framework, documentary research remains an important component, but visual sources and oral testimonies have taken on an increasingly significant role. In particular (Thompson, 2000), photographs create a sense of direct contact with the past, making history more accessible to the wider public (Burke, 2001). A meaningful example in Albania is related to the activities of the Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror i Filmit during the 1990s, when initiatives were undertaken to collect and document photographic and film

materials from urban communities. People of different ages contributed family photographs and personal accounts of everyday life, work, and lived experiences, often referring to periods dating back to the early twentieth century. These materials were processed and presented in publications and exhibitions, stimulating further documentation and collective discussions on historical memory and local identity.

The distinction between trained researchers and non-professional actors becomes significantly blurred when oral history becomes the primary research tool (Thompson, 2000).. In Albania, various projects with public or institutional support have aimed precisely at involving communities in documenting historical memory, often with the methodological participation and guidance of academic researchers (Sota, 2013). However, at its core, this remains an open and democratic endeavour (Ibid).

From this perspective, history is no longer perceived solely as a professional discipline, but also as a social practice in which individuals and communities take active part aktive (Simon, 2010). Community members are not limited to collecting data; they also contribute their lived knowledge and experiences, thereby enriching interpretations of the past with social and cultural dimensions that are often absent from traditional academic approaches (Portelli, 1991).

THE ROLE OF HISTORIANS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

In the Albanian context, the role of historians in the public sphere has traditionally been positioned in an authoritative manner, which has made it less easy to accept other actors who produce and disseminate history for public consumption (Sota, 2013). However, with the expansion of media and the growth of alternative forms of historical communication, historians have increasingly been confronted with non-academic narratives circulating in the press, television, and digital platforms (Ibid).

Within this framework, a considerable amount of information about the past is presented outside the standards of scholarly research, which has generated critical responses from the academic community. Historians have often found themselves in challenging positions, contesting interpretations that have already gained public support. One of the main criticisms concerns the fact that heritage and public history discourses tend to be influenced by contemporary social and political contexts, shaping the selection of the past according to present-day needs (Lowenthal, 2015). In many cases, state-supported initiatives focus on traditional historical figures and narratives, while community-based projects often aim to highlight local experiences, individual memories, and dimensions of victimhood or social agency. This has led, as noted in international literature, to a tendency in some cases to emphasise commemoration and symbolism rather than rigorous historical inquiry (Samuel, 1994).

Nevertheless, in contemporary developments, a reduction in tensions between academic historians and those engaged in public history can be observed, due to increased opportunities for cooperation (Ashton & Kean, 2009). In Albania, this collaboration has mainly emerged through museum projects, thematic exhibitions, and initiatives for documenting collective memory, where academic expertise is combined with community experience. One example of this rapprochement is the cooperation between researchers and heritage institutions such as the Muzeu Historik Kombëtar and other cultural heritage

structures, which have sought to balance scholarly interpretation with the need for public communication (National Historical Museum of Albania, n.d.).

Cultural heritage represents another field in which collaboration between historians and public actors has become increasingly important. Professionals in this sector value academic contributions for the accurate interpretation of historical sources, while a growing number of historians consider public engagement a natural extension of their scholarly work (Smith, 2006). This collaborative approach has become particularly evident in commemorative projects and major historical exhibitions, where specialist involvement is essential for constructing balanced narratives.

A significant international example is the commemoration of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 in the United Kingdom (2007), which involved extensive cooperation between state institutions, museums, and historians (Hall, 2007). Although this case has no direct equivalent in Albania, it serves as a reference point for how academic research can be integrated into large-scale public history projects with wide social impact.

Another important dimension of historians' role in the public sphere is related to academic research that, although initially confined to university circles, can have substantial public impact (Sota, 2019). In this regard, studies on the historical interconnections between economies and societies have shown that scholarly findings can generate wide public debate, especially when they address sensitive issues from the past.

In conclusion, the role of historians in the public sphere is complex and multifaceted. It ranges from that of academic expert to cultural mediator, reflecting the ongoing tension and cooperation between scholarly research and society's need to interpret the past.

PUBLIC HISTORY AS A SOURCE OF CIVIC AWARENESS

Although partnerships between historians and actors in cultural heritage or community initiatives are often productive, academic historians also maintain an independent and essential role in the public sphere. If public history is understood as the ways in which the past is represented and consumed in society, then the dissemination of academic research findings also constitutes an important form of it (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998). While some popular historical productions do not always make a direct contribution to critical understanding of the past, the role of academic historians remains distinctive, as they provide analyses based on scientific methods and address topics that are often not included in other forms of public history (Evans, 2001).

In this sense, history cannot be reduced solely to the dimensions of cultural heritage, museums, or local history. By considering the public not merely as consumers but as active citizens, history acquires a broader social function. Citizens require historical perspectives in order to understand and evaluate contemporary policies and developments, ranging from social welfare issues to international politics. Historical perspective serves as a critical tool that helps avoid the repetition of past mistakes and broadens the range of decision-making options in the present (Sota, 2013). In this way, history contributes to the formation of a deeper civic awareness and to the understanding of different societies in comparative contexts (Ibid).

If historians' work addresses issues of current relevance, then there is a professional

obligation to communicate research findings beyond the academic sphere. This communication represents one of the key functions of public history, linking scholarly expertise with the wider public (Ashton & Kean, 2009). Historians are traditionally engaged in various forms of academic writing, such as monographs and scholarly articles, but there is an increasing demand to reach broader audiences through alternative forms of communication.

One of the most important channels remains the print press. Editors of quality newspapers often provide space for historians' contributions, which participate in public debates on contemporary issues. Internationally recognised historians have regularly engaged in this form of communication, while opinion pages and letters sections in newspapers constitute an important space for interaction between historical research and public debate (Evans, 2001).

A significant example of academic intervention in public debate is the letter published in The Guardian in 2010 by a group of economic historians, who analysed the financial crisis through a historical perspective (Daunton et al., 2010). They argued, among other points, that concerns over public debt have often been historically exaggerated, and they emphasised the importance of international financial regulation, thereby offering a historically grounded interpretation of a major contemporary political and economic issue.

In the twenty-first century, however, the role of the print press has declined in comparison to audiovisual and digital media (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998). Television and the internet have become the primary sources of public history for broad audiences. Television, in particular, offers a wide range of formats, from documentaries to historical dramas, making history more accessible, but often limiting it to twentieth-century themes, especially the events of the Second World War. This medium relies heavily on visual archival materials and oral testimonies, which makes it more suitable for the emotional reconstruction of the past rather than for in-depth comparative analysis (Nichols, 2017).

Nevertheless, there are also successful examples of the critical use of television in historical interpretation, where documentaries have contributed to public debate on significant historical events (Kean & Martin, 2013). Similarly, radio has maintained a more analytical role, offering space for in-depth discussion and historical interpretation due to its reliance on spoken discourse. Various radio programmes that explore the relationship between the past and the present represent an important continuation of the tradition of public history as a source of civic reflection.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Historians' aspiration to expand their presence in the public sphere has become increasingly linked to developments in digitalisation. As has been noted in discussions on electronic sources, digital platforms have created new opportunities for access to and dissemination of primary historical materials (Kean & Martin, 2013). In this context, online archival platforms represent an important form of democratisation of historical knowledge, making archived material accessible not only to researchers but also to the wider public. A significant example is the Old Bailey Online, which is used both by academic researchers and by individuals interested in family and social history (Shoemaker, 2010).

The process of democratising expertise goes beyond access to digital archives. Modern technologies, including digital cameras and online platforms, have enabled individuals

to preserve and share documentary materials that were previously confined to private archives. In this way, the public is no longer only a consumer of history but also an active contributor to its production (Rosenzweig, 2011). This has created new spaces for collaborative research between historians and communities.

An important example of this approach is the research project launched in 2010 on the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, in which volunteers were engaged in transcribing his handwritten manuscripts. This project demonstrated that digitalisation can create new forms of scholarly collaboration, involving the public directly in the historical research process and establishing a more open relationship between experts and communities (University College London, 2010).

However, beyond its innovative dimension, the internet also plays a more traditional role as a channel for communicating historical research findings (Cohen & Rosenzweig, 2005).. It serves as a medium for disseminating academic analysis on issues of public relevance, particularly when these have social or political implications. The speed of publication and information sharing makes the internet an especially suitable platform for reflecting on the relationship between the past and contemporary developments.

In this context, the History News Network operates in the United States (History News Network, 2020), aiming to connect historical research with current public debates, while in the United Kingdom the History & Policy represents a more structured model of integrating history with public policy analysis (History & Policy, 2020). This platform includes numerous contributions from academic historians and provides publicly accessible materials on issues such as social, economic, and health policies.

The importance of these initiatives also lies in their impact on public decision-making processes. Historian Ernest May emphasised the importance of direct and concise communication of historical knowledge for the needs of policymaking, an approach that is reflected in the practices of platforms such as History & Policy (May, 1973; May, 2009).. Through seminars, publications, and interaction with public administration and advisory groups, these initiatives build bridges between academia and decision-making institutions.

In this way, the digital age does not replace the role of historians but rather expands it, offering new opportunities for interaction with the public and for influencing social and political debate.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has examined the multiple ways in which history extends beyond the boundaries of academia and interacts with the public sphere, taking diverse forms such as cultural heritage, community history, the media, and digital platforms. Across all these dimensions, public history emerges as a dynamic field in which professional interpretations are interwoven with the perceptions and experiences of the wider public.

However, it has often been argued that, despite the ever-increasing access to historical materials, a segment of the public does not always possess the historical awareness necessary to place knowledge within chronological and interpretative frameworks. From this perspective, history is often consumed more as a form of entertainment or as a means of identity construction rather than as a critical process of understanding the past. Although this view cannot be fully generalised, it finds some support in the challenges related to the quality and effectiveness of history teaching within educational systems.

On the other hand, the pessimistic stance of some historians who express concern about the "decline" of public history does not fully reflect contemporary realities. On the contrary, there is a growing societal interest in the past, which creates new opportunities for interaction between academic historians and the public. In this context, public history should not be seen as a declining field, but rather as an expanding space in which new forms of communication and collaboration can develop.

Historians who succeed in communicating with broad audiences through their work, while maintaining scholarly standards, demonstrate that there is not necessarily a conflict between public accessibility and academic rigour. Internationally recognised authors have shown that it is possible to combine engaging narratives with critical analysis without oversimplifying historical content. In this sense, the observation of a "re-engagement of historians with the public" reflects a genuine trend in the development of the discipline.

In conclusion, the visibility of historians in the public sphere appears to be secure and increasingly expanding, particularly in the digital age and in the context of the growing importance of public history. However, the main challenge is not simply their presence in this space, but the quality and effectiveness of the role they play as interpreters of cultural heritage, mediators of community history, and, above all, reliable sources of knowledge for citizens seeking to understand the world in which they live.

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DATA-DRIVEN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR AN INTELLIGENT SOCIETY: ENHANCING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH ALBANIAN LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT (AMU)

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ABSTRACT

The transition toward an intelligent society requires educational systems to foster higher-order skills, particularly critical thinking. This study examines the role of data-driven educational leadership in improving students' critical thinking through the analysis of Albanian Language Achievement Monitoring Assessment (AMU) results in lower secondary education. Using a mixed-method approach, student performance is analyzed across lower- and higher-order cognitive tasks based on Bloom's Taxonomy. Findings indicate stronger results in comprehension-based tasks, while performance in analytical and argumentative tasks remains significantly lower, revealing a gap between knowledge acquisition and critical reasoning. The study highlights the importance of using assessment data to inform leadership decisions and guide targeted instructional interventions. It concludes that evidence-based leadership can enhance teaching quality and support the development of critical thinking in line with the demands of an intelligent society.

Key words: *educational leadership; data-driven decision-making; critical thinking; intelligent society; AMU assessment; Bloom's Taxonomy; student performance; instructional improvement*

INTRODUCTION

Rapid technological development, artificial intelligence, and the expansion of knowledge economies have transformed expectations from education systems. Contemporary education is increasingly expected not merely to transmit information but to cultivate analytical, reflective, and problem-solving capacities. Among these competencies, critical thinking occupies a central role (Facione, 2011). OECD frameworks likewise emphasize that future-ready learners must interpret information, evaluate evidence, and make reasoned judgments (OECD, 2019). Parallel to this shift, educational leadership has increasingly moved toward evidence-based decision-making. Data are no longer seen

solely as accountability tools but as instruments for school improvement. This paper examines how AMU assessment data may function as a leadership resource to improve critical thinking in Albanian language learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Education in an Intelligent Society

The concept of the intelligent society has emerged in response to rapid technological innovation, digital transformation, and the expansion of knowledge-based economies. In such a society, human capital is increasingly defined not only by access to information but by the ability to analyze, interpret, and use knowledge in adaptive and creative ways.

Education, therefore, is no longer limited to transmitting disciplinary content. Its mission extends to preparing learners who can think critically, solve complex problems, collaborate, and make informed decisions in uncertain contexts. OECD (2019) emphasizes that future education systems must cultivate transformative competencies that enable individuals to respond to global challenges.

Within this perspective, schools are expected to function as environments where inquiry, reflection, and innovation are promoted. The role of curriculum and assessment shifts from reproduction of knowledge toward development of higher-order thinking.

In this context, the intelligent society requires a redefinition of educational success, moving beyond test performance alone toward competencies that support lifelong learning and active citizenship.

Critical Thinking as a Core Competence

Critical thinking is widely recognized as one of the central competencies of contemporary education. Facione (2011) defines critical thinking as purposeful, self-regulatory judgment involving interpretation, analysis, inference, explanation, and evaluation. Paul and Elder (2019) argue that critical thinking requires disciplined reasoning based on evidence, logic, and intellectual reflection. It enables learners to question assumptions, evaluate arguments, and construct reasoned conclusions.

Within school contexts, critical thinking is not developed spontaneously; it requires intentional pedagogical design. Tasks that involve comparison, interpretation, argument construction, and problem solving contribute to this development.

This study draws on Bloom's revised taxonomy as an analytical framework distinguishing lower-order thinking skills (remembering, understanding) from higher-order thinking skills (analyzing, evaluating, creating).

Particularly in Albanian language education, opportunities for developing critical thinking are substantial through text interpretation, literary analysis, argumentative writing, and discussion-based instruction.

Data-Driven Leadership

Contemporary educational leadership increasingly emphasizes the use of evidence to support instructional improvement. Data-driven leadership refers to the systematic use of assessment results, classroom evidence, and performance indicators to inform decision-making.

Mandinach and Gummer describe data literacy as a necessary competence for educational leaders, enabling them to interpret information, identify patterns, diagnose needs, and guide improvement efforts. Within this framework, assessment data should not be viewed solely as accountability measures, but as tools for understanding student learning and improving teaching practice.

Effective data-driven leadership includes:

- analyzing patterns in student performance;
- identifying gaps in higher-order skills;
- designing targeted interventions;
- monitoring implementation and progress.

Moreover, the use of data contributes to creating collaborative professional cultures in which teachers engage in reflective dialogue and shared problem-solving. This study positions AMU results within this perspective, viewing assessment data as a strategic resource for instructional leadership and school improvement.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between assessment data and critical thinking development.

Research Design

The quantitative component focused on analyzing students' performance across cognitive levels represented in AMU tasks, while the qualitative component supported interpretation of the pedagogical implications of these results. This combination allowed the study not only to identify patterns in achievement, but also to interpret what these patterns reveal about teaching practices and leadership interventions.

Sample

The study drew on AMU assessment results from students in grades VI–IX in lower secondary education. The selection of these grades was significant because they correspond to a developmental stage where analytical reading, interpretation, and argumentative expression are expected to emerge more clearly.

Research Questions

- To what extent do students demonstrate critical thinking through AMU tasks?
- What differences emerge between lower-order and higher-order cognitive performance?
- How can assessment data support educational leadership decisions aimed at improving critical thinking?

Hypothesis

Students will perform significantly better in lower-order cognitive tasks than in tasks requiring analysis and argumentation.

Instrument

The principal instrument analyzed was the AMU assessment in Albanian language. Items were classified into four categories:

- recall-based tasks
- comprehension tasks
- analytical tasks
- argumentative tasks

This categorization was aligned with Bloom's taxonomy.

Procedure

The research process included several stages:

- First, assessment results were collected and organized according to task type.
- Second, items were coded according to cognitive demand.
- Third, descriptive comparative analysis was used to identify differences in student performance across categories.
- Finally, findings were interpreted pedagogically through the lens of instructional practice and educational leadership.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis focused on frequency and percentage comparisons across cognitive levels.

Qualitative analysis interpreted the implications of performance gaps and related findings to literature on assessment, critical thinking, and leadership.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: *Student Performance by Cognitive Level*

Cognitive Level	Success Rate
Remembering/Understanding	75%
Interpretation	61%
Analysing	48%
Argumentation	42%

Results show a substantial decline as task complexity increases.

This suggests students perform more successfully in retrieval-based tasks than in deeper reasoning.

The findings indicate a possible mismatch between curriculum aspirations emphasizing competencies and classroom practices still privileging memorization-oriented instruction.

These results align with international research indicating that higher-order thinking requires explicit pedagogical support.

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The findings have important implications for pedagogy and educational leadership.

First, they confirm that assessment practices shape learning behaviors. Students tend to direct effort toward what is valued in evaluation.

Second, the gap between comprehension and argumentation suggests a need for stronger instructional focus on reasoning and evidence-based responses.

Third, findings reinforce literature emphasizing leadership as a mediating factor between assessment evidence and instructional change.

From this perspective, leadership is not external to teaching quality but part of the mechanism through which improvement occurs.

Data use should move beyond reporting toward improvement.

Recommended leadership practices include:

- evidence-informed school development plans
- teacher collaborative inquiry
- monitoring of higher-order questioning
- professional learning communities.

Leadership, therefore, functions as pedagogical agency, not administrative management alone.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for School Leaders School leaders

School leaders should institutionalize the systematic use of assessment data as part of instructional improvement processes.

AMU results should be interpreted as diagnostic tools for identifying specific gaps in higher-order thinking skills.

Leaders are encouraged to develop improvement plans grounded in evidence, integrate assessment analysis into professional reflection, and promote a culture where data are used for growth rather than control.

Recommendations for Teachers

Teachers should increase the use of strategies that actively develop critical thinking, such as text analysis, argument-based writing, structured debates, inquiry-based learning, and problem-solving tasks.

Greater emphasis should be placed on open-ended questions that require reasoning and justification.

Formative assessment should also be used more systematically to adapt instruction.

Recommendations for Educational Policy

Assessment frameworks should increasingly incorporate competencies related to critical thinking and not remain predominantly focused on content recall.

Professional development programs focused on data literacy should support teachers and school leaders in interpreting evidence effectively.

National assessment models such as AMU should include a larger proportion of analytical and argumentative tasks.

Recommendations for Students

Students should be encouraged to move beyond passive reception of knowledge and become active participants in learning.

Developing habits of independent thinking, argumentation, and self-assessment can contribute significantly to strengthening critical thinking competencies.

CONCLUSIONS

The study demonstrates that AMU data can serve as tools for diagnosing learning needs and informing pedagogical improvement.

Findings reveal a clear discrepancy between students' performance in lower-order and higher-order tasks, highlighting the need for greater focus on critical thinking.

More broadly, the study supports the argument that data-driven educational leadership can contribute significantly to transforming schools into learning organizations capable of responding to the demands of an intelligent society.

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THE LIMITS OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE: BETWEEN OBJECTIVITY, INTERPRETATION, AND POSTMODERN CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the limits of historical knowledge by addressing key debates concerning the nature, methodology, and reliability of history as a scholarly discipline. The analysis begins with an examination of the epistemological status of history, questioning whether it can be considered a science in the strict sense, given its reliance on incomplete and often distorted sources. The study further investigates the role of the historian as a selector and interpreter of the past, highlighting the influence of subjectivity and contextual factors in the construction of historical narratives. Particular attention is paid to the challenges posed by postmodernism, especially regarding the relativization of truth and the deconstruction of grand historical narratives. In addition, the paper analyzes the integration of postmodern approaches within historiography, identifying both their contributions and limitations. In this context, theoretical criticisms and their implications for historical practice are also examined. In conclusion, the study argues that historical knowledge remains a complex field situated between objectivity and interpretation. Its limits should not be seen as weaknesses, but rather as essential features that require critical reflection and a balanced methodological approach.

Keywords: *Torical knowledge; historiography; epistemology of history; objectivity; interpretation; historical sources; postmodernism; historical narratives; subjectivity*.

INTRODUCTION

The study of history as a scholarly discipline has long been the subject of profound epistemological debate. The central question is whether historical narrative can achieve a level of objectivity that transcends the individual interpretation of the historian, or

whether it remains conditioned by the author's subjective perspective and intellectual context (Carr, 1961; Tosh, 2015).

Traditionally, the positivist approach has conceived history as a form of empirical science, in which knowledge is constructed on the basis of verifiable facts and the critical analysis of sources. From this perspective, the historian aims to reconstruct the past through an objective and methodologically controlled process (Elton, 1967). In contrast, the idealist approach emphasizes the incomplete nature of historical sources and the active role of the historian in interpreting them, highlighting the importance of intuition, empathy, and historical imagination (Collingwood, 1946).

In recent decades, these two positions have been further challenged by postmodern critique, which questions the very possibility of objective knowledge of the past. According to this view, history is not merely a reflection of past reality, but a discursive construct shaped by language, culture, and power relations (White, 1973; Jenkins, 1991). These different perspectives have raised a series of fundamental questions regarding the nature of historical knowledge:

- How reliable is our knowledge of the past?
- Can historical facts be considered objective data?
- What role does interpretation play in constructing historical narrative?
- Is objectivity in history possible?

Debates surrounding these issues have led to a plurality of approaches within contemporary historiography. While some historians defend the cumulative and scientific character of history (Elton, 1967), others emphasize its interpretative and subjective nature (Jenkins, 1991). Nevertheless, in contemporary practice there is a growing tendency toward integrating these perspectives, viewing history as a discipline that combines empirical analysis with critical interpretation (Tosh, 2015).

IS HISTORY A SCIENCE?

The question of whether history is a science necessarily places the discussion within the field of epistemology, since it directly concerns the nature and status of historical knowledge. This debate has been present since the Renaissance period and has developed particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Tosh, 2015). Although many practicing historians do not directly engage with philosophical discussions, the differences in the ways they understand and interpret the past reflect precisely these theoretical debates (Carr, 1961). At its core, the discussion is centered on two main issues:

- Whether history should follow the methodological model of the natural sciences;
- To what extent language and interpretation influence the construction of historical knowledge (Jenkins, 1991).

In the nineteenth century, the development of the natural sciences strongly influenced the way knowledge was conceptualized. Within this context, positivism emerged, supporting the idea that knowledge should be based on empirical observation and inductive generalizations derived from facts (Sota, 2023).

In historical studies, this approach implied that the historian's primary task was the collection and rigorous verification of facts through critical analysis of primary sources. Interpretation was considered a process that should arise directly from the facts, without the interference of the historian's subjective values (Elton, 1967).

However, later developments in the philosophy of science demonstrated that even the natural sciences are not entirely free from interpretation, thereby weakening the stronger claims of positivism (Kuhn, 1962).

In contrast to positivism, the idealist approach emphasizes the fundamental distinction between the natural and the human worlds. According to this perspective, historical events cannot be understood solely through external observation, but require insight into the thoughts, intentions, and experiences of historical actors (Collingwood, 1946).

This implies that the historian is not merely a collector of facts, but an active interpreter who reconstructs the past through an intellectual and imaginative process. In this sense, historical knowledge is inevitably subjective and closer to artistic understanding than to scientific explanation (Sota, 2012).

The tension between these two approaches has not found a definitive resolution and continues to shape how historians understand their discipline. On the one hand, there is a tendency to preserve the scientific standards of research; on the other, the role of interpretation and context in the construction of historical knowledge is increasingly acknowledged (Tosh, 2015).

As a result, contemporary historiography is characterized by a more balanced approach, which recognizes both the importance of empirical analysis and the role of critical interpretation in understanding the past.

HISTORICAL SOURCES: INCOMPLETENESS, DISTORTION, AND RELIABILITY

The professional identity of nineteenth-century academic historians was built upon the development of rigorous techniques for identifying and critically evaluating primary sources. The methodological principles established during this period continue to form the foundation of contemporary historiographical practice, making critical source analysis the cornerstone of modern historical knowledge (Tosh, 2015). However, the principle of "being faithful to sources" is more complex than its formulation suggests and has remained a subject of ongoing historiographical debate.

First, historical sources are inherently incomplete. This incompleteness does not arise solely from the accidental or deliberate loss of documents, but also from the fact that a large proportion of human experience is never recorded. In particular, mental processes, unconscious assumptions, and unarticulated beliefs rarely leave direct traces in the historical record (Carr, 1961). Even the most well-documented historical figures have left behind only a fragmentary representation of their thoughts and worldview.

Second, sources are shaped by context and by the intentions of their authors. Historical documents do not represent a neutral reality; rather, they are products of power relations and the social structures in which they were produced. As historiographical studies have emphasized, many surviving sources reflect the perspectives of dominant groups, thereby producing an imbalance in the representation of historical experience (Burke, 2001). In this sense, archives are not merely repositories of the past, but also instruments of information organization and control (Foucault, 1972). Nevertheless, through critical methodology, historians are able to analyze not only the explicit content of documents, but also their subtext, identifying distortions and limitations embedded within them (Howell & Prevenier, 2001).

Another significant challenge relates to the abundance of sources, particularly for

modern and contemporary periods. Unlike nineteenth-century historians, who believed in the possibility of compiling a complete set of historical facts, contemporary historians face an overwhelming volume of material that requires continuous selection and interpretation (Tosh, 2015). This shifts the focus from the mere collection of data toward its analytical structuring in relation to specific research questions.

In this context, the concept of a "historical fact" acquires an interpretative dimension. Facts are not independently given entities; rather, they are selected and gain meaning through the historian's intervention. As Edward Hallett Carr argues, a distinction must be made between "facts of the past" and "historical facts," the latter being the result of selection and interpretation within a historical argument (Carr, 1961). Thus, the significance of a fact is not absolute, but depends on analytical context and research questions.

The process of fact selection is closely linked to the formulation of hypotheses. Progress in historical research is often achieved through the construction of clearly defined hypotheses that are tested against available sources. Even when hypotheses are not confirmed, they contribute to the expansion of analytical perspectives and to the identification of new dimensions of a problem (Bloch, 1953). This approach aligns with developments in the philosophy of science, according to which scientific knowledge is provisional and advances through continuous hypothesis testing (Popper, 2002).

A fundamental element of historical method is the role of imagination. Unlike the natural sciences, where data can be produced through experimentation, historians confront gaps in the evidence and must employ analytical imagination to reconstruct historical contexts. As R. G. Collingwood argues, historical understanding requires a re-enactment of the thought processes of past actors (Collingwood, 1946). This does not imply arbitrary subjectivism, but rather an interpretative process grounded in evidence and logical coherence.

Nevertheless, one of the main limitations of historical knowledge remains the absence of full scholarly consensus. Unlike the natural sciences, where broad agreement often exists regarding dominant explanations, history is characterized by interpretative plurality. This is linked to the complexity of historical phenomena and the multifactorial nature of historical causation (Evans, 2000). Each historical situation is unique and cannot be reduced to universal explanatory models.

As a result, even in the most well-documented cases, historians may arrive at differing interpretations regarding the relative importance of explanatory factors. This diversity of interpretations does not represent a weakness of the discipline, but rather reflects the complexity of the past and the inherent limits of historical knowledge.

In conclusion, historical sources constitute mediated and fragmentary material that requires careful critical analysis and interpretation. The historian's role lies in the selection, evaluation, and interpretation of these sources in order to construct a coherent, methodologically grounded understanding of the past.

THE HISTORIAN AS A SELECTOR AND INTERPRETER OF THE PAST

The comparison between history and the natural sciences has often been constructed on assumptions inherited from nineteenth-century positivism, which regarded scientific knowledge as fully objective and certain. However, developments in the philosophy of science have demonstrated that even scientific knowledge is provisional and conditioned by theoretical and methodological frameworks (Sota, 2012). In this sense, the comparison

highlights that historical knowledge is fundamentally dependent on the processes of selection and interpretation carried out by the historian.

The common assumption that the historian simply "discovers" the past and presents it in a neutral manner is outdated. In reality, historical research involves a series of choices: the selection of sources, the identification of significant facts, and the construction of meaningful interpretations. At each stage of this process, the direction of inquiry is determined simultaneously by the questions posed by the historian and by the nature of the available sources (Sota, 2021). Consequently, the strict separation between fact and value promoted by positivism proves to be untenable in historical study.

This does not imply that historical knowledge is arbitrary or entirely subjective in a relativist sense. Rather, it suggests that the assumptions, values, and theoretical approaches of the historian must themselves be critically examined as an integral part of the process of historical knowledge production (Evans, 2000). As Edward Hallett Carr argues, historical facts acquire meaning only through their interaction with the historian, making history a continuous dialogue between the past and the present (Carr, 1961).

Although historical inquiry contains an individual dimension, it cannot be separated from the broader social and cultural context in which it is produced. Research experience is to some extent personal, but historical interpretation is largely shaped by the values and assumptions of the historian's society (Burke, 2001). As Richard Cobb has noted, the writing of history represents one of the fullest expressions of individual personality, yet this individuality is constantly mediated by collective contexts.

Because social values change over time, historical interpretation is subject to continuous revision. Each epoch tends to project its own concerns and priorities onto the past. A significant example of this process is the evolution of historiography from a traditional focus on the state and political elites toward an increased interest in social history and the experiences of marginalized groups. In nineteenth-century historiography, the nation-state was viewed as the primary agent of historical development, a perspective closely linked to the political context of the time (Tosh, 2015).

After World War I, this vision was increasingly questioned, leading to a shift toward more critical analyses of the state and a growing interest in international and social history. In subsequent decades, developments in global historiography transformed the study of regions outside Europe. For instance, African history moved away from a Eurocentric framework toward an approach that emphasized African experiences and agency (Falola, 2003).

This process demonstrates that standards of historical significance are not fixed but evolve in relation to social and intellectual change. However, it would be inaccurate to claim that history is simply "rewritten" by each generation in a complete sense. Rather, it develops through an ongoing dialogue between competing interpretations, in which elements of consensus coexist with significant divergences (Evans, 2000).

The expansion of education and of the reading public in the twentieth century has contributed to a greater interpretative pluralism (Sota, 2024). Different historians may reach different conclusions about the same historical figures, such as Napoleon Bonaparte or Abraham Lincoln, depending on their theoretical perspectives and political values. This diversity of interpretations reflects the nature of history as a discipline that combines empirical analysis with value judgment.

In this context, historical interpretation cannot be separated from its normative dimension. As contemporary historiography emphasizes, every historical analysis inevitably involves judgments about significance, causation, and consequence (Duka, 2008). For this reason, expectations of a fully "neutral" or "value-free" history prove to be unrealistic.

In conclusion, the historian is not merely a collector of facts, but an active selector and interpreter of the past. Their role consists in constructing historical meaning through a continuous interaction between sources, research questions, and social context. This makes historical knowledge a dynamic, critical, and constantly evolving process.

POSTMODERNISM IN HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

The response of historians to postmodernism requires, first and foremost, its placement within the broader historical and cultural context that produced it. Postmodernism is not an isolated intellectual phenomenon, but rather a development closely linked to transformations in contemporary thought and to the crisis of traditional paradigms of modernity (Jenkins, 1991).

The term "postmodernism" itself implies a critical stance toward modernism, which had been grounded in belief in linear progress, universal rationality, and the authority of science as a source of truth (Lyotard, 1984). By challenging these foundational assumptions, postmodernism expresses a clear distancing from the intellectual traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and reflects a deep disillusionment with the outcomes of the modern project.

This approach is also connected to significant historical and cultural developments. Global crises such as the world wars, and particularly the experience of the Holocaust, have undermined confidence in the idea of uninterrupted progress in Western civilization (Evans, 2000). At the same time, technological power—once seen primarily as an instrument of emancipation—has increasingly been perceived as a source of risk, while scientific rationality is no longer regarded as a sufficient response to the complexity of human problems (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994).

Within this framework, postmodernism emerges as a theoretical stance that questions the possibility of objective knowledge and, consequently, undermines the epistemological authority of history as a discipline. By rejecting the idea of a single, stable historical narrative, it emphasizes the plurality of interpretations and the role of language in the construction of historical reality (White, 1973). As a result, history is no longer seen as a neutral representation of the past, but rather as a discursive construct.

One of the most radical implications of this approach is the denial of an inherent meaning within history itself. If the past does not possess an internal logic, then responsibility for the creation of meaning is fully transferred to the individual and contemporary society. From this perspective, traditional history loses its orienting function and risks being regarded as irrelevant (Jenkins, 1991).

However, skepticism toward historical truth is not an innovation of postmodernism. It has deep roots in the Western philosophical tradition. From the skepticism of ancient Greek philosophers to nineteenth-century relativism, doubts about the possibility of knowing the past have been consistently present (Sota, 2024). Even during the period of religious wars in Europe, historians were criticized for unreliability, while in the nineteenth century relativists questioned the attainability of absolute historical truth.

In this sense, postmodernism should be viewed more as an intensification of existing tendencies rather than a radical break from the past. It articulates more explicitly issues that have accompanied history as a discipline since its origins.

Nevertheless, the relationship between history and postmodernism is not necessarily antagonistic. Although some authors have predicted the end of history as a traditional discipline, historiographical practice suggests otherwise. History continues to function as a fundamental means of interpreting and understanding the past, adapting itself to the theoretical and methodological challenges of its time (Appleby et al., 1994).

In conclusion, postmodernism does not eliminate history but compels it to reflect on its own epistemological and methodological foundations. It contributes to the strengthening of historians' critical awareness by encouraging them to reconsider the relationship between fact, interpretation, and language in the construction of historical knowledge.

THE CHALLENGE OF POSTMODERNISM

So far, the traditional evaluation of historical research has been built upon an epistemological hierarchy in which the positivist approach is regarded as the highest standard of scientific objectivity. Within this framework, the scientific method has been seen as the principal means for knowing historical reality and for ensuring a critical distance from the historian's subjectivity. However, this perspective has been strongly challenged by contemporary developments in the philosophy of knowledge and in the humanities (Carr, 1961; Tosh, 2015).

Over the past three decades, the position of skeptics has been strengthened by the emergence of postmodernism, which has questioned the very possibility of an objective and stable history. Postmodernism does not regard history as a neutral reflection of the past, but as a discursive construction shaped by language, culture, and relations of power (White, 1973; Jenkins, 1991). In this way, it represents a significant departure from classical historicism and from the belief in the progressive accumulation of historical knowledge.

One of the theoretical foundations of postmodernism is found in the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, who argued that language is not a neutral instrument of communication but a structural system that organizes perception itself. According to Saussure, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, meaning that meaning does not derive from external reality but from differences within the linguistic system (Saussure, 1916/1983).

This concept has important implications for history, as it suggests that every description of the past is mediated through linguistic structures and cannot claim full transparency with historical reality. In this sense, language is not a "window" onto the past but a filter that shapes the way it is understood.

In this line of thought, Roland Barthes introduced the idea of the "death of the author," arguing that the meaning of a text no longer belongs to its author but is produced in the act of reading (Barthes, 1967/1977). This idea weakens the traditional notion of historical authority and suggests that even the historian does not fully control the interpretation of historical texts.

Similarly, Jacques Derrida developed the concept of deconstruction, which aims to uncover the hidden layers of meaning within texts and to demonstrate their semantic instability (Derrida, 1967/1976). This approach has become one of the central tools of

postmodern analysis, shifting the focus from "historical truth" toward the multiplicity of interpretations.

From this perspective, even the historian cannot claim a privileged epistemological position. As Hayden White has argued, historical narratives are rhetorically and literarily structured, making history closer to literature than to empirical science (White, 1973).

However, it is important to emphasize that the concept of "language" should not be reduced to a single, homogeneous system. Every society contains multiple discursive layers and different meanings that coexist and often conflict with one another. For this reason, historical meaning is not closed or fixed, but open and multidimensional (Sota, 2019).

Within this context, deconstructive practices have encouraged a more critical and reflective approach to historical texts. Nevertheless, as critics of postmodernism emphasize, such radical relativism risks weakening criteria of verification and undermining the ability of history to produce well-argued knowledge (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994; Evans, 2000).

In conclusion, the challenge of postmodernism does not lie in the denial of history itself, but in the reformulation of its epistemological conditions. It has contributed to a stronger critical awareness of the role of language, interpretation, and discourse, making history more sensitive to its own complexity, while simultaneously opening debate on the limits of interpretive relativism.

LIMITS AND CRITIQUES OF THE POSTMODERN APPROACH

Despite its significant influence on contemporary thought, the postmodern approach to history has been widely criticized on both epistemological and methodological grounds. One of the main objections concerns its extreme relativism, which risks blurring the distinction between well-argued historical interpretation and subjective opinion (Evans, 2000).

According to critics, if every historical narrative is treated merely as a linguistic construction without any claim to objective truth, then history loses its capacity to produce verifiable knowledge about the past. This leads to an epistemological position in which all interpretations are considered equally valid, regardless of their grounding in empirical evidence (Luarasi, 2003).

Another important limitation of postmodernism is its tendency to overemphasize language and discourse, while downplaying the significance of historical reality outside the text. This approach has been criticized for reducing history to a purely textual practice, thereby neglecting the material and social dimensions of the past (White, 1973).

Furthermore, many historians argue that postmodernism underestimates the role of source criticism, which remains a foundational principle of historical scholarship. Without at least a basic consensus on standards for evaluating evidence, history risks losing its character as a research-based discipline and becoming fragmented into an unlimited number of competing narratives (Jenkins, 1991).

Another critique concerns the practical implications of postmodernism. If the possibility of stable historical knowledge is denied, then the use of history in education, politics, and collective memory becomes problematic. Societies require a minimal level of historical consensus in order to construct identity and guide public decision-making (Evans, 2000).

Nevertheless, even its strongest critics acknowledge that postmodernism has contributed to the expansion of critical awareness within historical studies. It has

highlighted the roles of language, power, and selection in the construction of historical narratives, thereby encouraging historians to adopt a more self-reflective and critical approach to their own work.

THE HISTORIAN'S DEFENCE: REFLEXIVITY AND PEER REVIEW

In response to the challenges posed by postmodernism, many historians have not adopted a position of outright rejection, but rather a more moderate stance that seeks to preserve the standards of historical inquiry while acknowledging its epistemological limitations. In this sense, one of the main defences of the historical profession is methodological reflexivity.

The modern historian recognizes that the selection and interpretation of sources are not neutral processes, but are shaped by research questions, social context, and theoretical frameworks (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994). However, this does not imply abandoning objectivity; rather, it involves redefining objectivity as a critical process grounded in methodological transparency and verifiable argumentation.

A key element of this defence is peer review, which functions as a mechanism for evaluating and regulating historical interpretation. Through academic debate, critical discussion, and source verification, the community of historians establishes shared professional standards that help limit individual arbitrariness (Evans, 2000).

Within this framework, historical objectivity is not understood as the absence of subjectivity, but as the outcome of a collective process of scrutiny and argumentation. As several scholars have argued, history is not the product of an isolated observer but of a research community operating within established professional norms (Jenkins, 1991).

Equally important is methodological transparency. Historians are expected to make their interpretative choices explicit, clarify their use of sources, and acknowledge the limitations of the available evidence. This does not eliminate subjectivity, but renders it open to critical evaluation within the scholarly community.

In this way, history maintains its character as a critical discipline that does not claim absolute certainty, but instead seeks to construct interpretations that are as well-supported and evidence-based as possible. In response to postmodernism, this position may be described as a form of "critical realism," which acknowledges the complexity of historical knowledge while preserving the commitment to reasoned truth-seeking.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the nature of historical knowledge by situating it at the intersection of scientific objectivity, human interpretation, and postmodern critique. The debate on the epistemological status of history shows that it cannot be reduced either to a purely empirical science or to a merely subjective narrative, but instead represents a complex discipline built upon the continuous interaction between fact and interpretation.

The analysis of historical sources demonstrates that the past is never fully and directly accessible to the historian. The incompleteness of documentation, intentional or unintentional distortions, and the vast quantity of available material make selection an unavoidable intellectual act. In this sense, historical facts are not given entities, but the result of critical filtering and interpretative construction.

The role of the historian as both selector and interpreter further highlights that history is not a neutral reflection of the past, but a construct shaped by research questions, social context, and theoretical frameworks. This does not undermine historical knowledge; rather, it increases awareness of its limits and conditions.

Within this framework, postmodernism has introduced an important challenge by questioning the possibility of objectivity and emphasizing the role of language and discourse in constructing historical reality. However, this approach does not represent a complete rupture with earlier skeptical traditions, but rather an intensification of them under contemporary intellectual conditions.

Critiques of postmodernism suggest that extreme relativism risks weakening standards of verification and undermining the cognitive and social function of history. For this reason, contemporary historiographical practice seeks a balance between critical self-awareness and methodological rigor, through peer review and evidence-based argumentation.

In conclusion, history remains a dynamic discipline that does not offer absolute truths but rather reasoned and revisable interpretations. Its strength lies not in claims to certainty, but in its ability to construct justified understandings of the past by combining critique, method, and imagination in the service of historical knowledge.

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BEYOND HEALTHCARE: THE NEED FOR SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTIONS IN EMERGENCY MEDICAL DEPARTMENTS IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

Emergency departments are not only sites of medical intervention, but also critical settings where complex psychosocial needs emerge, many of which remain unaddressed. The integration of social work within these settings is essential for delivering effective, long-term and holistic care. International literature highlights the critical role of social work within emergency departments, while in Albania there is a notable lack of research and an absence of institutionalized social work practice in these environments. The aim of this study is to analyze the need for integrating social work into emergency departments, with a focus on addressing the psychosocial needs of patient and their families, as well as providing support to medical staff. The study adopts a qualitative approach, involving 27 participants, including 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews conduct with experts, patients and family members, and one focus group with 7 participants drawn from medical staff of emergency departments across in three tertiary hospitals in Albania. Preliminary findings indicate significant unmet psychosocial needs, a lack of structured social work provision, and strong support from medical staff for the integration of social workers within emergency departments. This study contributes to the limited body of literature on the role of social work in emergency health care in Albania.

Keywords: *social work, emergency departments, psychosocial support, trauma, healthcare*

INTRODUCTION

Emergency medical services represent one of the most critical points of contact between the individual and the health care system. They function as entry points for broad categories of patients, including victims of accidents, persons with acute medical conditions, victims of domestic violence and individuals in psychological crisis. Within these environments, the complexity of cases is continuously increasing: physical trauma coexists with emotional crises, family conflicts and social isolation directly affect clinical outcomes, while doctors and nurses face demands that exceed their strictly biomedical competencies (Blumenfield & Epstein, 2001; Begun et al., 2010). Despite the internationally documented need, Albania continues to be characterized by the absence of institutionalized social work structures within emergency services. This absence reflects a dual gap: institutional, since social workers are not integrated as part of multidisciplinary teams in emergency services; and empirical, since the Albanian literature on the psychosocial dimension of health services remains limited (Spahiu, 2018).

This study aims precisely to address this gap, based on qualitative data collected from experts, patients, family members and medical staff of Albanian tertiary hospitals. The main aim of the study is to analyze the need for the integration of social work services in emergency medical departments, with a dual focus: on one hand, fulfilling the psychosocial needs of patients and family members; on the other hand, supporting medical staff in relation to professional overload.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emergency Service as a Biopsychosocial Space

The biopsychosocial model, initially conceptualized by Engel (1977) and continuously revised by contemporary literature, provides the fundamental theoretical framework for understanding the complexity of emergency services. According to this model, the health condition of the individual cannot be reduced only to the biological dimension, but interacts with psychological and social factors that influence both the cause of the crisis and the outcome of the clinical intervention (Engel, 1977). Studies show that the emergency environment generates high levels of anxiety and disorientation among patients, influenced by factors such as diagnostic uncertainty, separation from the family, acute pain and fear of death (Osei-Bonsu et al., 2020). Patients who turn to emergency services often face multidimensional challenges: vulnerable groups such as the elderly, victims of violence, individuals with mental disorders and persons without social coverage are particularly exposed to gaps in care.

Furthermore, the crisis deeply affects families as well, who are forced to make difficult decisions, often without sufficient information and without adequate emotional support. This reality shows that the emergency service, by its very nature, requires an integrative and biopsychosocial approach to care (Mauer et al., 2018).

The Role of Social Work in Emergency Services

International literature widely documents the key role of social work in the context of emergency medical services. Clinical social workers perform multiple and complementary functions: crisis intervention, psychosocial assessment, emotional support, mediation between the patient and the health care system, discharge planning and coordination with social services outside the institution (Kohn et al., 2017). Their role has been documented as decisive in specific categories of cases such as suicide attempts, cases of domestic violence, child abuse and accidental injuries where the social factor plays an important etiological role.

Global models – from the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Australia – show that the integration of social work in emergency services not only reduces unmet psychosocial needs, but also contributes to institutional efficiency: it reduces unnecessary returns, decreases waiting time and optimizes the use of health care resources (Jacobson et al., 2020; Kohn et al., 2017; Mauer et al., 2018). Despite this, implementation is not uniform: variations between health systems and national social policies create major differences in the level of integration and competencies of social workers in emergency services.

Benefits of the Integration of Social Work

Empirical studies strongly support the thesis that the integration of social work in emergency services brings concrete and measurable benefits. Medical staff face expanded roles and high levels of stress, reflecting global trends in burnout (Shanafelt et al., 2015). Jacobson et al. (2020) report that the presence of social workers reduces levels of anxiety among patients and family members, positively affects therapeutic compliance and improves satisfaction with the service. From an institutional perspective, the social worker facilitates the workload of the physician by taking on administrative and coordinating tasks that would otherwise burden the clinical staff (Hall et al., 2019). The protective effect against professional burnout is also documented: when doctors and nurses are provided with support from multidisciplinary teams, levels of stress and cases of empathic failure are significantly reduced (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). From the patient's perspective, care directed by integrated teams significantly improves long-term outcomes: vulnerable patients return less frequently and the transition to community services is planned and supervised, avoiding fragmentation of care.

The Albanian Context and the Empirical Gap

In Albania, the health system has undergone significant transformations since the period of democratic transition, including the decentralization of services and redistribution of competencies between local and central levels (WHO, 2021). However, clinical social work remains non-institutionalized within hospital structures, including emergency departments. The profession of the health social worker is not formally recognized as a necessary function within medical teams, while the psychosocial needs of the population are high, especially under conditions of social inequality, mass migration and the weakness of community support networks. Studies in Albania suggest that social factors and access to services remain important challenges for patients (Spahiu, 2018). Filling the empirical gap through studies such as this one is the first necessary step toward formulating evidence-based policies for reforming the Albanian health care model.

METHODOLOGY

This study has a qualitative approach, which has been deliberately chosen to explore in depth the subjective experiences, perceptions and attitudes of actors involved in emergency medical services. The qualitative approach is considered particularly appropriate when the objectives of the study require understanding complex social and institutional phenomena from the internal perspective of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The sample of the study consists of 27 participants, recruited through purposive sampling from tertiary hospital services in Albania. This number was considered sufficient to achieve thematic saturation within the parameters of qualitative research. The data collection instruments were:

(a) 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with patients, their family members and field experts, which allowed deep and flexible exploration of the main themes; and (b) one focus group with 7 members of emergency medical staff, which enabled collective discussion and identification of institutional attitudes toward the role of social work. Data analysis was carried out through inductive thematic analysis according to the model of Braun and Clarke (2006), following the phases of familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, and review and refinement of themes. This process enabled the identification of main patterns linking unresolved psychosocial needs with perceptions of the potential role of social work.

Ethical aspects were fully respected: participation was voluntary, confidentiality was ensured and informed consent was obtained from each participant.

FINDINGS

Unmet Psychosocial Needs

The fundamental and most consistent finding of the study is the presence of significant unmet psychosocial needs within emergency services. Patients and family members reported high levels of anxiety, confusion and disorientation, especially during the initial phases of presentation in emergency settings, when diagnostic uncertainty and the overloaded clinical environment create strong stress conditions. Among patients, manifestations of acute stress were identified such as insomnia, panic, uncontrollable crying and difficulty in making important decisions. Family members, on the other hand, reported strong feelings of unpreparedness and institutional abandonment: they often arrived without knowledge of the patient's condition, without having any reference person to explain the situation, the process or the available options.

This lack of communication and support has direct clinical implications: uninformed family members make rapid decisions, often without fully understanding the consequences, which can jeopardize the continuity of care after hospital discharge.

Institutional Overload of Medical Staff

The second significant finding is related to the systematic overload of clinical staff. Doctors and nurses reported that they are regularly forced to take on non-clinical roles—such as providing emotional support, explaining socio-legal situations or coordinating with services outside the hospital—for which they are neither trained nor available in terms of time. This phenomenon, known in the literature as "role creep" (unauthorized expansion of role), produces dual costs: it reduces the efficiency of medical services and directly contributes to professional burnout. Medical staff expressed a clear sense of inability: working under conditions of clinical overload, they are unable to provide patients and families with the necessary emotional and psychosocial support, finding themselves in constant tension between professional duty and institutional limitations. The focus group with emergency staff highlighted that burnout is not seen as an individual phenomenon, but as a product of a system that lacks interdisciplinary support mechanisms.

Positive Support for the Integration of Social Work

The third finding, important for the policy implications of the study, is the broad and clear consensus of medical staff in favor of integrating social workers into emergency teams. None of the participants expressed opposition; on the contrary, most of them

formulated the need as urgent and necessary. This positive consensus is considered an important facilitating factor for the implementation of institutional reforms. Participants emphasized the need for structured interdisciplinary collaboration, with clear roles and competencies between the doctor, nurse and social worker.

Issues were also raised regarding the need for integrated training, clear cooperation protocols and institutional recognition of the role of social work as an integral component of the medical team, rather than an optional additional service.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are in clear alignment with international evidence on the importance of integrating social work into emergency services. Unmet psychosocial needs, overload of clinical staff and the presence of limited interdisciplinary collaboration are phenomena documented even in health systems much more developed than the Albanian one (Kohn et al., 2017; Jacobson et al., 2020). In accordance with the findings of this study, research in the Albanian context has identified gaps in the provision of integrated services and in addressing the social needs of patients (Spahiu, 2018). However, the Albanian context presents some specific characteristics that intensify the urgency of reform: the weakness of community social networks, the high level of family migration, the lack of a tradition of clinical social work and the still underdeveloped legal framework for the profession of health social work. From a theoretical perspective, the findings confirm the validity of the bio-psycho-social model as a conceptual framework for reforming emergency services. The patient-centered care approach, according to which the individual is treated as a whole of physical, psychological and social needs, necessarily requires the presence of structured psychosocial services within medical teams (Mauer et al., 2018). The integration of social work should not be seen as an additional luxury, but as a functional component of the contemporary model of care. The positive consensus of medical staff represents an important human and institutional capital: reforms in the health system have a much higher chance of success when implemented in professional environments where key actors accept and support them. This position allows the formulation of policy recommendations based not only on international evidence, but also on the specific Albanian context.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study argues with empirical evidence that the integration of social work in emergency medical services in Albania is not only desirable, but necessary. The current system does not address the psychosocial needs of patients and their family members, while the overload of medical staff continues to increase without compensatory mechanisms. The absence of the social worker within the emergency team creates serious gaps that directly affect the quality, efficiency and inclusiveness of health care. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are formulated: (1) formal integration of clinical social workers into emergency medical teams of tertiary hospitals, through legal and administrative acts; (2) development of interdisciplinary collaboration protocols between medical staff and social workers; (3) provision of joint training for multidisciplinary emergency teams; (4) funding of further longitudinal studies with a larger sample, including regional and community hospitals; (5) development of national health policies that explicitly recognize the role of clinical social work in the Albanian health system.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study presents some methodological limitations that should be taken into consideration in the interpretation of the findings. The small sample of 27 participants and the exclusive focus on tertiary hospitals limit the possibility of generalizing the results to the entire Albanian health system. The qualitative nature of the study, although valuable for the depth of understanding of the phenomenon, does not allow statistical generalizations. Future studies with mixed methods and larger samples would strengthen the empirical evidence and allow quantitative assessments of the impact of psychosocial interventions in emergency services.

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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN THE POLITICAL DETERMINATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of social stratification in shaping the political determination of the individual in the Republic of North Macedonia, analyzing how socio-economic, cultural, and educational factors influence the formation of political orientations and citizens' electoral behavior. In a multiethnic and transitional society such as the Republic of North Macedonia, social stratification represents an important element in the construction of political identity and in the process of individual party profiling. The study is based on theoretical approaches from political sociology and political culture, relying on the concepts of social stratification, social and cultural capital, as well as theories of political participation and ideological orientation. In this context, the paper analyzes the differences among various social strata in relation to perceptions of institutions, political trust, civic participation, and support for political parties. Special attention is given to the Albanian community in the Republic of North Macedonia, where the interaction of ethnic, economic, and cultural factors specifically influences individual and collective political determination. The paper argues that socio-economic status, educational level, and access to public resources directly affect the way individuals construct political beliefs and develop their participation in democratic processes. In conclusion, the study aims to demonstrate that social stratification does not represent merely an economic or status-based category, but rather a complex mechanism that influences political culture, civic awareness, and the political orientation of individuals in a democratic and multiethnic society such as the Republic of North Macedonia.

Keywords: *Social stratification, Political determination, Political behavior, Political participation, Party identification/party profiling, Socio-economic status, Ethnic identity*

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND POLITICAL DETERMINATION

Social stratification represents one of the fundamental dimensions of social organization, reflecting the manner in which individuals and groups are distributed within hierarchical structures based on material resources, social status, educational level, and political power. Within the framework of sociology and political science, social stratification does not represent merely an economic or class phenomenon, but rather a complex mechanism that directly influences the formation of individuals' political beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

In this context, the political determination of the individual does not occur in an isolated or random manner, but is the result of the interaction between one's position within the social structure and the everyday experiences deriving from that position. Social stratification functions as a filter through which individuals perceive political reality, collective interests, and ideological alternatives, thereby influencing the construction of political identity and party orientation (Islami, 2013: 208).

The continuous problematization of the past and present, the reservation toward the "other," and the persistent perception of malicious intentions among different communities create barriers to the development of trust and intercommunal cooperation. These phenomena, also present within the multiethnic context of the Republic of North Macedonia, directly affect political culture and the forms of political participation among individuals and social groups. Human society is not homogeneous, but heterogeneous. Beyond natural differences, individuals are also differentiated according to socially accepted criteria such as economic status, educational level, profession, and political influence. As a result, individuals are treated unequally regarding access to resources, power, and social privileges. This social inequality constitutes the basis upon which social stratification is built (Agani, 2002: 294).

Social stratification directly influences the level and forms of political participation. Individuals belonging to different social strata have unequal access to political institutions, varying levels of institutional trust, and different forms of political engagement. Political participation may manifest through voting, civic activism, participation in political organizations, or public protests. In this regard, more privileged social strata often possess greater material, cultural, and social resources that enable them to influence political and decision-making processes more effectively.

At its core, social stratification implies the division of society into different hierarchical levels, where individuals and groups are ranked according to their social position. Members of a particular stratum generally share common identities, similar lifestyles, and closely related political interests. For this reason, social stratification remains one of the key factors in understanding the political determination of the individual and political behavior in contemporary societies, especially in transitional and multiethnic states such as the Republic of North Macedonia.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, social stratification is closely intertwined with ethnic, historical, and institutional factors, creating a complex and multidimensional political reality. In this context, the political identity of the individual is not constructed solely on the basis of socio-economic interests, but also through ethnic belonging, historical memory, and perceptions toward state institutions. Among the major challenges

characterizing this reality are the intersection of economic interests with ethnic identity, low levels of institutional trust, the dominance of pragmatic orientations over ideological ones, and the lack of clear party profiling within certain segments of the electorate (Aliu, 2024).

In this regard, social space may also be understood as part of social stratification. Contemporary literature addresses this phenomenon through the concept of social urbanism, where space is perceived not merely as a physical or geographical category, but as a cultural, human, and political dimension. The individual is positioned within this space according to the social relations established over time and within the environment in which they live. In this way, space becomes an element that influences the formation of social and political identity.

In this direction, Doreen Massey conceptualizes space as a socially constructed reality where physical, emotional, and political dimensions intersect. This conceptualization has important implications for understanding political mentality, since an individual's political perception is closely related to the way they experience and interpret social space (Davis & Moore, 2007: 193).

Individuals living in different socio-economic and ethnic environments develop different perceptions regarding the state, institutions, belonging, and political future.

Within the context of the Republic of North Macedonia, this approach helps explain the fact that public space — cities, institutions, state symbols, and urban areas — is not experienced equally by all communities. It becomes a space of negotiation and symbolic rivalry, where political identities are constructed and reformulated, often in tension between ethnic belonging and Euro-Atlantic integrative aspirations.

In this sense, social stratification, constructed upon factors such as educational level, income, professional status, and access to public resources, directly affects the way individuals become informed, mobilized, and engaged in political processes. Individuals belonging to higher social strata generally have greater access to information, stronger communication capacities, and more confidence in their ability to influence political processes. Consequently, they tend to be more active in various forms of political participation, including voting, civic activism, public debates, and engagement in political and civil organizations. This approach is closely connected to the concept of capital developed by Pierre Bourdieu, who distinguishes economic, cultural, and social capital as key factors in structuring individual opportunities and one's position within society. From this perspective, political participation is not merely a matter of individual will, but also a matter of capacity, opportunity, and positioning within the social structure. Individuals with low cultural or social capital often have fewer opportunities to become involved in political processes due to the lack of information, social networks, and institutional trust (Bourdieu, 1984: 84).

In the case of the Republic of North Macedonia, social stratification is also intertwined with ethnic and territorial dimensions, making political participation even more complex. Differences in economic, educational, and institutional development among various regions and communities directly affect the level, form, and intensity of individuals' political engagement. For this reason, the analysis of social stratification represents an essential element in understanding political determination and political culture within a multiethnic and transitional society such as the Republic of North Macedonia.

RELIGIOUS STRATIFICATION AS A POLITICAL ORIENTATION

Socio-religious stratification represents an important dimension in the analysis of the political profiling of the individual, as it intertwines elements of social structure with religious beliefs and the value systems derived from them. From this perspective, religion is not presented merely as an individual spiritual matter, but also as a social and cultural factor that influences the formation of identity, norms, attitudes, and the political orientations of individuals. In contemporary societies, especially following global transformations and the weakening of traditional ideological systems, a return of identity dimensions into the political sphere has become evident.

Ethnic, religious, and civilizational affiliations have often become more significant than the individual's economic position or social welfare itself. In this context, political and ideological conflicts are frequently interpreted and presented as clashes between religions or civilizations, even though they fundamentally originate from political, economic, or geostrategic interests. This development has contributed to religion assuming a more prominent role in the construction of collective identities and in the political orientation of individuals (Xhaferi, 2005: 15).

Within the context of the Republic of North Macedonia, socio-religious stratification acquires a particular dimension due to the intersection of religious affiliation with ethnic, historical, and cultural identity. In a multiethnic and multireligious society, religion often functions as an identifying and politically mobilizing element, influencing the way individuals perceive the state, institutions, and social coexistence. For this reason, the political profiling of the individual cannot be understood solely through material interests or class affiliation, but also through the system of religious and identity-based values that shape political consciousness.

Religion and nation represent two notions that may simultaneously function as unifying and exclusionary forces for different social groups. Religion is primarily connected with the spiritual and moral dimension of identity, whereas the nation, in addition to its cultural and historical content, also encompasses a strong political dimension. Precisely the interaction between these two elements influences the creation of collective political identities and the orientation of individuals toward specific forms of political participation.

In the same line, religion may also function as an important source of social capital, creating networks of trust, solidarity, and cooperation among individuals and communities. These networks often transform into mechanisms of political mobilization, where individuals become oriented toward certain political attitudes and choices based on their religious affiliation (Verba & Almind, 1963: 43).

This approach is closely linked to the theoretical perspective of Robert Putnam, who emphasizes the importance of community, trust, and social capital in increasing civic and democratic participation. Nevertheless, the influence of religion on political profiling is neither uniform nor linear. It interacts with other factors such as socio-economic stratification, educational level, political culture, and institutional context. In some cases, religion may reinforce traditional and conservative orientations, while in other cases it may encourage social solidarity, civic engagement, and active participation in public life.

In this sense, religion functions in two directions: on the one hand, as a mechanism

that consolidates collective identities and traditional orientations; on the other hand, as a factor that creates social capital and encourages cooperation, trust, and civic participation.

For this reason, the role of religion in politics should be understood as flexible and conditioned by the social and historical context, rather than as a static factor that produces the same outcomes in every society.

Ultimately, the individual constructs their political and partisan profile by navigating among a multitude of social, ethnic, religious, and cultural identities, which often coexist, though not always in complete harmony. Therefore, individual political profiling is not only the result of economic interests or ideological convictions, but also of the selection of a dominant identity that provides meaning, orientation, and legitimacy to the individual's participation in political and public life (Tajfel & Turner, 1979: 33).

The interaction between religion, government, and politics significantly shapes social structures and individual behavior. A person's religious beliefs often influence their worldview, which is then reflected in political actions and opinions.

Religion, beyond its spiritual dimension, functions as a system of values and norms that provides individuals with a framework for interpreting social and political reality. Consequently, the worldview shaped by religious belief influences the way individuals perceive justice, authority, social order, and the role of the state. From this perspective, the influence of religion on political behavior is not only direct, but also mediated through political culture and socialization. Individuals raised in environments with strong religious norms tend to develop more coherent attitudes regarding moral and public issues, reflecting them in their political choices. This explains why issues such as social justice, civil rights, or family policy often acquire a strong religious dimension in public debates.

ETHNIC STRATIFICATION IN POLITICAL PROFILING

The socio-ethnic stratification of the individual in political profiling represents an important dimension in the analysis of political behavior, particularly in multiethnic societies. This concept implies the intersection of ethnic affiliation with social position, directly influencing individuals' political orientations and party choices. Nevertheless, the influence of ethnic stratification on political profiling is not uniform. It interacts with other factors such as socio-economic status, educational level, and political culture, thereby creating a high degree of complexity in electoral behavior. In some cases, ethnic identity dominates over economic interests, while in other cases these factors interact in shaping political orientation. Within the context of the Republic of North Macedonia, socio-ethnic stratification is particularly pronounced, as the political system and political parties often reflect ethnic divisions. This makes the political profiling of the individual a process in which ethnic identity, alongside other factors, plays a key role in determining political choice (Horowitz, 2021: 134).

From this perspective, ethnic identity often becomes a factor of political mobilization, where individuals tend to identify with parties or movements that represent the interests of their ethnic group. Individuals construct their political consciousness in relation to group affiliation, often favoring their own group within social and political processes.

In many cases, socio-ethnic stratification creates stable divisions within the party

system, where voting is not simply an act of individual rationality, but rather a reflection of group solidarity and collective identity. In ethnically divided societies, political competition frequently takes on an ethnic character, and political parties are organized along identity-based lines. Synonyms for the concept of an "ethno-state" — a political entity dominated or governed in the interest of a single ethnic group — include terms such as ethnocracy, ethno-nationalism, and homeland. Other related concepts emphasizing ethnic exclusivity or identity include ethno-racialism, ethnic nationalism, and identitarianism.

Ethno-nationalist refers to an individual belief or ideology strongly identified with a particular ethnic group and aimed at promoting the interests, culture, or independence of that group, often within a national context.

Ethno-nationalism emphasizes the unity, rights, and self-determination of an ethnic group, sometimes supporting the creation of a nation-state based on ethnicity rather than civic or multicultural principles.

Main Synonyms and Related Terms

Ethnocracy

A political structure in which a particular ethnic group holds a disproportionate share of power.

Ethno-nationalism

A form of nationalism that defines the nation on the basis of shared ethnic belonging.

Homeland / Fatherland / Motherland

Terms often used to describe a state belonging to a particular ethnic group.

Ethnic Nation

A state identified with a particular cultural or ethnic group (Berishaj, 2010: 31).

This ethno-nationalist approach is directly connected to the way socio-ethnic stratification influences the political profiling of the individual. Fundamentally, it demonstrates that ethnic affiliation is not merely a passive identity element, but an active factor that structures political orientations and party choices. From this perspective, socio-ethnic stratification creates conditions in which individuals tend to identify with political projects that defend and articulate the interests of their ethnic group.

This tendency is further reinforced by the logic of ethno-nationalism, which places ethnic identity at the center of political organization, transforming it into the primary criterion for political representation and mobilization. As a result, political profiling is often not constructed upon classical ideological divisions (left-right), but rather upon collective affiliations and group solidarity.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions of this analysis may be expanded across several essential theoretical and empirical levels, reflecting the complexity of the interaction between social stratification and political behavior in a society such as the Republic of North Macedonia.

First, it can be concluded that social stratification is not merely a static structural category, but a dynamic process that directly influences the construction of the individual's

political consciousness. In this sense, individuals do not act within a political vacuum, but rather within a specific social and institutional context that shapes their perceptions, interests, and modes of political participation.

Second, the analysis demonstrates that within the context of the Republic of North Macedonia, social stratification is closely intertwined with ethnic and religious dimensions, creating a hybrid form of political identity. This implies that political identity cannot be reduced to single analytical categories such as class or ideology, but should instead be understood as the result of the interaction of multiple factors operating at different levels of society.

Third, in multiethnic societies such as the Republic of North Macedonia, ethnic stratification remains a key determinant of political mobilization. It often surpasses the influence of classical socio-economic factors, directing electoral behavior toward collective solidarity. This creates a reality in which political parties function more as representatives of communities than as carriers of clearly defined ideological programs.

Fourth, religious stratification continues to play an important role in structuring political orientations, particularly in contexts where religion is closely connected with cultural and ethnic identity. It serves not only as a source of moral values, but also as a mechanism of political mobilization and legitimization. Nevertheless, its influence is not homogeneous, but varies depending on educational level, urbanization, and exposure to modernization and Euro-integrative processes.

Fifth, Euro-integrative processes and the influence of Western democratic standards are gradually contributing to the transformation of political culture in the Republic of North Macedonia. This is reflected in an increasing awareness of the importance of political ideology, transparency, and institutional accountability.

However, this transformation remains partial and mediated by the existing structures of social and identity-based stratification, which often slow down the consolidation of a more rational and civic political culture.

Finally, it may be concluded that the political profiling of the individual in the Republic of North Macedonia is the result of a complex and multidimensional interaction among social, economic, cultural, religious, and ethnic factors. This makes the use of an integrative approach in scientific analysis essential, one that goes beyond traditional one-dimensional models. Only through such an approach can the nature of political behavior be fully understood and the mechanisms identified that may contribute to the development of a functional and inclusive democracy.

Within this framework, the study of social stratification and its influence on politics is not merely a theoretical issue, but also a practical necessity for the construction of fairer public policies, the strengthening of democratic institutions, and the advancement of the country's integrative processes.

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FROM DECLINE TO DEPARTURE: HIGHER EDUCATION CRISIS AND STUDENT BRAIN DRAIN IN ALBANIA?

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses a phenomenon that has become increasingly concerning during the last decade of Albania's transition period: the brain drains of students and young people. The paper is structured into four main sections. The first provides an introductory overview of the concept of "brain drain" and examines the significant loss of human capital that Albania has experienced over more than three decades of transition. It highlights that one of the social groups most affected by this phenomenon has been the young people. The second section presents the research methodology of the study. It outlines the main research question: why do an increasing number of Albanian students choose to leave Albania to pursue their studies abroad? The paper identifies two main explanatory factors: the perceived deterioration in the quality of Albanian universities, and the attractiveness of opportunities created by globalization. The study employs a qualitative research method to examine the relationship between these variables. The subsequent section provides an overview of the higher education system in Albania, tracing its development from the communist period through the years of democratic transition. It points out that despite numerous reforms, the quality of the higher education system has deteriorated, in particular during the last decade. The analysis of the multi-faceted reasons for this decline is the subject of the next section. The paper concludes that the decline in the quality of universities, together with other factors, such as limited employment and career development opportunities, high levels of youth unemployment, a lack of meritocracy, and a widespread perception among young people that "there is no future" in Albania, has driven many students to seek educational opportunities abroad. This has been further facilitated by the increasingly "bordeless world" created by globalization, offering mobility and greater opportunities for young people.

Keywords: *Brain drain, students, Albanian higher education, universities, democratic transition, globalisation.*

INTRODUCTION: BRAIN DRAIN

Brain drain refers to the emigration of highly trained and talented individuals to countries that offer better opportunities for professional development and career advancement. According to the Oxford Dictionary (1989: 466), brain drain is defined as the emigration of highly trained or qualified people from a particular country. The term "brain drain" was first coined by the Royal Society of London in the 1950s to describe the outflow of scientists and technologists from the United Kingdom to the United States and Canada (Bogdani, 2025: 48). More broadly, from the 1960s onwards, the concept has been associated with the migration of human capital from developing to developed countries.

This phenomenon has significantly shaped Albania's socio-economic landscape throughout the post-communist transition period. Albania has experienced one of the highest rates of brain drain in the region and in Eastern Europe, with a substantial number of highly skilled professionals emigrating to the United States and various European countries (AIIS, 2005).

Another population group strongly affected by emigration is young people and students. Increasingly, Albanian students prefer to pursue their studies abroad rather than enrol in domestic universities. During the second decade of the transition period, it was estimated that approximately 3,000 Albanians enrolled annually in Western higher education institutions, mainly in Italy, France, Germany, and the United States, which represented nearly 30 percent of the total number of Albanian students (Tafaj, 2012).

At the same time, the number of students enrolling in Albanian universities has declined. Fewer young people are choosing to pursue and complete their studies within the national higher education system. In the academic year 2021–2022, approximately 30,910 students graduated from higher education institutions in Albania, marking a 5.4 percent decrease compared with the previous academic year (Hoxhaj, 2023).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Why do an increasing number of Albanian students choose to leave Albania to pursue their studies abroad? This constitutes the main research question of this study. We have identified two major factors as potential drivers of this phenomenon. The first relates to the perceived deterioration in the quality of Albanian schools and universities, while the second is the increasing attractiveness of opportunities created by globalization.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyse the causal relationship between two sets of variables. The dependent variable is represented by the high levels of brain drain among Albanian students. The independent variables are twofold:

- The decline in the quality and performance of the Albanian higher education system.
- The broader global phenomenon of globalization, which facilitates educational mobility and access to international study opportunities.

To address the research questions, the study employs a qualitative research method, drawing on secondary data. The aim is to examine the relationship between the increasing

number of students and young people who have left Albania during the last decade and two main explanatory factors: the decline in the quality of Albanian universities and the growing attractiveness of globalization.

For the qualitative research, content analysis of existing literature has been conducted. This involves a review of relevant international and national scholarly works, including books and peer-reviewed journal articles by scholars in the field. In addition, the analysis draws on documents, assessments, and reports produced by national government institutions and agencies, such as the Ministry of Education and Sport, the Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), the Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education, and the Accreditation Board. The study also considers studies and reports produced by think tanks, research institutes and international organisations, as well as relevant articles from national newspapers.

The analysis begins with an overview of the higher education system in Albania, examining its development from the communist period through the years of democratic transition.

ALBANIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION (HE)

Albania's higher education system during the communist period was highly centralized and state-controlled, with the government exercising control over virtually all aspects of the education system. It was strongly influenced by Soviet models, shaped by Marxist–Leninist ideology, and lacked both academic freedom and institutional autonomy. There was limited diversity in academic programmes and fields of study, with restricted opportunities in areas such as the social sciences, business, and international studies (Karafili et al., 2024). By the final years of the regime, the system was characterized by extreme isolationism.

Despite these limitations, the system had several positive features. Higher education was free of charge (no tuition fees) and accessible to all. The system was highly competitive and meritocratic, and the quality of teaching was generally considered strong. Admission criteria were strict and demanding; consequently, access to higher education was granted to only a small percentage of high school graduates based on academic merit. Only the most outstanding students were able to overcome the barriers to university entry, while others were directed towards technical and vocational education. Another positive feature was the high participation of women in tertiary education.

The number of higher education institutions was small and consisted exclusively of public institutions (funded and controlled by the state) and no private or international universities. The largest and most prominent institution was the University of Tirana, founded in 1957. A few other institutions were also located in the capital, including the Higher Agricultural Institute and the Polytechnic Institute, as well as higher institutes in two other cities, Shkodra and Gjirokastra.

After the system change in 1990, higher education in Albania entered a period of continuous reform that has lasted for more than three decades. Between 1994 and 2025, four organic laws regulating the higher education sector were enacted, accompanied by several amendments. During this period, the system and its institutions underwent significant transformations. These reforms were introduced by successive Albanian governments throughout the 35 years of democratic transition. As Karafili et al. (2024) note, reforms have focused on areas such as academic freedom and university autonomy, access to higher education for young people, the structure and curricula of study

programmes, governance of higher education institutions, the integration of teaching and research, cooperation with labour market actors, financing mechanisms, and the internationalization of higher education in order to integrate Albania's system into the global academic community. However, Kodheli (2020) argues that the reforms of HE has had more to do with political will and the nature of experimental legislation, than with a clear, efficient and long-term vision for higher education.

One of the most significant reforms of the last two decades has been the Bologna Process, which Albania joined in 2003 in the context of its aspirations for accession to the European Union. The main objective of the Bologna reforms was the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The standards of the EHEA, including those related to quality assurance, began to be implemented in both public and private universities in Albania (Laze, 2021). Efforts to align the national system with these standards, as Kodheli (2020) points out, have introduced several structural and institutional reforms. Nevertheless, the integration and implementation of the Bologna Process have proven to be challenging. Albania remains among the countries where, according to a recent Bologna Process report (European Commission, 2018), a quality assurance system is in operation nationwide, but has not (yet) been fully aligned with the ESG.

A major change in Albania's higher education system occurred with the Law of 1999, which for the first time permitted the establishment of non-public higher education institutions. This not only opened a phase of liberalization in the higher education sector, but also, according to many observers, it represented the first major setback for the system, as it triggered the massification of higher education in Albania. As Gjonça et al. (2014) note, during the transitional socio-political years, higher education in Albania was heavily impacted and became increasingly massified. By the beginning of the second decade of the transition period, the first private universities started to emerge, with the first private university in the country, the University of New York Tirana (UNYT), established in 2002.

However, the most significant problems emerged after 2005, when there was a rapid "inflation" in the number of both public and private universities, particularly due to the proliferation of private institutions. By 2010, the total number of higher education institutions had reached a ridiculous figure of approximately 60 (public and private combined). Following the higher education reform of 2015, this number was reduced to around 40 universities, which remains the approximate number today (Ministry of Education and Sports and QAAHE, 2025).

DECLINE OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

Despite continuous efforts and reforms undertaken by successive governments, the higher education (HE) system in Albania has not achieved high performance or standards, and in the last decade it has even experienced a noticeable decline. The causes of this decline can be attributed to a combination of several factors.

One factor, already mentioned above, is the massification and proliferation of universities. The existence of 40 higher education institutions (15 public and 25 private) is quite high for a country with a population of fewer than three million inhabitants. This has created a form of institutional inflation within the higher education sector.

The massification of universities, together with the high value that Albanians have traditionally placed on education, led to a significant increase in the number of students attending higher education. Another factor that contributed to this increase was the lowering of the admission threshold, with reduced minimum GPA (grade point average) requirements for entry. Consequently, after 2005 an exponential increase in enrolment rates was observed. As Vucaj (2017) points out, in 1990 Albania enrolled only 14,000 students, with limited institutional capacity. Critical changes occurred in 2005, when admission capacities were expanded, increasing enrolment from 52,000 students in that year to approximately 165,000 by 2013.

Unlike in the past, university education became accessible to almost everyone, including students with very poor academic performance from high school, provided that they could afford the tuition fees. Universities, particularly many private institutions, were increasingly transformed into "factories" selling diplomas rather than centers of academic excellence. This development led to a second factor: the decline in the quality of students entering higher education. Universities were no longer perceived as the "temples of knowledge" and elitist institutions they once were.

A third factor has been the declining quality of teaching, which is closely related to the qualifications and integrity of academic staff. During the communist period, holding a position as a lecturer or professor at a university was considered a highly prestigious profession. The competition for such positions was high, and employment criteria were strict and merit-based. Typically, only those who graduated with excellent results could obtain a university teaching position. During the transition period, however, these standards changed. Individuals with the right connections, particularly political ones, or those willing to pay bribes, were sometimes able to secure academic positions. To make matters worse, the widespread phenomenon of corruption, which became pervasive during the transition period across many spheres of public life, also affected the education sector. There have been numerous cases in which professors accepted bribes from students in exchange for passing grades or higher marks, practices that would be unthinkable in a properly functioning educational institution.

Lecturers and professors with weak academic credentials and questionable integrity could not be expected to deliver high-quality teaching, and this inevitably affected the academic preparation of students. Furthermore, due to corruption, bribery, and nepotism, grading practices were not always fair. Students who did not study diligently, or at all, could still obtain high grades and graduate successfully. This situation proved highly demotivating for students who worked hard and undermined the principles of meritocracy and fairness within the system.

Highlighting the issue of teaching quality, a study by Karafili et al. (2024: 145) notes that,

> "The majority of courses in Albanian universities are taught at a theoretical level that is considered mediocre, with practical skills largely absent, as evidenced by the fact that practical training comprises less than 3% of the ECTS credits in most bachelor curricula. Moreover, master's and doctoral programs suffer from weak student research and pervasive issues of plagiarism…These educational shortcomings have led to significant employment challenges for graduates."

Another important dimension of quality concerns infrastructure. Lecture halls and classrooms, in particular in public universities, continue to lack basic facilities such as adequate heating or sufficient IT infrastructure for students. A study conducted by Leskaj et al. (2024), which evaluated students' satisfaction at the University of Tirana regarding the services provided by higher education institutions, found that students expect higher quality lecture halls, modern laboratory equipment, improved lighting, and better thermal conditions. Students have consistently rated infrastructure poorly, as creating conducive and comfortable learning environments foster productivity and satisfaction.

Other factors that have negatively affected the quality of higher education include the relatively small share of the state budget allocated to this sector (approximately 0.5% of GDP in 2024, with research funding even lower, at under 0.05% of GDP), the preferential treatment by the government of certain universities (often private ones) at the expense of others, unfair competition among institutions, and the overall lack of financial and institutional resources.

The deterioration in the quality of Albanian schools and universities has compelled many high-achieving students and secondary school graduates to seek educational opportunities abroad. While the first decade of massification (from 2005 to 2015) witnessed a significant increase in enrolment rates, the following decade (up to 2025) has shown the opposite trend: a declining number of students attending Albanian universities.

According to a study conducted last year (Qefalia, 2025), which compared student enrolment figures for the last three academic years (2021–2022, 2022–2023, and 2023–2024) for both Bachelor's and Master's programs, a consistent decline can be observed. From 2021–2022 to 2022–2023, enrolments decreased by 2.28% for Bachelor's studies and by 1.6% for Master's studies. From 2022–2023 to 2023–2024, the decline was even more pronounced, with a decrease of 5.49% in Bachelor's enrolments and 1.22% in Master's enrolments. The author argues that considering the structure of the Albanian population and based on the most recent census data regarding the number of inhabitants in Albania, as well as future projections regarding student enrolments, particularly for Bachelor's and Master's programs (which represent the largest share), the numbers are expected to continue declining.

A report published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in 2019, examining the aspirations of young people (aged 14 - 29) in the Balkans regarding education and employment, found that 43 percent of Albanian youth expressed a desire to leave the country in order to pursue higher education or gain their first professional experiences abroad.

In addition to factors directly related to the declining quality of universities, there are also broader reasons why young people and students prefer to leave Albania and pursue studies abroad.

One such reason is frequently associated with the persistent political and socio-economic challenges facing the country, including poverty, inequality, limited opportunities, and a general lack of hope for the future.

Another factor that discourages students from striving for strong academic results during their university studies concerns employment opportunities. In a meritocratic society, students are motivated to work hard and achieve high academic results, which are expected to facilitate access to good jobs and the development of a professional career.

In Albania, however, this expectation is often not fulfilled. Employment opportunities, not only in state institutions but also in the private and non-profit sectors, are frequently determined not by academic merit but by other mechanisms, such as bribery, corruption, or political connections. As a result, graduates with excellent academic records may remain unemployed, while individuals with lower academic performance may secure well-paid positions due to personal or political connections. Issues related to the labour market, including limited employment opportunities, weak work ethics, and subjective hiring and dismissal practices, further contribute to this situation. The distortion of the labour market and the erosion of genuine competitiveness have been exacerbated by the inflation of university diplomas.

The lack of meritocracy and the pervasive influence of political interference in various spheres of public life have been chronic problems throughout the decades of Albania's transition. As Bogdani and Loughlin (2007) observe, meritocracy continues to be an alien concept in Albania. Employment, career advancement, and professional promotion are often determined not by merit but by political, clientelist, or nepotistic connections. Consequently, many educated individuals and skilled professionals choose to migrate to countries where their knowledge and talents are more adequately recognized and rewarded.

High levels of youth unemployment also represent a significant factor discouraging young people from remaining in Albania. According to an OECD report (2023), the unemployment rate among young people aged 15–24 in Albania stands at approximately 27 percent, which is higher than the average for the Western Balkans (21 percent) and significantly above the European Union average of around 10.5 percent.

The last, but not the least, factor attracting Albanian students to foreign universities is international university ranking. Global rankings have become influential indicators of the perceived quality and reputation of higher education institutions (HEIs), shaping the choices of students and their families. Unfortunately, Albanian universities perform relatively poorly in global rankings, with most institutions positioned between 3000 and 8000 worldwide. In the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, Albanian institutions are typically placed in the lower tiers, even in comparison with many developing countries. The University of Tirana, widely regarded as the leading higher education institution in Albania, is ranked approximately between 3600 and 4900 globally, and more precisely at 3624 in 2026 (UNIRANKS, 2026).

Therefore, the decline in the quality of universities, difficulties in securing employment, limited professional opportunities and career development prospects, and pessimism regarding the future have driven many of Albania's most talented students to seek educational opportunities abroad. These factors, combined with relatively low salaries and a widespread perception that "there is no future" in Albania, interact with broader processes of globalization.

GLOBALISATION AND ALBANIAN STUDENTS

Globalisation can be defined as the process through which goods, services, capital, technology, knowledge, and ideas are disseminated, alongside the increasingly rapid movement of people across the world. In this sense, Bogdani & Loughlin (2025: 49) note that, "globalisation constitutes a complex network of interconnectedness, interaction, and

interdependence among societies, wherein the significance of time and spatial distance has progressively diminished." Moreover, in an increasingly interconnected and "borderless" world, globalisation offers expanded opportunities for talented individuals to study, work, and succeed beyond the confines of their home countries.

In the contemporary era, social media has further intensified this process of interconnection by amplifying the reach and influence of global cultural dynamics. From the early development of the internet and email communication, the digital landscape has evolved to encompass platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok, alongside recent advances in artificial intelligence.

Globalisation has also significantly affected a small, once very isolated country, such as Albania. Following nearly five decades of extreme isolation under the communist regime, arguably the most isolated country in the Eastern Bloc, Albania began its transition toward an increasingly open society in the 1990s. Nevertheless, during the first two decades of this transition, Albanians continued to face substantial barriers to international mobility, often encountering lengthy and uncertain visa procedures imposed by foreign embassies. A major turning point occurred in 2010, when the European Union granted visa liberalisation to Albanian citizens within the framework of the country's EU accession process. This development enabled visa-free travel within the Schengen Area for short stays and represented a critical milestone in Albania's integration into Europe. Furthermore, visa liberalisation created expanded opportunities for young people and students to pursue education abroad. As Qefalia and Koxhaj (2011) observe, with visa liberalization, people will have greater movement opportunities, and the competition will be too large for public and private universities, so many qualitative students may leave for foreign universities, and this may give very serious negative effects for a 10–20 years period.

Within this context, the opening of borders has significantly enhanced opportunities for mobility and education, while simultaneously intensifying the outflow of skilled human capital and reinforcing patterns of brain drain.

Globalisation has profoundly reshaped higher education in Albania through increased internationalisation. Partnerships with foreign universities, participation in exchange programmes (such as Erasmus), and the expansion of joint degree programmes, have provided students with international exposure and access to Western-style education. At the same time, globalisation has facilitated new educational opportunities through digitalisation, improved access to online learning platforms, and the availability of international research, digital libraries, and academic resources, preparing students' integration into a globalized and technology-driven economy. While this process equips students with the skills, knowledge and international exposure necessary to succeed in a competitive global environment, it also exacerbates the loss of human capital from the domestic education system. Moreover, globalisation has expanded learning opportunities for Albanian students by enabling them to enroll in academic programmes that may not be available domestically.

On the other hand, it has also encouraged the migration of a significant number of students to more developed countries in pursuit of higher-quality education and improved employment prospects.

Overall, globalization has transformed the education landscape for Albanian students, by providing new opportunities for mobility and academic advancement, which their own country doesn't provide.

CONCLUSIONS

Following the collapse of communism and throughout the decades of transition, Albania has experienced one of the highest rates of brain drain in the region and across Eastern Europe, with a significant number of highly skilled professionals emigrating abroad, a phenomenon known as "brain drain". During the third decade of transition, another demographic group has been increasingly affected by emigration, the young people and students.

Increasingly, Albanian students have shown a growing preference for pursuing their studies abroad, while the number of students enrolling in domestic universities has steadily declined. Consequently, fewer young people are choosing to begin and complete their higher education within the national system.

This paper has sought to identify the underlying causes of this phenomenon. Two principal factors emerge. The first concerns the deterioration in the quality of the Albanian higher education system, while the second relates to the increasing attractiveness of opportunities generated by globalization. Despite continuous reforms undertaken by successive Albanian governments, universities in Albania have experienced a decline in standards and quality over the past two decades. The analysis has highlighted several contributing factors, beginning with the massification and proliferation of higher education institutions. In many cases, particularly among private institutions, universities have increasingly been transformed into "diploma mills" rather than centers of academic excellence. This trend, combined with the lowering of admission thresholds, has contributed to a decline in the quality of students entering higher education.

Another significant factor is the declining quality of teaching, closely linked to the qualifications and integrity of academic staff. Moreover, the widespread phenomenon of corruption and bribery, which became pervasive during the transition period across multiple spheres of public life, has also affected the education sector. Additional factors negatively impacting the quality of higher education include the relatively low share of the state budget allocated to the sector, a general lack of financial and institutional resources, preferential treatment of certain universities (often private institutions) by the government, and unfair competition among higher education providers.

The most direct and visible consequence of this systemic deterioration has been the brain drain of Albanian students. While the first decade of massification (2005–2015) witnessed a significant increase in enrolment rates, the subsequent decade (up to 2025) has been characterized by a clear reversal of this trend, with declining numbers of students attending Albanian universities.

In addition to the primary factor of declining educational quality, this study has identified other broader domestic structural reasons why young people and students choose to leave Albania. These include persistent political and socio-economic challenges, poverty and inequality, limited employment and career development opportunities, high levels of youth unemployment, relatively low wages, a lack of meritocracy, and the pervasive influence of political interference across public institutions. These factors, combined with a widespread perception that there is "no future" in Albania, interact with broader processes of globalization in an increasingly interconnected and "borderless" world.

Albania's opening in 1990, following five decades of extreme isolation under communism, and the subsequent liberalization of the EU visa regime two decades

later, further facilitated the migration of highly skilled individuals to more developed countries in pursuit of better educational and professional opportunities. Globalization has reinforced these trends by expanding access to international education, employment and mobility, enabling talented Albanian individuals to succeed beyond the confines of their home country.

For students in particular, globalization has created new educational opportunities through processes of internationalization and digitalization. It has fundamentally transformed the educational landscape, offering mobility and academic advancement opportunities that are often perceived as unavailable within Albania.

Although both, structural domestic factors and globalization, have contributed to the large-scale brain drain of Albanian students, this paper concludes that the deterioration of the higher education system over the past decade remains the most significant driver. This has compelled many of Albania's most talented students to seek educational opportunities abroad, particularly in the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Evidence from other contexts suggests that the prospect of European Union membership can contribute to reducing brain drain by improving "things at home". This trend is observable in several former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe that have joined the EU, where emigration levels have declined over time. In the case of Albania, meaningful improvements in the quality of higher education, the strengthening of meritocratic principles, the reduction of corruption and political interference, and the restoration of hope and optimism for the future, could encourage many young people and students who might think of leaving Albania would prefer otherwise to stay home.

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Assessing AI integration in Albania's education system: A national survey of teachers and institutions

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly transforming educational systems worldwide and plays a central role in the transition toward an emerging intelligent society. In Albania, however, the integration of AI into schools and universities remains uneven and insufficiently documented. This study examines the current state of AI integration in the Albanian education system by focusing on teacher adoption, digital skills, institutional readiness, and perceived barriers. The research is based on a quantitative survey conducted among teachers and academic staff across primary, secondary, and higher education institutions nationwide. Findings indicate that while more than half of respondents have experimented with AI tools, regular pedagogical use remains limited. Teachers primarily use AI for lesson planning, content generation, assessment support, and administrative tasks. Key barriers include insufficient digital infrastructure, lack of formal training, uncertainty regarding ethics and data privacy, and the absence of institutional policies. Significant disparities are observed between urban and rural schools and between higher education and pre-university institutions. The study argues that Albania is at an early but promising stage of AI adoption. However, uneven integration reflects broader structural inequalities that may influence the country's transition toward an intelligent society. The paper proposes a national framework focused on teacher training, infrastructure development, and ethical governance.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence; Albanian Education; Teacher Adoption; Digital Skills; Institutional Readiness; Intelligent Society*

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly reshaping education, offering tools that can transform both teaching and learning. Applications such as intelligent tutoring systems, automated grading, adaptive learning platforms, virtual assistants, and generative AI tools are increasingly being adopted worldwide (Holmes et al., 2019; Luckin, 2018). These technologies allow educators to personalize learning, automate routine tasks, provide timely feedback, and support informed educational decisions. Recent developments in generative AI platforms like ChatGPT, Google Gemini, and Microsoft Copilot have accelerated this trend, enabling teachers to generate lesson materials, create quizzes, summarize texts, and provide feedback in ways previously impossible (UNESCO, 2023; European Commission, 2022). However, the rise of AI also presents challenges, including concerns about ethics, data privacy, misinformation, and teacher preparedness (OECD, 2024a; Selwyn, 2019).

In Albania, digital transformation in education has gained momentum, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced schools and universities to adopt online learning (Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025; OECD, 2024b; European Training Foundation, 2023; World Bank, 2024). While this shift highlighted the potential of technology in education, it also exposed disparities in infrastructure, digital skills, and institutional readiness. Despite these developments, research specifically exploring AI integration in Albanian education remains limited. Existing studies have largely focused on online learning, general digital literacy, or educational technology use, leaving critical questions unanswered:

- To what extent are Albanian teachers using AI tools?
- Which AI applications are most commonly adopted?
- What skills and confidence levels do teachers have regarding AI?
- What barriers prevent wider adoption?
- How prepared are institutions to support AI integration?

This study aims to fill these gaps by providing robust, data-driven insights into AI adoption in Albania, focusing on both individual teacher practices and institutional readiness.

Research Questions:

- To what extent are Albanian teachers and academic staff using AI tools?
- Which factors influence AI adoption in education?
- What barriers limit effective integration?
- How prepared are Albanian educational institutions for wider AI implementation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Artificial Intelligence in Education

Artificial Intelligence in education refers to technologies that can simulate human intelligence to support learning, teaching, and administrative processes (Holmes et al., 2019; Luckin, 2018; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). AI applications have grown rapidly in

the past decade, with tools increasingly capable of analyzing large amounts of educational data, providing personalized learning pathways, and automating routine tasks (Holmes et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2023; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Common applications include:

- Intelligent tutoring systems that adapt to individual student learning styles and provide targeted feedback (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022)
- Automated grading and assessment tools, reducing teacher workload while providing consistent evaluations (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019);
- Predictive analytics, which identify students at risk of falling behind or dropping out (European Commission, 2022; OECD, 2024a; Selwyn, 2019);
- Adaptive learning platforms that personalize content and pacing for individual learners, particularly in subjects such as mathematics where AI-supported feedback and problem-solving systems have shown positive learning outcomes (Hwang & Tu, 2021);
- Virtual teaching assistants that support both administrative tasks and classroom interactions;
- Generative AI tools for lesson planning, content creation, and translation (UNESCO, 2023; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

International research shows that AI can improve student engagement, increase efficiency, and support differentiated instruction. For example, studies indicate that intelligent tutoring systems enhance learning outcomes by adapting lessons to each student's abilities (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022). AI-based assessment tools allow teachers to spend less time on grading and more time on instructional planning, while predictive models can help identify and support students who may be struggling (European Commission, 2022; OECD, 2024a; Selwyn, 2019). However, adoption also raises concerns. Teachers report challenges regarding algorithmic bias, misinformation, reliability of AI-generated content, and ethical considerations (European Commission, 2022; OECD, 2024a; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022). Furthermore, over-reliance on AI may limit critical thinking development among students if not used appropriately (European Commission, 2022; Selwyn, 2019).

Teacher Readiness and Digital Competence

Teacher readiness is widely recognized as a key factor in the successful integration of AI in education (European Commission, 2022; Redecker, 2017). Digital competence is essential for teachers to effectively use AI tools and to integrate them into pedagogy. According to the European Digital Competence Framework for Educators (DigCompEdu), teachers require not only technical skills but also pedagogical understanding, including the ability to design lessons with technology, assess students effectively, and ensure ethical use (Redecker, 2017).

- Studies across Europe highlight that teachers are more likely to adopt AI when they:
- Possess strong digital skills and confidence in using technology (European Commission, 2022; Redecker, 2017);
- Have positive attitudes toward innovation and openness to experimenting with new tools (European Commission, 2022; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022);

- Receive institutional support, including access to infrastructure, software, and professional development opportunities (Redecker, 2017; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022);
- Participate in structured training programs tailored to their teaching context (Redecker, 2017).

Research also suggests that younger teachers tend to adopt AI tools more readily than older teachers, likely due to higher digital literacy and greater familiarity with emerging technologies (Redecker, 2017; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022). Furthermore, teacher training is a crucial determinant: educators who participate in AI-focused professional development are significantly more likely to integrate AI into classroom practices (Redecker, 2017; Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025).

While teacher readiness is critical, it is not sufficient on its own. Effective AI adoption also depends on broader institutional support, access to technology, and clear policies that guide ethical and responsible AI use (European Commission, 2022; OECD, 2024a; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022).

AI Integration in Global and Regional Contexts

Globally, AI adoption in education varies considerably. High-income countries often have more advanced infrastructure, teacher training programs, and research on AI use, leading to higher adoption rates (Holmes et al., 2019; Luckin, 2018; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). For example, universities in the United States and Western Europe increasingly use AI for adaptive learning, predictive analytics, and automated assessment (Luckin, 2018; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022).

In contrast, countries in the Western Balkans face challenges such as uneven digital infrastructure, limited professional development opportunities, and inconsistent policies (European Training Foundation, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Studies in the region highlight a digital divide between urban and rural schools, affecting both access to technology and the capacity for AI integration (European Training Foundation, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Teachers in rural areas often lack adequate internet access, computing devices, and institutional support, which limits experimentation with AI tools (European Training Foundation, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

AI and Education in Albania

The Albanian education system has gradually incorporated digital technologies, with progress accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025; OECD, 2024b; European Training Foundation, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Online learning platforms, digital communication tools, and basic educational software became more widely adopted, revealing significant disparities in digital competence and institutional readiness (Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025; OECD, 2024b; European Training Foundation, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

Despite these developments, AI integration remains limited. Research indicates that while many Albanian teachers are interested in AI tools, most use them informally for example, to prepare lessons or presentations rather than for classroom instruction or personalized learning (Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025; OECD, 2024b). Key barriers include:

- Unequal access to technology between urban and rural schools (OECD, 2024b; European Training Foundation, 2023; World Bank, 2024);
- Limited internet connectivity and hardware availability (European Training Foundation, 2023; World Bank, 2024);
- Lack of formal teacher training programs on AI (Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025);
- Absence of national policies governing AI use in education (Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025).

Several Albanian universities have introduced courses related to digital literacy, AI, and educational technology, mainly in engineering, computer science, or information technology programs (Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025). However, teacher education programs in Albania have not systematically incorporated AI training, leaving future educators without the necessary technical and pedagogical skills (Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025; OECD, 2024b).

Regional studies also suggest that Albanian teachers are willing to experiment with AI but are uncertain about its educational applications and ethical considerations. Without clear institutional support and professional development, teachers may use AI mainly as a productivity tool rather than as a pedagogical enhancement (Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025; OECD, 2024b; European Training Foundation, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

Summary of Literature Gaps

Overall, the literature suggests:

- AI has significant potential to enhance teaching and learning, but adoption depends heavily on teacher competence, confidence, and institutional support (Holmes et al., 2019; Luckin, 2018; UNESCO, 2023; European Commission, 2022; OECD, 2024a; Selwyn, 2019; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Redecker, 2017; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022).
- In Albania and similar contexts, infrastructure limitations and lack of formal training hinder effective AI integration (Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025; OECD, 2024b; European Training Foundation, 2023; World Bank, 2024).
- Teachers often use AI for administrative and content preparation tasks, with limited focus on student-centered applications (Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025; OECD, 2024b).
- Clear guidelines on ethics, privacy, and responsible AI use are largely absent, creating inconsistencies across institutions (European Commission, 2022; OECD, 2024a; Selwyn, 2019; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022).

These gaps highlight the need for systematic, evidence-based research on AI adoption in Albanian education, including factors influencing teacher use, institutional readiness, and barriers to implementation. Previous research also suggests that AI is likely to reshape educational systems, labor market demands, and the broader relationship between technology and learning in the coming decades (Tuomi, 2018). This study addresses these

gaps by providing quantitative data on the current state of AI integration in Albanian schools and universities.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to systematically examine AI integration in the Albanian education system. A structured online survey was used as the primary data collection instrument, allowing for efficient reach across multiple educational levels and geographic regions. The quantitative approach was selected because it enables the collection of large-scale, comparable data, supports statistical analysis of trends and relationships, and provides a robust basis for generalizable conclusions (Holmes et al., 2019; OECD, 2024a; Redecker, 2017).

The survey was designed to measure several dimensions of AI adoption, including teacher usage, digital skills, perceived benefits, barriers, and institutional readiness. The instrument incorporated Likert-scale items, multiple-choice questions, and a limited number of open-ended questions, enabling both structured analysis and qualitative insights for context.

Survey Instrument Development

The questionnaire was developed based on a review of existing literature on AI in education and teacher digital competence frameworks (OECD, 2024a; Redecker, 2017; Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025). Key sources informing the survey design included:

- European Digital Competence Framework for Educators (DigCompEdu), for assessing teacher digital skills and readiness (Redecker, 2017);
- OECD TALIS reports, for questions related to institutional support and professional development (OECD, 2024a);
- UNESCO guidance on AI in education, for identifying ethical concerns and pedagogical practices (UNESCO, 2023; European Commission, 2022).

The survey was divided into five main sections:

- Demographic information, including age, gender, years of teaching experience, educational level, and geographic location.
- AI tool usage, capturing frequency, types of AI tools used (e.g., ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot), and purposes of use.
- Perceived benefits, exploring the impact of AI on teaching efficiency, lesson preparation, creativity, and student engagement.
- Barriers and challenges, including access to technology, infrastructure, training, ethical concerns, and administrative support.
- Institutional readiness and future expectations, assessing availability of policies, professional development programs, and resources for AI integration.

The survey items were pre-tested with a small group of teachers to ensure clarity, relevance, and reliability. Feedback was used to refine questions, reduce ambiguity, and ensure the survey was suitable for respondents with varying levels of digital competence.

Participants and Sampling

The survey targeted teachers and academic staff across Albania, representing primary, secondary, and higher education institutions. A total of 112 respondents participated, distributed as follows:

- Primary education: 34 teachers
- Secondary education: 46 teachers
- Higher education: 32 academic staff

Participants were drawn from both urban (61%) and rural (39%) areas, ensuring representation of geographic and infrastructural diversity. Major cities included Tirana, Durrës, Elbasan, and Shkoder.

A stratified sampling approach was employed to ensure representation across educational levels and regions. Invitations to participate were distributed via institutional email lists, professional networks, and teacher associations. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was guaranteed to encourage honest responses.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The survey was administered online between January 2025 and March 2026. Online distribution was chosen to maximize reach and convenience, particularly given Albania's geographic diversity. Respondents were provided with clear instructions and definitions of AI tools to ensure consistent understanding. Data collection followed ethical guidelines, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and assurance of confidentiality. Respondents were informed that their data would be used solely for research purposes and reported in aggregate form.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure content validity, survey questions were grounded in established frameworks and previous studies (OECD, 2024a; Redecker, 2017; Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025). The pre-test also contributed to validity by identifying unclear or irrelevant questions. Reliability was assessed using internal consistency measures, such as Cronbach's alpha, for multi-item Likert-scale sections. Reliability coefficients for key constructs (teacher confidence, perceived benefits, institutional readiness) exceeded 0.75, indicating strong reliability and consistency of the instrument.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to

summarize AI usage patterns, perceived benefits, and barriers. Comparative analyses were conducted to examine differences across:

- Educational level (primary, secondary, higher education)
- Geographic location (urban vs. rural)
- Age groups and teaching experience
- Gender

Inferential statistics, such as t-tests and ANOVA, were employed to explore statistically significant differences in AI use and confidence levels across groups. Correlation analyses were conducted to examine relationships between digital competence, frequency of AI use, and perceived benefits.

Open-ended responses were coded thematically to provide qualitative insights into teacher perceptions, challenges, and expectations. These qualitative elements complemented the quantitative findings by highlighting contextual factors that influence AI adoption.

Limitations

While the methodology provides robust insights, some limitations exist:

- The study relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or inaccurate recall.
- The sample, though geographically diverse, may not fully represent all Albanian schools, particularly very small or remote institutions.
- The study focuses on teachers' perspectives, and does not include direct observation of classroom practices or student outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a comprehensive overview of AI adoption, teacher readiness, and institutional support, offering a solid foundation for policy and practice recommendations.

RESULTS

Extent of AI Use

The results show that AI adoption in Albanian education is growing but remains limited Among all respondents:

- 57% reported having used at least one AI tool;
- 23% reported regular use;
- 34% reported occasional use;
- 43% had never used AI tools.

Teachers in higher education reported significantly higher levels of AI use than teachers in primary and secondary schools. This pattern is consistent with findings reported by the Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports (2025) and OECD (2024b). Nearly 72% of university staff indicated that they had used AI applications, compared with 51% in

secondary education and 42% in primary education. The most commonly used AI tools were:

- ChatGPT;
- Google Gemini;
- Grammarly;
- Canva AI;
- Microsoft Copilot.

ChatGPT was by far the most widely used platform, especially among university lecturers.

Purposes of AI Use

Respondents primarily used AI for practical and administrative purposes rather than for direct classroom interaction. The main purposes reported were:

- Lesson planning (68%);
- Preparing presentations and materials (64%);
- Creating quizzes and assignments (52%);
- Translating and simplifying texts (49%);
- Administrative tasks and email writing (44%);
- Student assessment and feedback (31%).

Only 18% of respondents stated that they used AI to personalize learning for students (Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025; OECD, 2024b). This suggests that AI is currently used mainly as a support tool for teachers rather than as a central element of instruction.

Teacher Confidence and Skills

Although many respondents had experimented with AI, confidence levels remained moderate.

- 21% considered themselves highly competent in using AI;
- 47% reported average competence;
- 32% felt unprepared or insecure.

Younger teachers and university lecturers demonstrated higher confidence than older teachers. Respondents under the age of 35 were twice as likely to use AI regularly compared to those above 50. Teachers who had participated in digital training programs reported substantially greater confidence in using AI. Among teachers who had received training, 74% used AI tools, compared to only 38% among those without training (Redecker, 2017).

Institutional Readiness

The survey revealed important weaknesses in institutional readiness. Only 27% of respondents agreed that their institution was well prepared for AI integration. The main limitations identified were:

- Lack of formal training programs (71%);
- Insufficient technological infrastructure (63%);

- Absence of institutional guidelines (59%);
- Poor internet access or equipment (46%);
- Uncertainty regarding data privacy and ethics (41%).

Urban schools and universities generally demonstrated higher readiness than rural institutions. Teachers from rural areas reported significantly greater difficulties related to (OECD, 2024b; European Training Foundation, 2023; World Bank, 2024):

- Internet quality;
- Availability of computers;
- Access to software;
- Institutional support.

Perceived Benefits

Despite these challenges, respondents expressed positive attitudes toward AI. The majority believed that AI could:

- Save time (82%);
- Improve teaching efficiency (74%);
- Support more creative lessons (66%);
- Increase student engagement (58%);
- Improve access to educational resources (56%) (Holmes et al., 2019; Luckin, 2018; UNESCO, 2023).

Teachers particularly valued AI for reducing repetitive tasks such as creating worksheets, correcting language, and preparing presentations.

CONCERNS AND RISKS

Participants also expressed concerns regarding the possible negative effects of AI. The most common concerns included:

- Students using AI to cheat (76%);
- Inaccurate or misleading information (69%);
- Excessive dependence on technology (63%);
- Privacy and data protection issues (52%);
- Reduced critical thinking among students (48%) (European Commission, 2022; OECD, 2024a; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022).

Many respondents emphasized that students often use AI-generated content without verifying sources or understanding the information.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that Albania is in the early stages of AI integration in education, aligning with international and regional literature on emerging economies (Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025; OECD, 2024b; European Training Foundation, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

More than half of the surveyed teachers and academic staff have experimented with AI tools, demonstrating interest and willingness to innovate. However, regular and pedagogically advanced use remains limited, reflecting global trends where adoption often lags behind technological availability (Holmes et al., 2019; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

Despite the challenges, teachers recognized the potential of AI to save time, improve efficiency, support creativity, and increase student engagement. These benefits are consistent with international studies emphasizing AI's capacity to reduce repetitive tasks and support higher-order instructional goals (Holmes et al., 2019; Luckin, 2018; UNESCO, 2023; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

At the same time, teachers expressed concerns regarding academic dishonesty, over-reliance on technology, misinformation, privacy issues, and reduced critical thinking (European Commission, 2022; OECD, 2024a; Selwyn, 2019; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022).

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, several actionable recommendations can be made to support effective AI integration in Albanian education:

National Teacher Training Programs

Professional development is essential to increase teacher competence, confidence, and responsible use of AI (Redecker, 2017; Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025):

- Basic use of AI tools, including generative AI applications and adaptive learning platforms;
- Pedagogical integration, teaching educators how to embed AI into lesson planning, content creation, and assessment;
- Ethical and responsible AI use, including guidelines on academic integrity, data privacy, and digital citizenship;
- Verification of AI-generated content, ensuring students and teachers critically assess AI outputs;
- Differentiated instruction with AI, using AI to personalize learning while maintaining student engagement.

Training programs should be adapted to educational level and teacher experience, with special attention to rural schools and pre-university teachers who currently face greater barriers.

Improvement of Infrastructure

Investment in infrastructure is critical to ensure equitable access to AI tools across Albania:

- Reliable internet connectivity in all schools, particularly in rural areas;
- Modern computer laboratories and digital devices, sufficient for multiple users;
- Licensed educational software and AI applications to support teaching and learning;
- Technical support and maintenance to sustain effective use of AI tools.

These measures can reduce the urban-rural digital divide and support the pedagogical potential of AI.

Development of Institutional Policies

Clear institutional policies are necessary to guide responsible and consistent AI use. Schools and universities should establish:

- Guidelines on acceptable student use of AI, including in assignments, assessments, and projects;
- Protocols for teacher responsibilities in using AI for instructional purposes;
- Policies addressing data protection, privacy, and ethical considerations;
- Procedures for monitoring and evaluating AI integration, including feedback from teachers and students.

A coordinated national framework can ensure consistency, transparency, and responsible adoption across educational levels.

Integration into Teacher Education

Future teachers should be equipped with both technical skills and pedagogical strategies before entering the profession. Teacher education programs in Albanian universities should include courses on:

- AI applications in education and digital literacy;
- Pedagogical methods for integrating AI into classroom instruction;
- Critical thinking and ethical evaluation of AI-generated content.

Embedding AI education at the pre-service level ensures that future teachers are prepared to leverage AI effectively and responsibly from the start of their careers.

Promotion of Research and Innovation

Ongoing research is essential to understand the evolving role of AI in education. Universities and research centers should:

- Encourage pilot projects testing AI in classroom and administrative contexts;
- Support interdisciplinary collaborations between education, computer science, and psychology;
- Examine student outcomes and pedagogical effectiveness of AI use;
- Develop localized best practices for AI integration in Albanian schools.

Research and innovation can provide evidence-based strategies, inform policy, and improve teacher confidence and adoption.

CONCLUSION

Artificial Intelligence is rapidly emerging as a transformative force in global education, with the potential to enhance teaching efficiency, personalize learning, and support innovative pedagogical practices (Holmes et al., 2019; Luckin, 2018; UNESCO, 2023; Zawacki-

Richter et al., 2019). This study provides one of the first comprehensive, data-driven analyses of AI integration in the Albanian education system, revealing both opportunities and challenges.

The survey shows that Albanian teachers and academic staff are generally interested and willing to experiment with AI tools, particularly in higher education and among younger, digitally confident educators. Tools such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, and Microsoft Copilot are primarily used for lesson planning, preparing educational materials, generating quizzes, and administrative tasks. However, AI is rarely employed for personalized instruction, adaptive learning, or direct student engagement, highlighting a gap between potential and actual pedagogical application.

Several key challenges constrain broader adoption. Teachers report limited confidence and digital skills, especially among older educators, combined with insufficient professional development opportunities. Institutional readiness is uneven, with rural schools facing infrastructure limitations, lack of access to digital devices, and minimal software availability. Furthermore, there is a lack of national and institutional policies governing ethical use, academic integrity, and data privacy, leaving teachers to navigate AI adoption independently.

Despite these challenges, teachers recognize the significant benefits of AI. Many believe that AI can save time, improve teaching efficiency, facilitate creativity, enhance student engagement, and provide easier access to educational resources. At the same time, they express concerns about over-reliance on technology, potential misuse by students, inaccuracies in AI outputs, and possible negative impacts on critical thinking skills. These concerns reflect global debates regarding AI's ethical, pedagogical, and social implications.

The findings underscore the need for a coordinated, multi-level approach to AI integration in Albanian education. At the national level, structured teacher training programs, clear ethical guidelines, and policies supporting responsible AI use are essential. At the institutional level, investment in digital infrastructure, access to licensed AI software, and technical support are crucial to enable equitable adoption. At the teacher level, professional development, mentoring, and resources tailored to pedagogical needs can increase competence, confidence, and effective use of AI tools.

This study also contributes to the broader literature on AI in education by providing empirical evidence from a developing educational context. Unlike many international studies that focus on high-income countries with advanced technological infrastructure, this research highlights the practical realities, barriers, and perceptions of educators in Albania. It also emphasizes the importance of context-sensitive policies and training, demonstrating that technology alone is insufficient to drive educational transformation.

In conclusion, Albania is at a critical juncture in the integration of AI in education. While interest and experimentation are strong, systematic adoption requires strategic interventions across training, infrastructure, policy, and research. If these steps are implemented, AI has the potential to significantly enhance teaching and learning outcomes, improve access to quality education, and foster innovation across Albanian schools and universities. By bridging the gap between current use and pedagogical potential, Albania can move toward a future where AI is not only a support tool but an integral component of educational practice and policy.

This study serves as a foundation for future research and policy development, providing insights into the factors shaping AI adoption, the challenges educators face,

and the steps necessary for responsible and effective integration. As AI continues to evolve, continuous evaluation, research, and adaptation will be essential to ensure that it supports meaningful educational improvements while maintaining ethical, equitable, and student-centered practices.

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EXPLORING HUMAN RIGHTS THROUGH PRACTICE-BASED LEARNING: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF EDUCATIONAL CARDS IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Within the framework of the FRIDAS project, a qualitative inquiry was conducted to examine the pedagogical value and applied relevance of a newly developed tool: the "Educational Cards." Designed to embed human rights perspectives into social work education, the cards present real-world scenarios that highlight ethical dilemmas, institutional gaps, and the complexities of frontline interventions. The study employed a focus group methodology, involving social work lectures, students, and practitioners in a structured session hosted at a university setting. After an introduction to the format, five selected case cards—addressing issues such as trafficking, child protection, homelessness, and discrimination—were reviewed in small groups, followed by a plenary discussion. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data captured participants' reflections on the usability, clarity, and contextual relevance of the materials. Findings revealed a strong resonance between the content of the cases and the Albanian social

context. Participants emphasized that despite originating from various European countries, the themes—violence, marginalization, and systemic neglect—reflect challenges increasingly present in local practice. Moreover, the cards were praised for their structured clarity and realism, which not only facilitated learning but also prompted professional self-reflection and ethical positioning. Social workers found them relevant for navigating the ambiguity of daily interventions, while students highlighted their usefulness in understanding real-life consequences of institutional decisions. Discussions also uncovered deeper emotional and ethical aspects of social work, particularly in relation to burnout, professional boundaries, and institutional inertia—issues often underexplored in conventional training settings. This study concludes that the Educational Cards offer a contextually relevant and pedagogically robust method for embedding human rights into social work education and reflective practice. It is recommended that the cards be adapted further for local contexts and systematically integrated into both academic curricula and in-service training, to enhance ethical awareness, emotional preparedness, and critical thinking in human rights-based social work. Such tools represent an innovative contribution toward aligning social work education with real-world complexities and the broader goals of the 2030 Agenda.

Keywords: *Human Rights Education, Social Work Training, Educational Case Studies, Reflective Practice*

Human rights constitute a foundational pillar of social work as both a profession and an academic discipline. Across Europe, social workers increasingly encounter complex situations involving violence, exploitation, discrimination, and social exclusion, which require not only technical competence but also ethical judgment and rights-based reasoning (Banks, 2012; Ife, 2016). Although human rights frameworks are well established within social work education, their translation into practice-oriented learning that reflects the realities of frontline interventions remains uneven.

Practice-based learning has been widely recognized as an effective pedagogical strategy to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Kolb, 2015). In particular, case-based approaches enable students and practitioners to engage with authentic scenarios, promoting critical reflection, ethical reasoning, and an understanding of the consequences of institutional decisions. By situating learning in concrete, contextually rich experiences, these approaches foster both professional skill development and reflective capacity.

Within this framework, the FRIDAS project developed *Educational Cards,* innovative tools designed to embed human rights perspectives into social work education through real-world case scenarios. This study examines the pedagogical value and applied relevance of these cards across multiple European contexts: Albania, Italy, Norway and Madrid, by exploring participants' experiences with their clarity, usability, contextual relevance, and capacity to stimulate reflective and ethical engagement. In doing so, the study aims to assess how such tools can enhance rights-based professional practice, support emotional preparedness, and strengthen ethical awareness in diverse educational and institutional settings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in a human right–based approach to social work, which frames professional practice as inherently connected to the protection and promotion of fundamental rights (Reichert, 2011; Ife, 2016). Central to this approach are the principles of human dignity, equality, participation, and accountability, which position service users as active rights holders rather than passive recipients of support. By embedding these values into practice, social workers are encouraged to navigate complex ethical dilemmas and advocate effectively within institutional constraints.

Normatively, the analysis draws on the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (European Union, 2000), providing a robust framework for understanding rights related to dignity, freedom, equality, solidarity, and justice. These principles underpin both the content of the Educational Cards and the analytical lens used to evaluate their relevance and applicability across diverse social work contexts.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the study is informed by experiential and reflective learning theories, which emphasize learning through concrete experiences, critical reflection, and iterative engagement with real-world scenarios (Kolb, 2015; Schön, 1983). Educational case studies, such as the FRIDAS Educational Cards, serve as reflective spaces where learners confront ethical dilemmas, institutional challenges, and professional decision-making processes in a structured yet flexible manner. By engaging with authentic cases, participants develop not only technical skills but also ethical reasoning, emotional awareness, and professional judgment.

The primary aim of this study is to explore the pedagogical effectiveness and applied relevance of Educational Cards as a practice-based learning tool for integrating human rights into social work education. The guiding research question is: *How do Educational Cards support reflective learning, ethical engagement, and professional development in human rights-oriented social work education across multiple European contexts, including Albania, Italy,* Norway *and Spain?* This transnational perspective highlights the potential for these tools to foster comparable learning outcomes while remaining adaptable to specific legal, cultural, and institutional settings.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, using focus group discussions to explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and reflections regarding the Educational Cards developed within the FRIDAS project. Focus groups are particularly well suited for examining shared meanings, collective sense-making, and interactive reflections around educational tools and professional practices (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This approach allowed participants to jointly reflect on ethical, emotional, and practical dimensions of human rights–based social work education. This composition enabled dialogue across academic, professional, and trainee perspectives.

The focus group was conducted in a university setting and facilitated by two academic staff members. Participants were first introduced to the FRIDAS project and the structure

of the Educational Cards. Five selected case cards—addressing human trafficking, child protection, homelessness, disability and migration, and discrimination against Roma communities—were then distributed.

Participants worked in small groups to review the cases, followed by a plenary discussion focusing on clarity, usability, emotional impact, and contextual relevance. The session was audio-recorded with informed consent.

Data analysis was informed by the principles of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), with an emphasis on reflective and interpretative engagement rather than formal coding procedures.

Transnational Study Context

The research was conducted within a transnational framework. Focus groups were organized in Albania, Italy, Norway, and Spain (Madrid). This design enabled the exploration of both common patterns and context-specific nuances in how Educational Cards are perceived and used across different European social work education and practice settings.

The present article draws primarily on the analytical synthesis of the focus group discussions, with particular attention to the Albanian focus group, while situating the findings within the broader transnational context of the FRIDAS project.

Participants

In Albania, the focus group consisted of **13 participants**, purposefully selected to represent diverse perspectives within social work education and practice. The group included: Three university lecturers in psychology and social work, five bachelor-level social work students, five social work practitioners employed in public and non-governmental social protection institutions in the city of Shkodra.

Data Collection Procedure

The focus group was conducted in a university setting and facilitated by academic staff members involved in the FRIDAS project. Participants were first introduced to the project objectives and the structure of the Educational Cards. Subsequently, five selected case cards: one from each country- Italy, Albania, Norway, Spain were distributed for review. These cases addressed issues of human trafficking, child protection, homelessness, disability and migration, and discrimination against Roma communities.

Participants initially worked in small groups to review and discuss the cases, focusing on clarity, usability, emotional impact, ethical dilemmas, and contextual relevance. This was followed by a plenary discussion in which key reflections were shared and debated collectively. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through an interpretative and reflective thematic approach. Rather than employing formal coding procedures or software-assisted analysis, the researchers engaged in a structured review of the focus group discussions, identifying

recurring patterns, shared concerns, and salient themes emerging from participants' narratives. This approach is consistent with exploratory qualitative research aimed at understanding perceptions and meanings rather than generating theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Analysis was guided by sensitivity to the human rights framework underpinning the Educational Cards and by the study's pedagogical focus. Across the transnational focus groups, four interrelated themes were identified, capturing the ways in which the Educational Cards support reflective learning, ethical engagement, emotional awareness, and professional development.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants received detailed information about the aims of the research and the use of the data and provided informed consent prior to participation. All data were anonymized during transcription and analysis, and participants were assured that their contributions would be used exclusively for research and educational purposes.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the focus group discussions, which engaged students, educators, and social work practitioners in the review of five selected Educational Cards, generated rich and multifaceted insights into their pedagogical value and applied relevance. Rather than relying on formal coding procedures, the findings emerged through structured dialogue and reflective engagement, as participants critically examined each case in relation to professional practice, ethical dilemmas, and human rights considerations. Through this interactive process, four interrelated themes became evident, illustrating how the Educational Cards support learning, professional reflection, and the integration of human rights principles into social work education and practice. The following sections present these themes in detail, drawing on participants' perspectives and experiences derived from the discussion of real-world cases.

Contextual Relevance and Transferability

Participants highlighted the significant contextual relevance of the Educational Cards, noting a strong resonance between the case content and the social realities encountered in Albania. Although the cases were developed based on experiences from various European countries, recurring themes such as violence, human trafficking, homelessness, discrimination, and systemic marginalization were recognized as increasingly present within local practice. This perception underscores the transnational applicability of the cases while simultaneously validating their relevance to national and regional social work education.

Students and practitioners alike emphasized that the scenarios depicted were not abstract or foreign; rather, they reflected the tangible challenges faced by professionals in the Albanian context. For example, one student remarked, "We are a human trafficking route," highlighting both awareness of Albania's vulnerability to transnational trafficking networks and the immediacy of the issue for local practice. Similarly, a practitioner noted,

"These situations are not foreign to us; we face them every day," underscoring the degree to which the cases mirror the complex realities encountered in frontline social work.

The transnational origin of the cases combined with their local relevance points to the broader transferability of the Educational Cards as pedagogical tools. By presenting universal themes within specific, contextually detailed scenarios, the cards facilitate comparative learning and reflective analysis, allowing students and professionals to explore the commonalities and differences across social work systems. This reinforces their value not only as national training resources but also as instruments for fostering cross-cultural awareness and understanding of human rights challenges in European social work practice. Such adaptability further supports the integration of the cards into curricula and professional development programs, highlighting their potential to strengthen the preparedness of social workers to respond effectively to both local and transnational issues.

Clarity, Structure, and Realism

The Educational Cards were consistently recognized by participants for their clarity, well-defined structure, and realistic representation of social work interventions. Practitioners particularly emphasized the authenticity of the cases, noting that they reflected the complexities and nuances of everyday professional practice in ways that traditional, hypothetical training examples often fail to capture. By presenting detailed narratives of actual cases, the cards allowed learners to engage with the unpredictable, context-dependent realities of social work, including the multifaceted needs of service users, the dynamics of institutional responses, and the interplay of legal, ethical, and social considerations.

Students highlighted that the cards enhanced their understanding of the tangible consequences of institutional decisions on vulnerable populations. The structured format of the cards—with clearly delineated facts, stakeholders, interventions, and outcomes—enabled learners to follow the progression of cases systematically, while still appreciating the inherent ambiguity and ethical complexity. This combination of structure and realism fostered meaningful engagement, allowing students to analyze not only what actions were taken, but also why decisions were made, how interventions unfolded, and what broader implications emerged for human rights and social justice.

Moreover, the realistic scenarios provided by the cards facilitated experiential learning by bridging the gap between theory and practice. This aligns with existing scholarship emphasizing the importance of authentic, practice-based educational tools in cultivating critical thinking, professional judgment, and ethical awareness in social work students (Kolb, 2015; Schön, 1983). By integrating realism with a clear pedagogical structure, the Educational Cards supported reflective learning that is both practical and analytically rigorous, preparing learners to navigate complex professional situations with greater confidence and insight.

Ethical Reflection and Professional Identity

The case discussions stimulated deep ethical reflection on the nature of social work practice and the formation of professional identity. Participants critically examined their professional roles within complex institutional settings, reflecting on the ethical dilemmas that arise when human rights principles encounter organizational constraints, limited

resources, or conflicting mandates. The cases encouraged participants to interrogate not only the actions taken by social workers in the scenarios, but also the underlying values, assumptions, and power dynamics shaping those actions.

Central to these reflections were questions of professional responsibility, advocacy, and the boundaries of social work intervention. Participants debated the extent to which social workers can and should act as advocates for human rights, particularly in contexts where institutional frameworks fail to adequately protect vulnerable individuals. This discussion revealed a shared recognition of the tension between normative human rights ideals and the structural realities of practice, where legal, administrative, or political limitations often restrict professional agency.

Importantly, the Educational Cards were perceived as facilitating processes of ethical positioning and professional self-awareness. By engaging with concrete cases, participants were able to reflect on their own ethical orientations, professional limits, and decision-making processes. This reflective engagement supported a more conscious articulation of professional identity, grounded in ethical responsibility and human rights commitments. As such, the cards functioned not only as pedagogical tools for case analysis, but also as formative instruments in the ongoing development of ethical judgment and professional integrity in social work practice.

Emotional Dimensions of Practice

The focus group discussions brought to the forefront the significant emotional impact associated with working on complex, long-term, and often unresolved social work cases. Participants openly reflected on experiences of frustration, emotional exhaustion, and moral distress, particularly in situations where institutional limitations, bureaucratic barriers, or insufficient resources constrained their capacity to respond effectively to human rights violations. These emotional responses were not described as isolated personal reactions, but rather as structurally produced experiences embedded within the broader organizational and policy environments in which social workers operate.

A recurring concern among participants was the risk of professional burnout, especially when sustained efforts do not lead to visible or immediate improvements in service users' situations. The cases discussed during the focus group provided a concrete basis for articulating these challenges, enabling participants to recognize emotional strain as an inherent component of social work practice rather than a sign of individual weakness. This collective reflection contributed to a normalization of emotional vulnerability within the profession and highlighted the need for supportive educational and organizational frameworks.

Importantly, participants emphasized that such emotional and ethical dimensions are often insufficiently addressed in conventional social work training, which tends to prioritize procedural knowledge and technical skills. In contrast, the Educational Cards created a reflective space in which emotional reactions, ethical uncertainty, and professional limitations could be openly discussed and critically examined. By making these dimensions visible, the case discussions encouraged a more holistic understanding of social work practice—one that acknowledges the emotional labor involved in defending human rights and underscores the importance of emotional preparedness, supervision, and reflective support in professional education and practice.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Educational Cards operate as a pedagogically robust and conceptually coherent form of practice-based learning within social work education. Their effectiveness lies in the way they situate human rights within concrete, real-life social work contexts, enabling participants to critically engage with complex situations that mirror the ambiguity and uncertainty of professional practice. By presenting cases grounded in lived experience, the cards encourage learners to move beyond abstract reasoning and to grapple with the practical implications of ethical and rights-based decision-making.

A key strength of the Educational Cards is their integration of realism, structured analysis, and ethical complexity. This combination supports reflective learning processes that extend well beyond technical problem-solving or procedural knowledge. Participants were prompted to consider not only *what* actions were taken in a given case, but also *why* those actions were chosen, *whose rights were prioritized or neglected*, and *how institutional constraints shaped professional responses*. In this way, the cards facilitated deeper forms of reflection that encompassed emotional responses, moral uncertainty, and professional responsibility—dimensions that are often marginalized in traditional, lecture-based approaches to social work education.

These findings are consistent with the broader literature on experiential and reflective learning, which emphasizes that meaningful professional learning occurs through engagement with experience, critical reflection, and dialogue (Kolb, 2015; Schön, 1983). The Educational Cards function as reflective triggers, creating a structured yet open pedagogical space in which learners can examine their assumptions, values, and ethical positions. Moreover, by explicitly framing cases through a human rights lens, the cards reinforce the centrality of human rights frameworks in shaping social work identity and professional purpose (Banks, 2012; Ife, 2016). Rather than treating human rights as an external or supplementary component of practice, the cards embed them within the core processes of assessment, intervention, and professional judgment.

Overall, the study suggests that Educational Cards contribute to a more holistic and integrative model of social work education—one that connects experiential learning with ethical reflection and human rights principles. Such an approach strengthens learners' capacity to navigate the emotional, moral, and structural complexities of social work practice, thereby supporting the development of reflective, rights-oriented professionals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study suggest several implications for social work education, professional training, and the further development of human rights–based pedagogical tools. First, the Educational Cards developed within the FRIDAS project should be systematically integrated into social work curricula at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Their grounding in real-life cases and explicit linkage between professional interventions and human rights standards make them particularly suitable for fostering reflective and practice-oriented learning. Embedding these materials within core and elective courses

would strengthen students' ability to critically analyse complex situations involving rights violations and institutional constraints.

Second, the study highlights the importance of facilitated learning when using case-based materials, especially for students and early-career professionals. While the Educational Cards provide structured and accessible content, guided discussion led by trained educators is essential to support ethical reasoning, critical reflection, and the interpretation of human rights norms in practice. Facilitators play a key role in helping learners navigate ambiguity, balance professional responsibilities with institutional limitations, and reflect on alternative courses of action.

Third, the continuous updating and refinement of the case materials is strongly recommended. Social realities, legal frameworks, and institutional responses evolve over time, and the educational value of the cases depends on their factual accuracy and contextual relevance. Incorporating feedback from educators, students, and practitioners—such as clarifying timelines, initial contact with beneficiaries, and case outcomes—would enhance the analytical depth and pedagogical clarity of the Educational Cards.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the need to give greater attention to the emotional and ethical dimensions of social work practice within education and training programs. The cases revealed the emotional burden, moral distress, and risk of burnout experienced by social workers, particularly in situations where structural barriers limit effective intervention. Integrating guided reflection on emotions, professional boundaries, and self-care strategies alongside technical and legal analysis would contribute to the development of resilient and ethically grounded professionals.

Finally, the study supports the expansion of the Educational Card model beyond formal academic settings. Given their demonstrated relevance and transferability, these materials have strong potential for use in non-formal education, continuing professional development, and vocational education and training contexts across Europe. Their alignment with the human rights framework and the Sustainable Development Goals further strengthens their applicability in transnational educational initiatives aimed at promoting social justice and rights-based professional practice.

CONCLUSION

This study provides robust qualitative evidence that the Educational Cards developed within the FRIDAS project constitute an innovative and pedagogically effective tool for embedding human rights perspectives into social work education. By drawing directly on real-world scenarios encountered in European social work practice, the cards enable learners to engage with human rights not as abstract legal principles, but as lived realities shaped by institutional structures, professional decision-making, and ethical dilemmas. In doing so, they effectively bridge the persistent gap between human rights theory and the everyday practice of social work.

The findings demonstrate that the Educational Cards foster reflective engagement at multiple levels. For students, they support the development of critical thinking, ethical awareness, and a deeper understanding of the consequences of institutional actions on vulnerable individuals. For practitioners, the cards offer a structured space for

professional self-reflection, enabling them to critically examine their roles, limitations, and responsibilities within complex systems of care and protection. Importantly, the discussions generated through the use of the cards also surfaced emotional and moral dimensions of social work practice—such as frustration, moral distress, and the risk of burnout—that are often underrepresented in conventional training models. This highlights the added value of practice-based learning tools in preparing social workers not only technically, but also emotionally and ethically.

Furthermore, the strong contextual resonance identified by participants underscores the transferability of the Educational Cards across national and cultural boundaries. Although the cases originate from different European countries, the themes of violence, marginalization, discrimination, and systemic neglect reflect shared structural challenges within contemporary European societies. This transnational relevance reinforces the potential of the Educational Cards to serve as a common pedagogical resource for social work education across Europe, while remaining adaptable to local legal and institutional contexts.

Finally, the alignment of the Educational Cards with the principles of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*—particularly those related to reducing inequalities, promoting social justice, and strengthening inclusive institutions—further affirms their relevance for contemporary social work education. By promoting a human right–based, reflective, and practice-oriented approach, the cards contribute to the preparation of social work professionals capable of responding critically and ethically to complex social problems. As such, they represent a meaningful contribution to the ongoing effort to align social work education with real-world complexities and global commitments to human dignity, equality, and social justice.

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BETWEEN EAST AND WEST: SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF NORTH MACEDONIA'S INTEGRATION INTO THE EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century has been characterized by a new international order and global turbulence, where every state entity seeks its own place on the global stage, including through membership in powerful political-military organizations. This article, in the field of political sociology and international relations, examines the perceptions of citizens of North Macedonia regarding membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), focusing on attitudes related to security, stability, political integration, modernization, and the future of the country. In addition to the theoretical-analytical aspect and qualitative methods, the research is based on a survey conducted with 256 respondents from various demographic categories. The results show that an overwhelming majority, 74%, express a positive attitude toward NATO membership, perceiving it as a guarantor of national security, regional stability, and international recognition. A smaller portion of respondents express skepticism, highlighting concerns regarding political dependence, financial obligations, and the potential for involvement in global conflicts. The study underlines that support for NATO membership is particularly strong among the ethnic Albanian, youth, and urban populations, while reservations are more pronounced among ethnic Macedonian, older, and rural citizens. These findings suggest that NATO integration is widely legitimized in the public sphere of North Macedonia, although under the influence of socio-economic, and political factors, dilemmas and pro-Russian and pro-Eastern tendencies also emerge. The paper concludes that understanding these perceptions is essential for policymakers

aiming to strengthen democratic legitimacy, foreign policy consensus, and public trust in transatlantic institutions.

Keywords: *NATO, North Macedonia, public perceptions, security, integration, foreign policy, sociological analysis*

INTRODUCTION: NATO, FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Organisation du Traité de l'Atlantique du Nord* or NATO is an international security pact established in April 1949. Its purpose is to strengthen the security of member countries within the framework of United Nations agreements and to foster cooperation among them. NATO reinterprets its strategies and structure based on periodic changes. Today, it possesses not only a military framework but also a civilian one. Its functioning is based on a tripartite structure: the Civilian Structure, the Military Structure, and supporting organizations (Organizations and Agencies). Its headquarters is located in Brussels. In total, it counts 32 member states and its main organs are:

- The North Atlantic Council.
- The Secretariat and the Secretary General.
- The Military Committee.
- Subsidiary Committees.

NATO, the most important pact of the Cold War period until 1967 against its founding cause, the Soviet Union, implemented the Massive Retaliation Strategy. The basic principle of NATO's actions was total opposition, regardless of the dimensions of a potential attack from the Soviet Bloc. Following international detente, this strategy changed, and up until 1991, it transitioned into the Flexible Response Strategy. The rule was established for a counter-attack against an Eastern Bloc assault on an equal scale, based on its conventional or nuclear character.

After the end of the Cold War, it undertook strategic changes, and after 1994, it put into effect the New Strategic Concept. The new strategy gave priority to crisis resolution through political methods and crisis management. Due to changed international conditions, the organization made a new strategic shift in 2010 (2010 New Strategic Concept), defining new methods of warfare against the modern dangers of the time such as terror, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, cybercrimes, etc. In this regard, the promotion of disarmament processes and crisis management came to the forefront. Today, through the term "out-of-area activities" and by expanding its scope of interventions outside of Europe, NATO has begun to implement a global strategy (Emin Dag & Pajaziti, 2019: 423).

Since its founding, NATO has been based on several fundamental principles defined in the Washington Treaty, which guide its functioning as a political-military organization:

- Collective Defense: According to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, an attack against one or more members is considered an attack against the entire alliance.
- Consultation: Enables member countries to discuss and harmonize their positions on security and defense issues.

- Consensus: All decisions are made with the agreement of all member countries, without a majority vote.
- Crisis Management: The organization is committed to the peaceful resolution of conflicts, but when diplomatic means are insufficient, it can undertake crisis management operations in accordance with the Washington Treaty or with a UN mandate (Mamuti-Fazlia, 2017: 101; Fahron-Hussey, 2019).
- Partnership for Peace: Approved after the end of the Cold War, aimed to strengthen cooperation between NATO and countries aspiring for membership.

NATO, which is usually associated with hard power, is not just a legal treaty or a military machine; it is something much more complex—a sociological actor. It is a social institution that creates a NATO identity, an agent of socialization for elites (military personnel, diplomats, bureaucrats of different countries), creates a specific language ("NATO-Speak"), a standardized culture, and by securitizing, it creates a collective self; it is an agent of global governance.

MEMBERSHIP IN NATO

In a world that validates the thesis that "war continues to evolve and is unlikely to be eliminated" (Coker, 2014), within an increasingly unpredictable context where geopolitical challenges, regional conflicts, and hybrid threats are rapidly changing, national security remains the top priority of every sovereign state. For many countries, especially small states or those with a turbulent history of transition, membership in NATO is not merely a political alignment, but a vital guarantee for their long-term existence and stability.

The process of integration into this structure requires deep reforms, not only in the military, but also in the consolidation of democratic institutions and the fight against corruption, thereby aiding the internal modernization of the aspiring country. The benefits of membership extend significantly into the economic sphere as well. The security guaranteed under NATO's umbrella increases a state's credibility in the eyes of foreign investors.

The official NATO membership process, which is guided by the open doors policy, passes through precisely these 7 steps:

- Step 1: Accession talks with NATO in Brussels.
- Step 2: A letter of intent is sent to the Secretary General of NATO.
- Step 3: Accession protocols are signed by NATO members.
- Step 4: Accession protocols are ratified by NATO member governments according to their national procedures.
- Step 5: The Secretary General invites the potential member to accede to the treaty.
- Step 6: The invitee accedes to the treaty according to its national procedures.
- Step 7: After depositing their instruments of accession with the US Department of State, the invitee officially becomes a NATO member (Brooke-Holland, 2024)

Article 13 of the Treaty gives allies the right to leave the Alliance if they wish: "any party may cease to be a party to the Treaty one year after having officially notified its denunciation." However, to this day, no state has left NATO.

NORTH MACEDONIA'S MEMBERSHIP IN NATO

The official initiative for the integration of Macedonia (today's RNM) into the North-Atlantic Alliance dates back to December 23, 1993, when the Assembly approved the decision for the state's accession to NATO.[1] This act authorized the President of the Republic to submit the official request, proving that from the very first years of independence, the country had a clear and unwavering pro-Western orientation. Subsequently, in November 1995, Macedonia signed the framework document for the "Partnership for Peace" program and was admitted into the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council.

The integration path of the RNM is characterized by diverse challenges, the most critical point culminating at the Bucharest Summit (2008), when members of the Adriatic Charter were evaluated for their commitment to Euro-Atlantic security: Albania and Croatia received official invitations for membership with the aim of strengthening peace in Europe (NATO, 2008). Unlike them, Macedonia was blocked and did not receive an invitation, as a direct consequence of Greece's veto regarding the name dispute.

Parallel to this blockade, the country faced regional identity and religious disputes, including Bulgaria's refusal to recognize the Macedonian language and national identity, and a long-standing conflict with Serbia over the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, which was finally resolved in June 2022 when Belgrade recognized its ecclesiastical independence.

Beyond external diplomatic obstacles, the integration process was severely slowed down by internal structural crises, including the 2001-armed conflict that required the Ohrid Agreement to stabilize the state, alongside chronic delays in judicial reform, institutional instability, and stagnant progress in the rule of law.

In 2011, Macedonia took the issue of the Greek veto to the Court in The Hague; the court ruled that Greece had violated the 1995 Interim Accord, but this did not change NATO's stance. Macedonia's status in relation to NATO did not change even after the Chicago (2012), Wales (2014), and Warsaw (2016) Summits. Due to the long-term blockade and the internal political crisis that engulfed Macedonia after 2014, the Euro-Atlantic integration process froze completely, remaining in a state of suspension *(status quo)* until the 2016 parliamentary elections.

In 2017, with the coming to power of the coalition led by the SDSM, supported by the Albanian DUI, as well as the commitment of NATO and the EU, a new spirit began, which resulted in overcoming the dispute with Greece and undertaking processes aimed at fulfilling the conditions for commencing negotiations for Macedonia's admission into NATO. On December 25, 2017, the Assembly of Macedonia approved the declaration to accelerate the reform and integration processes for the country's membership in NATO and the EU. Following the recommendations and strict criteria set by the Alliance, the Government took concrete steps to increase the defense budget. Starting from 2018, this budget was projected to grow by 0.2% per year, with the aim of reaching the standard NATO target of 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

This financial and structural reform prepared the country for the major geopolitical turning point of that year. On June 17, 2018, Macedonia and Greece signed the Prespa

[1] Official Gazette of the RM, No. 78, December 23, 1993.

Agreement, whereby Macedonia changed its name to "North Macedonia," ending the multi-year name dispute. This proactive foreign policy demonstrated efficacy not only in closing the bilateral dispute, but also in unblocking the Euro-Atlantic integration process (Leka, 2021: 50).

This act, although fiercely opposed by extreme ethnic-Macedonian circles and pro-Serbian politicians (Apasiev, 2018: 9), served as a direct diplomatic catalyst, causing the Republic of North Macedonia to receive its official invitation to begin NATO membership negotiations just one month later, at the Brussels Summit (July 2018). North Macedonia was officially admitted as a full member of NATO on March 27, 2020.

On this date, the country's instrument of accession was officially delivered to the US Department of State in Washington (which is the depositary of the North Atlantic Treaty), marking the conclusion of all legal and diplomatic stages. A few days later, on March 30, 2020, the flag of North Macedonia was raised for the first time alongside the flags of other members at the NATO headquarters in Brussels.

Currently, the Deputy Secretary General of NATO is Radmila Shekerinska from North Macedonia. She officially assumed office in December 2024, succeeding Mircea Geoană (NATO, 2026).

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH: CITIZENS' OPINIONS ON NATO

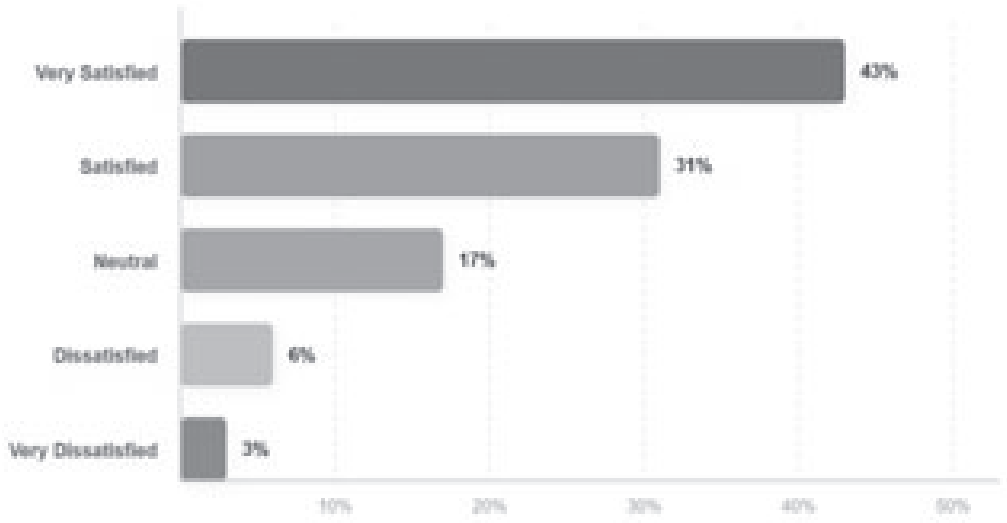
The empirical part of this paper, a field study, was conducted in the months of May-June 2025 in various cities of North Macedonia (Gostivar, Skopje, Kičevo, Debar, Veles, Štip, and Kumanovo), where our instrument was a bilingual survey (Albanian and Macedonian) consisting of six identity questions and ten thematic-structural ones. Through these questions, we attempted to highlight the perceptions of citizens regarding NATO as a political and international security organization, of which the RNM has been a part since 2020.

A total of 256 respondents were included in the research, of whom 161 were male (63%) and 95 were female (37%). In terms of ethnicity, 146 individuals (57%) declared themselves as ethnic Albanian, 86 (34%) as ethnic Macedonian, while 24 (9%) marked themselves as part of another ethnicity. From the perspective of residence, 66% (169) were urban citizens and 34% were rural citizens (87). In terms of age, 47% belonged to the 35-44 category, 1/4th (25%) were aged 45-54, 13% were in the 18-34 category, 10% in the 55-64 category, and 5% were aged 65+.

One of the key questions of this research (#1) aimed to measure the perception of citizens regarding North Macedonia's membership in NATO. The results show that the overwhelming majority of respondents evaluate this process positively. Specifically, 111 people expressed being "very satisfied," while 78 were "satisfied," which together make up about 74% of all respondents. Data from this study correspond 100% with those of a research study conducted in 2024 with 1000 respondents by the MCMS (Кржаловски, 2015).

On the other hand, a smaller portion expressed dissatisfaction: 16 people were "dissatisfied," and 7 were "very dissatisfied," representing only 9% of the responses. Additionally, 44 participants (or about 17%) chose a "neutral" stance, expressing no clear positive or negative evaluation.

Question 1: *How satisfied are you with North Macedonia's membership in NATO?*



This distribution suggests a favorable attitude toward NATO membership, perhaps reflecting a broad perception of the strategic, security, and international benefits that this process brings to the country. Support may also be linked to expectations of stability, collective defense, and the strengthening of North Macedonia's international standing.

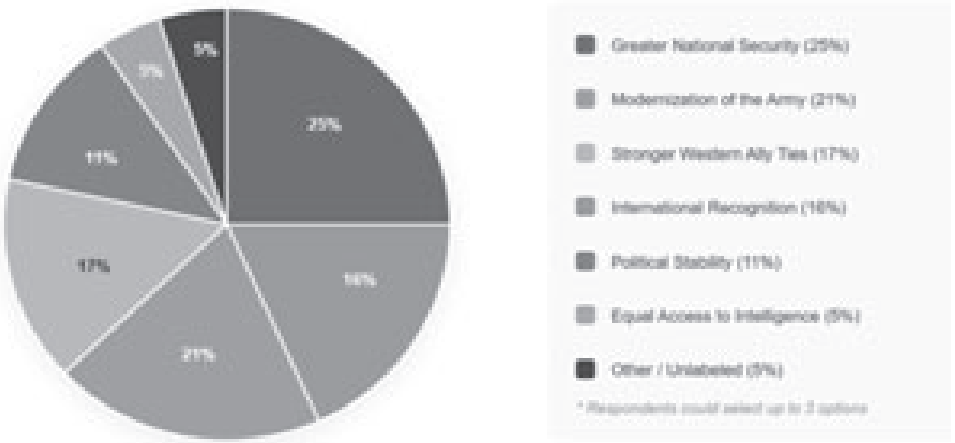
In terms of ethnicity, 67% of Macedonians and 79% of Albanians express satisfaction (either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied') with NATO membership, compared to a small minority who are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied (12% vs. 7%, respectively). These findings align with the general opinion prevailing about NATO along ethnic lines, as seen in various studies; IPIS 2024: 82% of Albanians and 57% of ethnic Macedonians think that NATO makes us a safer country (Koha, 2024).

An absolute majority of RNM citizens (76%) are of the opinion that NATO membership is linked to security, and only a small minority think that this step by official policy does not bring greater security. Furthermore, 4% of Albanians and 16% of Macedonians have serious dilemmas regarding the relationship between NATO and security for the country.

From the answers to question 3, we find that only half (52%) of the respondents are of the opinion that NATO brings stability to the Balkans. Forty percent highlighted the alternatives "little," "very little," and "not at all," which speaks to an unfavorable perception regarding the stability that this global formation has so far provided to the Balkan Peninsula.

From the chart mentioned above, it is noted that citizens believe more in national security (25%) and the modernization of the army (21%) than in political stability (11%). Thus, the greatest dilemmas are related to the external factor, where NATO is seen as a security entity. Another element emphasized by citizens is the modernization of the army (21%).

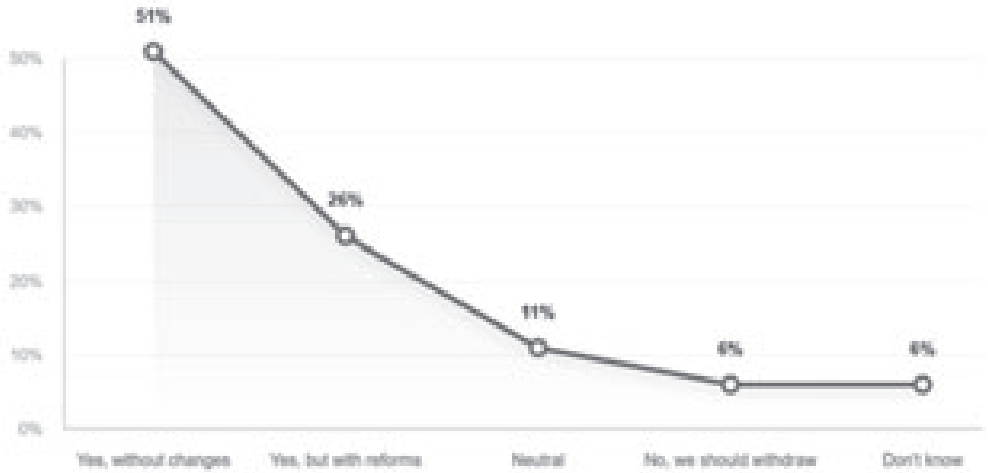
Question 4: *Perceived Benefits of NATO Membership in North Macedonia*



Three problematic issues highlighted by citizens are the risk of involvement in foreign conflicts, financial costs, and the loss of political independence. Among Macedonian citizens, the "financial aspect" and "involvement in foreign conflicts" are emphasized more, whereas among Albanian citizens, "foreign conflicts" and "tensions with non-NATO states" stand out. Forty-three percent of respondents stated that North Macedonia does not play an important role in NATO (question 6).

One of the sections of the questionnaire is also that related to the future of the membership in NATO: 51 % have affirmed that it should be continued without changes, 26% that it should be continued but with reforms in NATO and only 6 % that we should be de-membered [withdraw].

Question 7: *Should North Macedonia continue its membership in NATO?*



To the question "What does NATO membership mean to you personally or to the country?", key words mentioned were: "security" (23 times), "stability" (12 times), "empowerment," "investments," "safety," and "protection from Russian influence". Among ethnic Macedonian respondents, expressions such as "strong Macedonia," "new opportunities," "interference of Western powers in our country," and "dependence on Western countries" were also noted. Interestingly, pro-Russian tendencies appeared, such as "we should be in an alliance with Russia," "we must join Russia," and "Eastern countries should be a priority". Of this nature were also several answers to question 10: "we do not want cooperation with such an organization," "we must join Russia," and "independence in decision-making". In this question, we also find answers like "let's avoid emotional connections with Serbia" and "modernization of the army".

From this section, we conclude that a dose of antipathy toward NATO exists among Macedonian citizens, particularly those coming from rural areas and with low education, who express emotional ties to Russia and Serbia as two states with a powerful impact on Macedonian public opinion. This validates the thesis that the Balkans are strategically divided into two blocs: the pro-Russian alliance and the pro-NATO alliance (Reka, 2021: 15).

From a sociological perspective, integration into NATO has affected the main ethnic stratifications in the RNM in different ways. It reveals a deep strategic divide in the Balkans, confirming that geopolitical alignments are closely linked to collective cultural sentiments. For the ethnic Albanian population, Euro-Atlantic integration functions as a social myth with a high unifying power and as a primary mechanism for civic inclusion. Meanwhile, for ethnic Macedonians, the integration process creates a deep sociological tension between ontological security (preserving a stable national identity) and the utilitarian survival of the state. Thus, there is an evident hesitation or crucial dilemma among ethnic Macedonians who want the benefits of the Occident, while emotionally and mentally expressing support for the Slavic Orient. In this regard, we are not dealing merely with a statistical difference, but with an asymmetry of cultural perception.

CONCLUSIONS

The research confirms that the country's membership in NATO enjoys broad social support, although clear differences exist depending on ethnicity, age, and place of residence. Ethnic Albanians show higher trust in this alliance as a guarantee for regional security and stability, while among ethnic Macedonians, more dilemmas are observed, which relate mainly to financial expenditures and the risk of involvement in external conflicts.

In general, most of public opinion links this process directly to national security, viewing the modernization of the army as one of the most concrete benefits. However, views regarding NATO's impact on stability in the Balkans are split, as only half of the citizens see it as a guaranteeing factor in the region. Meanwhile, a significant portion expresses skepticism about the weight the country carries in decision-making, reflecting what is called a "feeling of peripheral marginalization". Despite these nuances, support for the future remains steadfast, as the overwhelming majority demands maintaining the Euro-Atlantic course, viewing this alliance also as a bridge for further integration into the European Union.

Based on our research, the authorities should strengthen public communication and counter alternative narratives by launching targeted information campaigns, particularly for youth and peripheral regions, to clarify the practical benefits of membership. Additionally, the government must accelerate military modernization and elevate the country's strategic engagement within NATO structures to foster a tangible sense of security and public trust. Finally, institutional strategies should capitalize on the 83% of citizens linking NATO to an EU future, while using joint forums to build an inter-ethnic consensus on national security.

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AI-MEDIATED LEARNING AND CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT: HELP-SEEKING, TRUST, AND INDEPENDENT PROBLEM-SOLVING

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Abstract

As artificial intelligence (AI) moves quickly into primary educational settings, important questions arise about the impact of its use on children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. This study examined the relationships between AI-mediated help-seeking, uncritical acceptance of AI-generated information, and an orientation toward independent problem-solving among 360 children aged 7 to 12 attending public and private primary schools in Tirana, Albania. Drawing on Piaget's constructivist theory and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, the study examined how habitual use of AI-based technologies relates to children's cognitive orientation during learning. Digital devices were the most common first response to academic difficulty (40.8%); 66.9% of children accepted AI-generated answers without reflecting on them first; and 55.8% named the computer as their primary educational helper. Age-group comparisons revealed a clear developmental gradient in which reliance on AI tools and uncritical acceptance were most pronounced among the youngest children (ages 7–8) and became less pronounced with age. The findings suggest that unguided AI-mediated and digitally mediated help-seeking is associated with a lower orientation toward independent problem-solving and with uncritical acceptance of information,

with younger children representing the group at greatest risk. The study supports the purposeful and pedagogically structured integration of AI and offers recommendations for teachers, parents, and education policymakers.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence (AI); Child Development; Socio-Emotional Development; Critical Thinking; AI-Mediated Learning; Independent Problem-Solving.*

INTRODUCTION

Children today are growing up with artificial intelligence available at almost every turn, at precisely the age when their basic cognitive and social habits are still taking shape. Between roughly 7 and 12, children build the capacities that will later define how they approach a difficult problem, how they weigh information, and whether they persist when something does not come easily (Piaget, 1964; Vygotsky, 1978). What this study asks, at its core, is whether the increasing availability of AI-assisted and digitally mediated answers is reshaping that process.

The concern here is not digital technology itself. Under the right conditions, access to information, real-time feedback, and adaptive learning tools can genuinely support how children learn (Luckin et al., 2016). The harder question is what happens in the absence of those conditions, when a child's first move on hitting a wall is to accept what an AI system offers rather than work the problem through, and when a screen quietly takes the place of a teacher, a parent, or a friend as the main source of help.

This matters beyond academic performance alone. Empathy, cooperation, and the ability to regulate one's own emotions develop through sustained relationships with other people, not through exchanges with an algorithm (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Denham et al., 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2006). To the extent that AI-mediated and digitally mediated help-seeking crowds out the relationships in which those competencies are built, the consequences could reach well beyond the classroom. However sophisticated an AI system becomes, it cannot offer the kind of affective responsiveness that makes human interaction developmentally formative in the first place (Sharkey & Sharkey, 2011).

Three research questions guide the study. RQ1: what patterns of AI-mediated and digitally mediated help-seeking, and trust in AI-generated information, are most common among children aged 7 to 12 in Albanian primary schools? RQ2: how much do these patterns vary by age? RQ3: what do they imply for children's independent problem-solving?

Two theoretical traditions frame the analysis. Piaget's (1964) constructivist account holds that children build knowledge by actively engaging their environment, through exploration, error, and self-correction, which all depend on children actually encountering problems they cannot solve right away. Vygotsky (1978) adds the idea of a zone of proximal development, in which a more capable other, a teacher, parent, or peer, plays a role in cognitive growth that nothing else quite substitutes for. Read together, both theories suggest the same risk: that AI tools offering instant answers, and displacing the humans who would otherwise guide a child through difficulty, may be associated with weaker engagement of the very conditions each theorist treats as essential.

LITERATURE REVIEW

AI in Educational Contexts

AI has moved into classrooms quickly over the past decade. Adaptive learning systems, intelligent tutoring platforms, and now generative AI tools show up everywhere from primary school to university (Holmes et al., 2019), and there is genuine evidence that well-designed tools improve engagement through immediate feedback and content that adjusts to the learner (Luckin et al., 2016). At the same time, a fair amount of scholarship pushes back on this optimism, especially where younger learners are concerned: when an answer arrives automatically, the child never does the effortful thinking that actually produces durable learning (Dede, 2010; Resnick, 2017).

That concern has only grown sharper with large language model tools, which can produce fluent, confident-sounding answers to almost anything a child asks (Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023). Several researchers have called for clearer frameworks separating productive from counterproductive AI use. The same tool, after all, can support learning when scaffolded well and undercut it when it simply substitutes for cognitive effort (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

Critical Thinking, Cognitive Offloading, and Social Learning

Critical thinking, the ability to weigh evidence, reason through problems, and reach defensible judgments, lies at the heart of what primary education is intended to cultivate (Facione, 1990; Paul & Elder, 2006). One mechanism that may undercut it is cognitive offloading: handing a mental task off to an external system rather than doing it oneself (Risko & Gilbert, 2016). The concern, longstanding in cognitive science, is that a capacity reliably outsourced to a tool tends to weaken from disuse (Carr, 2010; Hembrooke & Gay, 2003). A recent systematic review of over-reliance on AI dialogue systems reinforces this concern with more current evidence, linking habitual, unreflective use of AI-generated output to weaker critical thinking, decision-making, and analytical reasoning (Zhai, Wibowo, & Li, 2024).

Social learning theory points to a related but distinct concern. Bandura (1977) showed that children pick up behaviours, attitudes, and a sense of their own competence largely by watching and interacting with people who matter to them. When a digital tool takes the place of a teacher, parent, or peer as the main source of academic support, something is potentially lost beyond the immediate answer: the modelling through which children learn not just facts, but how to learn at all.

Developmental Considerations Across Age Groups

Piaget's (1964) stage theory makes a fairly specific prediction about who is most at risk. Children between roughly 7 and 11, in the concrete operational stage, lean heavily on immediate, perceptual experience and have only a limited ability to evaluate sources abstractly. As children approach the formal operational stage around age 12, the capacity for hypothetical reasoning and for stepping back to reflect on one's own thinking starts to come online.

Vygotsky's (1978) framework points in the same direction: older children, who have simply had more experience of guided learning, would be expected to show stronger independent problem-solving. Taken together, these theories predict a developmental gradient in which technology-dependent help-seeking and uncritical acceptance of AI-generated output are expected to be most evident among younger children and to decline with age. The present study was designed to test this prediction.

Children's Evaluation of Digital Information

Children in middle childhood are not, on the whole, equipped to critically evaluate digital information (Bråten et al., 2013; Strømsø & Bråten, 2010). The skill has to be taught deliberately and rarely shows up on its own (Hobbs, 2010; McGrew et al., 2018). In a study that anticipates much of what this paper finds, Druga et al. (2017) had children aged 3 to 10 interact with AI voice assistants and found that most rated the AI as more trustworthy than their own parents. More recently, in qualitative interviews with children aged 11 to 12, Heeg and Avraamidou (2024) found that children themselves spontaneously raised concerns about people becoming overly dependent on, and lazy because of, AI, suggesting that the unguided over-reliance documented in the present study is not merely a researcher's external concern but one some children already sense in their own use.

The Albanian Educational Context

Albania offers a useful setting for studying how quickly AI is entering primary education. As an EU candidate country, it has pushed its digital education agenda forward, with AKSHI coordinating much of the infrastructure expansion, and the national curriculum framework (MES, 2014) names digital competency as a priority that runs across subjects. What has lagged behind, though, is pedagogy: schools have devices in greater numbers than they have systematic instruction in how to use them critically, which leaves children encountering AI tools without much guidance in how to evaluate what those tools produce. Because the sample for this study comes from Tirana, the country's most digitally connected city, the findings describe a high-access urban setting and should not be read as representative of Albania as a whole.

METHODOLOGY

Operational Definition of AI

In this study, AI-mediated learning refers to children's use of digital systems capable of generating, retrieving, or adapting educational information on the child's behalf, including generative AI tools (e.g., conversational assistants), AI-enabled search and recommendation systems, and AI-assisted educational applications. Given children's developmental level, references to AI in the questionnaire were operationalized through familiar devices and AI-assisted tools rather than technical terminology. Items were written and grouped accordingly: items capturing AI use during academic tasks and trust in AI-generated information (the domains underlying the Frequency of AI Use and Trust in AI-Generated Information composites) specifically targeted AI-mediated help-seeking and the acceptance of AI-generated answers, while broader items on preferred learning

modalities described the wider technological environment in which AI-assisted tools sit, without asserting that every act of computer or phone use reflected AI use specifically. Where the manuscript refers to technology use or digital technologies more broadly, this distinction is intended; the composite variables analysed below are restricted to the AI-targeted items. We acknowledge this reliance on device- and action-based wording as an operationalisation choice rather than a fully resolved measurement issue, and return to it in the Limitations. Because AI applications are often embedded within devices and platforms that children at this age may not conceptually distinguish from computers or internet-based technologies more broadly, the findings reported below are most accurately interpreted as reflecting AI-mediated and digitally mediated help-seeking behaviours, rather than as a direct, isolated measure of generative AI use alone.

Research Design and Participants

This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design (Creswell, 2014).

Participants were recruited through a quota sampling approach across three age groups: Group 1 (7–8 years; n = 120), Group 2 (9–10 years; n = 120), and Group 3 (11–12 years; n = 120). In each age group, data collection continued until the agreed quota of 120 was reached, which produced equal sample sizes across the three groups and allowed for reasonably balanced comparisons by age. Parental consent, anonymisation, and adherence to the Declaration of Helsinki constituted the ethical safeguards applied.

Participants were drawn from 11 primary schools in Tirana (4 public, 7 private), selected to represent a mix of public and private institutions across different geographic areas of the city. Of the 360 children, 137 (38.1%) attended public schools and 223 (61.9%) attended private schools. Because private schools were both more numerous in the sample and, on average, smaller in enrolment, this distribution should not be read as representative of the public-private balance of primary education in Tirana as a whole.

Instruments

Participants completed a structured questionnaire covering six thematic domains: (a) preferred learning modalities, (b) AI use during academic tasks, (c) trust in AI-generated information, (d) behavioural responses to difficult tasks, (e) help-seeking behaviour, and (f) emotional experiences during learning. All items used forced-choice formats suited to the age range, and item order was counterbalanced across administration groups to limit order effects. For the youngest age group, trained researchers were on hand to clarify wording without steering responses. It is worth noting that forced-choice formats can introduce acquiescence bias, particularly among younger children (Borgers et al., 2000); we treat this as a limitation of the design rather than something the format itself can fully resolve.

Before the main study, the questionnaire was piloted with 20 children from the target age range, to check item clarity, whether the response format was understood, and how long administration took. The pilot led to some minor wording revisions aimed at improving clarity for the youngest respondents, after which the instrument was finalised for full data collection.

For the correlational analysis reported below, three composite variables were built from conceptually related questionnaire items. Frequency of AI use captures how often

children said they turned to AI-enabled digital tools - phone, computer, or voice assistant - during academic tasks or when they ran into difficulty. Trust in AI-generated information captures how readily children endorsed AI-generated answers as accurate and reliable, including accepting responses without checking them. Reduced independent problem-solving is, in effect, the inverse of self-directed effort: it is lower where children said they would try a task independently before asking for help, and higher where they endorsed turning immediately to a device or seeking an answer outright. Each composite score was calculated as the mean of its constituent items.

More specifically, frequency of AI use was built mainly from items assessing AI use during academic tasks; trust in AI-generated information drew on items assessing acceptance and perceived accuracy of AI-generated responses; and reduced independent problem-solving combined items on behavioural responses to difficult tasks and on help-seeking behaviour, capturing children's tendency to reach for an AI-assisted solution before attempting to work the problem out themselves. Throughout the article, AI use refers specifically to this composite: children's self-reported reliance on AI-assisted learning tools. Where the manuscript instead refers to technology use or digital technologies more broadly, it means the wider educational and technological environment in which AI tools sit, not the composite variable itself.

Participants also completed a knowledge comprehension assessment and a scenario-based emotional recognition task. Because those instruments warrant their own methodological treatment, results from them are reported in a companion manuscript currently in preparation (AI-Mediated Learning and Children's Development: Knowledge Comprehension and Emotional Recognition Outcomes).

Validity, Reliability, and Data Analysis

Structural validity was assessed using principal components analysis (PCA), preceded by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO value of 0.835 (meritorious; Malhotra & Dash, 2010) and a significant Bartlett's test ($\chi^2 = 890.021$, $df = 15$, $p < .001$) confirmed that the data were suitable for factor analysis. PCA extracted a single component (eigenvalue = 4.19; variance explained = 69.8%; all loadings > .79; see Table 1), and the questionnaire as a whole showed excellent internal consistency, Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$. Harman's single-factor test, however, indicated that the first unrotated factor accounted for that same 69.8% of variance, which suggests common method variance is a plausible contributor to the coherence observed (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We treat all factor-analytic and correlational results that follow as preliminary, pending replication using multi-method designs.

Analyses were conducted in R (R Core Team, 2023) and proceeded in three stages: (a) descriptive statistics for all items, reported both for the full sample and broken down by age group; (b) chi-square tests of independence with Cramér's V to compare age groups (Cohen, 1988); and (c) Pearson product-moment correlations with 95% confidence intervals. An alpha level of .05 was used throughout.

RESULTS

Factor Structure

Table 1. Factor Loadings for the Six Questionnaire Domains (N = 360)

Questionnaire Domain	Factor Loading
Preferred learning modalities	.827
AI use during academic tasks	.845
Trust in AI-generated information	.850
Behavioural responses to difficult tasks	.885
Help-seeking behaviour	.799
Emotional experiences during learning	.805

Note. Single component extracted; eigenvalue = 4.19; variance explained = 69.8%; α = .91. All loadings > .79 (Hair et al., 2010 threshold: .70).

Aggregate Descriptive Findings

Table 2. Frequency Distributions for Key Questionnaire Items, Full Sample (N = 360)

Item	Response Option	f	%
Primary response when not understanding something	Ask teacher	109	30.3%
	Ask parents	95	26.4%
	Search phone/computer	147	40.8%
	Ask no one	9	2.5%
Accept online answers immediately	Yes	241	66.9%
	Think first	86	23.9%
	Ask someone	33	9.2%
Computers always give correct answers	Yes	285	79.2%
	No	51	14.2%
	Don't know	24	6.7%
Sometimes receive answer I don't understand	Yes	264	73.3%
	No	96	26.7%
Response to difficult task	Try independently first	71	19.7%
	Give up quickly	53	14.7%
	Ask a person	15	4.2%
	Search immediately	221	61.4%
Primary educational helper	Teacher	69	19.2%

Item	Response Option	f	%
	Parent	60	16.7%
	Friend	30	8.3%
	Computer	201	55.8%
Prefer to…	Receive answer directly	249	69.2%
	Think independently first	111	30.8%
How do you feel when you do not understand something?	Upset	80	22.2%
	Nervous	92	25.6%
	Calm	39	10.8%
	Does not affect me	149	41.4%

Four patterns stand out. First, when something was unclear, more children reached for a phone or computer (40.8%) than asked a teacher (30.3%) or a parent (26.4%), and 55.8% named the computer as their primary educational helper overall. Second, 66.9% accepted online answers without thinking them through first, and a striking 79.2% believed computers always give correct answers. Third, despite this confidence, 73.3% reported that they sometimes receive answers they do not fully understand, underscoring the distinction between access to information and genuine comprehension. Fourth, 61.4% said they would search on a device the moment a task got hard, and only 19.7% said they would try it on their own first.

Comparisons of Age Groups

Table 3a. Key Item Response Distributions by Age Group (N = 360)

Item	7–8 (n=120)	9–10 (n=120)	11–12 (n=120)	Total (N=360)
Search phone/computer as first response: f	87	46	14	147
Search phone/computer as first response: %	72.5%	38.3%	11.7%	40.8%
Accept online answers immediately: f	101	76	64	241
Accept online answers immediately: %	84.2%	63.3%	53.3%	66.9%
Computers always give correct answers: f	113	94	78	285
Computers always give correct answers: %	94.2%	78.3%	65.0%	79.2%
Computer named primary educational helper: f	89	66	46	201
Computer named primary educational helper: %	74.2%	55.0%	38.3%	55.8%

Children aged 7–8 were the most dependent on technology across every category measured. Within this group, 72.5% (87/120) said their first move on hitting an obstacle was to look at their device, 84.2% (101/120) accepted online answers without reflecting on

them, 94.2% (113/120) believed computers are always correct, and 74.2% (89/120) named the computer as their main educational helper. Taken together, these numbers suggest that younger children tend to view digital technologies as unusually credible, even authoritative, sources of information and support.

That picture changes with age. Among 9–10-year-olds, 38.3% (46/120) said a device was their first response to difficulty; by 11–12, that figure drops to 11.7% (14/120), and the same downward trend holds for every other indicator of reliance on AI tools. Table 3b reports the chi-square tests confirming that these age-group differences are statistically significant across all four items.

Table 3b. Chi-Square Tests of Independence Across Age Groups

Item	χ^2	df	p	Cramér's V
Search phone/computer as first response	92.37	2	< .001	.507
Accept online answers immediately	26.84	2	< .001	.273
Computers always give correct answers	31.02	2	< .001	.294
Computer named primary educational helper	31.29	2	< .001	.295

Note. df = 2 for all tests (3 age groups × 2 response categories). Cramér's V interpreted per Cohen (1988): small ≈ .10, medium ≈ .30, large ≈ .50.

The chi-square tests bear this out: response distributions differed significantly across age groups on all four items (all $p < .001$). The effect was largest for first response to academic difficulty (Cramér's V = .507, a large effect by Cohen's 1988 benchmarks) and medium-sized for the remaining three, accepting online answers without reflection, believing computers are infallible, and naming the computer as primary helper (Cramér's V = .273–.295). In other words, the age-related gradient is not only evident in the descriptive statistics but is also supported by the inferential analyses.

Pearson Correlation Analysis

Table 4. Pearson Correlations Among Key Variables (N = 360)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Frequency of AI use	–		
2. Trust in AI-generated information	.83 [.79, .86]	–	
3. Reduced independent problem-solving	.69 [.63, .74]	.70 [.64, .75]	–

Note. Values are Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients (r) with 95% confidence intervals in brackets. All correlations were statistically significant at $p < .001$ (two-tailed). Composite scores were calculated as the mean of constituent items within each domain. According to Cohen's (1988) guidelines, all observed associations represent large effect sizes. Findings should be interpreted as exploratory because common method variance may have contributed to the observed magnitudes.

All three variables were positively and strongly associated with one another. Frequency of AI use correlated strongly with trust in AI-generated information ($r = .83$, 95% CI [.79, .86], $p < .001$) and with reduced independent problem-solving ($r = .69$, 95% CI [.63, .74], $p < .001$), and trust in AI-generated information was in turn strongly associated with reduced independent problem-solving ($r = .70$, 95% CI [.64, .75], $p < .001$). By Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, every one of these associations counts as large.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the findings tell a coherent and theoretically legible story. In this sample of Albanian primary school children, habitual reliance on AI-assisted and digitally mediated learning tools goes hand in hand with uncritical trust in information and a weaker orientation toward independent problem-solving, and both patterns are most pronounced among the youngest children, exactly as Piaget (1964) and Vygotsky (1978) would predict.

One finding worth sitting with: 55.8% of children named the computer as their primary educational helper, ahead of teachers, parents, and friends combined, and that figure climbs to 74.2% among 7–8-year-olds. This pattern is consistent with a shift in who children turn to when they need help. Developmental theory has long treated human interaction as the setting in which cognitive and socio-emotional skills are actually built (Piaget, 1964; Vygotsky, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), so when a machine appears to take that role for many children, the consequences could extend past academic performance and into the relational domain. That said, this has to remain a tentative reading: cross-sectional data simply cannot tell us whether AI use is displacing human interaction, or whether children with less human support to begin with are the ones gravitating toward devices.

A related point: 73.3% of children said they sometimes receive answers they do not understand. That number cuts to something educational technology debates often blur past the difference between retrieving information and actually learning something. AI tools are very good at the former. What the present data suggest is that they do not reliably deliver the latter on their own, without some pedagogical scaffolding around them (Resnick, 2017).

The age-group results sharpen this picture considerably. The clearest gradient, confirmed statistically by the chi-square tests in Table 3b, shows up in immediate device help-seeking, which falls from 72.5% at ages 7–8 to just 11.7% at ages 11–12, matching what Piagetian theory would predict almost exactly. Children still in the concrete operational stage appear to be the most susceptible to taking AI output at face value; as formal operational thinking comes online, that susceptibility eases, and indeed this item carried the largest effect size of the four (Cramér's $V = .507$). But the gradient should not be mistaken for resolution: even at 11–12, over half of children (53.3%) still accepted AI answers without reflecting on them, and nearly two-thirds (65.0%) still believed computers are always correct.

These correlations are worth reading carefully, given how the questionnaire was built. Because the three composite variables came from conceptually related items within the same instrument and loaded onto a single underlying factor, part of what we are seeing in the correlations may be shared measurement variance rather than three cleanly distinct psychological processes. The safer reading is that AI reliance, trust in AI-generated

information, and reduced independent problem-solving tend to travel together in this sample, not that we have established three separable causal mechanisms. We nonetheless report them as separate composites, rather than collapsing them into the single PCA-derived factor, because each maps onto a conceptually distinct construct with its own theoretical and practical implications; the single-factor result indicates that they are not psychometrically separable in this sample, not that the underlying constructs are interchangeable, and we treat the three composites as theoretically motivated facets of a broader AI-reliance orientation rather than as independently validated subscales.

The emotional data add something the descriptive statistics alone do not capture. Close to half of all children (47.8%: 22.2% upset, 25.6% nervous) said they feel upset or nervous when they cannot understand something. Yet the most common response to that distress was simply to reach for a device. This pattern may reflect a tendency to bypass rather than engage directly with the challenge: when a child's habitual answer to cognitive and emotional difficulty is to reach for a device rather than work through it with another person, they may miss out on two things at once: a chance to practise regulating that difficult feeling, and the developmental experience of struggling through a problem alongside someone else.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study found that habitual reliance on AI-assisted and digital help-seeking among Albanian primary school children was associated with lower self-reported independent problem-solving orientation, greater uncritical acceptance of information, and increased reliance on digital rather than human sources of educational support, a pattern most pronounced among younger children. The purpose of this paper is not to suggest that AI is inherently harmful. Rather, the findings indicate that the developmental implications of AI use depend substantially on how these technologies are integrated into children's learning environments. When accompanied by critical literacy instruction, effective pedagogical scaffolding, and meaningful human interaction, AI may be compatible with healthy development. In the absence of these conditions, however, the present findings suggest that less favorable outcomes may be more likely.

Six recommendations emerge from these findings. First, AI tools should be positioned as a secondary resource, introduced only after children have made a genuine attempt to solve a task independently. The present findings indicate that 61.4% of children, including 72.5% of those aged 7–8 years, turn to digital search immediately when faced with difficulty. Second, digital literacy, including the evaluation of information sources and an understanding of the limitations of AI-generated content, should be incorporated into the curriculum from the earliest years of primary education, with instruction adapted to children's developmental levels. Third, schools should provide opportunities for sustained reasoning, problem-solving, and interpersonal engagement that cannot be readily delegated to technological tools. Fourth, both schools and families should preserve opportunities for face-to-face interaction, given its central role in socio-emotional development. Fifth, policymakers should develop evidence-informed and developmentally appropriate frameworks to guide AI use in primary education and review them regularly as technologies evolve. Finally, teacher education and professional development programmes should

prepare educators to integrate AI critically, foster digital literacy, and maintain human relationships as a central component of the learning process.

Albania specifically, these findings carry important policy implications. The data were collected in some of Tirana's most digitally resourced schools, yet the results suggest that expanding access to technology without corresponding investment in critical digital literacy may leave children better able to access information than to evaluate it. The Ministry of Education and Sports, in collaboration with the National Agency for Information Society, should ensure that national digital education strategies place as much emphasis on pedagogical development as on technological infrastructure, with particular attention to younger children, who emerged in this study as the group at greatest risk.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Second, all primary data were derived from children's self-reports using forced-choice formats, which may introduce acquiescence bias (Borgers et al., 2000). In addition, children in this age range have well-documented limitations in metacognitive accuracy (Flavell, 1979), meaning that reported behaviours may not fully correspond to actual behaviours. Future research would benefit from incorporating behavioural observations and performance-based measures alongside self-report data.

The study employed non-probability quota sampling and is therefore not nationally representative. Common method variance may also have contributed to both the observed correlations and the emergence of a dominant factor, highlighting the value of multi-source research designs. Furthermore, because several questionnaire items relied on children's everyday device- and action-based language (e.g., "phone," "computer," "search") rather than explicitly referencing AI, the instrument cannot fully distinguish AI-specific use from broader digital technology use in every instance. Future research should examine whether more explicit AI-related item wording, once developmentally appropriate for this age group, alters response patterns. Finally, although the composite variables were constructed from conceptually related questionnaire items, their psychometric properties warrant further examination through confirmatory factor analysis and multi-method assessment. The knowledge comprehension assessment and emotional recognition task are reported separately in the companion manuscript described above.

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THE "SMART CITY" PROJECT AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS: THE CASE OF ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

The classic philosophical debate on the relationship between freedom and security constitutes one of the fundamental issues of modern political philosophy, which takes on a new dimension in the era of digital technology and artificial intelligence. "Smart City" projects, already under development in Albania, promise increased urban efficiency and security, but at the same time raise serious ethical and democratic concerns. This study is based on theoretical and normative analyses, relying on the contribution of philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Michel Foucault, and Jürgen Habermas. Through an interdisciplinary approach, perspectives from political philosophy, ethics and technology studies are combined to analyze the implications of the "Smart City" in the Albanian context. The analysis identifies three main ethical issues: (1) The risk of continuous surveillance and the creation of a culture of control, as analyzed by Foucault, in the concept of the panopticon; (2) The challenges related to the protection of privacy and individual autonomy from the use of personal data; (3) The reduction of democratic participation as a consequence of the delegation of decision-making to algorithms and technical experts. Although "Smart City" projects offer important benefits for urban development in Albania, they require a strong legal and ethical framework. It is essential to ensure transparency, citizen involvement and respect for fundamental rights to avoid abuses and increase public trust. The main challenge remains the balance between technological innovation and the preservation of values such as freedom, justice and human dignity.

Key words: *"Smart City", surveillance, technology, ethics, data privacy*.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid technological developments of recent decades have made it possible for a good part of the infrastructure and services of cities to be automated and significantly improved, as a result of the use of intelligent technologies, which collect data, analyze them, and make decisions in real time. "Smart City" means a city that uses digital technology data to improve important aspects of urban life, such as; transportation, energy use, public services, order and security, sustainability and quality of life, For Kitchin (2018) Sourbati & Behrendt (2021), "Smart City" projects have their origins in the 1970s. The first examples of smart cities are Songdo and Seoul (South Korea), Singapore (Singapore), Amsterdam (Netherlands), Zurich (Switzerland), Oslo (Norway), Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), Barcelona (Spain).

In the Balkans, almost all capitals of the countries have entered into initiatives to transform themselves into smart cities.

Despite the great advantages they present, the development of "Smart City" projects has also sparked major debates regarding ethical, political and social implications, this is because "Smart City" initiatives create an increasing dependence on data collection through intelligent technologies such as cameras, sensors or tracking devices, to processing and interpretation and decision-making. The use of these elements raises ethical concerns regarding autonomy, transparency, responsibility, privacy, etc.

Decisions regarding the management and administration of urban life have traditionally been made through processes of public discussions and consultations, while with technological developments and "Smart City" projects, this decision-making is increasingly dependent on digital systems and algorithms, the way in which they operate remains inaccessible to ordinary citizens. This is why the "Smart City" should not be understood as a major step in technological development but as a fundamental transformation of the relationship between the state, society and technology. The ethical dilemmas regarding the concepts of "Smart City", or digital city, must be analyzed beyond the immediate interests or benefits in terms of efficiency and security. These dilemmas evoke fundamental philosophical issues regarding the relationship between individual freedoms and collective well-being. Throughout the history of political philosophy, thinkers such as Tomas Hobbes, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, and Michel Foucault, have presented their views on supervision, freedom, public participation and the exercise of power. Their views, together with those of Habermas, Arendt and, more recently, Byung Chul-Han, help us to understand how digital technologies can simultaneously improve public services by expanding forms of surveillance and social control. Through these perspectives, we understand that technological innovations are never neutral but reflect the efforts of authority to normalize state interference in individual freedoms.

These concerns receive particular attention, especially in countries with still unconsolidated democratic institutions, when citizens' trust in institutions is still low. In Albania, the idea of a "Smart City" is very new. The information that has circulated for several months is scant. Members of the government, so far in their articulations, have only expressed the idea of installing smart cameras in about 20 cities in the country, starting from Tirana. However, smart cameras are only one of the many aspects of smart cities.

Furthermore, the element of cameras has been justified with the classic argument that surveillance will help to increase order and security.

The local media has meanwhile reported on the concerns of citizens regarding the installation of this type of technology, as for them this implies continuous surveillance, and uncertainty about the management of this data.

Consequently, the implementation of "Smart City" projects in Albania cannot be assessed only in terms of the benefits of technological progress, but must take into consideration the institutional and infrastructural capacity to guarantee effective governance that protects human rights.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a qualitative research methodology aiming at a conceptual normative analysis. The paper addresses the ethical implications of "Smart City" projects through the analysis of philosophical, sociological and political concepts. The main research question is: how can the ethical challenges of digital surveillance and "Smart City" projects be understood, through theories of political philosophy and contemporary ethical conception? The analysis is built on classical and contemporary theories that address issues of ethics, surveillance, democracy and power, with the aim of building a theoretical framework for assessing the normative challenges arising from digital/smart urban governance. In this context, the paper relies on the theoretical views of Th. Hobbes, J. S. Mill, I.Kant, M. Foucault, J. Habermas, H. Arendt and B. C. Han, who offer different perspectives on the relationship between security, individual freedom, democratic participation and technological control.

The work is qualitative; meanwhile the method is interpretative, analyzing the case of our country, as an example through which ethical concerns arising from the implementation of "Smart City" projects can be examined. In this context, our concern is to answer the question, what is the main institutional and ethical challenge for the implementation of the "Smart City" initiative, taking into account the level of citizens's trust in institutions as well as the protection of personal data. Combining philosophical analysis with the Albanian context, the paper aims to highlight the ethical risks and governance challenges associated with the use of intelligent technology in urban management, emphasizing the necessity of transparency, democratic accountability and the protection and respect of fundamental human rights in the process of digital transformations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of smart cities represents an opportunity in which urban spaces, instead of being managed by traditional and rigid administrative structures, use digital systems of data sensors and analytical data to manage the daily life of the city. Public services are monitored and managed in real time; also, intelligent systems regulate traffic based on the traffic load in real time, making a real-time observation, control and regulate the space. In these "Smart City" models, the management and the decision-making depend largely on the data that is generated. So, the decisions that are made are no longer based solely on human judgment or on expert debates and discussions, but largely depend on the large amount of data and their analysis through sophisticated algorithms. Those who support the

idea of smart cities say that this makes spatial management and governance more efficient and less error-prone in terms of certain decision-making, and why not also less costly.

"Smart City" as e new model of governance

However, it must be understood that the adoption of such drastic changes also brings out a radical change in the relationship between citizens and state institutions. This is because the city is no longer just a social and political space, but also an infrastructural machine that continuously produces and processes data for its citizens. This new way of functioning also finds out some ethical issues, when it comes to city governance and management, as it creates dependence on data systems, raises concerns about who has control over this data, who interprets it, and who proposes public policies that affect the citizens' lives. Conseguently, this leads us to the main ethical concern; if governance becomes dependent on data from intelligent systems, which controls this data and, most importantly, who interprets it.

Since the birth of such initiatives, in the world, scholars have raised various concerns, which essentially evoke a long-standing debate in philosophy, the debate ranking freedom versus security. The concern is best expressed through three questions:

- Should we constantly sacrifice freedom for more security?
- Should we protect freedom against security?
- Can this ratio be balanced?

The classical political debate between freedom and security

Political philosophers have defended different positions on this issue. Thomas Hobbes (2017) gave priority to security at the expense of freedom. In *Leviathan*, he states that security is the foundation of social order. Therefore, to protect security, we must sacrifice our freedoms, because the lack of security brings a much worse situation than giving priority to freedom over security. If freedom prevailed over security, this would bring violence and chaos to society. From this perspective, the use of surveillance technologies can be justified, because they bring security and stability to society. A contrary view to Hobbes is presented by John Stuart Mill (2011), who emphasizes the importance of individual freedoms as a central value in society. Restrictions on freedom, says Mill in *On Liberty*, are acceptable only if they cause harm to others. Excessive surveillance and observation become a problem because they limit personal freedom without an objective justification. Another important perspective is given to us by Immanuel Kant (1996), who in the second formulation of the categorical imperative states: treat the human being, both in your own person and in that of others, always as an end and never as a means. This means that the addition of supervisory mechanisms becomes problematic from an ethical point of view, as it violates human dignity by reducing people to subjects of control.

Digital surveillance and the new Panopticon

One of the most important views on surveillance and the development of intelligent technologies are presented by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. In his analysis of modern institutions, Foucault (1877) in *Discipline and Punish; the Birth of Prison*, describes

the idea of the panopticon; a system in which individuals behave as if they were being observed all the time, even though they are not. The concept of the Panopticon was first introduced in its literal sense by Jeremy Bentham in *Panopticon; or, The Inspection House* (1791/1995). Bentham, one of the most influential philosophers of modernity, conceived the Panopticon as an architectural model for institutional surveillance, designed to enable continuous observation while minimizing the need for direct supervision.

Let us recall that the paradigm of modernity was rationali and efficient at its core. Through the panopticon, the rational choice was aimed at minimal cost. Although the panopticon was initially born as an initiative for the better management of the prison institution, according to Foucault (1877), all institutions in modern society, such as schools, hospitals, companies, factories, etc., have adapted this concept.

In the case of "Smart city", surveillance is no longer limited as in the case of prisons or special institutions, it becomes a normality of daily life through cameras, sensors and tracking systems. This creates what can be known as the digital panopticon, an environment in which citizens model their behavior, because they know that they are being watched. This massive surveillance limits people and pushes them to model their behavior. In sociology, this is a completely familiar situation. The experimental method in sociology, for Giddens (2007) in addition to its advantages, also presents its limitations, and one of the limitations is precisely related to the modification that people make to their behavior when they know that they are subjects of the experiment. The public's reaction to surveillance technologies in our country is profoundly shaped by communist regime. During that period, surveillance was not primarily conducted through advanced technological systems or digital devices, as it is today. Instead, the mechanisms of monitoring and social control relied extensively on human networks, where ordinary citizens, informants, and state collaborators functioned as instruments of observation and espionage. This historical experience has contributed to a collective memory in which surveillance is associated not only with state authority but also with interpersonal distrust, influencing contemporary attitudes toward modern surveillance technologies.

Privacy, data ownership and algorithmic power

"Smart City" intelligent systems are based on the collection of many aspects of management's city life, data in terms of traffic, energy, and even health-related behaviors. This data, once collected, is processed and then the respective decisions are made. The concern that arises here has to do with privacy and the fact that who owns the ownership of this data collected through surveillance technologies? Secondly, do citizens have the right to object to the collection of data about them? How can we be sure that this data will not be used for purposes other than those for which it was originally collected? In the absence of intelligent technologies, in the past decisions were made by people and officials who administered the city, while today decision-making is increasingly shifting to automated systems, or what are now known as algorithms. But although algorithms may be more efficient in making decisions, they are not necessarily neutral, because they operate on the basis of assumptions and biases in the data on which they are tested. This can lead to biased and unequal outcomes, especially for the most vulnerable categories and groups in society.

Democratic accountability in digital governance

Perhaps the most important concern when talking about the "Smart City"'s development has to do with the way the decisions are made and who is responsible for them. If the governance and administration of the city depend on technical digital systems and algorithms, we are faced with the risk that decision-making will slip from the hands of democratic institutions into the hands of private technology companies and automated systems. Here we face a very serious concern that has to do with the way accountability is conceived in democratic societies. The German philosopher Jurgen Habermas (1996) in *Beween Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse theory of Law ans Democracy*, stated that democracy depends on the participation of citizens in public debates, where citizens take part in rational discussions about decisions that are then taken by the majority. It is precisely through this dynamic process of communication that legitimacy is established, as laws, public policies, and collective decisions emerge from open, rational dialogue among citizens rather than being imposed through top-down authority.

The problem is that in the "Smart City" situation, decision-making moves from the terrain of public discussions to spaces that are inaccessible to public participation. Citizens do not have a clear idea of how decisions are made, which are later used to determine who is responsible if mistakes occur. This consequently reduces the levels of transparency, which is vital for democratic societies, and weakens accountability.

Public Space, Power, and the Risk of Depoliticization

Hannah Arendt offers another important perspective on this transformation. Arendt emphasizes the importance of the public sphere as the space where individuals appear, speak, and act together as political beings. For her, freedom is not only individual autonomy, but participation in collective political life. From this perspective, "Smart City" systems can be seen as potentially ambivalent. On one hand, they can improve communication between citizens and public institutions. On the other hand, they can also reduce public life to data management, where political debate is replaced by technical optimization. If governance becomes too focused on efficiency and prediction, there is a risk of depoliticization. Citizens may no longer engage in meaningful public debate, but instead interact with systems that already "decide" what is efficient or optimal. This weakens the space of political action that Arendt (1958) in *Human Condition* considers essential for freedom.

Transparency, control, and psychological power

A more recent philosophical perspective is provided by Byung-Chul Han, who analyzes contemporary digital society as a system of transparency and self-surveillance. According to Han (2015), modern power no longer operates mainly through external repression, but through internalized control, where individuals willingly expose themselves and monitor their own behavior. In "Smart Cities", this logic becomes even more visible. Citizens are constantly generating data through smartphones, transport systems, and online services. At the same time, they are encouraged to be "transparent" in the name of safety, efficiency, and convenience.

However, this transparency is not neutral. It creates a situation where individuals are permanently observable and measurable. Over time, this can lead to what Han describes as a form of psychological pressure, where individuals adapt their behavior to what is

visible and measurable, reducing spontaneity and critical thinking. Unlike traditional surveillance models, this form of control does not rely on force. Instead, it works through participation and self-exposure. Citizens become both subjects and producers of surveillance at the same time.

Ethical concerns about the "Smart City" project in Albania.

The implementation of "Smart City" technologies in Albania raises some serious ethical concerns that go beyond the aspects of profitability and efficiency. Despite the fact that these systems are often presented as neutral tools for improving urban public services, they in fact reflect aspects of power, control and the relationship between the state and the individual. Our starting point for judging these concerns has its roots in the long-standing debate between deontological ethical theories and theories that evaluate actions based on consequences, which are otherwise called consequentialist. If we rely on deontological theories, especially Kantian theory, moral actions should be judged only in relation to moral principles, and not at all to benefits or consequences. The basis of this idea is the concept of human dignity. According to Kant (1996), we cannot use people as tools, despite the great benefits we may have, because doing so would violate their dignity. Therefore, both observation or surveillance and the manipulation of people to adopt self-control behaviors become morally problematic, because they violate important principles of individual autonomy and privacy. However, ethical theories that emphasize the consequences of actions have as their evaluation criteria for actions the benefit, utility, and efficiency, and are willing to sacrifice individual autonomy or privacy for the sake of consequences. Consequently, if the digital technological systems of a "Smart City" reduce the number of crimes, improve traffic, and increase the level of public services, they can be justified even if they violate individual autonomy or privacy.

In fact, this is the most common argument used whenever the application of technologies that monitor and collect data on citizens is discussed, that is, everything is done for the sake of the public good. However, here a moral debate arises, since a consequentialist theory risks not taking into account and violating autonomy or privacy, for the sake of profit. This debate becomes crucial especially in those societies where democratic institutions are still fragile, since the risk of misuse of data, violation of autonomy or privacy of the individual is great. So in a society like ours, ethical concerns about digital technologies and "Smart City" initiatives must be seen in relation to the current state of institutions.

These concerns are essential to address, considering that "Smart City" systems collect and process sensitive personal data, and if institutional protection systems are not sufficiently secure, then the risk that this data will be misused with or without purpose is great.

Citizen concern and lack of trust in institutions regarding surveillance and surveillance technologies is justified if placed in a historical context;

First, surveillance has been a widely used tool since the communist system, and since many people have suffered its consequences, this returns as reminiscence in the present.

Second, in recent years, our country has faced major problems regarding the infrastructure for storing and managing citizens' data.

Let us recall here: hacking and public disclosure of citizens' income and bank deposits, disclosure of telephone numbers and vehicle license plates, personal identification numbers,

real estate lists, etc. The disclosure of this data exposed citizens to various risks, such as threats, fines, or various forms of blackmail.

Added to this, the party patronage platforms, which collect a whole lot of data on citizens about their political orientation, and the suspicious shadows of how this data can be used to blackmail and influence the electoral outcome. This situation of recent years, fully justifies the concern and skepticism of citizens regarding surveillance and monitoring technologies.

Despite the problems listed above, this does not mean that the "Smart City" project should be opposed, but the need for a legal structure, independent institutional oversight and transparent governance should be strongly emphasized before this project is implemented in practice.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The "Smart City" concept represents not only a technological transformation of governance of city life's management, but also a reconceptualization of the relationship between the state, technology and citizens. At a time when intelligent technologies can improve the efficiency of public services, traffic management and urban safety, aspects of public health, at the same time they present important ethical challenges related to privacy, autonomy, transparency and democratic accountability.

Decision-making based on advanced digital systems is not necessarily neutral, as algorithms reflect the assumptions and limitations of the data on which they are built, creating opportunities for bias, discrimination and lack of transparency in the decision-making process. The analysis highlights that the expansion of surveillance technologies can produce new forms of self-control and self-discipline of citizens, gradually limiting the space for individual freedoms and democratic participation.

Regarding the case of Albania, the study highlights that the ethical challenges of "Smart City" are closely related to the level of trust in public institutions and the institutional capacity to guarantee the protection of personal data. Previous experiences regarding data leaks to the public or the experience of surveillance during the communist period increase the doses of citizen skepticism towards technologies that are based on continuous monitoring.

The paper concludes that the development of smart cities should not be evaluated only on the basis of technological efficiency or economic benefits, but also in relation to the respect of the fundamental principles of ethics and democracy. A "Smart City" project can be considered successful only if it manages to guarantee a balance between technological innovation, public safety and the protection of fundamental human rights.

The implementation of "Smart City" initiatives in our country should be accompanied by a clear legal framework, independent oversight mechanisms, transparency in the use of algorithms and strong policies for the protection of personal data. Furthermore, citizen participation in the design and monitoring of digital governance policies is a key condition for maintaining democratic legitimacy and increasing public trust. Only in this way the digital transformation of cities can serve better management of urban services, and for strengthening democracy, individual freedom and institutional accountability.

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ALBANIAN TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND FAMILIARITY WITH AI IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine the readiness of educators and educational leaders to adopt and effectively utilize Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools within educational settings. Though a comprehensive review of existing literature and an analysis of current practices, the study explores teachers` perceptions and levels of familiarity with AI technologies, as well as identifies gaps that hinder their integration into teaching environments. The findings underscore the necessity for educators to enhance their pedagogical performance and to adopt innovative instructional methodologies aligned with institutional requirements. Additionally, the results reveal that female educators demonstrate greater awareness of AI implementation in education, and that teachers employed in public education institutions exhibit higher level of interest in understanding and addressing AI-related needs, whether on an individual or institutional level. The research methodology emphasizes the importance of interventions aimed at increasing teachers` familiarity with AI tools and investigates the relationship between educators' perceptions and their knowledge of AI applications. The study highlights the critical need for ongoing training, workshops, and practical activities focused on AI concepts and their application across various disciplines. To fully realize the transformative potential of AI in education, collaborative efforts between institutions and teachers are essential to develop coherent curricula and to promote the integration of AI tools, ensuring that educators are equipped with the requisite skills and knowledge to facilitate effective implementation.

Key words: *Artificial Intelligence tools, educational settings, teachers` professional development, AI literacy*

LITERATURE REVIEW

A central theme in current scholarly discourse is that teachers` beliefs, interpretations of the curriculum, and professional trajectories fundamentally influence the extent to which artificial intelligence is integrated into classroom practices in a meaningful and sustainable manner (Casal-Otero et al., 2024). Educators serve as key mediators between policy aspirations and classroom realities, their understanding of AI, confidence in utilizing AI tools, and perceptions of associated risks and benefits critically shape how AI is adopted and conceptualized for student engagement (MacDowell et al., 2024). Consequently, an expanding body of research emphasizes the importance of cultivating AI competences among teachers, recognizing that their attitudes and skillsets are pivotal to fostering AI-ready learning environments (Black et al., 2024).

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the digitalization of education, thereby intensifying interest in AI as a means of supporting online and blended learning modalities. This abrupt transition underscored the effective engagement with digital tools, including even AI, relies on technical proficiency but also on teachers` readiness, emotional resilience, and self-efficacy (Karataş et al., 2024). Studies conducted during and following the pandemic, highlight that educators` emotional intelligence and technological confidence significantly influence their willingness to experiment with AI, their persistence in overcoming technical challenges, and their capacity to sustain student engagement in virtual environments (Zhang et al., 2024). The integration of AI within education must be contextualized within its broader historical development. Since its emergence as a research field in 1970s, AI has been applied across diverse sectors including education. Education evolved from early intelligent tutoring systems to contemporary learning analytics, adaptive platforms, and generative AI tools (Brandão et al., 2024). Recent literature emphasizes that AI can support personalized learning, formative assessment, and scalable feedback, thereby potentially enhancing learning outcomes and promoting inclusivity (Du et al., 2024; Walter, 2024). Nonetheless, scholars caution that AI introduces inherent risks, including data privacy concerns, algorithmic bias and surveillance, particularly when technologies are implemented in a top-down, instrumental manner (Sperling, 2024).

Many educators consider AI as an augmentation of their professional roles, the integration of AI into creative and interdisciplinary projects enables students to explore AI`s capabilities and limitations reflectively (Yim and Wegerif, 2024). However, the role of AI in professional development extends beyond technical workshops, encompassing mentoring and peer collaboration. AI-supported professional learning platforms can provide personalized feedback, simulate classroom scenarios, and offer adaptive learning pathways that mirror the experimental opportunities (al-Zyound, 2020; Cardona et al., n.d). Such approaches suggest that AI can serve both as the content of teacher learning and as a tool to facilitate that learning, underscoring the importance of coherence between AI utilization and teachers` digital literacy (Rutti-Joy et al., 2023; Karataş et al., 2024).

In conclusion, teachers` familiarity with AI, perceptions, skills, and ongoing professional development are critical determinants of whether AI integration will genuinely enrich educational experiences. Equally important are the challenges related to designing inclusive AI educational strategies and addressing issues of diversity and equity. Effectively tackling these challenges will be essential for realizing AI`s potential to contribute to more responsive, humane, and socially just educational systems.

METHODOLOGY

The paper uses a quantitative methodology to collect primary data from a survey shared with teachers from primary, elementary and secondary schools in Albania. This approach was selected to better understand whether teachers are prepared to incorporate AI tools in educational settings and to understand how professional development of teachers in this regard supports this goal. The cross-sectional design was used to spot patterns across many teachers who teach in different school types or who belong to different genders.

Teachers who participated in the survey belonged to a mixed target group regarding age, gender, school, or professional development. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire which required information regarding demographics, knowledge of AI tools in education, confidence in using these tools in classrooms, their intention for the future regarding its usage, self-rated knowledge on AI. Data analysis process applied Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis test as well as SPSS to generate the results. Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare distributions between two independent groups while Kruskal-Wallis test was used for multi-group comparisons. The hypothesis of the study

RESULTS

Based on the data collected from the study, resulted that the majority of teachers are familiar with AI concepts in education but not at an expert level. They have got basic knowledge from personal research, that is why the data suggests a moderate level of familiarity among teachers who have a very significant knowledge and understanding of AI in educational context. Getting in consideration the updates that teachers have got on AI tools in education, they incorporate them according to the needs of the students and the needs of the teaching process itself. Said that, being prepared for the incorporation of these tools, the process of curricula improvement and adoption with AI, is smoother and easier.

Confidence in using AI tools is a skill gained through experience, and it takes time unless you are an expert in the field. This data indicates that teachers remain uncertain about their capabilities in AI, feel less confident and always doubt whether they are using AI tools correctly or not. However, teachers with high confidence guarantee an ongoing search for new implementations, knowledge and improvement of how to use these tools properly. The results emphasize the need for skills development in this regard. The data also suggests that the teachers` confidence increases if they are more familiar with the concepts, usage of AI tools and their peculiarities. So, the more familiar they are with AI tools, the more confident they feel using them.

The gender comparison between teachers, suggests that women are more informed and knowledgeable regarding AI concepts than man. However, this result does not show a strong correlation between gender and familiarity. There are many reasons why the number of respondents being familiar with the concept of AI is higher in women rather than men. One reason is because the sample was random, and the number of women who took the survey is higher than the men. On the other hand, the number of women being employed in education system in Albania is higher than men, therefore even the number of women taking the survey would be higher.

The study also compared the knowledge of teachers regarding the school they teach, whether it was private or public. As a result, the data claims that teachers who teach in public schools are more familiar with the concept of AI and AI tools in education in comparison to teachers who teach in private schools. The difference between each is huge, however there is no positive correlation between this data and the research question. The lack of correlation stands on the fact that the sample was random, as a result the number of participants from public schools was higher than from public ones. However, this data also indicates that it is not only the infrastructure that affects the familiarity with AI tools. In private schools the technological tools don't miss, though the familiarity of teachers with these tools is lower compared to public schools where the lack of technological infrastructure is the main issue. This result suggests that it is essential to get to know and understand the concepts first and then initiate the process of equipping schools with these tools. If teachers and students don't know how to use these tools, they would be useless.

The aim of this survey was also to analyze the relationship between AI use and participation in professional development. According to the data collected, results that teachers need more practical training and to foster collaboration with education institutions or agencies that might be helpful in this area. These training courses would make teachers more familiar with the concept of AI tools in education and therefore they will feel more confident using them. While, if these training and professional development activities are missing, the familiarity of teachers with AI tools will be lower and consequently their confidence will be lower. What educational institutions benefit from this lack of knowledge and skills is less educated students in using AI tools properly and according to their needs.

Lastly, teachers were also asked regarding the professional development they need and consider beneficial for their career. Professional and practical training was the most required kind of professional activity teachers considered as essential for their future career. Though the teachers might work individually into trying to understand the platforms, the guide of an expert to inform them about the proper usage, the limitations, the level of reliability, the commands, in a practical way, is essential. On the other hand, by being involved in ongoing projects and workshops, teachers will be updated with the changes, and it would be easier for them to use the platforms themselves or help their students do so. Said that, though the interest of teachers to know more about AI tools is high, though they might get informed about the tools individually, practical training, workshops or projects would improve the situation and facilitate the process of AI tools involvement into education curricula.

To sum up, the teachers` familiarity with AI platforms and knowledge is positively related to their confidence in using AI tools. This correlation along with the need they have for practical activities to develop their skills in the field, recommends that the teachers` confidence in using AI tools in educational settings can be enhanced if their familiarity with these concepts and tools is increased through practical development, training and workshops. As a result, teachers` professional development activities focus must be on increasing the familiarity with AI tools and providing trainings and practical activities and experiences that would improve their confidence levels.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The data suggests that familiarity and knowledge positively affect the confidence of the teacher in classroom. If the teacher is familiar with the terminology and the tools, the more confident they feel in class, and the more they are willing to use these tools. As a result, as scholars agree, the more exposed teachers are the levels of self-efficiency rise. Teachers support the usage of AI tools in classrooms since the majority of them consider them important tools that facilitate the assessment process, provide personalized and tailored lesson plans, reduce time for feedback and approach the needs of students and teachers.

The primary data revealed that though private schools in Albania have a better and updated technological environment, teachers who teach in public schools are more updated and tend to attend more trainings on AI tools implementation in educational institutions. Teachers who teach in public schools are more familiar with the benefits of using AI tools for educational purposes and are more willing to develop their professional skills in this aspect. Furthermore, considering the gender classification, teachers who were more familiar with AI concepts in Albania are females and less familiar are male. As a consequence, teaching programs are more preferable from females rather than males. However, by analyzing other correlations regarding how much they use AI tools in classroom or what would they prefer to improve their skills in, female teachers were more concise and specific rather than men.

Considering all the above mentioned, it is recommended to provide practical tasks and workshops for teachers to improve their skills and enlarge the knowledge on how to properly use the AI tools in classrooms. Practical training would make teachers become more familiar and confident to use AI tools, as a result students' performance and teachers` performance will improve. Though reliable, the results are limited due to the low percentage of teachers who participated in the survey. The small sample and response rate might create generalizations and teachers might not feel totally represented. On the other hand, self-reported measures mentioned by participants might create biases since their responses were optimistic. In this regard, a bigger sample and observations would strengthen the claims and support the results of this survey.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, it is highlighted that the majority of teachers have got considerable knowledge and awareness regarding AI concepts and their usage. However, if they are compared in terms of confidence, only those teachers who are trained are able to feel more confident using these tools. Said that, a positive correlation exists between teachers' familiarity with the terminology and the confidence they have when using them. Though the interest of teachers to get trained and practice regarding the ways and methods that can be used to incorporate AI tools in classrooms, the questionnaire identified the lack of these trainings so far and the need for these trainings to help teachers develop their professional skills and adopt the needs of the students. Another issue that the questionnaire revealed was that even though private schools are technologically equipped, teachers who teach in public schools are more willing to use and actually use more AI tools in classrooms because they are more familiar with the concept and the tools themselves.

Considering all the results, the study recommends Albanian educational institutions to prioritize AI issues and to provide trainings, workshops and practical activities to teachers so that they can master their skills in using AI tools and enhance their confidence in this area. Meetings with AI experts should be organized to foster collaboration and guarantee a continues training for teachers and update them accordingly. Addressing all the issues properly, the familiarity of teachers with AI will increase and their interaction with these tools will improve.

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INNOVATIONS AND CHALLENGES IN ELT IN THE ALBANIAN CONTEXT: THE CASE STUDY OF ELBASAN HIGH SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

English Language Teaching (ELT) in Albanian schools has undergone significant transformation in the recent years, driven by curriculum reforms, digital integration, and alignment with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). English, which is introduced from the first grade, provide students with longer exposure and a stronger foundation in communicative competence. Innovative practices such as project-based learning, cross-curricular approaches and the use of digital tools in Smart Labs and online platforms have enriched classroom experiences. Furthermore, national and international initiatives, including professional development programs and Erasmus+ projects, have contributed to teacher growth and the modernization of pedagogical practices. Despite these achievements, ELT in Albania continues to face challenges. Urban and rural schools face unequal access to resources. This creates disparities in learning opportunities. The exam-oriented culture often prioritizes grammar and memorization over authentic communication and learner autonomy. Additionally, while some teachers embrace new methodologies, others struggle with limited training in ICT use, inclusive education, and innovative assessment strategies. Student motivation and opportunities for authentic language practice outside the classroom also remain limited. This paper discusses both the innovations and the challenges shaping the ELT in Albanian schools, by emphasizing the case study of the High Schools of Elbasan, highlighting best practices while addressing systemic constraints. The analysis emphasizes the need for sustained teacher support, digital literacy, and inclusive approaches to ensure that ELT continues to meet global standards while responding to local realities.

Key Words: *EFL, innovations, challenges, curriculum reform, high school.*

INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a key school subject in the Albanian high schools. English has now become necessary for an educational career advancement and career in a globalized society. Elbasan, being typical of a typical educational institution in this type of educational context: Albania, provides an effective context for exploring the situation in which innovation and issues of sustainability coexist within the high schools. In recent years Albania has made substantial educational reforms during which focus is added to a shift in digital integration and digital curriculum modernization. However, most schools still are hampered about infrastructure, development and access to resources. This paper explores to what extent pedagogical and technological innovations are implemented in the Elbasan high school context, and how they relate to the remaining barriers: mixed abilities classes, exam-based practice and teacher training gaps. The research answers three main questions: What creative pedagogies, practices (pedagogical, technological and curricular) are emerging in EFL teaching at Albanian high schools? What are the biggest challenges to effective EFL instruction and learning? What is best for policy, school leadership and teacher practice to connect innovation to equity and sustainability? This paper stands out for having been structured as follows: a Literature Review (i) summarising the present research, a Methodology demonstrating the study's conceptual framework, a Findings Section (ii) presenting key patterns, a Discussion: describing the study findings in relation to Elbasan's schools, and a Conclusion/Recommendations (iii) discussing implications for future EFL practice in Albania.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Innovations in EFL Teaching in Albania

Recent literature shows the growing importance of technology and innovative pedagogy in EFL classrooms in Albania. Balla (2023) notes that despite the difficulties that accompany sustainability and training strategies, technology has become popular among students, who find their digital tools as engaging yet accessible. Likewise, research from Durrës (Osmani & Tartari, 2024) indicates that learners engage much more with digital tools, highlighting the need for suitable infrastructure and teacher practice. Collaborative teaching and digital creative methods, such as those described in this study, have also attracted focus. Dervishaj and Presi (2024) describe higher education's digital creative methods and co-teaching arrangements, which can be adapted to secondary contexts to ensure enhanced in-class interaction. Zela and Jata also reinforce this claim (2024), stating the role of the digital resources in motivating students and connecting language learning to professional contexts. UNESCO's encouragement on Media and Information Literacy (MIL) at the curriculum level has helped to build digital competence and information awareness in Albanian learners. At a pedagogical level, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has been discovered as a major agent in facilitating speaking and listening skills (Sefa & Xhaferi, 2023). Their study points to increase in learner autonomy via CLT, yet still with existing resource and methodological limitations on the part of many teachers. Likewise, Jani and Celaj (2024) assert that there is potential for new methodologies and technologies integrated successfully in the Albanian curriculum to revolutionize language

learning. In general, innovation in Albanian EFL teaching is about digital and digital ICT integration and collaboration, curriculum redesign, each of which present possibilities for more motivating, learner-centered and approach-oriented instruction.

Difficulties in EFL teaching in Albania

Despite these developments, there are still structural and pedagogical difficulties for the Albanian EFL teachers. Mehilli & Kolaj (2022) found that the challenges came by mixed-ability classes mainly centered on a variety of learning styles, lack of confidence in communication, limited access to up-to-date materials and low student motivation. Just as Sefa and Xhaferi (2023) report, traditional teachers-centered approach remains strong. As a result, this can limit the successful implementation of CLT. The limitations in infrastructure have not gotten better. In the SCAR review (2025), 80% of teachers in Albanian pre-university schools blame inadequate equipment and unstable internet for the barriers to digital education. Osmani and Tartari (2024) point out, moreover, that while the students are enthusiastic about technology, teachers receive less instruction about what to do with these tools. Apart from infrastructure, systemic injustices are also there that erode the quality of the EFL service. Albanian National Strategy for Development (2022–2030) emphasizes digital literacy and widespread access, but the digital divide continues to marginalize rural schools and at-risk communities. Moreover, the immense burden of testing and inspection procedures discourages new or inventive ways to produce things. Finally, even though Albania's EFL sector is innovative, it is in practice characterized by: an uneven distribution of resources, low teacher support and structural pressure to teach traditionally (and exam-oriented).

METHODOLOGY

This text adopts a qualitative-descriptive method, synthesizing contemporary literature, policy publications and context-rich sources on EFL teaching in Albania; more specifically in the context of Elbasan. The study does not utilize primary data, but uses Elbasan's high schools as a micro-case to discuss the national direction of the relationship. This study is based on recent literature on the EFL innovations and challenges in Albania (2022–2025), the evaluation of educational policy documents (namely UNESCO MIL and national digital strategies) and practical application to the context of Elbasan education, with the local EFL high schools practice as a backdrop. It reviews the salient contribution of the research to the EFL teaching implications for innovation, equity and professional development in teaching and learning.

FINDINGS

Innovation, Digital and ICT Tool Integration

Studies often reveal that the Albanian students respond positively to digital learning. "Students love it," as Balla (2023) observes, realizing technology's motivational potential. Similarly, Osmani and Tartari (2024) found the same situation in Durrës, where the use

of digital tools for learning created a lively atmosphere among students but still needed sufficient teacher preparedness and infrastructure. A more recent study by Zela & Jata (2024) extends this line to ESP settings and validates the conclusion that digital literacy corresponds with communication at work. At a broader systemic level, the MIL (Media Information Technolgy) initiative from UNESCO (2025) also enhances the digital and media literacy in curriculum implementation. As such, for Elbasan high schools, this evidentiary basis reveals substantial potential for digital-based tools - namely, integrated applications, integration of blended learning platforms and multimedia exercises to support communicative competence development.

Advances in Pedagogy: CLT, Collaboration and Creative Methods

Sefa and Xhaferi (2023) demonstrate that CLT encourages the development of both communication and independence. However, its implementation is hampered by limited resources. Dervishaj and Presi (2024) highlight that: „digital creative methods" and co-teaching arrangements provide co-working and engagement. Similarly, Jani and Celaj (2024) identify technology-mediated instruction as a motivational factor that supports positive behaviors. The deployment of communicative tasks, virtual exchange opportunities and projects in Elbasan classrooms might facilitate the more dynamic and learner-centered approach to EFL learning.

Curriculum Alignment and Teacher Development

National and international initiatives, ranging from the 2022-2030 digital education initiative to the ongoing ELTA Albania workshops, highlight increased support for ICT training and teacher professional development at the institutional level. These steps will improve this with increased training for teachers in Elbasan, and thus more opportunities to take innovative approaches when the method is integrated.

CHALLENGES

Infrastructure and Inequitable Resources

The SCAR report (2025) stated that the majority of Albanian EFL teachers lack adequate technical support resources. Osmani and Tartari (2024) confirmed that enthusiasm for digital learning is frequently greater than schools' technical capacity. Elbasan has urban vs rural school divides that illustrate the uneven preparedness for innovation.

Teacher Training and Mixed-Ability Classes

Mehilli Kolaj (2022) suggests that teachers are generally not prepared to meet the variety of learner needs, due to a scarcity of materials and low motivation. According to Sefa and Xhaferi (2023), there is also a dependence on traditional teaching methods. According to Balla (2023) over reliance on technology can also lead to a lack of depth of learning. For the Elbasan schools, this finding emphasises the importance of ongoing, specialized professional development relevant to the subject of differentiated instruction and communicative forms of pedagogy.

Exam-Driven Instruction and Motivation

Albania's EFL culture is still mainly an exam-centered society and teachers may find themselves unable to adapt flexibly for the good of their profession. As a result, learners may view the English language as a topic they need to go through exams rather than a medium for communication. However, this tug-of-war between assessment and real learning still pushes people forward. Equity and Digital Divide According to World Bank (2025), socioeconomic inequalities still exist, since rural schools often have limited access to the internet and resources. For Elbasan, particularly in suburban or rural areas, fair access to digital learning is a serious problem.

DISCUSSION

The Elbasan case is emblematic of larger trends within the Albanian EFL context: innovation at work alongside constraint under pressure. Real progress includes students' enthusiasm, a national commitment to digitalization and the growing number of professional development projects. Engagement and confidence of learners would be vastly improved for teachers who utilize interactive platforms, blended learning and communicative tasks. But the issues are still sticking. Inequitable access, inadequate instruction and training and infrastructural failures also limit further innovation. In contrast, test focused instruction and mixed-ability classrooms also stifle experimentation and creativity. Innovations have to be brought in at a slow pace and right place from day one - baby steps, scaling it slowly but surely and steadily to make progress a little bit but to allow for sustainable growth. The motivation factor is also important. Engagement: If EFL learning connects to real-life actions, such as landing or starting a job, traveling or studying, students tend to focus more. CLT and computerized tools that support this link as long as job tasks are relevant and meaningful. Finally, there is a strong need for leadership and policy support. In Elbasan, the school leaders should provide adequate ICT equipment usage, coordinate regular workshops on this, and also help to develop the cooperative learning environment. National policymakers will all need to devote budget toward providing funding to schools, which have the ability and talent, but face the challenge of implementing that in order to close the digital divide. It's getting teachers in to work with the local schools in the implementation. That must be an inclusive partnership if innovation is to spread among students across the country.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article explores the innovative products and challenges associated with molding English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Albanian secondary schools, particularly in Elbasan. It highlights the rapid advancements in digital and pedagogical innovation, alongside the ongoing systemic challenges. To enhance EFL provision in Elbasan and beyond, the following measures are recommended:

- Develop Infrastructure: Ensure access to the internet and adequate stocks of equipment and digital resources for students, especially in rural and resource-limited environments.

- Gradual Innovation: Implement changes in phases—start with a pilot program, conduct reviews, and then expand based on feedback.
- Continual Professional Development for Teachers: Focus on training that emphasizes digital pedagogy, communicative tasks, mixed-ability teaching, and learner-centered assessment.
- Foster Student Curiosity: Connect classroom activities to real-life communication, encouraging students to draw from their experiences and aspirations.
- Align with Examination Expectations: Integrate communicative abilities into assessment methods to balance innovation with accountability.
- Promote Equity: Ensure that all schools receive technology and support, so no institution is left behind.
- Inspire Reflective Leadership: Leaders should supervise educational practices, seek feedback, measure outcomes, and adapt strategies as necessary.

In conclusion, Albania's EFL landscape is at a pivotal moment. The path forward clearly lies in innovation; however, achieving sustained success will require collective efforts to address fundamental challenges. If these strategies form the basis for reforming EFL education in Elbasan, they could propel the country towards a more dynamic, engaging, adaptive, and future-oriented educational model that emphasizes equity, teacher-centered support and meaningful learning outcomes.

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VOLUNTEERING AS A TOOL FOR DEVELOPING CIVIC COMPETENCES AMONG LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Civic education and social responsibility have become central priorities in contemporary educational systems, particularly in efforts to promote active citizenship among young people. Within this context, volunteering is increasingly recognized as a meaningful pedagogical approach that connects classroom learning with real community engagement. This study examines the contribution of volunteer activities to the development of civic and social competences among lower secondary school students, focusing on students' perceptions and experiences. The research was conducted at "Ndre Mjeda" School in Shkoder as part of a school-based initiative developed in cooperation with local volunteer associations and community actors. Data were collected through questionnaires and focus group discussions with approximately 100 students from the upper grades of lower secondary education. The study explored students' perspectives on how participation in volunteering influences their sense of civic responsibility, solidarity, and collaborative engagement within the community. The findings indicate that a large majority of students (87%) perceive volunteering as a meaningful experience that enhances their awareness of community needs and strengthens their capacity for cooperation and social participation. These results suggest that volunteering can serve as an effective complementary strategy within civic education in basic education. The study also underscores the importance of sustained partnerships between schools

and civil society organizations in order to create authentic opportunities for student participation and the development of active citizenship.

Keywords: *volunteering; civic competences; civic education; student experience; school–community cooperation*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary education systems, the role of schools has expanded beyond the transmission of academic knowledge to encompass the holistic development of students as active, responsible, and socially engaged citizens. This shift reflects broader societal transformations characterized by increasing social complexity, digitalization, and concerns regarding declining civic participation among young people (OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2015). Across many educational contexts, there is growing recognition that traditional instructional approaches alone are insufficient to cultivate the dispositions and competences required for democratic engagement.

Civic competences—understood as a combination of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes—are now considered essential learning outcomes in basic education (European Commission, 2018). These competences include critical thinking, empathy, collaboration, and a sense of social responsibility, all of which are fundamental for participation in democratic and community life (Hoskins & Saisana, 2017). However, fostering such competences requires pedagogical approaches that extend beyond classroom-based instruction and engage students in meaningful real-world experiences.

Within this framework, volunteering has emerged as a powerful educational tool that connects formal learning with lived social experience. Unlike traditional didactic methods, volunteering situates students within authentic community contexts, enabling them to confront real social issues and actively contribute to their resolution (McDougle et al., 2020). Through such engagement, students develop not only cognitive understanding but also affective and behavioral dimensions of civic competence.

In the context of Albania, efforts to strengthen civic education have gained increasing attention in recent years, particularly in alignment with European educational frameworks. Nevertheless, the integration of structured volunteering within school systems remains relatively limited and often lacks institutional continuity. This creates a gap between curricular intentions and practical implementation.

The present study addresses this gap by examining how participation in structured volunteering activities contributes to the development of civic competences among lower secondary school students. Focusing on students' perceptions and experiences at "Ndre Mjeda" School in Shkoder, the study explores how volunteering influences their sense of responsibility, social awareness, and engagement with the community. Within this framework, civic education has become a central pillar of schooling systems. However, empirical evidence consistently shows a gap between theoretical civic knowledge and actual civic participation among adolescents. Many students can describe civic values but struggle to translate them into real-life action (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019). This gap has led researchers and policymakers to emphasize experiential learning approaches, among which volunteering stands out as one of the most effective mechanisms for developing civic identity and social responsibility.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite its educational potential, volunteering in many school contexts remains:

- informal
- sporadic
- poorly integrated into curricula
- dependent on individual teacher initiative

In Albania, and particularly in lower secondary education, volunteering is not yet systematically institutionalized as a pedagogical tool. This limits its potential impact on civic competence development.

RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS

The main aim of this study is to examine how structured volunteering activities contribute to civic competence development among lower secondary school students.

Research Question:

How does participation in volunteering activities influence the development of civic competences among lower secondary school students?

Sub-questions:

- How do students conceptualize volunteering?
- What competencies do students develop through volunteering?
- What institutional conditions support or hinder volunteering in schools?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to:

- civic education research in Albanian contexts
- school–community partnership literature
- experiential learning theory application in compulsory education
- policy discussions on curriculum enrichment

LITERATURE REVIEW

Civic Competences in Contemporary Education

Civic competences have become a central pillar of educational policy across Europe and beyond. The European Commission (2018) defines civic competence as the ability to act as responsible citizens and fully participate in social and civic life, based on understanding of social, economic, and political concepts. This competence integrates knowledge with values such as respect for human rights, social justice, and democratic participation.

Recent educational frameworks, including the OECD Learning Compass 2030, emphasize the importance of "student agency" and the capacity to co-create value in society (OECD, 2018). These frameworks highlight that civic learning is most effective when students are actively engaged in real-life contexts that require decision-making, collaboration, and ethical reflection. Empirical research suggests that civic competences are not developed through passive learning but through active participation in social practices (Hoskins et al., 2021). Schools that provide opportunities for student participation in community-oriented activities tend to foster higher levels of civic engagement and social responsibility.

Volunteering as Experiential Learning

Volunteering is widely conceptualized as a form of experiential learning, grounded in the idea that knowledge is constructed through experience and reflection (Kolb, 2015). In this context, volunteering provides students with opportunities to engage directly with community needs, transforming abstract civic concepts into tangible experiences.

Recent studies indicate that participation in volunteer activities enhances empathy, prosocial behavior, and social awareness among adolescents (Guzman & Lippincott, 2020; van Goethem et al., 2019). Moreover, volunteering has been associated with increased self-efficacy, improved communication skills, and stronger interpersonal relationships (Sano et al., 2021). Importantly, the impact of volunteering is significantly influenced by the presence of structured reflection. Without guided reflection, students may not fully internalize the learning outcomes of their experiences (Celio et al., 2011). This highlights the need for pedagogical integration of volunteering within school curricula.

School–Community Partnerships

The success of school-based volunteering initiatives depends largely on effective collaboration between educational institutions and community organizations. Such partnerships provide students with access to authentic learning environments while enabling schools to extend their educational mission beyond the classroom (Furco, 2017).

Recent research emphasizes that sustained partnerships contribute to the quality and continuity of volunteering programs, enhancing both student learning and community impact (Sanders et al., 2020). In the European context, initiatives such as the EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027) explicitly promote youth participation and volunteering as key mechanisms for social inclusion and civic engagement. However, challenges remain, including logistical constraints, lack of institutional support, and variability in program quality (Batsleer, 2022). Addressing these challenges requires strategic planning and integration of volunteering into school structures and policies.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods descriptive research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of how volunteering contributes to the development of civic competences among lower secondary school

students. Mixed-methods designs are particularly appropriate in educational research where both measurable outcomes and subjective experiences are central to understanding complex phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The rationale for combining methods lies in the multidimensional nature of civic competences, which encompass not only observable behaviors but also internal processes such as value formation, identity development, and emotional engagement (Hoskins et al., 2021). Quantitative data allowed for the identification of general patterns and trends across participants, while qualitative data enabled an in-depth exploration of students' interpretations and meaning-making processes.

The study follows a convergent parallel design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same phase, analyzed separately, and then integrated during interpretation. This approach enhances the validity of findings through triangulation and provides a more nuanced understanding of the research problem (Johnson & Christensen, 2020).

Research Setting and Context

The research was conducted at "Ndre Mjeda" School in Shkodër, an educational institution that actively promotes community engagement through collaboration with local civil society organizations. The school provides structured opportunities for student participation in volunteering activities, including environmental campaigns, social assistance initiatives, and awareness-raising events.

Such a context is particularly suitable for investigating civic competence development, as authentic engagement in community-based activities has been shown to enhance experiential learning outcomes (Furco, 2017). The presence of ongoing partnerships ensured that volunteering activities were not isolated events but part of a sustained educational effort.

Participants and Sampling

The study involved approximately 100 students aged 13–15 years, representing the upper cycle of lower secondary education. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their active involvement in volunteering activities.

This age group is particularly significant for the study of civic development, as adolescence is a critical period for the formation of civic identity, moral reasoning, and social awareness (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). At this stage, students are capable of engaging in abstract thinking while being highly responsive to experiential and peer-based learning environments.

While purposive sampling limits generalizability, it enhances the relevance and depth of findings by focusing on participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Cohen et al., 2018).

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURES

Quantitative Data

A structured questionnaire was administered to all participants. The instrument included Likert-scale items designed to measure key dimensions of civic competence:

- Sense of civic responsibility
- Awareness of community needs
- Teamwork and collaboration skills
- Willingness to engage in civic life

The questionnaire was informed by established civic competence frameworks, ensuring content validity and alignment with international research standards (European Commission, 2018). Reliability was supported through internal consistency of scale items.

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions, which provided a platform for students to reflect collectively on their experiences. Focus groups are particularly effective in capturing shared meanings and social dynamics, as participants build on each other's responses (Morgan, 2019).

Discussion prompts focused on:

- Personal experiences during volunteering
- Emotional and social impacts
- Perceived changes in attitudes and behavior
- Interpretations of civic participation

RESULTS

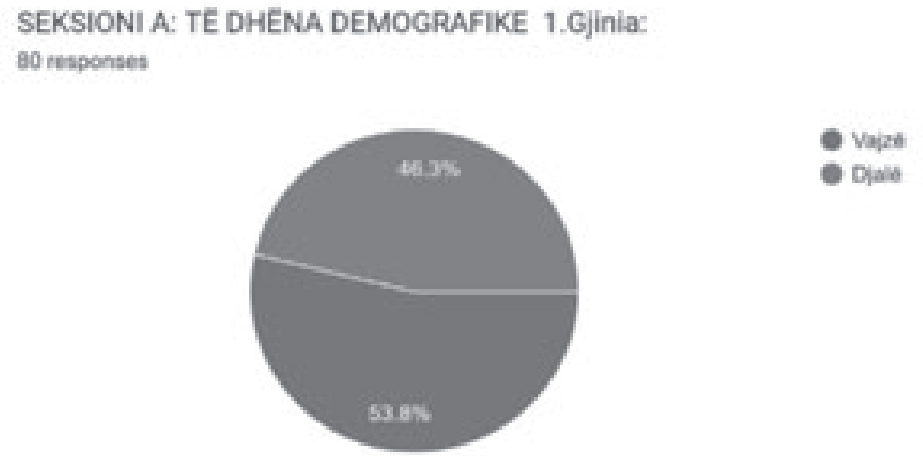
The data analysis for this project study was built on a combination of qualitative and quantitative instruments, which were used to assess the perceptions, experiences, and readiness of various stakeholders to integrate volunteering as an integral part of school life.

Quantitative Findings

The data analysis for this project study was built on a combination of qualitative and quantitative instruments, which were used to assess the perceptions, experiences, and readiness of various stakeholders to integrate volunteering as an integral part of school life.

Analysis of data from the student questionnaire

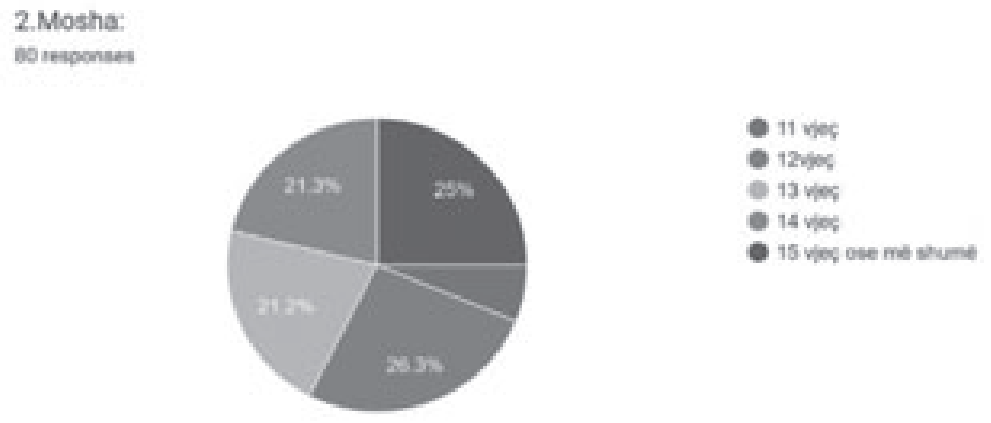
Graph 1. *Demographic data*



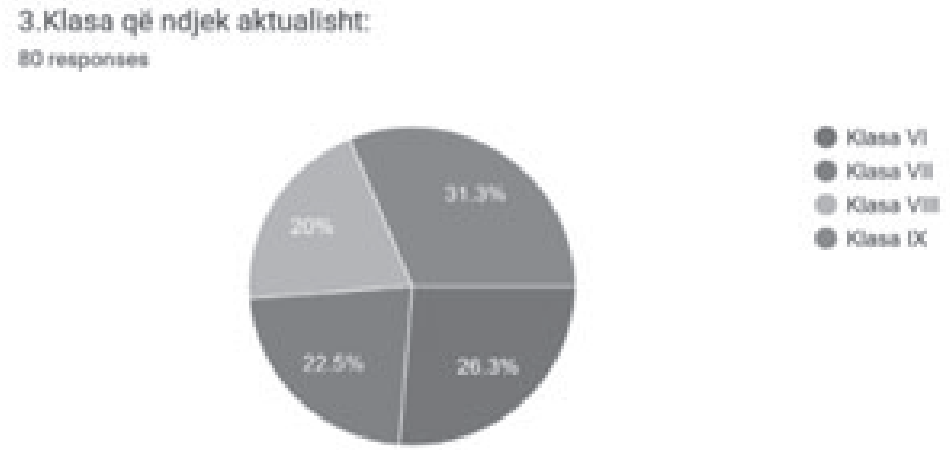
From the data collection, we conclude that in the first question regarding gender, the majority are female (53.8 %). However, the difference is not significant and indicates that the group of respondents is balanced in terms of gender, which serves as a very positive indicator of the validity of the questionnaire.

The data show that the most represented age group is 12-year-olds, accounting for 26.3% of the total respondents. This indicates a heightened interest in the topic of volunteering at this age. It is closely followed by those aged 15 and above with 25%, 14-year-olds with 21.3%, and 13-year-olds with 21.2%, demonstrating a balanced participation among students of different ages.

Graph 2. *Age*



Graph 3. *Class attending*



Finally, the least represented group is 11-year-olds, with only 6.2%, which is expected considering their younger age and more limited involvement in extracurricular activities. This is also positively evaluated for our work, as it reflects a good balance of ages across the nine-year education cycle. It is also observed in this graph that the balance of respondents is maintained, which logically aligns with the preceding questions. This is again very valuable for our work.

The data show that volunteering is a well-known concept among the respondents, with a high percentage of individuals having heard of it (87.5%). However, the figures indicating uncertainty and the presence of students who are not familiar with it—even if only 5%—suggest that intervention is needed and further underline the value of this study.

Graph 4. *Have you heard of volunteering?*

5. *If yes, how do you understand volunteering? (Open-ended response)*

Based on the open-ended responses provided by students in grades VI–IX, it appears that the concept of volunteering is generally perceived in an intuitive way and closely associated with helping others, solidarity, and the absence of material gain. The data show a wide range of interpretations. More than 70% of students explicitly mention the lack of payment or financial benefit as a central element of volunteering, indicating that they automatically associate volunteering with an economic sacrifice. However, they may not be fully aware of the other educational, civic, and social values it carries.

A considerable portion of students (around 25–30%) expands the concept of volunteering beyond the financial aspect, reflecting a deeper level of understanding, although it is not yet articulated in formal civic or social-ethical terms. Some students respond with *"I don't know" or provide very general answers such as "help," "a good action," "to help," or "when you help someone,"* suggesting that a small group of students has not yet formed a clear concept of volunteering as a notion. This is understandable for the lower grades of the second cycle (grades VI and VII), but it indicates a clear need for conceptual and educational intervention.

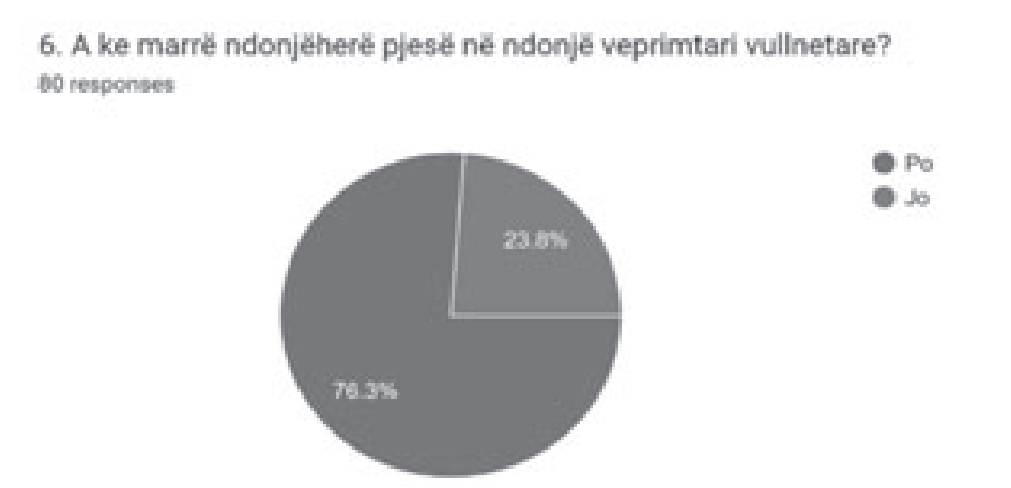
A very small number of students mention real-life experiences, such as helping the environment or participating in an organization. This shows that although limited, there are individual experiences that can serve as inspiring models for others.

This highlights an important opportunity for education and awareness, which this work aims to address through:

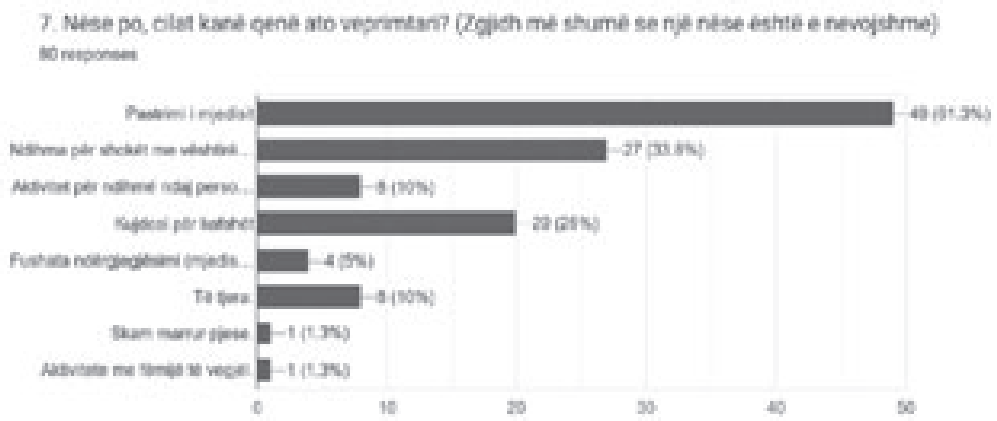
- Integrating the topic into homeroom sessions and elective curricula;
- Providing training and active involvement in real volunteering activities;
- Promoting inspiring experiences from peers and external partners.

The data show that the vast majority of respondents have participated in volunteer activities (76.2%), indicating a satisfactory level of engagement. This result may suggest

Graph 6. *Have you ever participated in any volunteer activity?*



Graph 7. *"If yes, which activities have they been? (Select more than one if necessary)"*



an active community that is aware of the importance of volunteering. However, the 23.8% of respondents who have not participated may indicate the need for more information, opportunities, or incentives to increase participation in such activities—precisely what our proposal aims to address.

From the responses, it is understood that nearly half have participated in cleaning activities. This is related to the fact that schools and tradition tend to associate volunteer work with cleaning, which encourages us to introduce more diverse and inclusive forms of activities.

It is observed that students value participation and understand the importance of these activities, making the intervention worthwhile.

Graph 8. *"How important do you think participation in volunteer activities is for a student like you?"*

9. What do you think are the benefits of a student participating in volunteer activities? (Open-ended response)

From the processing and review of the open-ended responses, several main lines of perception emerge. Most students mention as the main benefit spiritual satisfaction, personal happiness, a sense of pride, or well-being that comes from helping without personal gain. They indicate that, for students, helping others is a source of positive emotional experience*: "It feels good spiritually," "Spiritual satisfaction," "Helping others is a kind of personal satisfaction," "I feel good when I help others," "They feel proud of the work they do."*

This is an encouraging indicator of the potential that volunteering has in shaping students' moral and ethical development. The analysis of this question shows that:

- The sense of empathy and emotional awareness is highly present, which provides an excellent foundation for civic education.
- There is a growing awareness of the formative value of volunteering, especially in terms of social skills and a sense of responsibility.
- The lack of practical experience remains an obstacle to building a full understanding; therefore, the project should aim to include concrete experiences, guided reflection, and active involvement.
- The inclusion of motivational elements (symbolic or formal), such as recognition, certificates, or public exposure, could help increase participation.

We observe that when students are provided with different options, the distribution is almost spread across all activities, although environmental care predominates, which is also logically related to question 7.

From what can be seen, students are divided in their opinions. The balance of responses highlights an increasing need for intervention. They mainly request information, but also interventions involving several components that are expected to be developed in the future.

Graph 10. *In which areas would you like to participate if the school offered volunteering opportunities? (Select more than one if you wish)"*

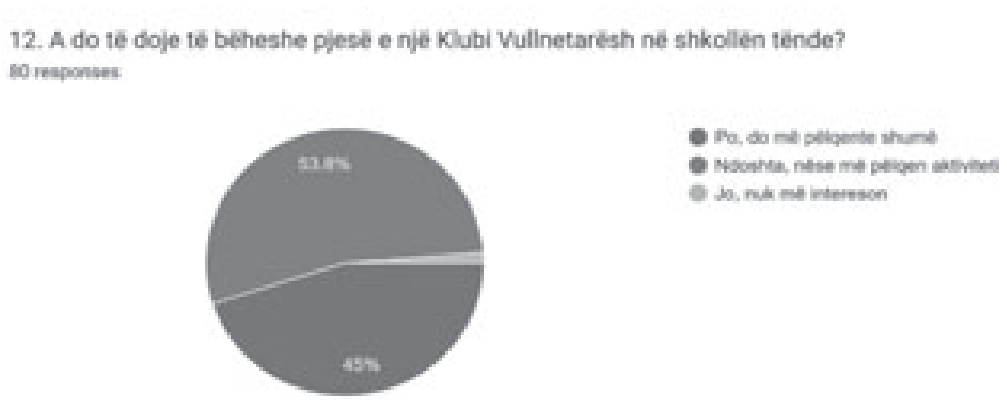
Graph 11. *What do you think would make it easier for you to participate in volunteer activities? (Select more than one if you wish)"*

The data show that students express a willingness to participate (53.8%), although this remains dependent on personal preference. This suggests that they may lack experience and have not been exposed to well-structured activities. The small proportion who stated that they are not interested may be linked to a lack of information and unfamiliarity with the concept of volunteering.

13. In your opinion, what benefits can participation in volunteer activities bring to you personally and to your school?

The data collected from students' responses to this question show a growing awareness of the impact that volunteering has both on personal development and on improving

Graph 12. *"Would you like to become a member of a volunteer club at your school?"*



the school climate and its image in the community. A large part of the students mention positive effects such as: *"it helps me feel useful," "it increases my self-confidence," "I would feel proud," "personal satisfaction," "you feel good when helping others," "a positive inner feeling," "it makes me more aware," "it teaches me to be more empathetic," and "it educates me as a citizen."*

This indicates that students are aware of the influence of volunteering on their emotional, ethical, and social development, which provides a very strong foundation for sustainable educational interventions.

Students also associate volunteering with improvements in school life such as: *"cooperation," "more friendships," "positive atmosphere," "the school would be more appreciated," "the school would have a good reputation," "the school is seen as a support for the community," "the school becomes cleaner," "it helps children in need within the school," and "it brings students together."* These responses show that students view volunteering not only as a personal matter, but also as a means of building a better and more united school.

Some students mention practical and social benefits (experience, skills, recognition), such as: *"certificates," "praise," "respect from others," "recognition from society," "new friendships," "better relationships," "socialization," "communication skills," and "experience in helping the community."* This grouping indicates that recognition and external motivation also hold value for students, suggesting that volunteering projects should include mechanisms of evaluation, recognition, and symbolic rewards. A limited number of students responded with *"I don't know," "nothing,"* or *"it just makes me feel good."* These responses suggest that a small portion of students have not yet developed a clear understanding of the long-term impact of volunteer engagement, possibly due to their age or lack of real experience.

It is recommended that future interventions include:

- Guided reflection at the end of each volunteer activity, where students can share how they felt and what they learned.
- Motivation and recognition systems, such as certificates of appreciation, boards displaying the names of engaged students, and photo exhibitions.
- Activities with visible impact, giving students the opportunity to clearly see the results of their contribution.

Overall, the survey results show that volunteering in school has a significant impact on students' personal, emotional, and civic development, helping to foster a sense of belonging and solidarity within the school community.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS (DEEP THEMATIC INTERPRETATION)

Three interrelated themes emerged from the qualitative analysis, illustrating how students interpret their volunteering experiences.

Theme 1: Development of Empathy and Social Consciousness

Students consistently described volunteering as an experience that exposed them to previously unknown social realities. Many reported that they had gained a more realistic understanding of inequality, vulnerability, and community challenges.

This shift was often described in emotional terms, suggesting that volunteering functioned as a catalyst for moral awareness. Students moved from abstract awareness of "social problems" to concrete understanding of human experiences behind those issues.

Theme 2: Strengthening of Collaborative and Interpersonal Competences

A second dominant theme was the development of teamwork and communication skills. Students emphasized that volunteering required coordination, shared responsibility, and active listening.

Rather than functioning as isolated learners, students experienced themselves as part of a collective effort. This fostered not only cooperation but also increased confidence in social interaction with peers and adults.

Theme 3: Emergence of Civic Identity and Agency

The most significant interpretive finding was the emergence of civic identity. Students increasingly described themselves as *"contributors," "helpers," or "active members"* of their community.

This shift reflects a transition from passive participation in school life to a more active sense of agency in society. Students began to associate civic engagement with personal responsibility and self-definition.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

The analysis reveals that participation in structured volunteering activities is associated with substantial development across multiple dimensions of civic competence, including social awareness, interpersonal skills, responsibility, and emerging civic identity. Importantly, the findings demonstrate not only measurable trends but also meaningful shifts in students' perceptions, attitudes, and self-understanding.

Rather than functioning as isolated outcomes, these dimensions appear to be interconnected and mutually reinforcing, suggesting that volunteering operates as a holistic learning experience. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data provides a nuanced account of how students interpret and internalize their experiences.

Transformation of Civic Awareness

A central finding of this study is the marked increase in students' awareness of community needs, reported by 87% of participants. While the quantitative data indicate a strong trend, the qualitative findings provide deeper insight into the nature of this transformation.

Students frequently described volunteering as a turning point in how they perceive their social environment. Many participants emphasized that prior to their involvement, they had limited awareness of local social issues. Through direct engagement, however, they encountered situations that challenged their assumptions and broadened their perspectives.

For example, several students referred to volunteering as an experience that allowed them to "see beyond everyday life" and recognize inequalities or unmet needs within their community. This shift suggests the development of what scholars describe as critical civic

awareness, which involves not only recognizing social issues but also understanding their broader implications (García-Pérez, 2020).

Importantly, this awareness was not purely cognitive. Students' narratives indicate a strong emotional dimension, with many expressing empathy and concern for others. This combination of cognitive and affective engagement is widely regarded as essential for meaningful civic learning, as it connects knowledge with motivation for action (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019).

Development of Empathy and Social Responsibility

Closely linked to increased awareness is the development of empathy and social responsibility, which emerged as a dominant theme in the qualitative data. Students consistently reported that volunteering enabled them to better understand the experiences and challenges of others.

What is particularly noteworthy is that empathy was often described as developing through direct interaction rather than abstract discussion. Students highlighted moments of personal contact—such as helping individuals or participating in community initiatives—as especially impactful.

These experiences appear to contribute to a growing sense of moral responsibility, with students expressing a stronger inclination to support others and contribute to the community. This finding aligns with contemporary research suggesting that experiential learning contexts are particularly effective in fostering prosocial values among adolescents (UNESCO, 2017).

Moreover, the narratives suggest that responsibility was not perceived as an external obligation imposed by teachers or institutions, but rather as an internalized value. This distinction is critical, as internal motivation is more strongly associated with sustained civic engagement over time (Zaff et al., 2015).

Enhancement of Collaboration and Communication Skills

The results indicate that 82% of students experienced improvements in teamwork and communication skills, highlighting the social dimension of volunteering as a learning process.

Qualitative findings reveal that volunteering activities required students to engage in coordinated group efforts, often involving planning, problem-solving, and shared decision-making. These interactions provided opportunities to develop practical skills that are difficult to cultivate through traditional classroom instruction alone.

Students frequently referred to learning how to:

- Listen to different perspectives
- Negotiate roles within a group
- Resolve disagreements constructively

Such experiences reflect the development of deliberative competences, which are essential for participation in democratic processes (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017).

In addition, students noted improvements in their confidence when communicating with others, including peers, teachers, and community members. This suggests that

volunteering contributes not only to technical communication skills but also to social confidence and self-efficacy, both of which are important predictors of civic participation.

Strengthening of Agency and Civic Participation

A significant proportion of participants reported a greater willingness to engage in civic activities (74%), indicating that volunteering may influence students' behavioral intentions as well as their attitudes.

Qualitative data suggest that this shift is closely linked to the development of personal agency. Students described feeling that their actions could have a tangible impact, even at a small scale. This perception of efficacy appears to play a crucial role in motivating continued engagement.

Rather than viewing civic participation as distant or inaccessible, students began to see it as something within their reach. This transition from passivity to agency is a key indicator of civic competence development and is strongly supported by existing literature on youth engagement (Ballard, 2014).

Furthermore, students expressed interest in participating in future volunteering activities, suggesting the potential for long-term behavioral change. While the study does not track longitudinal outcomes, these intentions are significant indicators of emerging civic commitment.

Formation of Civic Identity

One of the most profound findings of this study is the emergence of a developing civic identityamong participants. Through their involvement in volunteering, students began to redefine their role within the community.

This shift is evident in the way students described themselves—not merely as students, but as individuals capable of contributing to society. Such reflections indicate a movement toward what is often described as active citizenship identity, characterized by a sense of belonging, responsibility, and engagement (Flanagan & Levine, 2018).

Importantly, this identity formation appears to be a gradual and reflective process. Students did not simply adopt new roles; rather, they constructed new understandings of themselves through experience and interaction.

This finding underscores the importance of providing young people with opportunities for meaningful participation, particularly during adolescence, when identity development is especially salient.

Variability and Uneven Impact of Volunteering Experiences

Despite the overall positive findings, the study also identifies a subset of students (13%) who reported no significant change in their perceptions or competences. This highlights the non-uniform nature of volunteering outcomes.

Qualitative data suggest several possible explanations for this variability:

- Limited depth of engagement in activities
- Lack of structured reflection

- Differences in individual motivation
- Variability in the quality of supervision or guidance

These findings reinforce the argument that volunteering, in itself, does not automatically lead to learning. Instead, its effectiveness depends on how it is designed and implemented.

In particular, the absence of structured reflection appears to limit the extent to which students are able to connect their experiences with broader civic concepts. This supports previous research emphasizing that reflection is a critical component of experiential learning (Eyler, 2018).

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data reveals a coherent pattern: volunteering contributes to the development of civic competences through a combination of experience, interaction, and reflection.

While the quantitative data provide evidence of widespread positive outcomes, the qualitative findings illuminate the processes through which these outcomes are achieved. Together, they suggest that volunteering is most effective when it:

- Engages students in meaningful, real-world contexts.
- Encourages interaction and collaboration.
- Supports reflection and critical thinking.
- Fosters a sense of agency and responsibility

This integrated perspective strengthens the validity of the findings and provides a comprehensive understanding of volunteering as a pedagogical tool.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that volunteering serves as a meaningful and effective pedagogical strategy for fostering civic competences among lower secondary school students. Rather than functioning as an auxiliary or extracurricular activity, volunteering emerges as a powerful form of experiential learning that bridges the gap between theoretical civic instruction and real-world social engagement.

One of the most important conclusions is that volunteering enables students to transform abstract civic concepts into lived experiences. Through direct interaction with community members and real social challenges, students develop a deeper and more personal understanding of civic responsibility. This experiential dimension significantly enhances the relevance and impact of civic education.

In addition, the study demonstrates that volunteering contributes to emotional and ethical development. Students reported increased empathy, greater sensitivity toward social issues, and a stronger sense of moral responsibility. These affective dimensions are essential for sustaining long-term civic engagement, as they shape the values and motivations underlying participatory behavior.

Furthermore, volunteering plays a crucial role in strengthening interpersonal and collaborative skills. Students learn to communicate effectively, work in teams, and engage constructively with diverse groups. These competencies are not only important for civic participation but also for broader personal and professional development.

A particularly significant outcome is the formation of civic identity. Many students began to see themselves as active participants in their communities rather than passive observers. This transformation suggests that volunteering contributes not only to skill development but also to the construction of self-concept and social belonging.

However, the study also indicates that the impact of volunteering is not uniform across all students. The presence of participants reporting no significant change highlights the importance of structured guidance, reflection activities, and pedagogical integration. Without these elements, volunteering risks remaining an isolated experience rather than becoming a transformative learning process.

From an educational policy perspective, these findings strongly support the integration of volunteering into formal civic education curricula. Schools should not treat volunteering as an optional activity but rather as a structured and intentional component of civic learning. This requires sustained collaboration between schools and community organizations to ensure that volunteering experiences are meaningful, guided, and reflective.

In conclusion, volunteering represents a highly effective approach to civic education that fosters cognitive, social, and emotional development simultaneously. When properly designed and supported, it has the potential to cultivate engaged, responsible, and socially aware young citizens who are better prepared to participate actively in democratic society.

This study has several limitations. First, the use of purposive sampling limits the generalizability of findings beyond the specific school context. Second, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias, as students may provide socially desirable answers (Cohen et al., 2018). Third, the study does not include longitudinal data, limiting the ability to assess long-term effects of volunteering on civic engagement.

Additionally, variability in the quality and intensity of volunteering experiences may have influenced outcomes.

This study has implications for both educational practice and policy.

At the school level, educators should integrate volunteering into curricula as a structured learning experience rather than treating it as an extracurricular activity. This includes incorporating reflection activities, clear learning objectives, and assessment strategies.

At the policy level, education systems should promote institutional partnerships between schools and community organizations to ensure sustainability and quality of volunteering programs. Aligning volunteering with national civic education frameworks can enhance its effectiveness and scalability.

Furthermore, teacher training programs should include preparation for facilitating experiential learning and civic engagement activities, ensuring that educators are equipped to guide students effectively.

Future research should explore longitudinal effects of early volunteering experiences, particularly how they influence civic participation, social responsibility, and democratic engagement in adulthood.

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V. INDEX

PRESENTERS & CONTRIBUTORS

Aferdita LULI: 104, 115, 135
Afize SULA: 51
Agri SOKOLI: 42
Agron KASA: 7, 10
Agron RUSTEMI: 355
Aida BRUÇAJ: 50, 54
Aida HAXHIU: 30
Aida LUMSHI: 40
Aida THOMAJ: 55
Alba María del CARMEN GONZÁLEZ-VEGA: 111
Albana DEMALIAJ: 36
Albana IDERSHAI: 112
Albana JANKO: 76
Aledia KONDAJ: 4, 83
Alfred HALILAJ: 44
Alfred NINI: 61
Ali PAJAZITI: 24
Ali SHINGJERGJI: 227, 314
Aljula GJELOSHI: 146
Alketa BAJRAMI: 33
Alketa KARAMETA: 81
Alma ALIAJ: 5
Alma BEGAJ: 43
Alma GJANA: 76
Alma LAMA: 138
Alsenja DEMALIAJ: 56
Altin KULLI: 227
Ambera DUKA: 138
Ananda Rao KURITI: 120
Andrew MKOMBA: 142
Anila BOSHNJAKU: 146
Anila HYKA SMØRGRAV: 4
Anila POLOSKA: 49
Anisa HYSESANI: 109
Anisa KAPIDANJA: 49
Anisa KRASNIQI: 97
Anita HAXHIA: 31
Antarantela HASA: 106
Anxhela ULDEDAJ: 55, 283
Apostolos G. PAPADOPOULOS: 4
Arben SINANI: 132
Arbër KRYPA: 5
Ardita ABDULI REKA: 143
Ardita BUFAJ: 63
Ardita PRENDI: 153
Arian VULA: 91
Ariton RAMA: 355
Arlinda YMERI HALLUNOVI: 68
Armand KRASNIQI: 4
Arsim SINANI: 211
Arta KAQI: 5
Arta KËPUSKA: 64
Artan DERMAKU: 4

Artan NIMANI: 133, 140
Artemisi SHEHU DONO: 107, 166
Artur LUGU: 48
Asunta TOROMËNI: 63, 202, 240
Aurela SALIAJ: 4
Aylin TOPAL: 4
Bajame VOSELA: 314
Bashkim ALI AZEMI: 117
Bavjola SHATRO: 4
Begeza GËRBI: 51
Besart GASHI: 126
Besarta NEZAJ BESHKU: 150
Besarta PELAJ: 126
Besim GOLLOPENI: 5, 71
Besmir PEPSHI: 5
Besmir PREMALAJ: 88
Besnik RAMA: 47
Bevzenko LYUBOV: 24
Blerim OLLURI: 4
Blerina MALIQATI: 38
Blerina QEMALI: 41
Blerina RRUSTEMI: 65
Blerina RUSTEMI: 5
Blerta DRENOFCI: 157
Blerta MEHMEDI: 132
Borut RONČEVIĆC: 4
Bruna KARECI: 38
Brunilda KARECI: 29
Brunilda LAMA: 233
Brunilda ZENELAGA: 4, 73
Burim PLAVA: 115, 135
Caterina PETROCCHI: 149
Comfort Oyinlola OYAFUNKE-OMONIYI: 125
Cristiane LANINI: 112
Dafina DODOVECI: 112
Danjela EREBARA: 74
Denalda BASHOTA: 34
Denis CELCIMA: 14, 138
Denisa TITILI: 122
Denisa VOSELA CANI: 227, 314
Dhurata MYRTOLLARI: 51
Diana AVIRVAREI: 18
Diana PETROVA: 21
Dijana ALILI BEQA: 126
Donaldi POLOSKA: 49
Dorela DUÇI: 124
Doreta KUCI TARTARI: 105
Dorina PONOSHECI: 5
Dorjana KOLAJ: 314
Dragos-Cristian MUNTEANU: 149
Drilon BUNJAKU: 4, 6, 7
Drita KADRIU: 108
Dritan DUSHI: 53, 80
Edlira DEMIRI: 79
Edit LEZHA: 80
Edlira DYRMISHAJ: 87
Edlira HYKA: 75
Edlira XEGA: 62
Edona VOJVODA: 117
Eftali DINGO: 47
Eglantina GUMA: 75
Ejona ICKA: 14
Elda GACAFERRI: 65
Elda SOKOLI KUTROLLI: 1, 5, 10, 42
Elionita ZEKA: 108
Elisaveta KAPURANI: 37
Elitsa DIMITROVA: 100
Elona HOXHA: 272
Elona KRASNIQI: 148
Elvin ŞAMAN: 25
Elvina DUSHI: 53
Emanuela BELULI: 150
Emine SHABANI: 61
Endrit TEMAJ: 91
Enida BOZHEKU: 94
Enkelejda HAXHIRAJ: 183
Entela RUNA: 134

Era SYLMETAJ: 65
Era VINA: 166
Erald BAKALLI: 7, 10
Eranda BILALI: 80
Erenestina GJERGJI HALILI: 4, 98
Erika D. URŠIČ: 18
Eriola HASANAJ: 85
Eriona ÇELA: 77
Eriona DEDA: 259
Eris DHAMO: 291, 349
Erjona FUSHA: 113
Ermal MEHMETI: 66
Ermioni CEKANI: 4
Ermira ZHITI: 77
Ernaso KERBIZI: 45, 154
Esad BEHRAMI: 137
Esmeralda BODURI: 31
Esmeralda ISMAILAJ KAJO: 137
Esmeralda ISMAILI: 39
Estela FERKO: 306
Etleva XHABIJA: 67
Eurona LEKA: 5, 12, 129
Fabiola ELEZAJ: 124
Fatjona HAKA: 68
Fatjona TOSKA: 46
Fatos KRASNIQI: 131
Fejzi LILA: 128
Fëllanza LLUHANI: 108
Ferdi KAMBERI: 5, 6, 16, 58, 140
Ferdinand MARA: 82
Ferim GASHI: 28
Fiona TODHRI: 306
Fisnik LATIFI: 24
Francesco PIETRONIRO: 147
Franz KOK: 4
Freskina MULA: 5
Gani RROSHI: 4, 7
Gani S. PLLANA: 59
Genita HOXHA: 101
Genti KRUJA: 98
Gentiana ISEBERI: 349
Gertjana HASALLA: 272
Geta MITREA: 78
Gezim HODOLLI: 131
Gjokë ULDEDAJ: 4
Gjovalin GJELOSHI: 114
Gloria FARASHOLLI: 37
Hajrulla ÇEKU: 6
Hamdi ALIU: 131
Hamlet UGOCHUKWU IHEANACHO: 95
Haxhire KASAJ: 93
Hifza IRFAN: 23
Ilaria IANNUZZI: 118
Ilda MEMIA: 291
Ilda POGACI: 151
Ilia LARTI: 79
Imer HAZIRI: 132
Ina XHAKOLLI: 5
Irena BIBA: 31
Irena NIKAJ: 4, 89, 122
Isak SHEMA: 116
Ismajl BAFTIJARI: 4
Itena HOXHALLARI: 110
Izabela ŚLĘZAK: 104
Jacques MARION: 6, 7, 11
Jani SOTA: 322, 338
Jasin MEMEDI: 89
Jelena GAKOVIĆ: 4
Jeta STAROVA MEHMETI: 66
Jetmira BASHA: 190
Jetmire GALLOPENI: 102
Jeton PLAVA: 115
Jola KEPI: 4, 5, 6, 12
Jonida LAMAJ: 4, 6, 12
Jonida NUSHI: 30
Jorida RUSTEMI: 4, 151
Josif GJIPALI: 67

Josilda DOÇI: 144
Julejda ALIAJ: 183
Julian COTA: 101
Juliana ÇYFEKU: 62
Juliana LAZE: 4
Julinda TODA: 55
Juventina NGJELA: 125
Kimete CANAJ: 15
Klajdi XHEBEXHIU: 82
Klea FANIKO: 4
Kledi BUKACI: 97
Klorida TEFERIÇI: 249, 338
Kozeta VUKSANLEKAJ: 114
Krešimir ŽAŽAR: 5, 21
Lea YPI: 5
Ledia KASHAHU: 75
Ledian RUSTA: 175
Ledja LALA: 118
Lejda ABAZI: 154
Leke SOKOLI: 5, 7, 10, 13, 73
Leonardo TARAGJINI: 283
Leons HASANI: 259
Lindita IVZIKU: 52, 218
Lindita LLUKAJ: 50
Lindita LOHJA: 142
Liri JOLLJA: 332
Livia KARAJ: 55
Lorenc EKONOMI: 5
Luana HARIZAJ: 114
Luljeta KODRA: 87
Lumturije CARA: 52
Majlinda LIÇI KOÇI: 121
Majlinda QYRA: 75
Malvina MARKU: 150
Mariia GRYSHCHENKO: 92
Marija GEIGER ZEMAN: 27
Marinela LIKA: 34
Marinela PANE: 157
Marsela HARIZAJ: 43
Marsela RESULAJ: 300
Marsida VISHKA: 74
Masitah GHAZALI: 141
Matilda LIKAJ: 72
Megi OSMAN: 37
Melisa GJOKA: 233
Mentor ALISHANI: 5
Meri KRAJA: 103
Merlina POGRAZHA: 277
Migena KAPLLANAJ: 155
Mimoza KURSHUMLIA: 84
Miradije BERISHAJ: 28
Miranda LOWENSOHN: 81
Miranda RIRA: 101
Miranda SPAHIU: 349
Mirela BOGDANI: 84, 363
Mirela HOLY: 27
Mirela PJETRANI: 48
Mirlinda JASIQIV: 85
Miruna PANDELE: 20
Morena BRAÇAJ: 46
Muhammad ZAMAN: 23
Myjeser ILJAZI: 66
Myrella LÓPEZ-FARFÁN: 111
Naim FANAJ: 129, 148
Naser ZABELI: 211
Neralba DEMALIAJ: 56
Nertila MUCKA: 45
Nevila FURXHIU: 202, 240
Nexhmie KASTRATI: 35
Nicholas PIETROPAOLO: 147
Nita HOXHA: 5
Nita SINA PRUTHI: 5
Nurtene DEVA: 5
Nurul Fathihin NOOR SHAH: 141
Nutan MARIAN TIGGA: 57
Nysjola DHOGA: 91
Oladele ADELERE ADELEKE: 127
Oleh IVANOV: 19

Olga KUTSENKO: 5
Orest MUÇA: 1
Ovidiu-Florin SENDRONI: 26
Oyinlola OYAFUNKE COMFORT: 125, 127
Pal NIKOLLI: 28
Pietro ZOCCONALI: 5
Qendresa BIRAJ: 146
Rajmonda KURSHUMLIA SYLA: 84
Ramiola KALEMI: 277
Rezear KOLAJ: 314
Richard ABAYOMI: 127
Risvan TERSHALLA: 145
Riswadi BIN AZMI: 141
Ritvana HAJDARI: 107
Robert ÇITOZI: 82
Romina Gurashi: 5, 152
Rudina ALIMERKO: 40
Rudina Duraj HOXHA: 121
Ruzhdi KADRIJA: 35
Safete HADERGJONAJ: 139
Sara ULDEDAJ: 211
Sarra CHAHBANE: 65
Sazan SHIRA: 32
Selim PRETHI: 74
Selim TASCI: 22
Selvije HALIMI: 139
Serdar DIZMAN: 131
Sergiu BALTATESCU: 5
Sevdije SADIKU: 144, 152
Sevim MUSTAFA: 148
Sherif SEJDIU: 58, 133, 140
Shkelzen HASANAJ: 96
Shqipe HUSAJ: 15
Sidita DURAJ: 134
Simona MARIA STĂNESCU: 70
Simona MIHAIU: 70
Skender BRUCAJ: 136
Skënder DEMALIAJ: 36
Stela DHIMA: 39
Stelina LIÇI: 83
Suela KOCIBELLINJ: 259
Svetla DIMITROVA: 314
Svetla KOLEVA: 5
Tamara BESEDNJAK VALIČ: 5, 17
Taulant SHAHMANI: 54
Teuta ARIFI: 5, 69
Tina UYS: 5
Tiziano CENSI: 118
Tomi TRESKA: 52, 218
Tonin GJURAJ: 5, 7
Tringa KOZNIKU: 5
Vaishali B. KATKE: 59
Valbona BANKA: 151
Valbona NATHANAILI: 211, 233, 283
Valbona ZEQIRAJ: 133
Vasil TOLE: 5, 7, 10
Vilma PROKO: 123
Visarda DUNGA: 103, 233
Xhovana BASHAJ: 60
Zakarya FARAHMAND: 90
Zenel SINA: 218
Zeqir HASHANI: 102

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